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Lessons from a Utah Mall

What would you have been prepared to do?

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On February 12th, Ogden City (Utah) police officer Ken Hammond took his wife, Sarita, out for a Valentine's dinner and a little family shopping. By now, most of you have heard about what happened next at the Trolley Square Mall in Salt Lake City. I'm not going to repeat the story here; there are plenty of accounts with a direct connection to the people involved. But as soon as I saw the first MSNBC news video of the press conference interview with Officer Hammond and his wife, I knew there were some great training points to be made. First of all, I should tell you that I don't know Officer Hammond and I am taking my information about the incident from public news sources. I'll consider them to be reliable for our purposes, as some of the information is directly from the above video, and the other reports I have seen are very consistent. Regardless of the details, there are some excellent training points to be learned from this incident. I am a firm believer in post-action critiques and that is where I want to focus in this column. What can we all learn for the next time?

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- You never know when things are going to happen.** The Hammonds certainly weren't looking for their night out to take this sudden turn. Officer Hammond wasn't even in his own jurisdiction. But he was prepared. How many of you know someone, or maybe you are someone, who doesn't think you need to carry a firearm when you are off duty? Because he was armed, Officer Hammond was able to respond to that inner voice that told him it was time to act to protect others. Had this not been part of the "95%" of the time he says he carries off duty, his options would have been very different. When a reporter asked: "Why not leave?" he replied: "cause that's not me." I suspect that Officer Hammond is the sort of person who would have tried to do something anyway. Maybe the results would have far different. If you carry a badge, carry your gun!
- If you carry your gun, carry your badge.** In this case, Officer Hammond had his, but by his own statement, he couldn't get to it while his gun was in his hand. He was obviously aware of the hazards of being in street clothes and having a gun showing. His own efforts at responding to the shooting had to include his continuing efforts to identify himself, not only to responding police, but to other innocent people in the mall. His own words: "I was yelling and screaming as loud as I possibly could to everybody in the mall, just so they could recognize me as being a police officer." The result of this was that others recognized that he was not a "man with a gun" to be feared, but was, in fact, there to protect them. This is an extremely important element. It is not just a matter of keeping yourself safe from friendly fire, but also trying to allay the fears of others. Officer Hammond did this well, even without being able to display his badge. But I'll bet that from now on, he carries it where he can reach it, even with a gun in his hand.
- Plan ahead with your family and friends, just in case something like this happens.** Make it clear to them what you want them to do, if... In this case, I don't know if the Hammonds ever discussed such things in advance. Or maybe the fact that Mrs. Hammond is a dispatcher made her aware of what she needed to do. Regardless, their teamwork on this was amazing. Officer Hammond did not just tell his wife to get to safety, he gave her the task of summoning help. In my eyes, Mrs. Hammond is a hero in this for two reasons. First, she MADE the phone call. I don't mean she punched buttons on the phone. Remember her statement: "For some reason my cell phone couldn't get through, so I took a cell phone from a waiter." (Anyone else thinking, "Git 'er done!?") And second, she then said that the dispatcher was more concerned about her "locking herself down" in a safe place. Her concern was to get the dispatcher to listen to the description of her husband, so it could be relayed to responding officers. It was, and Ken Hammond was not mistaken for "man with a gun, there now, with shots fired." Her husband protected her by sending her away from the danger. She protected him by her persistence in making that phone call count.
- Be aware of how your mind reacts under stress.** While engaging the gunman, Officer Hammond was so focused on the shotgun that he couldn't describe the gunman. This is normal and should be expected. There are a number of physio-psychological effects that are possible in these situations. Be aware of them. Officer Hammond, in his press interview, was careful not to be specific about the details of number of shots he fired, or the distance between himself and the gunman. All that will be worked out later. Understand that these reactions occur, and you won't commit yourself to statements that may later be seen to be

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false.

5. **Carry spare ammunition.** Although Officer Hammond didn't make any mention of counting his shots in the video, another press report stated that he only had 8 rounds in his Kimber, so he shot sparingly to keep the gunman pinned down, hoping to not run out of ammo until help arrived. Fair enough. But I'll also bet that Officer Hammond will carry at least one spare magazine in the future. If I'm carrying a gun that has less than a 10 round capacity, I carry two spare reloads. If I have a so-called "high capacity" pistol, I might only have one reload. It is reason enough to have a spare magazine for an auto-loader just in case you need to clear a malfunction, let alone being prepared for a protracted gunfight.
6. **Be prepared to engage "active shooters."** Once again, the killing of innocent people stopped when the gunman was engaged by an armed protector. It took us a long time to get past the old philosophy of containment and negotiation. To be sure, there is a time and place for that, but not when people are still being attacked. From Columbine on, that lesson has been hammered into us. We ignore it, not at our own peril, but at the peril of those we are sworn to protect. A reporter asked Officer Hammond if he tried to "engage him (the gunman) verbally." Some people were already dead or wounded and others were under attack. In this case, it's time to invoke what I call the "Tuco Principle." It's from Tuco's bathtub scene in the movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. When his revenge-seeking, one-armed nemesis takes the time to explain why it will be such a pleasure to kill him, Tuco shoots him dead without a word or any hesitation. His next line is the classic: "If you have to shoot, shoot. Don't talk." Sometimes the movies get gun tactics right, and that was one of the times.

As it turns out, the Salt Lake City officers who responded to this incident also have been given well-deserved praise and recognition for the way they handled this incident. In this case, everyone's training and exemplary professional actions kept a bad situation from being even worse. There will be other lessons learned from this, but I think it is important to recognize that the threat to innocent people stopped when, in the words of the Ogden City Council resolution, "Officer Hammond instinctively and without hesitation jumped into action to protect innocent lives." One officer and his wife, who were just out for dinner. Would you be prepared to act, and would you act, in a similar situation? If you are that kind of person, then you need to prepare in advance. I think this is an outstanding model to learn from! I'll be talking about this one with my students and my friends for a long time.

Steve Denney is a former municipal police sergeant, USAF Officer and chief of security/safety officer for a large retirement and healthcare community. A former SWAT officer, crime prevention officer and both military and police firearms trainer, he is currently an instructor for LFI Judicious Use of Deadly Force, LFI Stressfire, and NRA and other defensive tactics disciplines. He currently trains police, military and private citizens. He is a charter member of ILEETA and a member of IALEFI.



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