



Editor, PoliceOne
with Rachel Fretz

Taking the plunge: Water safety that could save your life

By Rachel Fretz, PoliceOne editor

When considering the primary threats to officer safety, gunfire, edged weapons, physical assaults, car crashes and even heart attacks generally come to mind. Rarely, however, is drowning on the list.

Tragically, three separate officer drownings in just one month stand testimony to this very real, yet rarely discussed officer survival issue.

In May, Border Agent [Richard Goldstein](#) drowned while searching an area near the Salton Sea in California, Probation Officer [David Poling](#) from Ohio, died in a strong river current while pursuing a suspect and Texas Game Warden [Teyran "Ty" Patterson](#) drowned when his boat capsized during a search and rescue operation on a river.

The Ohio and Texas incidents underscore the importance of remembering that it's not just officers who patrol near major waterfront areas who need to be aware of drowning risks. Anyone who patrols near lakes — big or small — rivers, canals and even pools can find themselves in water-related danger if unprepared.

PoliceOne talked to law enforcement water safety expert [Dave Young](#) of specialized programs for the Northcentral Technical College-RedMan Training Division in Wisconsin to help shed some light on best practices in a waterborne environment. Young is the founder of this type of training for water-based survival and defensive tactics training for law enforcement.

Young said there are five key mistakes officers make when it comes to water safety:

- Overestimating your abilities in the water
- Failing to have a "Plan B" if things go wrong
- Failing to call in your exact location (entry point) at a body of water so backup can find you
- Following a subject you're pursuing too closely
- Making dangerous assumptions

Overestimating your ability

Overconfidence about your abilities in the water can pose a major threat to safety. Pursuing a suspect or participating in a water rescue is not like jumping in the pool and swimming all day as a child. One cramp, especially to the limbs — legs or arms — can be life-threatening to an adult, even in average temperature and average depth water. It is an officer's



RedMan Training instructor Dave Young strongly recommends that agencies do water submersion and operation test on their firearms. Water tension effects firearms differently, and some external triggers can hinder discharge and cause weapon malfunction.



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responsibility to understand his or her own limitations and act accordingly.

cruisers: [Watch Video](#) 

“Not everyone is buoyant,” said Young. “I have met some people that I place in the ‘iron duck’ category, meaning that no matter what stroke, kick or breathing method they use, they sink.”

It’s your responsibility to candidly test your own water abilities and make tactical decisions based on that. If you know you’re an “iron duck,” don’t chase a suspect into the water.

Here’s a practice test: Pick a target goal, say swimming for 30 seconds in your duty gear. If you can’t do it without panicking or having major difficulty, don’t put yourself in a position where you would have to.

Remember, swimming and staying afloat in duty gear is tiring and difficult — sometimes to the surprise of an officer who suddenly finds himself in the water— and fatigue is deadly. It can take just 3-5 seconds for a fatigued person to slip under and drown. If you know you’re not proficient in the water, don’t set yourself up to be a drowning victim.

Young recommends that patrol officers who work in a lake/river or high-density pool area go through an annual water screening in order to test their limitations.

Failing to have a Plan B

If your initial plan isn’t working, you’ll need a need another one. Say you’re swimming to a drowning subject who is calling for help, but when you grab him, he turns and grabs you, climbs on you and pulls you under the water. You’ll need to be prepared to quickly implement “when/then thinking” in a water environment just as you would on land. “When this person grabs me, then I will...”

Or, say you’re swimming back to safety when you start to experience severe cramps that limit your ability continue with the rescue. Will you try to fight through it, or will you make a tactical decision to momentarily let go of the other person and take a breather so you’ll be better able to make a successful rescue, thus potentially saving *two* lives?

If you enter the water at any time and fail to plan ahead for things that could go wrong, you maybe be jeopardizing your life more than you realize.

Failing to call in your exact entry location

Think about your normal routine. When you respond to land-based calls, you clearly identify your street location for back up. You and your fellow officers know the geographical area like the back of your hand. The same protocol, Young says, must exist when you approach or enter a body of water.

“When you call for back up, give more information than just the name of the lake,” said Young. “Each body of water needs pre-designated markers at points of entry around the perimeter that correspond to a letter.”

On a local map, agencies should mark those points (e.g. dock, boat ramp, swim clearing) so they can be quickly referenced. This way, if you enter the water away from your parked cruiser, your specific point of entry can be better identified by responding officers.

Following too closely to a subject you’re pursuing

A good rule of thumb is to let the subject stay 30 paces ahead of you, giving you time to evaluate what’s ahead — like a drop-off into a lake — and avoid it if necessary. Failing to provide that buffer can lead you to run blindly into the water and find yourself taken off guard and unprepared.

Dave Young suggests the following exercises to help identify your water abilities:

- Breathing control – Go to a local pool and see how well you’re able to hold your breath and monitor your ability to breath effectively while afloat.
- Check your buoyancy. Are you able to float well?
- Identify the arm stroke and leg kick that works best for you in order to tread and move effectively in the water.

Water behavior and properties

To better prepare for the possibility of needing to function in bodies of water in your area, it is important that officers log all possible information about them. This includes, but is not limited to:

It's your job to enter the water smartly and safely. Watch the suspect and use him as your barometer for the water conditions and his waterborne abilities. Is he standing, indicating the water is shallow? Is he gasping for air in cold water? Is he swimming like a fish, or struggling to stay afloat? All these things can give you quick insight into what you'll face if you go in.

Making assumptions

It is deadly to make assumptions in a waterborne environment, where there are hundreds of factors, most of them unpredictable.

"Most people drown because they gauge the water incorrectly," said Young. "They assume it's shallow when it's not, or they assume there's no serious current when there is."

Another potentially deadly assumption is misjudging distance. For instance, you might enter the water and get halfway to the victim or person you're pursuing before realizing how far away they really are (and, looking back, how far away the shore is). Once you're deep into the water, struggling and suddenly feeling unable to return safely to shore, it could be too late. Don't blindly assume that you're going to be able to reach someone. Take the time to seriously consider their distance from shore and your ability to get out there and back safely.

Also, if you're considering going in after a suspect because he claims to be drowning, stay alert to a "water ambush" of sorts. Don't assume that he's really drowning just because he's thrashing around. Stay alert to the possibility that he's luring you in so he can attack you in the water, hoping you'll be at a disadvantage.

Rescue considerations

The five key mistakes are not limited to suspect pursuits; many officers who die in drowning accidents are trying to help a victim. Officers are very action-oriented, but in cases like this, it can work against them. Your first priority is to not becoming a victim yourself.

To this end, don't go into the water unless you have to. This goes against the traditional "rescue now/think later" mindset of police officers. But remember, you are the solution to the emergency; you are not the emergency. While it might seem counterintuitive to wait 30 seconds in order to find an object to extend to the victim or to breathe and call for back up, it's nonetheless critical. Officer impulsivity in water rescue situations has shown, time and time again, to be deadly.

In most communities, police are not the designated first response team for water rescue. Generally the EMS and fire folks have more training and equipment for these situations. Therefore, it is up to police departments to reach out to these local experts, to know what resources are available in your community and to have a plan in place ahead of time. You will not have time to draw up a tactical plan when an emergency is in progress.

That said, when you're standing on shore, look for any available resources. Depending on your surroundings, this may be a life vest, boat, branch or rope.

Once you engage the victim, communication will be very important. Young recommends the following steps:

- Stay calm
- Tell them to look at you
- Talk in a professional and positive voice
- Be direct – stay in control!
- Establish a dialog

Suspect pursuit considerations

Chasing a fleeing suspect into the water is highly dangerous and before doing so, you should strongly consider your water abilities. Officers can have a

- Water depth
- Undertows
- Currents (open water)
- Flows (water released by man-made sluices or structures)
- Debris on bottom
- Water temperature
- Topography (terrain on bottom)
- Location and types of bridges
- Water entry points
- Wildlife (alligators, snakes, etc.)

tendency to fall into the “*I have to catch the bad guy, no matter what*” mind-set, but before you decide to follow, you need to take the time to weigh the officer safety risks.

In addition to following too closely, there are two other key safety threats to consider when chasing a suspect into the water:

- Once he hits the water, you can't see his hands;
- It will be difficult to swim with a firearm in your hand (unless you've specifically practiced this skill).

So remember to be safe and practice the five rules of water safety: Know your limits, have a Plan B, call in your exact location, pay attention to how the victim or suspect is reacting to the water environment, and *never make assumptions*.

Do I take gear off before getting in the water?

Your duty belt, which weighs in at 18-21 pounds while dry, will be very heavy when it's waterlogged. But it can be helpful in many situations, and aid the officer in his/her survival. For instance, it can serve as a



1. A way to secure/access your firearm (keep your ballistic vest on and place it between your vest and chest).
2. An anchor – something to wedge between, say, you and the dock, if there is a strong current (wrap around piling).
3. An impact weapon.

Of course, it's not just a duty belt that weighs you down. If an officer weighs 230 lbs., and wearing all of his/her assigned gear then add an approximately 18 lbs., with 20%-30% restricted movement and loss of flexibility. Once in the water and the uniform is submerged, the officer will have anywhere from 30-40 lbs. of added weight, or more based on the type of construction of the vest and duty gear. Knowing how to maneuver with this added bulk and restriction is key to water safety training.

→ Read a checklist for [waterproofing your gear](#)

Also read Dave Young's [Water survival defensive tactics](#)

[For more information on water safety survival training, visit RedMan.](#)

Water survival defensive tactics

As editor of PoliceOne, Ms. Fretz writes on a broad range of topics that affect the law enforcement community, and provides cutting edge tactical tips and techniques straight from our Street Survival seminar experts.

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