

Fatal Plano police shooting highlights dangers of gun-flashlight combo

07:39 AM CST on Tuesday, January 11, 2011

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The undercover officer approached a suspected drug dealer in the darkness, wary that his target might be armed and prepared to strike.



The Surefire X300 flashlight is shown in this undated Dallas police evidence photo.

So the Plano cop drew his gun from his holster. He pointed it at the shadowy figure. He tried to activate his gun-mounted flashlight.

A shot rang out. The suspect fell to the ground. The officer had made the worst possible error.

The Oct. 13 accidental fatal shooting of unarmed Michael Anthony Alcala, 25, in a Far North Dallas parking lot highlights what some experts say is the potential danger of affixing flashlights to guns – something many departments around the nation now routinely do. In this case, a light switch was directly below the gun's trigger guard.

"You have a tool that is capable of delivering lethal force and playing with it by adding things to it. Doing things to it is always, to me, a very dangerous combination, dangerous mix," said Ken Cooper, a veteran New York firearms instructor and consultant. "To me, a gun should be a gun, a flashlight is a flashlight."

Even those who see no problem with the concept and the design of the gun in question say that familiarity with the altered weapon is essential.

"Anything new that you hang on your gun, you better make sure you're prepared to use it," said Harvey Hedden, executive director of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association.

The Plano shooting sparked a lawsuit on behalf of the Alcala family against the city of Plano that alleges negligence in the shooting.

The narcotics sergeant who killed Alcala said in his written statement to Dallas police investigators that he had previously carried a Surefire brand X200 light on his gun with pressure switches on each side of the grip of the gun. He said he was issued the Surefire brand X300 light with the pressure switch directly under the trigger guard over the summer.

"There was no training associated with using that flashlight," said his attorney, Bob Gorsky. "That's a concern that we have, obviously, and we're dealing with a dynamic, stressful police operation. We've got a flashlight mechanism that he had not been trained on, and it almost created a perfect storm situation there."

Alcala's criminal history included convictions for marijuana possession and for stealing a car, according to public records. Undercover officers had arranged to meet him to purchase black tar heroin, according to police documents.

The officer, whose name is being withheld because he works undercover, remains on administrative leave. He told Dallas police investigators he intended to activate the flashlight with the switch located under the trigger guard of his gun.

A Collin County grand jury that was considering manslaughter charges took no action in the case against the sergeant last year.

In the wake of the shooting, Plano police and Surefire officials maintained there is no problem with the device. Plano declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Patrol officers in Plano are being offered the same light this year, but they must go through training at the gun range before receiving them, officials have said.

Thousands in use

There are thousands of similar Surefire lights and pressure switches in use in various police and military agencies, and they've been in use since the 1980s, according to the company.

"We haven't been approached with any issues where our product is causing any malfunction of, you know, trigger," said Ron Canfield of Surefire. "The activation of the light itself has nothing to do with the activation of the trigger. It's a different finger; it's an isolated motor movement."

But Hedden, who said he does not see a problem with the equipment generally, said the finger movements are not necessarily isolated.

"One of the issues that you do see in some types of equipment like this is under stress trying to get one finger to do something that the other fingers aren't," Hedden said. "You tend to have a sympathetic response from the fingers – they all want to do one thing."

Area police departments have varying policies regarding gun-mounted flashlights.

Garland police allow the use of gun-mounted flashlights, including the same light that was mounted to the Plano officer's gun. But they do not allow pressure switches, said Officer Joe Harn, a department spokesman.

Instead, their officers are trained to activate the light by using the thumb on their nonshooting hand to flip a switch on the light itself, Harn said.

Mesquite police said they, too, allow mounted flashlights, but they do not allow pressure switches.

In Austin, officers are allowed to purchase their own flashlights, including the Surefire X300. They are also allowed to use a pressure switch like the one the Plano officer had on his gun, officials said.

Austin Sgt. Robert Richman of the Learned Skills Unit said the Plano case was a "horrible tragedy, but based on my skill and experience, I would not blame the light or its switch's placement for pulling the trigger."

In Fort Worth, members of specialized units such as SWAT and K-9 are allowed to use gun-mounted flashlights after they go through training, officials said.

In Dallas, only SWAT members are authorized to use such weapons, including pressure switches, in part because "they have a higher level of frequency in training than your average Joe patrol officer," said Assistant Chief Floyd Simpson.

"It's not just one-time training," Simpson said. "It's weekly and sometimes daily training. When you get in these high-stress situations, you fall back on your discipline. Your discipline is based on muscle memory."

Hedden said the problem might be related to a lack of training. A good training regimen would include time at the gun range and simulation exercises, he said.

Officers traditionally illuminate an area with a flashlight in one hand and hold a gun in the other, "which basically means that neither one is under terrific coordination," Hedden said. "So the idea of mounting the light on the gun is a great idea, is a good way to prevent a lot of accidental shootings."

Cooper and others aren't so sure.

"You're putting something in a grip of the gun that I think could be potentially, as a firearms instructor, could be a problem," Cooper said. "Is it a good idea to put it there? Obviously not, since somebody just got shot with it."

He said the proper way to activate the X300 light with the pressure switch in the Plano case would be with the middle finger on the shooting hand. One of the fundamental rules of gun safety dictates that the index finger, which is the trigger finger, should be kept off the trigger until you are ready to fire the gun.

In the face of stress

"But under stress, things happen," Cooper said. "The trigger might not have been pressed with his trigger finger. The trigger may have been fired by his middle finger."

Proper training would likely lessen the odds of fatal errors, Cooper said. "But you're never going to be able to re-create the stress of lethal force stress if there's an encounter with a bad guy."

Ed Nowicki, an expert police trainer and former Chicago cop, said it's best to keep it simple when it comes to guns.

"It's like the pocket police officer," Nowicki said. "It's a gun, it's a firearm, it shoots pepper spray, you can do your taxes on it, you can use it as a radar gun. It does all these things. Well, the problem is I would rather have it do one thing really well."