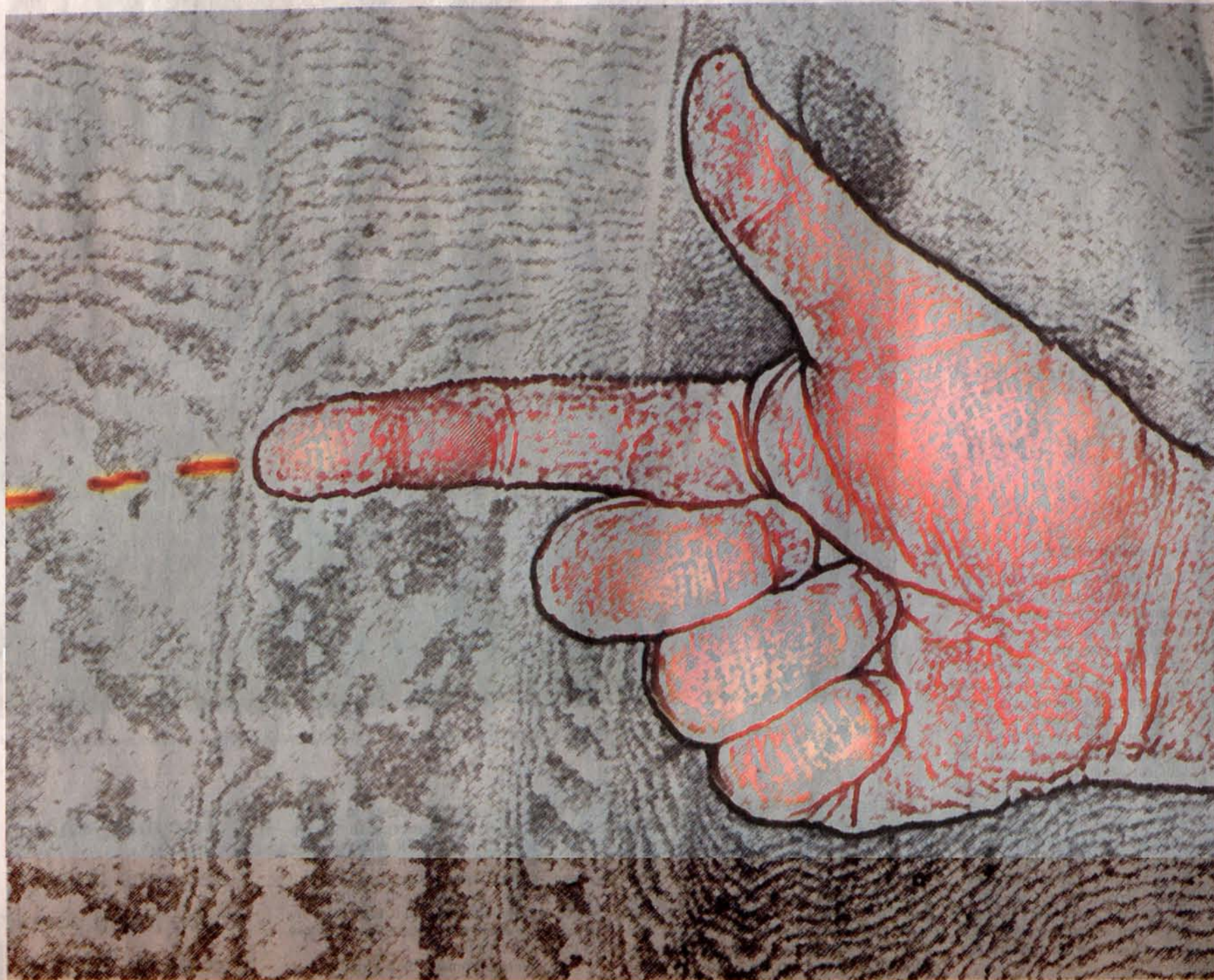


NEW YORK OBSERVED

'I Know What It's Like To Shoot An Unarmed Man.'



Photograph by Lioudmila Koudinova for The New York Times; illustration by John Cayea/The New York Times

By GABRIEL COHEN

I KNOW what it's like to shoot an unarmed man.

Minutes after I received a radio call about a bank robbery, the getaway car sped past me. I entered into a high-speed pursuit, which ended when the other car crashed into a light pole. I jumped out of my patrol car and approached on foot, pistol raised, heart full of adrenaline. Suddenly the passenger door swung open, and a man lunged out toward me. I fired, and fired again.

I soon discovered that I had just shot a hostage.

Luckily for me, the wound was not fatal. Even better, the man was not real. After the shooting, the lights went on in a small basement room of the New York Police Department training academy, where I stood in front of a wall-size video screen, clutching a Glock 19 semiautomatic pistol that shot laser beams instead of bullets.

"How many shots did you fire?" asked Officer Joe Gentile, a lanky, easygoing firearms instructor. My heart was still pumping, and I struggled to remember. "Um, three?" I ventured. Officer Gentile consulted a computer screen; the Firearms Training Simulator keeps track of every trigger pull, and knows where every laser bullet hit.

Gabriel Cohen is the author of the novel "Red Hook."

"Nope," he responded matter-of-factly. "You fired six times."

Every time the police get involved in the shooting of a civilian — as in the case of Sean Bell, a groom-to-be who was killed last month as he left his bachelor party in Jamaica, Queens — some people rush to pass judgment, either for or against. Ever since I visited that basement room, I'm not so eager to make up my mind.

As a novelist who often writes about urban crime, I wanted to learn more about what it's really like for police officers on New York streets. So I signed up for the Citizens' Police Academy, a free 14-class version of the training offered to police recruits; the course is held in the same classrooms, with the same instructors, and in the same cheerless building that the real police use, on East 20th Street in Manhattan. The Police Department established the program in 1993, as a way to reach out to New Yorkers, and more than 1,900 civilians have taken the course.

In the fall of 2005, I found myself in a low-ceilinged, concrete-block classroom that smelled of gun oil, surrounded by a group of middle-aged civilians who also wanted to know what it was like to be on the other side of the badge — from a priest, to a retired blood bank technician, to the president of the tenant association at a public housing project in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The firearms simulator cast us in the role of police officers answering all sorts of dan-

Ever since firing a laser gun in a police training course for civilians, he has not been eager to judge who's right, and who's wrong, when the real bullets fly.

gerous radio calls, such as one about a disgruntled former employee firing shots in an office, or a father high on meth beating his daughter in their home. The class went silent and tense as we took our turns behind the gun, especially after we learned that many of the scenarios were ones in which real officers had been killed.

"Did anyone get a little adrenaline rush up there?" Officer Gentile asked us later.

"In real life, your heart would be beating a mile a minute." He explained that as blood pressure rises and adrenaline pumps into the system, the ability to think clearly often decreases.

A lot of time at the academy is spent trying to inoculate recruits against rash judgments. They spend five days learning the basics of firearms technique, firing 600 rounds out at the Rodman's Neck training site in the Bronx, and then they take a six-day course in tactics, including exercises entering a house in which other police officers pose as criminals. Instructors emphasize that they should use force only as a last resort. In one video scenario, an angry suspect jumps out of a car, raises his fists at the screen and shouts, "Come on, punk, let's go now!"

"Does that mean you have to fight him?" Officer Gentile asked. "No — you could still back up and talk." He explained that rookie officers often want to plow into a situation and take charge, but the best move is often to retreat and wait for backup, a notion the Police Academy expresses through a simple formula: Safety equals time plus distance.

Television shows give the impression that police officers are constantly running around firing their guns, but in reality most of New York's 37,000 officers will rarely, if ever, fire their weapons during the course of their careers. I learned that police officers are never allowed to cock a firearm (too much chance of an accidental shooting), and

that they can never fire warning shots (too risky in a city with such high population density). High-speed police car chases have been banned in New York: adrenaline can impair an officer's ability to make good decisions even after a chase ends.

As the simulator makes clear, though, real life can challenge even the best training and judgment. People may assume that every situation offers clear right and wrong choices, but the harrowing scenarios in the firearms simulator showed me how that line can blur, especially when time compresses and distance disappears.

FOR example: You get a radio call about a disturbed man holding a baby. You enter an alley and suddenly a man staggers out from behind a Dumpster. He's shirtless and shouting, drunk or otherwise deranged, and he carries a baby in a car seat. As you watch, horrified, he drops the seat, then snatches it up again. Using the firmest voice you can muster, you order him to set the baby down. Instead of complying, he reaches behind his back, pulls out a large machete, and rushes toward you.

How should you react?

Officer Gentile shakes his head. "I've seen this scenario a million times," he says, "but in real life I'm still not sure what I would do. If you shoot the guy, you're a hero. If you shoot the baby, then you'd have to live with that for the rest of your life."