

TRAINING FOR REALITY



By Jeff DuPont, Program Specialist, FLETC

Group photo of the "Top Cop" recipients with President Obama in the White House Rose Garden on May 14, 2010 (official White House photo)

January 17, 2009, started out like any typical Saturday in the small town of Glasgow, located in northeastern Montana. On this particular day, it was clear and cold in the Big Sky country.

Abundant snowfall had carpeted the eastern plains and the below zero temperatures had all of the area roads snow packed and icy. Residents were busy attending to many of the same things that they would ordinarily do on a Saturday morning, but little did they know, their lives were about to take a drastic turn for the worse.

The morning had turned to afternoon and at approximately 4:30 p.m., a lone sniper with no apparent motive, concealed near the parking lot of the local hospital decided to take his first shot. Moments later, a 37 year old Emergency Medical Technician and mother of four lay motionless on the icy ground; killed instantly from a lethal bullet wound. Upon hearing gunfire, a nurse who was on duty at the hospital, along with her husband, ran to the fallen victim to render aid, but were both hit themselves while attempting to rescue the victim, who unbeknownst to them, was already dead. Although both would-be rescuers were wounded, they were able to retreat to the cover of their vehicle where the husband retrieved his own weapon, contacted 9-1-1 and then returned fire, holding the gunman at bay until officers from the Glasgow Police Department arrived and engaged the shooter in a gun battle.

During the exchange of fire, the gunman was wounded, although not mortally and then quickly retreated to the thick cover of the nearby Milk River, located approximately 40 feet



President Barack Obama greets Bureau of Land Management Ranger Alex Burke Association in regards to her receiving awarded the prestigious "Top Cop" award from the National Association of Police Organizations on May 14, 2010. (official White House photos)

away from where he initially started his rampage. Unsure of the gunman's location or his next move, Glasgow police quickly locked down the town and sent out a request for help from any and all available law enforcement.

At around 6 p.m. Ranger Alex Steven Burke, of the Bureau of Land Management, and a graduate of the FLETC, was headed

to town to meet a friend for dinner following a well-deserved day off. Ranger Burke is responsible for patrolling a vast area in the northeastern part of the state and after a long week, was looking forward to a quiet evening and some quality time with friends.

The roadblock that was set by the Glasgow Police was the first indicator that something was amiss as Ranger Burke approached and soon found out. The local police explained the situation to the off-duty Ranger who immediately called dispatch to go in-service. Ranger Burke quickly returned home, changed into duty gear and responded to the call for assistance. While in-route, Burke's friend and occasional co-worker, Phillip Wright of the U.S. Border Patrol was summoned and met with Ranger Burke and the two of them, along with a local officer and a canine, soon took up the trail of the killer.

The tracking conditions were difficult. The canine was not a tracking dog, so Burke and Wright had to rely upon their skill as backcountry trackers to stay on the trail. The frozen ground had been tainted with signs from other officers, livestock and numerous wild animals, which made staying on track extremely difficult, especially under the stressful circumstances that come with knowing what may be waiting for them at the end of the trail. One thing that Burke and Wright used to their advantage was the subtle drops of blood that had been left on the newly fallen snow by the wounded gunman. Burke explained that at first, they noticed the blood around every forty yards or so, but eventually that diminished to around every four hundred yards or more.

After two and a half hours on the trail, Burke, Wright and the canine officer found themselves down beside the Milk

River, several miles away from the initial incident. Their perseverance and determination to stay on the trail was about to come to fruition. Burke said that all of a sudden they experienced a "very weird sensation" sort of a "sixth sense" telling them that the killer was very close. They would later find out that he was less than 100 yards away, when Ranger Burke made a call to dispatch, updating them on their present location and situation. At this point Burke noticed several drops of fresh blood on the frozen ground and was in the process of telling the dispatcher that they were close, when Wright suddenly yells out, "Show me your hands; show me your hands, knife!"

Following the verbal commands issued by Wright, the next sequence of events all happened in less than a minute, "very quickly" as described by Burke. Wright was in the lead, followed by the canine officer, then Burke and an unknown local officer brought up the rear. Burke had relayed to dispatch that they had contacted the suspect and then quickly terminated the call and focused full attention on the direction where Wright was looking and shouting commands.

Without warning, the suspect exploded from his hiding place, running an erratic pattern, toward the tracking party, with a knife in hand. At approximately 40 to 50 yards away, Ranger Burke yelled out "Shoot, shoot, I'm going to shoot," as the canine officer simultaneously released his dog who attacked the armed assailant. Just as the dog was about to put the bite on the attacker, he recklessly and wildly swung the knife, cutting the dogs mouth, breaking off one of its teeth, causing the dog to disengage as the attacker continued his advance toward the officers. As the suspect closed the distance,



the canine officer fired a single shot, but Ranger Burke noticed that the attacker didn't react. The officer had missed and did not fire a second shot. At this point, Burke took over.

Ranger Alex Steven Burke – more precisely Alexandra Steven Burke – then stepped into harm's way and shielded the other officers from any further onslaught. She leveled her Remington model 870 and fired a single round of buckshot, which delivered 15 pellets right on target. The threat was eliminated. Instinctively, Burke reloaded and tactically approached the motionless suspect and handcuffed the now lifeless body. Although she knew the suspect was more than likely dead, she thought earlier during the search that the suspect they had been tracking could possibly have been wearing body armor, prompting her to take the extra precaution by applying the handcuffs. The search for the dangerous fugitive was now over and all of the officers that had been involved in the sniper incident would safely be going home later that evening.

For her actions that night, Ranger Alexandra Burke was awarded the prestigious "Top Cop" award from the National Association of Police Organizations. She was also honored as a recipient of the Bravery Award given by the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association. In May 2011, Burke was greeted by President Obama in a Rose Garden ceremony which recognized the annual Top Cop recipients. In May 2012, Ranger Burke will return to Washington D.C. during Police Week and be honored once again. This time she will be recognized as the April 2012 officer of the month by the National Law Enforcement Officer's Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) and be featured in their annual fundraising calendar.

Ranger Burke graduated from FLETC in February 2005. She was a member of the Natural Resources Police Training program class 501. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management Ranger credited much of her FLETC training for surviving the events of that fateful January night. She was quick to give credit to the other officers who were involved in the hunt for the fugitive, especially Border Patrol agent Phillip Wright, whose abilities and skill in back-country tracking was described by Burke as "amazing." Ranger Burke also gave praise to the FLETC staff that was instrumental in her training, especially those who instilled in her the "winning mindset" and a gave her the tools to survive such a perilous situation. Ranger Burke extended her gratitude to the FLETC staff and said "Thanks guys, for all of the training. If

duty ever calls for me to do the same thing, I would do it all over again, knowing I've been trained by the best!" ✪

Jeff DuPont presently serves as a Program Specialist in the Driver and Marine Division's Marine Training Branch. Since joining FLETC in 2004, DuPont has served as a Driving Instructor and as a Senior Instructor in the MTB. DuPont has over 15 years of uniformed service as a Sheriff's deputy and as a trooper with the Georgia State Patrol.

DuPont is a veteran of the U.S. Navy and also holds a U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner's master's license. He has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and is currently enrolled in the master's program at Troy University.

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