

PATROL RIFLE CAR CARRY CONDITION

Is there a different or better way?

As one of the old guys who helped influence LEO's in the Midwest when the profession transitioned from the shotgun to the patrol rifle, I can tell you that it was a tough fight that took years to win. A concession that we collectively made back then was to adopt the shotguns car carry condition, mainly because we were afraid of negligent discharges (NDs) and it made the transition training a bit easier. Another reason was because quality, lockable, in-car patrol rifle racks were not widely available back then, and finally, there was concern that a rifle may discharge in a crash, which we now know is highly unlikely. Therefore, the patrol rifle's equivalent car carry condition meant that the rifle's bolt was closed on a cold chamber (empty), the safety selector on safe, and a fully loaded magazine was inserted. This requires the patrol officer to properly charge the rifle upon its deployment. However, when stress is induced both in training and on the street, this simple task has proven on occasion to be forgotten or done improperly (generally a short stroke) causing the rifle not to load and putting officers and citizens' lives in great danger.

Center Mass, Inc., started teaching patrol rifle instructor schools in 1997, and we were advocates of the aforementioned car carry condition. Our instructors wrote a white paper called "Patrol Rifle Training, Equipment and Policy Considerations." We donated that work to the National Tactical Officers Association who published it in 2002 and it was utilized for years as a resource to help agencies across the nation in transitioning to the patrol rifle.

Center Mass, Inc., will now begin presenting a second car carry option for agencies that field scout cars with lockable rifle racks. This option is called the ready condition, whereby the patrol rifle is deployed with a round in the chamber and the selector lever on safe. The patrol rifle is then locked in the scout cars rifle rack. This allows the rifle to be properly loaded and press checked in a safe environment, prior to a shift, just as we do with our duty pistols.

Why? Do your officers carry their handguns on the street without a round in the chamber? Of course not. If they did, do you think they would remember to charge the pistol and do it properly as they rolled up to violent scenes? As a profession, we know that would not be good policy as it would unnecessarily jeopardize our officers' lives. Therefore, we require pistols to be charged for duty and trust in our officers training and judgment to be safe with their pistols on the street, and before and after every shift.

Why then should the patrol rifle be any different? Moreover, most American LEO's carry semi-auto pistols with no safety. Yes, it's true that when the pistol is holstered its trigger is covered, but when the pistol is

drawn the officer becomes the pistol's only safety mechanism and everyone accepts that as best practice. It seems the patrol rifle is viewed differently, even though it has a mechanical safety switch, which makes it impossible to fire when it's engaged. It can be argued that this mechanical safety feature makes the patrol rifle far safer for officers to deploy than their pistol. Yet, we make our officers hit the street with unloaded rifles.

Could we not view the scout cars locked rifle rack the same as a pistols holster? Yes, the rifle's trigger is exposed in many rifle racks and the safety could inadvertently get moved from safe to semi, and in a perfect storm, something could inadvertently get within the trigger guard and depress the trigger causing a discharge. Yes, that could happen, but what will never happen again is an officer deploying on a violent scene with an unloaded rifle.

I have witnessed my peers, students and competitive shooters forget to charge the rifle or short stroke the charging handle under stress countless times in the last 40 years. I have designed and conducted many courses of fire for my agency, at the schools my company runs and at the National Patrol Rifle Championships that specifically and repeatedly force the shooter to remember to charge the rifle. I find myself watching in consistent amazement how often this simple task causes officers problems.

Therein lies the problem. We know this happens in training and on the street. So, let's assume you poll your officers, and they tell you they have never forgotten to charge the rifle or accidentally short stroked it in training or on the street. Well then, I would say carry on smartly with your traditional car carry condition as you obviously don't have this problem. However, what if they tell you that this has happened? Are you going to provide more well intended training as the corrective action? Or might you consider taking a more decisive action to solve the problem once and for all, so the only thing your officers must do while under any sort of stress is go hunting, make positive ID, move the selector switch from safe to semi, and not miss? If it was me making the decision and I was not sure how to proceed, I might consider a test run with my most experienced rifle armed officers first to see how it goes. If it's a success after some time, then I'd be more comfortable with expanding the practice. And if the practice brings no added value, I could go back to the traditional method and know that I at least tried a new approach.

I don't believe that this is just an officer training issue as we have collectively hammered home the absolute importance of properly charging the rifle with countless reps and all kinds of various stimuli to try and create stress inoculation. We've had nearly 30 years to fix it and this recurring problem still exists. In fact, this training starts at the academy, carries on throughout the officer's career at in-service training and

we even send some officers to special high speed patrol rifle schools, but the problem persists, even amongst our most proficient patrol rifle armed officers.

I do believe our profession's priorities might be upside down as it seems that we are more fearful of a negligent discharge (ND) with a patrol rifle, rather than ensuring that our officers are 100% ready to protect themselves and the citizens they serve by having loaded rifles. Speaking of priorities, just take a look at how many holes are in every single PD's walls, ceilings, lockers and floors from pistol ND's, yet we still mandate that pistols are made hot when you hit the street. What's the difference? Will there be more patrol rifle ND's if you allow loaded rifles? Perhaps, but administrative loading and unloading the patrol rifle is 100% a training issue that can be mitigated by you as it has nothing to do with the stress associated with the violence officers encounter on the street, because that stress does not exist before and after a shift. I hate to make this comparison as the police are not the military, but we should learn from any source possible. For example, when our armed forces leave a base to go on a mounted (in a vehicle) patrol, they often have no idea if they will end up in a gun fight (just like a cop here in the good old safe USA). The only difference is the armed forces have loaded rifles at the ready. In fact, the armed forces even allow 18-year-olds to carry loaded M-4's (patrol rifles) in vehicles that don't have lockable rifle racks. Why is that? Because the services have just a bit of experience in knowing how conditions can change in a split second from serene, to full-on combat. As a former Army Drill Sergeant (guy who trained new soldiers) I can tell you with the utmost confidence that those 18-year-old boots have nowhere near the gun handling experience that your cops have. Yet we send our experienced, educated, degree holding cops on the street with unloaded rifles every day, because we are more afraid of them having a negligent discharge, rather than increasing their odds of winning a gun fight. In short, we need to be committed to giving our officers the best possible chance for survival as we ask them to risk their lives.

If the label of failure must be attached, then that failure starts with guys like me who have not stood up and pushed back on the status quo, or at least brought the subject up for debate, even though we have known the problems associated with the currently accepted car carry condition exist. A personal experience happened to me in the fall of 2014. I was working my last few shifts before I retired. I literally drove around with blinders on so I wouldn't get into anything, but in typical Jeff Felts style, I drove right into two groups who were gun fighting each other. At that point I was 49 years old and had been using and training with a patrol rifle for over 30 years. Countless hours as a soldier, cop and SWAT cop, let alone with my company and the NPRC. Guess what Mr. Patrol Rifle himself did as I bailed out of the scout car? I unknowingly short stroked the charging handle of my agency issued pool gun as I took off chasing the suspects up the stairwell of a Section 8 housing complex to the 4th floor. After the arrests, I realized

my rifle was not charged and that I had unknowingly risked my life and that of the other cops who came to back me up. I didn't tell anyone as I was extremely embarrassed. However, I did diagnose what likely happened and guess what, I've seen the same thing happen in training many times before. When I pulled the charging handle back it angled downward and stopped at the front of the collapsible stock leading me to believe under stress, that my rifle was charged. Why didn't you look at the charging handle to ensure it was done properly, Jeff? Well, on the street things can get very dynamic in a split second and you must keep your eyes on the threat so you can respond appropriately and in a timely fashion. Ergo the street is not the sterile flat range, nor can we recreate every dynamic scenario our officers will encounter in the training environment.

As the founder of the NPRC, I receive the various nominations for the Chief Jeff Chudwin Patrol Rifle Excellence Award. I have received nominations over the years where the nominee has had a malfunction, and one whereby the nominee unknowingly short stroked his charging handle (verified by body cam) while under the most extreme stress imaginable and then came face to face with a killer. Ever since I learned of that incident I have felt a sense of culpability because if I had stood up earlier and advocated to change this practice, there's a chance this nominee would have never been in that situation. Today I am standing up in the hope that it will help inspire others to at least consider changing their patrol rifle car carry policy and training in the name of officer safety and survivability.

Please consider simplifying your officers' job and increasing their survivability by allowing them to properly load their patrol rifles in a safe and sterile environment before the start of a shift. Take the time to hammer home proper administrative patrol rifle loading, press checking and unloading in the training environment. Then trust your officers with their loaded patrol rifles just as you trust them with their loaded pistols. By doing this, if they should need to take a shot, they will have confidence the rifle is properly loaded and the odds of hearing the dreaded metallic click are greatly reduced.

Respectfully,

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