New Nonfiction by Erick L. Sokn: You Can Never Know for Sure

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As a military police officer in the 1970s, I responded to multiple shots fired calls, homicides, vehicle accidents, armed robberies, assaults, bar fights and brawls (there is a difference), and many other incidents. I arrested people for rape, homicide, child abuse, armed robbery, and assault. I took handguns, knives, and even one shotgun away from a variety of people in a variety of situations. And I physically subdued—I don't even know how many—people while doing that job. I was treated twice for injuries I received during my service, had friends spend days in the hospital, and fortunately knew only one who didn't survive.

I was really pretty good at de-escalating a lot of situations. I was also pretty good at deciding when de-escalation wouldn't work and taking decisive action to quickly contain a situation. There were so many incidents that it just became a way of life, and I've never been able to turn off the situational awareness it embedded in me.

As a squad leader and acting sergeant, often riding solo as we were short on people, I was responsible for the outcome of a lot of incidents. I was frequently the specifically requested backup unit for other patrols. I remember the feeling of adrenaline heightening my readiness heading into multiple situations. For me, the waiting was the hard part—you could feel the tension in your body and learned to control it.

Cops deal with an adrenaline surge at the start of every encounter. They hold themselves in check until the situation clarifies and then push themselves through it and into action. When everything broke loose and I started moving, I never noticed the adrenaline. Once moving, my mind and body seemed to just move as one, flowing with the changing environment.

I learned how a blind rage can be triggered and what it can do once—and released it completely only once. It was during a brawl off-post. We were three MPs in regulation haircuts walking into a bar that didn't much care for service people, and we stood out right away. We'd already had a few, and Pacheco, a squad member and friend, was more argumentative than he would've been sober. The bouncers at the door didn't want us in their bar. Pacheco took exception to that and started arguing. A bouncer went to push him. He didn't even finish the motion—I just reacted. While the bouncer's hands were still moving forward, I used his momentum and helped him through the door and onto the sidewalk, where I was already on top of him. That's just how tuned my reaction time was back then. I hadn't planned it. When he moved, I moved. I didn't think.

The bar emptied behind me. I was still on the bouncer, on the ground. I remember the feeling of weightlessness as several people must have grabbed me from behind and lifted me off him, a clump of his hair coming with. They threw me forward into the parking lot. As I rolled to my feet, I saw the area outside the bar with probably 25–30 people pouring out the door and lining up against us.

I couldn't see Nick. Nick and I were close; we trusted each other's dependability and capability completely. I saw Pacheco on the ground with three guys over him, all kicking him. I remember yelling, "They've got Pacheco!" and heading toward his location, expecting Nick to still be fine. I was mad. The crowd came at me then. There were just so many in the group between us. I only made a few feet of progress at a time and

had to fight for every inch of it. But I let the rage flow and kept fighting forward and to the right, to where I had last seen Pacheco.

I was the only one of our group still on my feet when it was over and the squad cars started pulling into the parking lot. Nick was in the hospital for three days, Pacheco was in for overnight observation, and I—after having my head X-rayed to make sure I didn't have a fractured skull—was sewn back up and released.

The morning after, the severity of the fight was obvious. My face was swollen and discolored. Both eyes had that deep black-and-blue look you get with a broken nose. My right eyebrow was stitched end to end where a head butt had landed. My ribs, back, and joints were bruised deeply enough that it hurt to move, and both hands were swollen and cut. But I forced myself up and went to the hospital to check on Nick and Pacheco.

We actually took a total of seven of them with us to the hospital. Nick had just completed his Army enlistment, which was the reason we were out to begin with. He was taken to the civilian hospital. He counted the others as they were brought in. Nick went down with a group on him early. Someone in that group had taken out his right knee with a side kick. In a brawl you are fighting all sides at once. You simply can't avoid everything. Once Nick was on the ground, they had him. Nick and Pacheco thought they could account for possibly one, or at most two. So, the other five were "credited" to me as the minimum I was responsible for—and it's possible it was all seven. That's what letting your rage out can do.

Learning what you are capable of makes it difficult to think in the self-righteous terms used by most "civilized men." The "There but by the grace of God go I" is more like it. The savage nature of man is part of you; it may be buried by modern society and custom, but it's there nonetheless. And

once you uncork that bottle, something in you always knows you can do it again. Maybe that’s why those who serve have trouble fitting into civilian life again.

Personally, I like to think that God needs sheepdogs too—those who know what they are really capable of and are willing and able to meet savagery with savagery when necessary.

There have been times in the business world and interacting with what I would call total assholes that I have wished for a less civilized world again. It has been so tempting to release that part of me sometimes. I guess that’s why they call it exercising restraint.

One incident that bothered me for a long time was pulling the trigger on someone who turned out to not deserve it. He wasn’t even hurt and is still one of the dreams that woke me up night after night for around 15 years—replaying the scene over and over in my head, trying to see what I’d missed. And time and time again, making the same decision to pull the trigger and seeing and feeling everything in stark detail.

My unit and another MP unit had been dispatched to an arms room alarm and were told no one should be in the building, everyone was accounted for. We saw the locks had been cut off, lying on the ground to the right side, and the door stood slightly ajar. Nick and I went through the door, me going first and to the left, Nick following and staying to my right. The arms room was dark, and everything was mostly just shadows and deeper shadows. Second chance vests (the nickname for the first Kevlar vests) did not exist back then. You got one chance. If you screwed up, you died.

We saw the intruder. Nick identified us as Military Police and yelled for him to freeze.

He was just a shadowy silhouette when he turned and started raising his hands toward me, with a weapon in his right hand. We were less than 20 feet apart. Neither of us was going to

miss at that range. If I had waited, his weapon would have been level with my chest a fraction of a second later, and it would have been too late. So, I pulled the trigger—center of mass, slow and steady. Everything was in slow motion. I remember the feel of my finger changing shape against the resistance of the trigger, the pressure required dropping as the trigger traveled toward the fire point, concentrating fully on making my first shot count, and knowing I was putting a second round in him right behind the first. I had all the time in the world to stop him before he even leveled on me.

My weapon never even discharged. Just as the trigger was reaching the fire point, I heard the subject yell, *"Don't shoot!"* I was able to grab the hammer with my right thumb just as the trigger reached the fire point, and I held it back with the weapon still centered on him while I watched and waited.

It doesn't get any closer than this—he should have already been dead. I had fired that sidearm many times and knew where the trigger let loose. It was at the release point. I should not have been able to catch the hammer before it fell, but I did.

He still had a weapon in his hand, being raised in the direction of my chest, but the signals were conflicting. I just reacted on my gut. Something in the way he yelled—his tone or the timing, maybe—didn't match a full-on aggressive action after being surprised, with two weapons pointed at him, mine and Nick's. That reasoning was not at a conscious level and would take years to work out as the why. It was a very tense second, waiting with the hammer held back, my weapon dead center of mass, his raising toward my chest… the adrenaline surge was off the charts. Pure fear that I might be wrong and allowing him first move. My body screamed for me to finish the shot, to not let him level on me—but my mind insisted I hold.

He was, in fact, raising his arms over his head. It wasn't

until we were next to him that we could identify what he was holding as a nightstick. Black, round, and about 18″ long. But the initial action—while facing me in the dark room, only a silhouette—looked exactly like a firearm being raised into firing position. I remember everything about the scene even today. I had an instant vision of how it would play out, and every fiber of my being was complying with this vision to ensure it became reality. I was totally focused on killing this guy before he could kill me.

And I would have been ***wrong***. An innocent man would have died. A “good guy” with the guts to go in and play hero would have died! In my mind’s eye, I had killed him. Sounds stupid, I know. He’s fine, I’m fine; no harm, no foul. But the mental impact felt like I had killed him—I was that committed to the action. In the recurring dream, nearly every time, the hammer would fall before I could catch it. Very occasionally, I was able to catch the hammer, only to have him be the one who fired once he leveled—and I’d wake up at his muzzle flash.

Pulling the trigger in the arms room has bothered me the most of everything that happened during my time as an MP, even though the other soldier was unharmed. It gave me nightmares for a decade and a half and still pops into my head randomly. It bothered me not because I was willing to kill someone, but because I could be wrong when I did. I guess I always prided myself on making the right choice in tough situations—I had so far—and this proved I could be wrong.

I searched over and over for what I had missed. But in every deep-dive review and in every dream, I always decided pulling the trigger was the right choice. Even when it turned out I was wrong, the initial choice to fire was the correct one. I felt I was still perfectly willing to kill someone if it was necessary—but now I knew I could be wrong in the choice.

I felt unbelievable guilt for starting to pull the trigger on an innocent man—for not correctly identifying the weapon as a

nightstick instead of as the barrel of a gun. I also felt significant guilt for not finishing the shot. Finishing the shot was the correct tactical choice given the situation. The decision to grab the hammer was made on instinct instead of objective evidence. It was a risk that should not have been taken under those circumstances.

My training and all evidence said this guy needed to die, and I let him live. Not finishing that shot could have gotten both me and Nick killed. I failed on both sides of the equation. I was wrong to start pulling the trigger when all the facts were in, and wrong to stop the hammer fall with the facts available at the time the decision needed to be made.

The incident taught me that even when all evidence and every data point says the answer is A, the real answer can still be B. Evidence can be wrong, misleading, or incomplete. You still have to decide. You still have to act. The arms room taught me that decision-making isn't about certainty; it's about probability, and recognizing when objective evidence runs out and judgment has to take over. If you have the subject-matter expertise and experience, it isn't a guess; it's a higher level of thinking, almost at a reflex level—your mind arriving at an answer with reasoning it can't always articulate in the moment.

Years later, as an engineer, this way of thinking made me more cautious and more able, when needed, to decide a path on incomplete evidence. I didn't jump to conclusions, but I wouldn't hesitate to choose.

Maytag was my first job as an engineer. About six months after I was hired, they cut 43% of the engineering staff. I stayed. I went from six projects to twenty-two. I sorted through them and made recommendations on which to keep and which to drop or put on hold.

There was one project that looked fine on paper—all the

numbers checked out—but I told them something felt off about it, like I was missing something. The Director of Engineering said he had been having the same feeling, so we shelved it, even though on paper it should have moved forward. My time as an MP taught me that judgment under uncertainty isn't just about knowing when to act but also when to stop.

On another occasion, we were replacing the metal spinner basket on a washing machine with a plastic version I was designing. The spinner basket size was being increased, which reduced the distance between the basket and the outer tub by about fifty percent. This was done to increase the advertised capacity of the washing machine, making it the largest capacity machine in the industry.

The first prototype basket cost $1 million. We also had to address issues with the outer tub sagging over time from the weight of the water and the transmission cover changing shape when the basket was spinning. Both of these issues reduced clearance even further, and under certain conditions the basket would hit the tub

I was making what I hoped were the final design tweaks to the transmission cover when the Director of Engineering came down to the lab and told me we were at the drop-dead point to release the rest of the capital for launch. I'd only been an engineer for two to three years.

He asked, "Is this going to work?"

I told him, "I think so."

With that, he approved another $3.8 million in tooling, presses, and other equipment. We didn't even have a full set of successful testing completed yet. We pulled the trigger—on a $4 million spend—based on an "I think so," from me, not actual evidence.

And it worked.

High-risk, short-timing projects and judgment calls were a significant part of my engineering career. I learned in the arms room that we never really know for sure if a decision is the correct one in the moment. You can’t know until the final results are in.