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TRAFFIC STOP AMBUSH

Tips for thwarting and surviving roadside attackers

By Greg Erie



Ambush attacks resulting in line-of-duty deaths are on the rise and have been for several years. There is no good news/bad news approach to these types of attacks. An ambush is what it is. It is defined as: an act of hiding, waiting for others to appear, and then suddenly attacking them.

However, there are things to look for. One thing that stands out is traffic stop ambushes. In video after video of traffic stop ambushes, one thing remains constant: brake lights. This was brought to my attention at an International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA) conference by retired chief Jeff Chudwin. You would be hard pressed to find a better trainer. When Chudwin talks, people listen.

When conducting a traffic stop, most people place their car in park anticipating being **stationary** while the officer conducts his or her business. Why would someone sit and wait for you with their brake lights **on**? This should be a huge red flag to approach with caution or call for backup.

Approach side



[WATCH VIDEO: Pay attention to driver's cues and behaviors, in particular the brake lights.](#)

Approaching, which side do you take? Driver or passenger side? Typically officers have been trained driver-side approaches but in recent years, the passenger side is starting to reveal some tactical advantages. It's also safer in traffic.

One advantage of approaching from the passenger's side is people expect you to approach the driver, so it presents an element of surprise to would-be attackers.

Ever make a passenger-side approach at night and have the occupant(s) of the vehicle completely shocked when you tap on the window? Drivers expect you on the driver's side, so use surprise to your advantage.

Because the driver expects the officer to arrive on the driver's side, approaching opposite requires the driver to shift position — and plans. If, for example, the driver were attempting to ambush you, instead of just raising his or her weapon to shoot through the driver side window — easily done without even looking at you — they now have to acquire where you are on the passenger side and shift position in the car to shoot at you.

Most importantly, a passenger-side approach affords you safe egress if you should be attacked. Rather than fleeing into traffic, you will find cover behind a road barrier or in a drainage ditch.

In my department, we have conducted training at length to determine the “best” way to react when being shot at on a traffic stop. It really comes down to the reaction of individual officers. In training, some back peddled while trying to draw their weapons. Others turned to their left and ran into oncoming traffic while drawing their weapon. All of them subconsciously flinched before doing either, which bought the attacker more time. Given these findings, passenger-side approaches seemed to be more advantageous and tactically sound. You don't want to flinch yourself into traffic.

When they pay too much attention



[WATCH VIDEO: Again, notice the brake lights, but also the broader behavior of the driver — his driving and movements within the vehicle.](#)

Another indicator we have seen during traffic stop ambushes is the attacker being overly attentive to where the officer is when making their approach. They will turn and look a couple of times and fidget in their car seat while the officer is approaching. This might be a pre-attack indicator.

Furtive movements and undue attention to your position, when combined with brake lights on, should set off a red flag. Slow down and engage the driver and occupants with caution. At the very least, they'll know you're picking up what they're laying down and might reconsider an attack.

We tell our officers once the traffic stop is initiated, and the offender has pulled over, to turn their wheels to the left, leaving the car in drive, and do a slow count to ten while watching the offender vehicle (another tip I picked up from Chudwin). We do this because if the offender were to jump out and begin firing, officers only have to stomp the accelerator and drive around or through the threat using gross motor skills. Ever try putting your car into drive, turning the wheel, and *then* stomping the accelerator while getting shot at? Not as easy as it sounds.

Effective cover

If you have the ability, get cars from a local junkyard and take them to your range. Experiment with different types of cars. Find the areas on vehicles that provide **cover**. I was surprised to discover that it took 52 rounds from an AR-15 to penetrate through the passenger side “B pillar” of a Ford Explorer and exit through the driver's side “B pillar.” Don't get me wrong: The rounds went right through the passenger side pillar, but it took 52 rounds to degrade the driver's side pillar enough before the rounds began exiting. Even then, they were already coming apart.

Bullets and cars don't go together like peas and carrots. The glass on a car will rip your round apart resulting in little more than fragmentation hits on target. Experiment with different rounds as well.

The information you gather through experimentation with ammunition and junk cars might prove vital someday, and experience is a poor teacher because the test comes first and then the lesson. Experience all you can **before** the test comes, my friends!

Conclusion

Finally, trust your instincts. If something feels off, slow down and proceed with caution. Your subconscious might be trying to tell your conscious mind something important.

It may feel routine at times, but each traffic stop is unique and involves unknown risks. Treat it as such. Very, very few people are willing or wanting to attack police officers when they least expect it. But it does happen. Remember that and until next time, train hard and stay safe.

About Greg Erie

Greg Erie has been a Waterloo, Iowa, Police Officer since 1995. He is a field training officer (FTO), TASER and defensive tactics instructor, firearms instructor and department armorer. He served 13 years as a patrol officer and has been on the department tactical unit since 1998, where he serves dual roles as both entry officer and police sniper. He has been the training officer for his department since 2008, and he is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. He can be reached at erieg@waterloopolice.com.