

# Toronto tactical squad to test stun guns

## Targets zapped with probe delivering 50,000 volts

BY CHRIS EBY

Electric stun guns have been added to the arsenal of Toronto police as the force searches for alternatives to using lethal force in violent confrontations.

Tasers — stun guns that fire a metal dart charged with a paralyzing electric current — are already credited with saving lives in other parts of Canada.

The Ontario government yesterday approved a four-month pilot project with the Taser used exclusively by the Toronto force's tactical unit.

"This is going to save lives; I know for a fact it has in Victoria and it has in Edmonton," said Toronto police Sergeant Doug Walker, who heads the tactical unit's training section.

There are field studies underway by city police in Edmonton and Ottawa and in six RCMP detachments and two special units in Alberta, B.C. and Saskatchewan.

The Victoria City Police Department has already included the devices in their "less-lethal" inventory (pepper spray, tear gas, bean-bag guns), with the blessing of both provincial politicians and civil libertarians.

The Taser works by firing a metal probe propelled by wires from distances of up to 6.5 metres that breaks the skin and zaps the target with 50,000 volts of electricity, over-riding the person's neuromuscular system, making muscle contractions impossible.

In the 20 years North American law enforcement agencies have used Tasers, no deaths have been directly linked to the devices. And, according to a recent medical study conducted by the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, the electrical shock does not in-

terfere with heart rhythm or pace makers.

There is also no medical evidence to date of any lasting effects. The shock lasts a matter of seconds and recovery is virtually instantaneous.

Police say the devices are invaluable in situations where officers are confronted by violent suspects who are mentally disturbed or in a drug induced rage.

The limitations are that they can only be used up to certain distances and the dart may not always pierce heavy coats or clothing.

Environmental factors may also play a role. The locations of the RCMP field study are deliberate in that the officers are seeing if the stun guns work in freezing-cold temperatures (High Level, Alta.) and rainy, humid climates (Surrey, B.C.).

The results of both the RCMP Ottawa, and Edmonton police studies are expected in January.

Yesterday, the media were given a live demonstration of the effects of Tasers at the Emergency Task Force barracks in Toronto, where the squad's commander, Superintendent Wayne Oldham, volunteered to be stunned.

With a probe already attached to his chest, Supt. Oldham charged an officer with a rubber knife, simulating a violent confrontation.

After being zapped the six-foot tall, 220-pound man cried out in pain and crumpled to the ground.

"It was painful ... electric pulses going through your whole body. I just fell down, I couldn't take another half a step," Supt. Oldham said immediately afterwards, his face red and his brow wet with perspiration.

"I didn't think it would be that bad."

Patti Whitten, a tactical paramedic, also allowed herself to be zapped and after collapsing in a heap, gasping, described the feeling as like being "hit with a sledgehammer."

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KEVIN VAN PAASSEN / NATIONAL POST

Toronto Police demonstrate a TASER gun yesterday, which employs an electrical current to the body.