

CRAWFORD COUNTY DEPUTY JOHN KLEPADLO III

Domestic disturbances routinely show up on police department daily activity logs, but experienced officers know that some of them turn out to be anything *but* routine. Family conflicts are unpredictable and can become extremely violent before police even have a chance to intervene.

Crawford County Deputy John Klepadlo, a 5-year veteran, was well aware of this reality last February 3 when he was dispatched just after 2 p.m. to a reported domestic dispute in progress at an apartment in the city of Grayling. However, the circumstances he found at the scene were not typical of an explosive situation.

Deputy Klepadlo, accompanied by a Grayling officer who also was assigned to the case, discovered that the 23-year-old tenant whose loud, angry behavior spurred the disturbance complaint was actually not face-to-face with the object of his rage. He was arguing with his girlfriend over the phone. There was no immediate possibility of violence between the two at this location.

In addition, the subject – although still highly agitated – was cooperative. He stated that the only other person at home was his 2-year-old son, and he gave the officers permission to search the apartment in order to see for themselves. His claim proved to be true.

Deputy Klepadlo then addressed the issue of a strong odor of marijuana that permeated the apartment. He questioned the subject's use of the drug in the presence of his little boy. The subject admitted he had been smoking marijuana and that he did not have a medical card authorizing him to use it.

As a result of this conversation, when the officers left the apartment complex a complaint was filed with Child Protective Services. That agency, based on what was described as "a history of similar complaints" involving the father, assigned two case workers to investigate the situation at the apartment.

According to the CPS investigators' account, the subject's attitude toward them was highly abrasive from the moment of their arrival at the location, and he progressively became angrier and more hostile. They said he apparently knew they would be coming to the apartment and immediately began demanding to know whether they were there to take his son. With his fists clenched he warned that "you'll see what happens" if they tried to remove the child from his custody.

Feeling seriously threatened the case workers left the scene and reported back to their office. They prepared and filed a petition which convinced a Probate Court Judge to promptly order exactly the official action the subject had warned against.

A little more than two hours after he responded to the original domestic disturbance complaint, Deputy Klepadlo returned to the apartment to assist

Child Protective Services workers in serving the court order. He was joined by Grayling Patrolman Al Somero.

There were major differences in this subsequent assignment, factors which combined to make it far more dangerous.

This time, the target of the subject's rage wasn't at the other end of a telephone connection. The CPS workers and police officers were in direct confrontation with him.

This time, the primary goal of the official intervention wasn't to calm down a tense and potentially abusive family situation. It was to carry out an action -- taking custody of his young son -- that was certain to enrage the subject and spike the likelihood for a violent reaction to the very top of his emotional gauge.

These risk-intense elements made the circumstances volatile from the outset. When the officers and case workers reached the apartment complex they found the subject outside with his son. He was loading his truck, evidently rushing to get away before the authorities could engage him. His failure to avoid them set the stage for a tragic progression of events.

When Deputy Klepadlo and the others advised him of the court order to remove the boy he at once became furiously adamant, repeatedly insisting "You are not taking him!" and "That's not going to happen!" He then lifted the child and

carried him up a flight of stairs to his apartment. The officers and CPS workers followed him.

Inside the apartment the risk of violence rapidly escalated as the subject's emotions approached the breaking point. While the case workers attempted to explain the court order through the pounding noise of a blasting stereo, his anguished rage intensified. Despite the obvious realities he faced, he desperately insisted again and again, "You're not taking my son!"

Deputy Klepadlo and Patrolman Somero drew their Tasers and aimed them at the subject. This unmistakable warning had no noticeable effect and the situation continued to worsen. The subject set the boy down at his side, then placed his hands in his pockets. The officers readied their Tasers and shouted commands for him to show his hands. When the man finally complied, he did so in a way that set the stage for the kind of ending to the incident that no one wanted.

As the subject withdrew his hands one of the CPS workers yelled one chilling word – "Knife!" Deputy Klepadlo holstered his Taser and drew his Glock service pistol. Patrolman Somero, shouting orders to drop the weapon, backed farther out of reach of a stabbing or slashing attempt. The subject, who had been holding the knife behind his back as he continued screaming, "You're not taking my son!" suddenly shifted his stance and lunged directly toward Deputy Klepadlo with the knife extended in front of him.

Having ignored numerous warnings and all opportunities to desist before he spiraled completely out of control, despite the auto-pistol now pointed at him from just a few feet away, he continued past the point of no return. Deputy Klepadlo was forced to act in self-defense, and for the protection of the others at the scene. There was no way to know how much damage might be done by the enraged man if he wasn't stopped immediately. Deputy Klepadlo fired a single round into the subject's chest.

Emergency medical assistance was called to the scene, but none of the implemented first-aid measures succeeded. The subject, with the knife lying on the floor next to his hand, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Deputy John Klepadlo, thanks to your professional and personal discipline, you made every effort to prevent the subject from bringing tragic consequences to himself and his 2-year-old son. Thanks to your expertise, critical judgment and commitment to duty, you succeeded in defending your own life and, by doing so, protecting the others who were with you, performing their respective duties.

You have truly earned POAM's highest honor, and it is a privilege to present you with our Police Officer of the Year Award.

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