

**IONIA COUNTY OFFICERS  
PHILLIP HESCHE AND FREDERICK STRAUBEL**

The most critical decision law enforcement officers can make is to employ lethal force. According to professional protocol it is the action of last resort and, personally, no one wishes to be in a situation where it has to be taken. But sometimes there is no viable option. Sometimes it is the only way to achieve the best possible outcome when innocent lives are immediately at stake.

Ionia County Deputies Phillip Hesché and Frederick Straubel faced exactly those circumstances last June 22 in an incident that did not yet involve the Sheriff's Department when it began about 10:45 a.m., but swiftly developed into a major emergency.

City of Ionia Public Safety Officers Randy Dankenbring and Jennifer Skorka were dispatched to a residence to conduct a well-being check on a man described as being deranged and unstable. They were cautioned that the subject had a long gun and he had stated, "If you send the police to my house, I will kill myself." After they reached the location and surveyed the property, they knocked on the front door and called out to the man but received no response. They then returned to their patrol car and reported the status to

dispatch, which had been attempting without success to reach the man by telephone.

Upon hearing a muffled popping noise that sounded like a backfire but could have been gunfire, they moved the car to a more secure location that was near enough to view the house. They were joined by Officer Doug DeVries, and the three of them were standing outside their vehicles, assessing the situation, when a much louder bang suddenly rang out. This was unquestionably the sound of a gunshot. At that point the incident became a rapidly intensifying emergency in which the danger level for officers and area citizens accelerated by the moment.

Public Safety Dispatch quickly learned a major incident was unfolding. Officer Dankenbring radioed that two residents of a neighboring home were requesting an ambulance because they'd been shot. Then shots were fired at Officers DeVries and Skorka while they were retrieving emergency gear from their vehicles. Fortunately, they weren't hit, but their patrol cars were. The extremely disturbed and hostile subject, armed with a shotgun he obviously intended to continue using, then set out on foot through the neighborhood.

Recognizing the fast-expanding potential for a multi-victim tragedy, Public Safety dispatch sent out an emergency tone and an urgent request for assistance from State and County police units. The Ionia County Critical

Incident Team and officers from several departments, including the Ionia County Sheriff's Department and Michigan State Police, rushed to the area.

Deputy Straubel, a 15-year veteran of the Sheriff's Department, was deployed with his fellow members of the Critical Incident Team. When he arrived he joined Deputy Hesche and the two of them, upon hearing that the subject was seen walking east on Main Street, set out together in pursuit.

As they proceeded, it was alarmingly apparent that many civilians who were going about their business on that summer morning could soon be in serious jeopardy. They instructed a homeowner who was outside his house to go back indoors. They encountered several construction workers and told them to immediately take precautions, including "getting down." The fact was that anyone along the way could unknowingly become a target at the whim of an unstable man who already had shot two of his neighbors and attempted to shoot three officers.

Once Deputy Straubel and Detective Hesche could clearly see the subject, who was carrying the shotgun in his right hand, they took cover behind a tree. They verbally identified themselves as police officers and ordered him to drop the weapon. Instead, the man leveled the gun to his hip and fired at them.

It was blatantly obvious that the subject was determined, for whatever deranged reasons, to use deadly force until he was stopped by it. He had tried to maim and possibly kill five people in the previous few minutes. Now he was firing away at two more officers, professionals who were equipped and trained to defend themselves and bring an end to the imminent threat to their lives and, quite possible, the lives of others.

Deputy Straubel returned fire with his service rifle, wounding the man – staggering him but not bringing him down. Even if there had been the tiniest sliver of possibility that lethal force could have been avoided, it would have vanished in the next moment.

The subject defiantly yelled, “Is that all you got?” and fired another blast at the officers. Deputy Straubel again returned fire, this time causing him to fall to the ground atop his shotgun. He was pronounced dead less shortly thereafter at Sparrow Hospital in Ionia.

Deputy Phillip Hesche and Deputy Frederick Straubel, you put yourselves directly in harm’s way by confronting a subject who had attempted to kill several people and was obviously intent on shooting others, be they private citizens or law enforcement personnel. Your decisive action, your bravery, and your professional dedication protected the lives and safety of civilians and your fellow officers by preventing further violent attacks.

We therefore are proud to thank you and honor you as POAM Police  
Officers of the Year.

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