

# YOGA

## A NEW SKILL SET FOR COMBAT PERFORMANCE

By Kris Mienert and Olivia Kvitne

Just as the title of this publication indicates, SWAT operators continue to look for the “tactical edge.” Most operators by now should be familiar with functional fitness and proper nutrition and how they are critical to a safe and successful SWAT career, but what about the bigger picture of creating a holistic SWAT operator?

SWAT operators see the worst of the worst. Over time, call after call, year after year, the buildup can be career-ending. But it doesn’t have to be. There is a little known skill set that can not only increase one’s SWAT tactical ability, but also create resiliency to high levels of stress. It may be something you’d never considered trying before. What if it was yoga?

The May 2015 report, “The President’s Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing,” identified officer wellness and safety as one of six pillars.

“**There is a little known skill set that can not only increase one’s SWAT tactical ability, but also create resiliency to high levels of stress. It may be something you’d never considered trying before. What if it was yoga?**”

The report states that “a large proportion of officer injuries and deaths are not the result of interaction with criminal offenders but the outcome of poor physical health due to poor nutrition, lack of exercise, sleep deprivation, and substance abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

The task force identified several action items, including continued

research of an annual mental health check for officers as well as fitness, resilience and nutrition and the promotion of safety and wellness within law enforcement agencies. Police administrators have a duty to identify and implement action items for their own agencies that are in line with the task force’s above recommendations. This might require looking outside the standard police training concepts and introducing unfamiliar but relevant and research-based practices.

Many studies have been published about the benefits of yoga, as well as other mindfulness training, as a self-regulation tool for the nervous system. Several yoga programs already exist specifically for the needs of veterans with post-traumatic stress. Typically, these programs are rooted in trauma-sensitive yoga, which is specific to students who have witnessed

traumatic events or cumulative stress in their lives or careers. Because of these studies and the success of yoga in VA hospitals, it is now being implemented as a strategic tool to assist law enforcement officers and fire service members in stress inoculation and nervous system regulation.

“Yoga” can be a four-letter word that might cause most SWAT officers to cringe. Yoga, which simply means “union,” provides techniques to train the mind, nervous system and physical body to work together and perform at their highest level of functioning. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) supports the integration of yoga into the exercise regimens of healthy individuals so long as properly trained professionals deliver instruction.<sup>2</sup>

Yoga works on areas of the brain responsible for clear communication under stress, accessing information visually and responding with intelligent gut reactions, situational awareness, proprioception, body awareness and

“**“Yoga” can be a four-letter word that might cause most SWAT officers to cringe. Yoga, which simply means “union,” provides techniques to train the mind, nervous system and physical body to work together and perform at their highest level of functioning.**

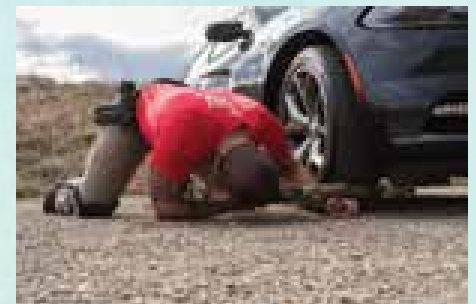
mechanics, and accessing “flow,” also known as “in the zone,” where one is operating at optimal levels of activity. Besides the brain and nervous system, yoga strengthens small stabilizing muscles and increases mobility, which helps for balance in awkward shooting positions, lessens injury rates and creates faster recovery from injury.

All the benefits above can assist in the practices of firearms, defensive tactics and physical exertion, as well as the mental aspects of community relations, peer relations, emotional adaptability, assessing suspects and accurate split-second response, ultimately leading to increased combat effectiveness. A properly trained instructor can effectively demonstrate yoga concepts and postures that cross over to the skills and shooting positions SWAT operators require to do their job well.

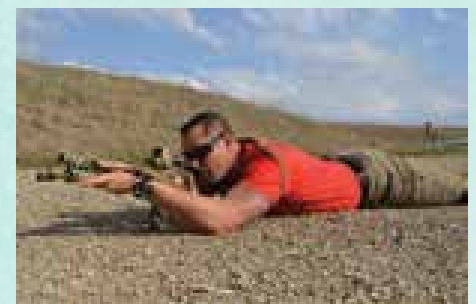
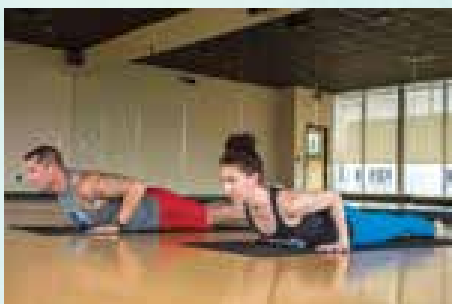
Not all yoga classes are created equal. Although all methods should be “moving meditations” rooting themselves in breath work and mindfulness, several yoga classes may highlight physical elements as the highest priority.

All yoga practices require endurance of mind and body, yet both Bikram (practiced in a hot room) and Ashtanga yoga have a rigorous series of postures that could be argued to be the most physically demanding. These would not be the classes to take on

## THREAD THE NEEDLE



## COBRA



your first day of yoga. Hatha yoga is the root of all other lineages and a great place to begin. Hatha yoga breaks down postures while emphasizing breath work and meditation. Vinyasa yoga typically flows from one posture to the next using the breath to link the postures together. Keeping balanced while flowing through these different positions will teach fluidity and core strength. Familiarity with yoga postures is recommended before this class.

Although not traditional, practicing Hatha and Vinyasa in a hot room has grown in popularity. Often known as “hot power yoga,” adding heat can increase the feeling of physical cleansing as well as mental endurance. Iyengar yoga uses several props and tools to emphasize proper alignment in each posture. The precision Iyengar yoga requires will lead to absolute balance between strength and mobility, as well as mental and physical stamina. For a simple practice with passive postures that increases mobility of connective tissue and joints, try Yin yoga or restorative yoga. Both are good to practice when returning from an injury as there is little to no weight on joints, yet all the value of mindfulness and meditation.

Introducing yoga into one’s agency should not be done by going to your local yoga studio and asking an instructor to host a class. The recommended approach to a yoga class specifically for law enforcement would be to research and find a practice with a specialized protocol, rooted in Hatha and trauma-sensitive yoga, developed from research and in conjunction with psychologists. Having an instructor trained in one of these programs, or at least the trauma-sensitive yoga method, is critical to the success of the program.

In his book “On Combat,” Lt. Col. Dave Grossman states, “Yoga, Zen, and the martial arts may have some

### WARRIOR POSE



### LUNGE



### SQUAT



Photos feature Olivia Kvitne of Yoga For First Responders and Rick Largesse of SSV Concepts.

“

**Introducing yoga into one’s agency should not be done by going to your local yoga studio and asking an instructor to host a class. The recommended approach to a yoga class specifically for law enforcement would be to research and find a practice with a specialized protocol, rooted in Hatha and trauma-sensitive yoga, developed from research and in conjunction with psychologists.**

”



mystical connotations, but when you strip away the mysticism, all that is left is a simple process that allows you to gain conscious control over your unconscious nervous system, and then puts it to work for you.”<sup>3</sup>

The dynamics of law enforcement are ever changing. With increased scrutiny by the public, officers need to ensure they are taking care of themselves not only physically, but mentally as well. Seeking out any skill set that will establish healthy and balanced lifestyle habits early in one’s profession is essential to having a long and safe career. ■

“

**The dynamics of law enforcement are ever changing. With increased scrutiny by the public, officers need to ensure they are taking care of themselves not only physically, but mentally as well. Seeking out any skill set that will establish healthy and balanced lifestyle habits early in one’s profession is essential to having a long and safe career.**

”

## REFERENCES

1. President’s Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing. “Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing,” Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015.
2. “Diversify Your Clients’ Workouts with Yoga.” American College of Sports Medicine, 2013. <http://certification.acsm.org/blog/2013/february/diversify-your-clients-workouts-with-yoga>.
3. Grossman, D., L. Christensen. *On Combat*, Warrior Science Publications, 2008.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Kris Mienert** is a 28-year veteran of the Woodbury (MN) Police Department, currently assigned as a police commander, with previous positions as a paramedic, 17 years as a SWAT operator and three as the SWAT commander. She holds a bachelor of science in criminal justice from Winona State University and a master of arts in public safety administration and education from the University of St. Thomas. Mienert has been previously certified as a Physical Fitness Specialist through the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research and a RKC/HCK kettlebell instructor. She is an adjunct instructor for LouKa Tactical LLC.

**Olivia Kvitne** has been a lifelong yoga practitioner and a yoga instructor since 2003. She taught weekly trauma-sensitive yoga classes at the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) Training Center and presented continuing education workshops on yoga and the neurological system for LAFD, as well as special workshops for high-ranking command staff of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Yoga for First Responders (YFFR) was originated at LAFD in conjunction with department psychologist Dr. Robert Scott. She currently teaches YFFR for several fire departments and has been a guest instructor for the Department of Public Safety in Austin, Texas, and Blue River Fire Academy. She is a contributing writer for *LA Yoga* and has written for American Military University’s blog, *In Public Safety*, and the inaugural issue of *Yoga Iowa*. She is a member of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA), holds her Fire Instructor 1 certification and is the 2016 recipient of the Warrior Award and Community Choice Award from Yoga Alliance International for her work with veterans and first responders.

GIVE US FEEDBACK!

We want to know what you think. Email [editor@ntoa.org](mailto:editor@ntoa.org) with feedback or questions about this article.