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Officers take lessons from the FBI's book

Armstrong, Savasta spent 10 weeks at Quantico training facility



Sgt. Mark Savasta of the Paxton Police Department, left, and Lt. David Armstrong of the Holden Police Department attended a 10-week training session at the FBI's facility in Quantico, Va. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

By **Melissa McKeon** CORRESPONDENT

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On the grounds of the FBI training academy in Quantico, Va., is a street called Hogan's Alley, a mock town of real buildings where officers learn everything from interviewing techniques to more dramatic events, such as the pursuit of terrorists.

Working in such an elaborate setup and in the state-of-the-art facilities would be an enviable training opportunity, one that sounds as if it would only be available to the elite accepted into the FBI. But four times a year, the FBI conducts a 10-week National Academy and accepts police officers from all over the world to attend and learn from the experts.

Lt. David Armstrong of the Holden Police Department and Sgt. Mark Savasta of the Paxton Police Department were accepted this spring to the FBI National Academy in Quantico, along with more than 250 law enforcement officers from 49 states and 22 countries. They learned techniques to deal with everything in law enforcement from budgets to bullets.

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The FBI National Academy, established in 1935 and formerly known as the FBI Police Training School, is aimed at helping professionalize local law enforcement by bringing them to Quantico to learn about the most up-to-date techniques in forensic science, behavioral science and legal issues, as well as understanding terrorism, learning leadership development and communication, and keeping their departments healthy – both mentally and physically.

Sgt. Savasta and Lt. Armstrong agree that it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, one that broadened their law-enforcement world and their resources for their towns.

The two attended with law enforcement personnel with titles ranging from patrolman to chief, from departments in Mongolia to Massachusetts, South Africa to South Carolina.

With such a broad range of personnel in attendance, there was one surprise: No matter where they live, most officers face the same challenges.

“The statistics may be a little different, but the overall issues we’re dealing with are the same,” Sgt. Savasta said.

No matter what the course or the rank of the attendees, they were all there to learn. It was a great leveler, both officers say.

“Rank went out the window day one,” Lt. Armstrong said.

That equality gave officers the chance to learn from others of all ranks and with different perspectives.

The two also learned that there are different ways to deal with the challenges they face, techniques they learned from the course leaders, a team of experts Lt. Armstrong said are clearly proven leaders: “You’d follow them to the ends of the Earth.”

The wealth of experience and knowledge behind the instructors in the program (all FBI professionals), is invaluable to an officer from a small-town department who would otherwise find it unlikely to be offered such an opportunity.

Attendees chose their courses from more than 100 offerings; Sgt. Savasta and Lt. Armstrong focused on administration and leadership.

Courses included role-playing in real-life situations that law enforcement might encounter, many played out in Hogan’s Alley.

Among the courses were some that struck a personal chord for many officers, including those from the Wachusett Region. A course in officer-involved shootings brought back memories of the shooting of Paxton Police Chief Robert Mortell in February 1994; that shooting was, in fact, used as an example. Now a lieutenant, Lt. Armstrong was a patrolman when Chief Mortell was shot in Holden while pursuing a breaking-and-entering suspect through woods off Reservoir Street. Lt. Armstrong looks back now and sees how ill-prepared small-town departments were, and how not only being prepared for communication, but also for the aftermath, could have helped immensely.

That course had contemporary resonance as well: The country, he said, is in a record year for police-involved shootings.

“The stories you head from across the country were sobering,” Lt. Armstrong said.

Both officers attended with the full support of their superiors and co-workers.

Chief Robert Desrosiers from Paxton was a firm supporter of Sgt. Savasta’s participation, both because he sees the immediate benefits of professional training and because he knows that, for any police officer in the 21st century, it’s become a necessity.

“Since I started this profession, it’s gone from GED or high school diploma to bachelors (degree) and beyond,” Chief Desrosiers said. “With good reason. It’s gotten very complex, very challenging.”

Chief Desrosiers applauded Sgt. Savasta’s participation, and hopes that other officers will apply and be accepted.

In Holden, Lt. Armstrong had Chief George Sherrill’s backing as well, particularly because the chief himself had gone through some training at Quantico. He sees the big picture of what such special training can mean for small town police departments.

“I hope it paves the way for future folks from the department to attend,” Chief Sherrill said.

The commitment of 10 weeks away from their departments and families was not just a personal one for the

two officers: Their fellow officers sacrificed to cover shifts and duties while they were away.

"It was a team sacrifice," Sgt. Savasta said.

What did they bring home for that sacrifice? Both officers see the contacts they made with both FBI experts and their fellow officers the world over as among the greatest resources they gained. Both believe networking with alumni of the program will serve them well in any challenge they might face.

Sgt. Savasta said he learned to make the most of time spent on all aspects of his job, including the time spent maintaining physical health.

Everything they learned, however, had one goal.

"One of the overall premises of everything we did was to keep our officers and our communities safe," Lt. Armstrong said.

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