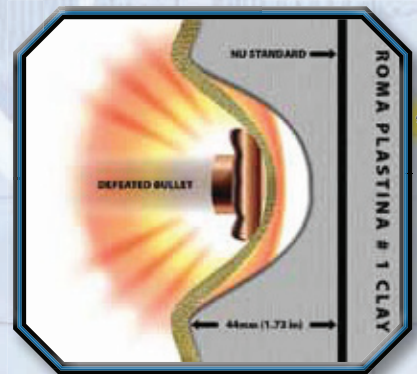




IS YOUR BODY ARMOR JUNK – OR A JEWEL?

Understanding The New NIJ Standards



Courtesy: Point Blank and PACA Body Armor

Should you throw your body armor in the trash or thank the guy in the department who selected it? Chances are, neither action is appropriate, though a few department decision-makers may deserve to be given a serious dose of whoop-ass. As a technology buff, I often write about computers, cameras and the like. When I was asked to research and write this article, it threw me a curve. My editor reassured me body armor involves more technology than anything else a cop uses. I've learned *that* is the understatement of the decade — so much for my “computer-only” stance.

Rarely has so much information been put forward by so many, resulting in total confusion of the masses. Geek-speak, techno-jargon, turf-wars, slick-tongued sales people and a myriad of others have all peed in the soup, making the result mostly useless. How did *you*, the user/wearer of body armor end up with the particular vest you were issued? Did the vest-fairy visit you? Did you just hut-hut right down to Supply and pick up your required gear without a care or thought about it? Probably.

Some Basics

The reality is most cops are wearing a vest selected by someone in their own agency who probably didn't have a clue about the nuances of vest design or standards and was trying to work within a very

limited budget. That's not to say inexpensive vests are crap, in fact a cheaper vest may be better than a zoot-deluxe expensive one. It's just a matter of fact. Sorry. Remember, it's only your life you're entrusting to the administration to make the best and safest choice for body armor.

“Exactly what do you have?” is a legitimate question and one you should be able to answer. Every vest has a label on the inside and it must show two pieces of data; the threat level certification, e.g. II, IIA and IIIA, and its expiration date. The expiration date is nothing more than the manufacturer's warranty and is typically around five years. Don't interpret this to mean you should toss yours simply because it's out of warranty, and it doesn't mean it'll no longer be able to stop a feather — should someone shoot you with one. Wearing a vest, even one beyond the expiration date, is better than not wearing one at all.

Body armor deteriorates over time. How quickly it deteriorates and to what degree depends on how often it's worn, the conditions (such as extreme heat and perspiration) under which it's worn, and how the owner cares for the vest. The best way to care for your body armor is to lay it flat or hang it in a climate-controlled environment. Don't fold, roll or wad it up; this will cause set wrinkles, which is death to the materials. Don't launder your vest, only wipe it off with a *damp* cloth and don't use bleach. Most odor-eliminator products can be bad for your vest, so they're not recommended. It's



MSA's Templar armor series also meets new NIJ standards.



Art by: Sequoia Blankenship

were borne as a result of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, so they've been at this for a few years. They're the ones who've established the *minimum performance requirements*.

In recent years the NIJ has come under fire; their testing procedures were sketchy, inconsistent, and considered unreliable. Some accused the NIJ of being run by former executives of the body armor industry. The NIJ testing process was akin to having the answer key to a math test — they told you precisely where on each vest they'd be shot for the test. As might be expected, some in corporate America, in their drive for sales and profits, added extra layers of protective fabric to their vests in the test-spots to be shot/tested by the NIJ. The remainder of the vest would remain "light and airy," and unfortunately, wouldn't stop rounds nearly so well.

Other manufacturers would repeatedly submit the same poorly manufactured vest model to the NIJ until one squeaked by. Then they'd claim all of their vests "met NIJ certification standards." Things got so bad Congress investigated the NIJ some years ago and they issued a report calling for a complete overhaul of the agency and its operations to ensure officer safety. Nothing happened. What bullshit.

Actually, Ballistic Resistance of Personal Body Armor — NIJ Standard 0101.06, originally published in July 2008 is what happened. Having realized they'd gotten a little sloppy over the years, NIJ instituted significantly tougher standards and testing for body armor. I must get a bit technical here. If you're not into detail, skip the next couple of paragraphs, but I encourage you to read them anyway.

Heart Of The Matter

Threat Level is a scientific measure presented from shooting a variety of ammu-



Today's highly fitted vests are often engineering-light years ahead of technology only a few years old and offer enhanced ballistic protection. Here, the Trilhouette TG series from Protective Products, Inc. (PPI) offers a honeycomb carrier system and recessed closure system.



The "Dress Vest" from Armor Express is a "visible" carrier that can fit a wide range of ballistic panels from the company.

a simple concept, take care of your vest and it'll take care of you.

Government Oversight?

Who's in charge of ensuring your body armor passes muster? And what's muster? The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is the government agency tasked with certifying body armor. Think of the NIJ as the research, development and evaluation arm of the Department of Justice (DOJ). They



Point Blank's new NIJ .06 certified Vision Level II armor is considered one of the lightest systems available today. The new concealable carrier system is loaded with advanced features, including ThorShield technology — a lightweight, conductive material lining that protects officers from electroshock weapons such as TASER devices and stun guns.



This carrier for women offers specific construction methods to meet a female officer's fit needs. It has 12 points of adjustment for an exact fit. (Photo: Armor Express)



Safariland's AJ Carrier is the cover that holds all six of Safariland's new models that adhere to the NIJ-06 standards. The models are: XT-300 Type II, XT-300 Type IIA, XT-700 Type II, XT-300 Type IIIA and MT-330 Type IIIA/Spike 3.

inition at various velocities, i.e. 9mm, .40, .45, etc. at body armor. The body armor is then certified to a specific level (II, IIA, IIIA) based on its ability to stop the particular level of threat. Level II is what most agencies issue their officers; Level IIIA is what they *should* be issuing. There's really no reason not to issue IIIA vests; the difference in weight is negligible.

Testing Methods are a whole different issue. They deal with the circumstances of the shoot — distance, velocity, shot location on the vest, environmental issues, in essence how hot the shot is and the situation under which it's fired. The NIJ establishes its own testing methods, which includes firing rounds specially loaded to ensure consistency of velocities and many of them are loaded to be faster than duty ammo.

For a full view of the NIJ 0101.06 standard, go to their web site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/ — it's good bathroom reading. Now back to plain English.

The FBI, among many larger agencies, decided to do its own testing and create its own body armor specifications because (in their opinion) the NIJ's standard wasn't tough enough. But today's NIJ standards are tougher than ever. They're now consistently applied, are based on

me because the manufacturers had to go back to the drawing board and make better products. Depending on who's in the discussion, some cling to the NIJ as the final word while others have abandoned the NIJ in favor of their own or FBI's tougher specs. Who should you believe? That's your call, but in every case, it needs to be an informed decision.

Get What You Pay For

Are there trade-in programs for my current vest so I can get a new one for little or no cash? As of this writing the simple answer is *no*. But if you're paying for your own vest, don't be a cheap bastard. A new vest meeting current NIJ standards will range in price from \$600 to \$1,000 — you'd spend that amount on a rifle or some other *toy*, so why recoil in horror over paying for body armor?

Lighter is nice, but not necessarily better. For years, cops demanded body armor that was lighter and cooler to wear and the manufacturers dutifully complied. Their methods however — reduce the number of layers of protective fabric — resulted in vests that were significantly less effective. And on top of that, they charged more

money. Huh? What?

"Why am I wearing a vest?" That's a question you should answer for yourself. If you're only wearing it because you



Other ballistic containment devices like this portable shield from Point Blank, have specific guidelines concerning their ballistic ratings.



Point Blank's Vision and HI-LITE armor for women features a new contoured shape, streamlined stitching and Point Blank's "Smart Seam" construction. ThorShield technology is incorporated, along with a higher neckline for additional coverage and a wide range of other features.

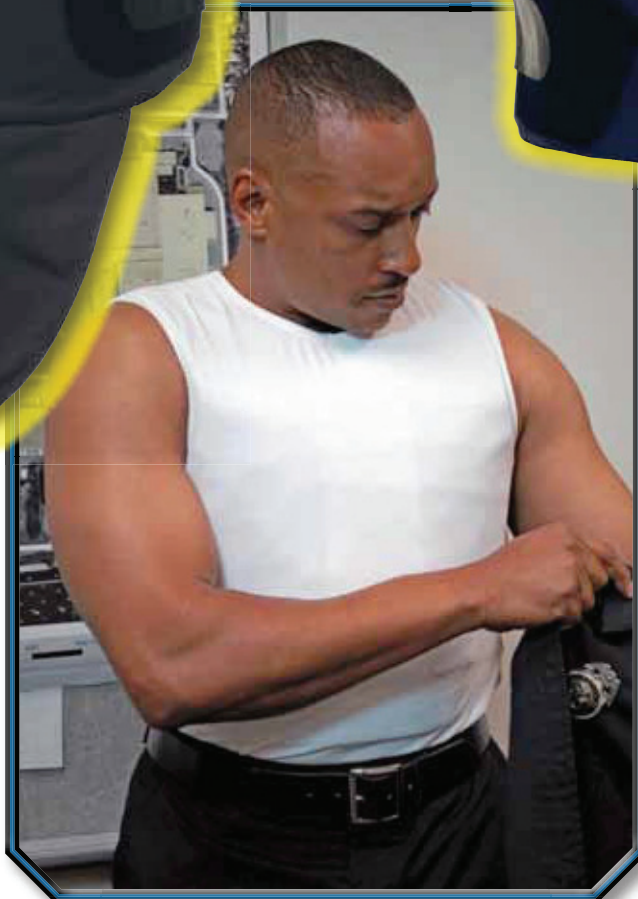


have to (by way of agency policy), you might as well stop reading this article now. Be honest with your answer. If you have the option of selecting your own type of vest, you should know the answer intuitively, it'll help guide your purchasing decision.

"What kind of vest should I choose?" Only the best, strongest, save-my-ass kind. Officers working urban environments may think they are most in need of the higher level of protection. Well don't get lulled into thinking just because you work in Squirrel-fart Montana you won't come up against tougher rounds. Some of the quietest towns on earth can be home to some of the weirdest and most lethal ammunition. One expert said, "If a cop is wearing body armor with a threat level certification below IIIA, he's playing Russian Roulette with his life." I agree; you want the most protection available. Your family may thank you for it some day.

Last Year's Model

A vest you may have been issued or purchased recently under the previous set of standards is still safe to wear. Vests most of you are using today have saved many lives, so there's no need to panic. Must a vest be replaced when it expires? No. Most likely it should be replaced right around the expiration date because ammunition and guns change. We're constantly receiving officer safety notices about some new weapon, a




The "Lo Pro" also from Armor Express, offers a high level of concealment, perfect for under uniform wear.

new round, or a new gun the bad guys are using to kill cops. There's an ongoing evolution of weaponry. Your vest from three years ago was certified before new threats were even known. Will your old vest work? Probably, but maybe not.

Second, and perhaps more important, body armor technology is constantly improving. Just another money grab, right — remember when cell phones weighed three pounds and cost \$1,000? Are you still carrying a cell phone like that? Body armor technology has improved over time just like cell phones. Today's body armor is better able to stop rounds than its predecessors because the scientists and engineers

are constantly trying to make it better. Maybe you should consider replacing your vest every few years, you upgrade your cell phone that often — it sure as hell isn't going to stop a bullet. Make a vest choice you can justify to your family. A good vest is not designed to be *comfortable*; it's designed to be *comforting* (to you and your family).

As I bring this writing to a close, I must acknowledge the significant contributions made in the research phase. Especially helpful were Don Hacklander of San Diego Police Equipment Company and other industry experts. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. 

Editor's note: I'd personally like to thank Gene Wolberg, former Senior Criminologist for the San Diego Police Crime Lab. Gene's tireless efforts in testing soft body armor throughout the 1980s and 1990s played a large part in many of the changes made to NIJ standards. He was a champion of officer safety and I wish he were here to see his hard work come to fruition. Gene passed away in May 2000 — I still miss him.

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