



How a “perfect storm” led to one of America’s most exemplary law enforcement training centers.



On the heels of a tragic shootout and devastating hurricane, the St. John Parish Sheriff’s Office has created a facility worthy of today’s officers.

In 2012, when Mike Tregre took office as sheriff of St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana, he found a department that was regrettably out of date, stuck in manual processes with a minimum of electronics. With its headquarters in LaPlace, an industrial corridor and major port leading to New Orleans, he knew at once that a major overhaul was necessary to align with modern requirements.

Then, within a month, tragedy struck. On August 16, 2012, in an act of domestic terrorism, a group led by radicals calling themselves “sovereign citizens” ambushed an off-duty sheriff’s deputy who was directing traffic at a plant. Responding department officers, going to the hideaway of the attackers, found themselves in a fierce gun battle. Before the attackers were subdued, two officers had given their lives and another critically wounded. The community was rocked.

Captain Charles “Chip” Wale survived the gun battle, coming away with the conviction that their agency of 200-plus officers needed improved training.

Then, less than two weeks after the shooting, challenges came again. On August 28, Hurricane Isaac devastated the Parish with 80-mph winds and torrents of rain.

Referring to the series of events, Wale says, “It was the perfect storm to support our intent to create a state-of-the-art facility and program for our officers and the community.”

The mandate: “Do It Right.”

During the next few years, the Sheriff explored avenues for establishing a center that would meet their needs. One promising site was an abandoned bowling alley that could be outfitted with the latest range equipment. But before



retrofitting could take place, Wale had a unique opportunity to participate in an excellent example of officer training.

In the winter of 2016, the FBI invited Wale to attend its National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Sheriff Tregre, having already graduated from this professional course of study exclusively for U.S. and international law enforcement managers, made the nomination because of demonstrated leadership qualities. The nominee qualifications are rigorous, and Wale was one of 230 ranking law enforcement officers from 47 states and 21 countries to participate in the 10-week session. The program "serves to improve the administration of justice in police departments and agencies at home and abroad and to raise law enforcement standards, knowledge and cooperation worldwide."

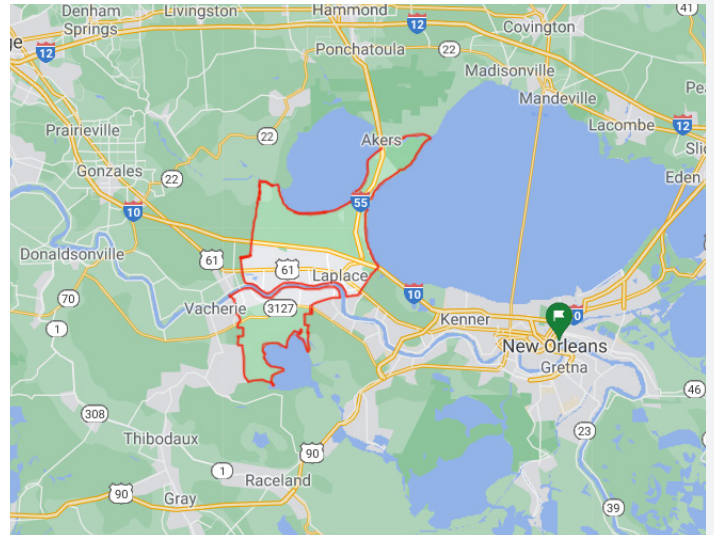
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Returning from the Academy, Wale was more determined than ever to improve St. John's training. He examined the best law enforcement training facilities across the country: From the \$6-billion New York Police Department (NYPD) 750,000-square-foot academy to state-of-the-art ranges in small towns in Texas and North Carolina. He saw firsthand how the most successful training venues were carefully tailored to the needs of their department and community.

During his explorations, Wale heard about InVeris Training Solutions.² Originally intending to purchase a FATS[®] virtual system, his team visited the InVeris headquarters in Suwanee, Georgia. After viewing the company's simulators, the team viewed the advanced live-fire systems, which evolved from the firm's pioneering Caswell technology.

As the officers were being impressed by the target systems, InVeris account manager Brian Gokey took the conversation to a deeper level. He inquired about departmental needs and queried how they would use the equipment.

As the Department made decisions about building the training center, they continued to talk to InVeris. They noted that InVeris not only offered best-of-breed equipment, but the expertise to provide an end-to-end, turnkey solution.



Soon they realized that the way forward was to demolish the bowling alley and rethink the project from the ground up.

Sheriff Tregre now issued a mandate, "Do it right."

Built with purpose: An exemplary training facility for many years to come

Wale explains, "Early on, we realized that we wanted to use InVeris' services. Once we were able to secure InVeris as the vendor for our project, our engineering team began directly communicating with their engineering team. This became a purpose-built building."³

He remarks that a new building carried additional benefits for the community: "By demolishing the abandoned bowling alley, we not only had the opportunity to start over with a clean-sheet design but help a neighborhood that was struggling. Part of the neighborhood flooded during Isaac and ever since has had a lot of vacant homes and business sites. So, we wanted to help that neighborhood with a police presence and the opportunity for increased commercial purpose."

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¹ See <https://www.fbi.gov/services/training-academy/national-academy>

² Then operating as a subsidiary of Meggitt PLC.

³ In design terms, a purpose-built structure is distinguished from buildings created with a general purpose. It denotes carefully planning and constructing all elements to fulfill the central intention of the project.



Most important, Wale and Tregre agreed that St. John Parish could now become a leader in law enforcement training, an example for agencies seeking direction.

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To accomplish this objective, the Sheriff's Office pulled out all the stops, creating an ambitious budget to be funded by bonds.

Wale comments, "Total investment-wise, we ended up with a \$10-million price tag. We were making a statement that St. John Parish is ready to train our people."

In view of the recent demand for improved training, Wale emphasizes, "Our commitment to officer training came before the current social movements. We had already gotten out ahead with updated programs. We had started our diversity training. We purchased a FATS L7 virtual system early on for officers as a model for decision making. But with the new building, our value to officers has exponentially increased."

Having demolished the original structure in 2019, construction began in earnest in 2020 with a view toward completion and finishing the ranges in 2021.

For live-fire equipment, the Sheriff's Office installed the InVeris XWT Wireless Target Carrier as well as turning targets, complemented by the latest innovations in bullet traps, environmental protection and shooting stalls.

"We have a facility that no one else has" says Wale. "We have created an environment that we have full control of. We have been able to introduce unprecedented training features to our officers. I have been especially pleased with InVeris' customer service and their immediate response. All in all, as we complete the punchout phase, we are pleased with the direction of this project."

Wale concludes, "We feel pride."

The grand opening: a momentous day for the St. John's community

On April 30, 2021, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, himself the son of a sheriff, joined Sheriff Tregre, Capt. Wale and other dignitaries to celebrate the opening of the Lloyd B. Johnson Law Enforcement Training Center. For the man who knew the road that led to the center, the day had special significance.

"This is a product of visionary leadership," Gov. Edwards said, praising the facility as "state of the art" and saying, "It's something to be very proud of."

Tregre noted that building a quality training facility that serves law enforcement and the community is critical to public safety. Officers who are well trained are better prepared to act decisively and correctly, which results in greater productivity and effectiveness.

He added, "There are so many Monday morning quarterbacks who will scrutinize decisions of law enforcement officers or what training they had or did not have that may have contributed to good or bad decisions made in split seconds or were made hours or days at a time; we, as sheriffs and chiefs, have to train our officers better than ever before."

Sheriff Tregre also spoke about the projected community impact of the new facility: Reduction of urban blight. Increased

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interaction between citizens and law enforcement. Boosting police presence. The ability to offer women's self-defense classes, crime prevention programs, hunter education, public range dates and concealed carry classes. It also can benefit the local economy as instructors and officers nationwide can travel to the River Parishes for training.

Notably on the outside of the building, a memorial for fallen law enforcement officers will be erected. But perhaps it is the Training Center itself that furnishes a daily testimony to a sheriff's deputy that responded to tragedy, by creating a facility worthy of the dedicated law enforcement officer.

InVeris Training Solutions is the global leader in integrated live-fire and virtual weapons training solutions. With its legacy companies, FATS® and Caswell, InVeris Training Solutions has fielded over 15,500 live-fire ranges and 7,500 virtual systems globally during its 95-year history. The company is headquartered in Suwanee, Georgia and partners with clients in the U.S. and around the world from facilities on five continents.