



Firearms Training: Creating Options For The 'Real' World

By Richard Kay

Back in Issue #76 (Feb/Mar 2012) of this magazine, I presented an article on firearms training related to competency standards based on realistic operational expectations. This was motivated by a general apathy in the industry towards making training appropriate for professional and competent use in the modern operational environment, largely as a result of a security firearms forum held in 2008.

In 2013, the regulators are again in the process of conducting a review of firearms training within the security industry. At the time of writing this article, there have been two forums: one for training providers, security companies and instructors, and one for firearms instructors only. So far, the focus of both these forums has centred on the administration of firearms training (i.e. paperwork, guidelines, etc) rather than the actual content and application of training itself. No doubt training content will be examined, but it is interesting how administration is addressed first, suggesting that instructor and/or company liability is a more important focus than operational safety for officers carrying firearms on the job.

The main shortcoming of current firearms training is not that it is inappropriate; it is that it is incomplete. The industry focus is on 'basic' knowledge and skill acquisition, training officers to pass a theory test and shoot a passing score on clinical shooting serials, and that is it. There is generally no skill development or operational preparation through tactical drills and reality-based scenarios. Whilst there is no restriction on instructors and companies training students

properly, financial considerations usually outweigh operational considerations.

A recent US study into public safety officer assaults and deaths, reviewed 40 incidents involving 43 offenders and 50 officers. Extensive interviews were conducted with the officers, and the offenders, and some startling information was learned. Some offenders admitted they started to carry firearms at 9-12 years of age, with many admitting to being armed 'most of the time' by 17 years of age.

Consider these findings in the context of new recruits to the industry. How many of our new recruits have never handled a firearm before, let alone a handgun? The days of popping of a few rounds in the backyard with an air rifle are long gone, and there is a diminishing hunting culture.

Some will say that recruits do not need to have familiarity with firearms, that 'we'll teach them what they need to know'. That is fine, if it is done and done properly, but sometimes it is not. Even if it is, what happens once they leave the training course? Once the officer is employed and operational, how much training do they receive? On average, most officers engage in firearms training once a year, when they requalify via industry requirements. If they work for a more progressive organisation, maybe they get to shoot quarterly or monthly.

Offenders, on the other hand, practice with firearms on a regular basis, with 80 per cent of offenders studied stating they averaged about 23 practice sessions a year. Just taking these facts into consideration, who is more prepared for an armed street confrontation: the offender or the officer?

Let us examine a few other ‘training scars’. Since most officers only ‘qualify’ once a year, how much of that training involves just standing static on a firing line and punching holes in a paper target, versus training to shoot on the move? Movement in a gunfight is essential. If you are behind cover, stay there, but if not, you will want to move to cover if possible. The problem with cover is that most officers do not think of it until it is too late, or there is no cover available. If you look at shooting statistics, most confrontations involving firearms occur at five metres or less. How much cover is there between you and the offender at this range?

It is the nature of public safety operations that officers deal with people in close proximity all the time. You cannot handcuff someone or conduct search procedures from 10 metres away. We have to be in close, and therefore there are not a lot of cover options available. With these being the facts, then we need to move, to create some action, to make them react to our action; to steal back some of that action versus reaction time. Therefore, officers need to train in shooting on the move, as well as close quarters training. The theory that says ‘if they can hit the target at 20 metres they can hit it at 3 metres’ is out-dated. The dynamics of a gunfight at one metre are totally different to how it is going to occur at 10 metres.

Another common phrase in firearms training is ‘slowly press the trigger until the firearm discharges and it is a surprise to you’. How many officers have heard that before? How many instructors have said it before? You are sending lethal projectiles down range; your firearm should never go off as a surprise to you. Do you really think that you will ‘slowly press the trigger’ as an offender is trying to kill you from two metres away? Of course not!

Officers Need To Train The Way They Work

The issue is that many firearms instructors do not think past the square range. What passes on the range as ‘training’, often has no real merit on the street.

When considering any training, ask yourself some simple questions:

- Is it simple to do, and can it be performed under stress?
- Does it play into natural instinctive reactions (or does it go contrary to how I am going to instinctively react when faced with a life or death confrontation)?



- Does the training make sense in a real world environment?

Even if instructors do train with movement, some do not teach students to move rearward. The theory is that they always want students to move laterally, to step off the line of fire. Let us test this theory:

- Is it simple to do, and can it be performed under stress? Yes
- Does it play into natural instinctive reactions? Yes
- Does it make sense in a real world environment? Not necessarily

Suppose an officer is going down a long narrow hallway. At the end of the hallway is a room with a door that they need to go through. All of a sudden the offender pops out of the door and starts shooting. Moving in on the offender may be an option, and you cannot move laterally because you are up against the wall in that narrow hallway, so moving rearward while returning fire is a plausible option.

The Real World Is About Having Options

The real test of any tactic is to put it into the operational environment. To limit officers to only moving laterally does not make sense, because moving laterally in the real world is one of many options, it is not the only option.

An instructors' sole focus should be the safety of the officers they train, so the more information

and options you can provide the better. Officers should be encouraged to develop what works for them, within lawful and operational parameters. Instructors who encourage adaptation recognise this process and utilise it in training. Correcting students for minor variations in technique, simply because it is not the way the instructor does it, is not placing the interests of the officers first.

But you cannot put all of the blame on the firearms instructors. How many students show up to class with poor attitudes? How many officers look at their firearm as just another tool? Officers are resistant to change. How many resist trying a new shooting drill, or learning something different because they ‘already know how to shoot’, or do not want to look silly in front of colleagues?

Our attitudes need to change. Look at the statistics, if they do not motivate you to take firearms training more seriously – if they do not shock you into making your training more realistic and relevant – then nothing will. We may have gone down the wrong path, but it does not mean it cannot be fixed.

Train as you work, take it seriously, and stay safe.

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