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RANGEMASTER'S COMBATIVE SKILLS COURSE

By Tiger McKee

Rangemaster's Combative Skills class is an advanced study of personal combat. Much more than a shooting seminar, this class explores everything from unarmed defensive tactics up to the application of lethal force. Although quite an undertaking, Rangemaster succeeds by integrating the talents of three instructors.

Jim Higginbotham is a law enforcement officer with over fifteen years experience. Dane Burns served as a bail enforcement agent, handling hundreds of fugitives. Chief Instructor Tom Givens has logged over twenty years instructing military personnel, law enforcement officers and civilians. Combining the talents of these three instructors provides the Combative Skills student with a unique look at the conflict curriculum.

According to Givens, the ultimate aim of Combative Skills is to prepare the student for the unexpected. Imagine defending against one attacker when several other armed assailants unite in the fight against you. What are your options when a routine traffic stop suddenly turns into a violent assault, leaving no opportunity to present and employ your firearm? You are in a cramped hallway searching for an armed felon and the lights go out, darkness surrounds you, and survival hinges on your ability to search and fight with the aid of a flashlight. How will you react?

In the opening lecture Givens explains, "To overcome the problems likely to occur during a lethal confrontation your reactions must be reflexive, occurring at a subconscious level." Proficiency of this degree is reached only through repetitive training or, as Givens is fond of saying, "total immersion." This goal is achieved by rotating among the trio of



Training with Tom Givens included close-quarter firing drills.



The Memphis Police Department's shoot house provided the ideal environment for training scenarios using Simunitions.



The final portion of the class included a shoot-off between students and consisted of multiple targets and using cover.

instructors, studying fighting contingencies and practicing them under a variety of circumstances.

Although Jim Higginbotham's storehouse of shooting knowledge includes lessons learned in the competitive arena, application of these skills is supported by his law enforcement experiences. An excellent example of this reality based training is his "three-second rule" for using cover. Accurately engaging targets from behind cover requires exposing parts of your body to the threat. If you can see them, they can see you. The probability of taking a hit from return fire increases exponentially when confronting multiple threats. Jim's recommendation is to change firing positions and move to a different location behind cover at least every three seconds.

Considered by itself the "three-sec-



The Combative Skills Class of 2002 posing in front of the Memphis Police Department's Training Center entrance.

ond rule" is fairly simple. In reality it is an extremely complicated principle. Applying this maxim while using cover, engaging multiple targets in order of their tactical priority, keeping your weapon loaded and functioning, and maintaining environmental awareness is physically and mentally arduous.

On the range it's my turn to run the three-second drill. Bolting towards cover I present my pistol and snap off a couple shots at the threat on the far right. One down, four to go. I drop to a kneeling position behind cover and engage the second bad guy. So far so good. Crossing over to the left side of my cover I reload and fire two shots at bad guy three. Another position change and I'm set for the fourth threat. That's when it registers the third target is still standing. I reacquire the third threat, firing until it drops. As I shift the sights back to the fourth target my thoughts are on ammo management. I'm past counting rounds, but with a seven round mag I know another reload is coming up. Finally it sinks in that the yelling from behind is Jim reminding me it's past time to change locations. I assume a new position by dropping onto both knees, continue engaging targets, and consider myself lucky this is only a drill.

During his six years as a bail enforcement agent Dane Burns was responsible for hundreds of arrests, including apprehension of some extremely violent felons. These exploits provided Dane with a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't when it comes to unarmed fighting techniques.

"My favorite actions," Dane explained during our first session on defensive tactics, "are those that are effective, but to the casual observer don't appear to be aggressive." As an example Dane places his right foot between a student's legs, then simply steps forward. "This upsets their balance," he adds as his body mass forces the student to move backward, "both physically and mentally." Should the situation require more aggression Dane recommends simple and efficient combinations of strikes and kicks. "The



Students use the three-second rule while employing cover.

advantage of these techniques," Dane adds while demonstrating open hand strikes to the solar plexus, elbows to the head, and low kicks to the legs of a student in a protective F.I.S.T. suit, "is they don't require constant practice to remain proficient."

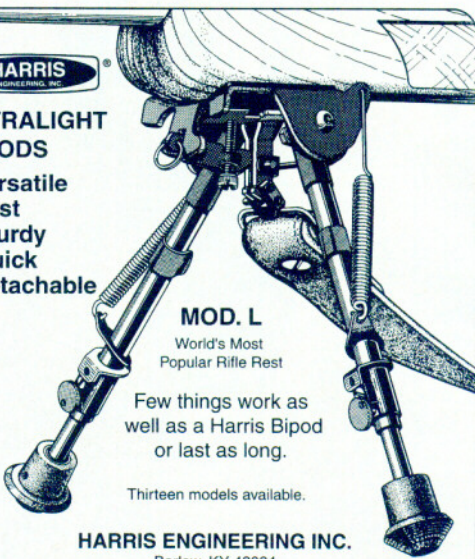
Eventually the students suit up and pair up to spar. Watching two of the combatants move about the mat looking for an opportunity to attack, it's apparent both are running low on energy. They have been at it for almost two minutes and the protective suits they

wear are bulky and hot. A punch is thrown, blocked, and then with a push one man is down with the other on top, striking the head and chest of the man on the ground. "Get up," Dane yells, "don't quit!" Rolling over, the fighter on the ground dislodges his opponent, scrambles sideways on his hands and knees, finally managing to get far enough away from his tormentor to stand. In the short time it takes him to get to his feet his attacker has closed the gap between them and throws out a combination of punches. The defend-

er's response is a series of swift kicks. "Time!" Dane announces. Breathing hard, the fighters separate and happily strip off their protective helmets. "Two minutes may not seem like a long time," Dane reminds us, "but in a fight it can seem like a lifetime."

Over the past two decades Tom Givens has witnessed firearms training progress from the rigid marksmanship stances of the past into the dynamic techniques studied today. During this evolutionary period, improved techniques have been developed for fighting with a flashlight, such as the Harries and Rogers methods. With the development of these contemporary methods many of the techniques from the past have been discarded. However, there are some fighting skills of old which are still viable today. The "ancient" FBI technique for flashlight use, where the light is held off to the side, is a perfect illustration. When used in conjunction with the "neck index" firing stance, which positions the light against the jaw or neck of the shooter, the FBI search technique has numerous advantages.

If your light is already in your hand,



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Prior to the Simunitions drills, students ran through live-fire scenarios in the shoot house.



Range time with Givens also included one-hand weapon manipulations, including reloading and malfunction clearances.

a good idea in any low light environment, you may not have the time to present your pistol and use the Rogers technique (which requires a moment to position the flashlight between the first two fingers of the support hand, like a cigar), and acquire a two-handed grip on the pistol. When searching a large area or structure the Harries technique, which relies on isometric tension to keep the light and weapon aligned, can quickly become tiring.

With the updated FBI method you search with the light, holding it wherever needed, while keeping the pistol in a retention position close to the body. When a threat is identified you index the light against your jaw or neck while pushing the weapon out to fire, ending up in a position similar to draw-

ing an arrow in a bow.

This stance, which Givens highly advocates, aligns your eyes, flashlight, weapon and sights instantly, allowing engagement of threats without delay. Maintaining the weapon in a retention ready position eliminates the danger of leading with your pistol around a corner and reduces the possibility of someone attempting a disarm move against you. Searching is accomplished without covering any non-hostiles with your muzzle, and when scanning for additional threats your weapon can remain pointed towards a specific threat area or a downed suspect, who might decide to re-enter the fight any second. Ideally, as Givens stresses, the operator should be proficient in as many flashlight techniques as possible.

This flexibility allows you to use the method best suited to your situation you are operating under.

Thanks to Lt. Michael Rallings and the Memphis Police Department's Firearms Training Unit, our class was able to take advantage of the department's indoor training facilities. The range's assortment of flashing blue lights and white strobes allows Givens to simulate the adverse operating conditions students are likely to encounter on the street. After lecturing on the various techniques and low light operating principles, Givens runs students through each lighting method under a variety of conditions. During these drills students discover the advantages and disadvantages of many techniques and determine which work best for them as individuals.

The class stands ready on the firing line of the darkened range, our eyes just beginning to adjust to the lack of light. Suddenly the darkness explodes as the blue revolving lights and white strobes behind us come to life. The targets downrange dance from side to side, left, right and back again, as though actually moving. Attempting to engage under these conditions would be difficult, if not impossible.

Luckily, our hand-held combative flashlights emit enough lumens to overcome the disorienting effects of the flashing blue and white lights. We position our flashlight beams on the targets and they stabilize, ceasing their maddening dance. Muzzle blasts erupt along the firing line as shots are placed into the center mass and heads of the targets. Recalling Givens' warning about lights being target indicators we extinguish our flashlights and, as a group, move left to avoid being targeted by our light signature. After moving, we again light up the area as we search and scan for additional threats. Then lights out and we change positions again. Knowing the conflict may continue at any moment nobody is too quick to disconnect from the fight.

Fights are like wildfires: unexpected, intense, unpredictable, hard to control, and always dangerous. With violent conflicts there is no established

