

DYNAMIC ENCOUNTER TRAINING: An Analysis of Contemporary Firearms Training Methods and Their Task Suitability for High Stress Combat Scenarios

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Since the inception of structured firearms training in the late 1920's, officers and instructors alike have been taught to believe that stylized techniques for shooting were required in order to score well in qualification and shoot well in combat. These techniques have often focused on complex motor skills and have demonstrated for many that they can be difficult to learn and even more difficult to apply. Add to this that most officers are not adequately prepared through their training to effectively deal with spontaneous life threatening circumstances without significant risk to themselves and are completely unaware of the affects of survival stress on motor skill performance and you have a recipe for disaster.

The purpose of this research is to aid in the design and implementation of training programs that are based on human performance limitations as affected by the intensity of the stimuli encountered during combat stress. The research domain for this project relates to both cognitive/perceptual awareness and motor skill development and specifically impacts upon the current paradigm in training with the application of firearms. Core to this research is the analysis of contemporary training standards and their task utility in spontaneous life threatening events.

The data from this research will have significant impact upon the law enforcement community generally and firearms training and high liability interdiction specifically. The focus was to determine, through observation and survey, the innate or natural response to a spontaneous "life threatening" event generated by simulation in a dynamic training environment. The research identifies responses characterized by shooting position preference and "hit" potential and determines whether stylized shooting performance is reproducible during periods of high stress.

Law enforcement professionals face an operational dilemma

each time they begin a tour of duty. Often without the benefit of relevant and practical physical skills, they must effectively manage life threatening spontaneous occurrences. Those who have been properly trained for real world need by recognizing human performance limitations are prepared. Those who have not had that positive training experience will face their life threatening challenges without the essential tools necessary to succeed. Invariably, this leads to increased personal risk for the officer and costly civil litigation for the agency.

The current paradigm in use throughout the criminal justice system to train officers in subject control procedures, particularly with firearms, is representative of an approach to training that I will refer to as "activity". This approach stems from a managerial view of the training function as one of only conducting mandatory training programs and not one of assisting field operatives in the performance of their mental and physical duties. This value statement clearly demonstrates a serious shortage of collaborative organizational and operational objectives and commits training efforts to unacceptable financial expense for poorly calculated outcomes. Logistically, training often becomes a numbers game where documentation that everyone has "qualified" on paper and "looks" the same on the range is superior to their demonstrated competency in the field. Regardless of ideologies, egos or money, the data in this study directs that the focus of firearms training change from its static, highly structured marksmanship environment to an interactive, dynamic environment where reality based training is employed. It is obvious that the incidence of field related failure is correlated with the officer's inability to adequately respond using contemporary training methods.

It is the intent of this research to provide hard data on the physiological reactions to survival stress using simulated, spontaneous scenarios and subsequently recommend a

defensible direction for future training with firearms applications designed to control violent subject behavior. Specifically, this research analyzed:

1. The physiological reactions to survival stress as they relate to shooting stance preference.
2. Whether traditional sighted fire is employed when the events are spontaneous in nature.
3. Changes in visual efficiency and preference for the objects in focus.

Methodology

This research focused on the question "what are the effects of induced stress on physical performance with handguns?" Although there are many effects, only stance preference and visual performance are within the scope of this project. A survey instrument entitled Comprehensive Training Survey: The Effects of Induced Stress on Physical Performance with Handguns in a Simulated Combat Environment was developed to quantify the collected data and provide a platform for the debriefing of incidents. The data was then organized according to theme to determine existing trends.

The research model used for the collection and assimilation of data is an "action research" model presented in Action Research and Organizational Development written by J. Barton Cunningham (1993). This model was introduced in 1946 to denote an approach to research combining theory building with research on practical problems. It analyzes the process of systemic change and identifies the practical problem of how to enter an organization or culture effectively and facilitate that change. A basic assumption of action research is that learning within the group through the development of new attitudes is a basic resource for the research (Cunningham). Operating under the premise of "do the client no harm" and "work for the betterment of the whole", the intent was to first determine who the client was and to what end might they be helped. The client turned out to be the individual officer as it is that officer who affects the system. How that officer might be helped concentrated upon improving survival skills for risk reduction which also provided a by-product of liability reduction for the agency. The desired end state for the change effort incorporates enhanced skill competency and personal confidence to more effectively deal with spontaneous occurrences of violence directed at the officer personally.

Utilizing the Comprehensive Training Survey, data was collected regarding the training backgrounds of all participants to determine what, if any, influence their

demographic background or training had on their performance in the simulated spontaneous incidents. All of the incidents were scripted and involved violent physical attack on the officer with an instrument of lethal force. All of the firearms involved were equipped to fire Simmunition dye marking ammunition which gave feedback on accuracy and provided an impetus to avoid the pain of being hit by making a mistake. Additionally, the survey served to redefine the problem once again to determine if, in fact, contemporary training methodologies were core to observed diminished performance capacities. Finally, it provided the instrument that documented the performance of all participants and codified their responses. This required searching for commonality in their responses to determine underlying themes influencing individual performance.

Once data collection and analysis was complete, a diagnosis was made of the current state of firearms training to "get a picture of what is going on". The "picture" of diminished performance provided a broader understanding of the true nature of the problem and helped to establish what the desired end state should be.

Results and Findings

The learning that has taken place since project inception begins to answer the research question posed. With regard to that postulated, note: Physiological reactions to survival stress (sympathetic nervous system activation) demonstrate crouching, squaring the body to the threat and locking the arms at full extension. This favors symmetrical body positioning and not asymmetrical configurations common to "stylized" shooting methods. Further, the sympathetic nervous system prioritizes the visual sense forcing binocularity and causing farsightedness. This eliminates the use of the weapon's sights as previously trained. Competency based training to provide a system of instruction relevant to performance expectations of the job is required. This relevance must correlate with the practical nature of the techniques as they are to be applied in a real world environment. Current instructional methodology is designed around a weapon handling, marksmanship, combat progression. Data collected shows that the highest percentage of training time focuses on marksmanship development, with simulated combat experience a rarity. Unfortunately, marksmanship skills are closed motor skills which are not reproducible under conditions of survival stress. One can therefore state that during a life threatening occurrence, the tools provided to shoot accurately are no longer available. The findings postulate a new training design methodology of weapon handling, combat, then marksmanship. The emphasis shifts from a

scored measure of effectiveness to a demonstrated ability to apply lethal force in a simulated, relevant real world encounter. This focus on combat orientation establishes a framework for reproducible skills, builds confidence and makes the subsequent task of marksmanship development much easier.

The composite results of physical performance for all respondents during the execution of the Comprehensive Training Survey statistically represent:

Squaring the body to the threat	59%
Focused vision on the threat	93%
Used binocular vision	88%

These three items favor the symmetrical Isosceles stance and not the asymmetrical Weaver which is a bladed approach. Contemporary instructional methods continue to stylize shooting stances and attempt to control the officer's response through periods of high repetition training. Statistically, however, data compiled from this research demonstrates that officers categorically respond to a spontaneous, life threatening occurrences with their survival instincts and not their parasympathetic motor skills training. This postulates a design methodology more in line with instinctive behavior, that is, combat before refined marksmanship and gross motor skills before fine or complex. This is the venue of combat training. The emphasis must shift from a scored measure of effectiveness to a demonstrated ability to apply lethal force without hesitation when required in simulated, relevant real world encounters. This focus on combat orientation provides reproducible skills training during periods of extraordinary stress, builds confidence and ultimately makes the task of marksmanship development much easier.

Conclusions

It is necessary to develop a new training paradigm to use as the vehicle of facilitation for the new research. Dynamic Encounter Training (DET) has been designed to provide the tools that enable trainers and administrators to work together as partners and achieve specific goals. This approach requires that trainers develop skills beyond the competencies they currently possess to design and administer training.

In the application of lethal force, law enforcement officers practice a high art. Historically, the Samurai provided a law enforcement function in their application of lethal force, but were arguably more competent in doing so. Was it practice that made them so, or the intangible duty to task.

We may never know that answer, but one thing is for certain — if the focus of training does not move from the controlled, static environment to an experiential one, the results of that training will remain where they are today. That finality, with each passing court case, underscores a demonstrated lack of skill.

The expected end result of firearms training for the law enforcement community has remained constant since the earliest records of structured learning. Simply stated, you must hit that at which you are shooting. Officers regularly demonstrate static skill competency each time they report to the range for qualification. Unfortunately, this sterile competency is adulterated in the field to a level of serious concern for personal safety as the skills previously learned do not make the jump to an emotionally charged, violent environment.

Perhaps the answer rests with the next generation of instructors who, while they might have a specialty in one or more aspects of the use of force, are generalists in that they understand the operational needs of officers at all levels within their accepted use of force matrix. Law enforcement use of force training needs an ongoing assessment framework for everything taught in subject control in order to continue the evolutionary process of moving from the overly complicated to the easily reproduced. The military has not been wrong over the years in presenting material in the "keep it simple" paradigm. So it should be in law enforcement. This requires work, however, and a dedication to the process of research and learning.

To dedicate oneself to improve upon human performance potential with a firearm is a multidimensional task with far reaching consequences. The work involved will affect individuals as well as organizations and will bring the desired end state into alignment with training philosophies. The training determinants of cognitive processing and biomechanical ability will combine to produce a more competent officer of the future. The challenge is to remain focused and look to the past to provide a window for the future.

About the Author

Mr. Burroughs' experience in the law enforcement community spans 25 years as an officer and professional trainer. Internationally published and recognized as a use of force expert, he conducts training worldwide as President of TALON Training & Development, Inc.

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