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Tactics & Training

What Really Happens In A Gunfight?

The conclusions from twenty-five years of lethal force investigation.

By Dave Spaulding



Most lethal confrontations occur in bad light, Criminals like the dark. This complicates and confuses the situation.

Like many serious students of personal defense, I constantly update my knowledge of what actually happens when one is faced with a deadly threat. The best way to do this, at least to my way of thinking, is to talk with the folks who have been there. This means talking to gunfight survivors, getting their perspective on what transpired at the moment of truth. It only makes sense that by talking to those who have won in life's ultimate contest, to see what they saw, felt and heard, the rest of us will be better able to understand what to expect and how to prepare for it.

There are some who question such an approach, saying that the mind often does not "record" events clearly, which I admit does have some merit. I can remember working as a violent crime detective and taking witness statements from not only the victim of a particular crime, but also from people who witnessed the event. The discrepancies between what the various people saw and heard can sometimes be quite dramatic. These discrepancies are due to the shock effect that such an incident has on the witness' psyche.

Most people who witness a violent event (such as a crime in progress) are not accustomed to violent acts. Crime witnesses have told me that they always thought a violent attack would look like the antiseptic event as portrayed by television. When a bystander witnesses blood, victim screams, pandemonium and the sheer violence of the real thing, they are taken back and oftentimes tell themselves, "This can't be happening; this can't be real." This denial state will certainly interfere with their re-telling of events.

Unfortunately, this same attitude and level of perception is also the norm with crime victims, oftentimes resulting in a deadly lag time. Criminals and terrorists know this and believe me, they use it. Additionally, criminal attacks tend to happen in times of reduced light (predators like the dark), and the human eye does not function as well when the light is low, further clouding the witness perception of the event. I have interviewed people who were just a few yards from a crime and cannot remember what type of weapon was used in the attack. Interestingly, this is usually due not to low light, but to inconsistent light. While what the perpetrator was doing was clear, his face, hands or other actions are often cast in shadows by the inconsistent light at the scene. Think about the environment that you live in. How often is there a totally dark environment? Isn't there usually a street or house light that lights up an area with darkness all around? Look down an alley sometime.

It is likely that you will see a lighted area but with dark spots, like the shadowed area behind a nearby dumpster. This inconsistent light environment is very real and is a factor in armed confrontations. Police officers have told me of incidents where they left their flashlight behind because they were working the day shift and they didn't need a light because the sun was out. Then they get into a situation where they need to look into a dark closet, alcove or basement and they just can't see well enough. Being able to see well is critical.

Perception is a funny thing, but it is really all that we have when trying to investigate such events. The human mind is not infallible...actually it is easily tricked. There are any number of magicians and illusionist who are making a good living making people think they saw something they did not. Unless a video camera is running at the time of the event (which is happening more and more), then the testimony of the participants is still the best indicator of what transpired. This is still the standard for our court system and I feel that it will remain a big part of defense research for years to come.

Even the video camera does not always tell a complete story. Quite often, what the viewer sees is not necessarily what actually transpired. For example, a student of mine was involved in one of the most publicized shoot-outs in recent history. In this case, this young deputy assisted a state trooper on a traffic stop that turned out to involve two domestic terrorists who were also murder suspects in another state. The fight took place at very close range and fortunately, the deputy was not hit. Unfortunately, neither was the suspect who then became the subject of a nationwide manhunt.

After the trial was over and the court imposed "gag order" was lifted, I was able to talk with the deputy at length. I was quite gratified when he told me, "Lieutenant, everything that you told us in the basic academy was true. It happened just like you said it would. I felt that I was very well prepared for what happened." We instructors live for such moments; they make all of the frustration worthwhile. I then went on to ask him a battery of questions that I had asked so many others over the years, feeling that I already knew the answers since I had watched the video over and over again. It was at this point that I found

out that my eyes had not seen what really happened. I said, "I was glad to see after the initial exchange that you moved behind the engine block of your cruiser to take cover."

His response to this was surprising, "I didn't take cover, I fell down and it was the scariest part of the whole situation. Here I was in the middle of a gunfight and I was flat on my back. I was terrified that I was going to get shot in the butt. I felt so helpless. What you told us in the academy about not trying to walk backwards was so true." This and other such incidents have made me realize that videos do not necessarily tell the whole story. It is essential to interview the participants.



Changing light conditions aggravated by muzzle flash and loud noise all add to the confusion of a gunfight.

THE GUNFIGHT PROJECT

Over the last 25 I have made it a point to talk with every gunfight survivor that I could find. Last count, I had spoken with almost 200 individuals. These people include men and women, military (including war veterans), law enforcement and legally armed citizens. These confrontations include battlefield situations, back alley struggles, attempted muggings, attempted rapes (and successful rapes) and the like.

Right after I started my law enforcement career, a local police officer was involved in a shooting incident. I had the opportunity to speak with him and found myself fascinated with his accounting of what transpired. Afterward, I thought that what had happened to him could happen to me and I needed to be better prepared than he had.

So I undertook this project to educate myself on what happens during lethal encounters. At every opportunity, I sought out others and asked them what happened. I then developed a list of questions and included them in my interview process. I did not try and make this process "scientific" as it was for my own edification. Once I got involved in defensive skills instruction, I began to rely on what I was told to develop my lesson plans and decide what I should teach. Over time, I have found this approach to be quite reliable.

I began to seek training from the best and most famous firearms instructors and was concerned when what I had learned sometimes conflicted with what they taught. On one occasion, I spoke with one of these well-known instructors and inquired about a discrepancy regarding a technique he taught based on what I had been told. He looked at me and said, "Young man, I have been teaching this technique around the world with a great deal of success. I'm not going to change now based on a few war stories." This technique was one of this instructor's flagship techniques. It was quite clear that he was not going to let reality get in his way.

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Gunfights are high-stress situations that are often aggravated by one being taken by surprise and caught flat-footed.

Several weeks ago, I was talking with Handguns editor Dave Arnold about this same topic. When I told him of some of the trends that I had seen, he asked me to write an article about the myths of gun fighting. I had a few reservations about this, as I never intended to do this. I have not catalogued it, nor have I tried to put percentages on how often something happens. Quite frankly, there seems to be no set pattern on what people remember about their confrontation. What I have found, however, is that there are certain trends that seem to occur, in some fashion, over and over again. With this in mind, I agreed to Dave's request to report on what I have been told. I am not trying to go head to head with the research of others, nor am I trying to become the guru of gun fighting. It is information that the reader may use as they see fit. If it helps someone somewhere, that's great.

SIGHTS TO SEE

One of the great controversies of gun fighting has long been whether or not people can use their sights during the high stress of a gunfight. First, let me say that some version of point shooting needs to be taught in any defensive handgun course. There are going to be times when pointing the gun at someone close will be a necessity, period. However, I am not convinced that it is impossible to see the sights in a gun battle. This being the case, I always ask the people I interview if they remember seeing their sights during their confrontation. I know that there are different scientific studies explaining

how it is impossible to see the sights on a pistol during an armed confrontation. Recently, AO Sight System released a document entitled "Factors Influencing Visibility of Firearm Sights During BAR" (BAR meaning body alarm reaction) in which author Dr. Edward C. Godnig claims that it is possible "to maintain visual awareness of the 'sight picture'." I, too, have found this to be the case, but it is dependent on several factors. The first is whether or not the subject in question was caught unaware and the startle response kicked in. When startled, people will respond out of fear and panic, which usually does not result in the desired outcome.

The biggest factor during a startle response is luck. While luck will always be a factor in every confrontation, I am not convinced that we should make it a factor in our training. When statements are made such as, "I'm not going to be able to use the sights anyway, why spend training time using them?" It is almost as if we are expecting to be caught unaware and allowing luck to be the deciding factor. Clint Smith has said, "When you get up close you don't have to be good, you just have to be lucky," which is certainly true. Maybe the answer to this problem is not to be worried about whether or not to use sights, but to concentrate on being "switched on" to what is going on around you.

Without fail, the people who remember seeing or using their front sight are the ones who were prepared to engage in combat.

Good examples of this are soldiers on the field of battle or SWAT cops who know going in that they are quite likely to shoot. These folks kept sights in their "cone of vision" and relied on them when a hostile target was encountered. I have also experienced this phenomenon while working narcotics for a number of years. Prior to raids and vehicle takedowns, I would visualize in my head what I planned on doing, including where my firearm would be. This position would always be some type of high ready position where the gun and its sights were within my "cone." I found that during the operation itself, that when I encountered potential hostiles, I could shift between the actions of the suspect and the location of my front sight with little problem. The big difference here is that I was "prepared" to engage and not caught in startlement. Awareness is as important to gun fighting as is trigger control.

Along these same lines, the speed of the event is also reported frequently. While it is common knowledge that people report a sense of slow motion during an armed confrontation, there are also people who say, "It happened so fast, I just couldn't get caught up." While some may relate this to being startled, I'm not sure that the speed of the event and startle response is one in the same thing. Being startled is being caught flat footed and not being able to get in the fight quickly enough. The people I have spoken with report that their aggressor was fast, moved quickly and aggressively, moved with purpose, and inhibited rational, controlled thought on their part. One person told me that they actually were aware of their attacker's presence and were preparing to respond, but when the attack came, it just happened faster than they thought it would. This same person asked me, "What happened to all this slow motion s**t that I've heard about? This guy moved at warp speed." Add to this trying to draw a gun, necessary movement, muzzle flash and other related things and, well, speed kills.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

For many years, we have been taught that armed confrontations occur at very close distances (often times at arm's length), that few shots are fired and the person involved usually misses. These statistics were compiled from the FBI's Officer Killed Summary, which are released on an annual basis. Note that the operative word here is killed; these are officers that lost their confrontation. Have you ever wondered what happened with the officers that won? Did they do anything different to help ensure they would prevail?

In 1992, veteran police officer Dick Fairburn, now a trainer for the Illinois State Police, was commissioned by the Police Marksmen Association to answer this very question. Mr. Fairburn's original quest was to try and answer the stopping power debate of the time, in which he failed because the database of 241 shooting incidents was too small. However, what he did develop were some interesting trends that showed what officers did when they won the confrontation. One of the most interesting was the distances involved. While the FBI statistics show distances as being around ten feet, the PMA study showed the average distance being more like twenty. This makes sense, as distance will favor the person with the most training. This relates directly back to awareness as the sooner you see trouble coming, the more time you have to prepare for war. The PMA study also shows that the hit ratio per encounter was closer to 62 percent instead of the often-reported 18 percent. The history of gun fighting for more than a century has shown that the person that lands the first solid hit will usually win the confrontation. Hitting is hard to do without preparation and relying on luck is an invitation to disaster.



Being able to see one's assailant and being clearly able to identify them as a lethal threat is very important to avoid liability.

While talking with the people that I have interviewed, I could not help but notice that the people who performed the best (and could also remember the best) were the ones who were able to keep control of him or her self. Many remember getting control of their breathing and using this to fuel their inner drive. Those who could get control and overcome the startle response were able to handle the situation. Many of these folks reported that they were not surprised, but were angered by the audacity of the person trying to attack them. It appears that those who became angered were able to channel the chemicals flowing into their system into fight instead of flight or freeze. Many advised that they had taken the time to think about what they would do in the event they were attacked and had even played out scenarios in their head. It is clear that this role-playing or visualization prepared them to take action with little lag time. For years this has been called if/then thinking. For my students, I tell them to think of it as when/then thinking.

The other trend that I have noted in regards to the use of sights is the actual configuration of the sight itself. I have noted two distinct categories of individuals who remember using their sights; they are those that used long guns and those that used a revolver. The reason for the long gun use of sights seems to be directly related to responding as one is trained. All that I spoke with advised that when they saw the threat facing them, they brought the gun up until their cheek connected with the stock and the fired. None of the people I spoke with advised that they had ever been taught to fire their rifle or shotgun from the hip. When asked why they remember their sights, a common response was, "Because they were shoved up in front of my face."

Revolver shooters continuously told me things like, "I remember that big red (or orange, or green) front sight coming right up in front of my eyes and laying right on his chest." For those of us who broke into defensive shooting using revolvers, we can remember how well that red front insert contrasted with the wide black rear sight on our Smith & Wesson Model 66 or Ruger Security-Six. Those of us who did not have such an insert would usually paint our front sight with some high visibility color. Think about what is now available on semi-automatic pistols. We now have to line up three dots or we have to place a dot on top of a bar, all of which I believe is too complicated for our eyes to do quickly. The revolvers simple, but contrasting, sight system was easy for the eyes to use under stress.

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Fear and panic are reduced by preparation and an awareness of potential danger.

Dr. Godnig reports on this phenomenon, "Contrast of a target is a critical variable directly related to ease of visibility. Contrast corresponds to the ability to discriminate a dark visual image from a lighter visual image within a total visual surrounding. In general terms, contrast is the relationship between the lighting intensity of two adjacent areas. A dark image, approaching black (having no reflected light) is most easily seen next to a white (reflecting all light) background. Shades of gray that mostly resemble each other in light intensity and reflection are most difficult to visually discriminate and separate because the contrast values are most similar." Dr. Godnig also states, "Size of an object is related to visibility because relatively larger image sizes have the potential to stimulate more retinal cells inside the eye resulting in higher numbers of cones and rods sending information via the optic nerve to the brain for visual information processing." Objects that are large and of contrasting color are easier to see under stress, which makes the current generation of semi-auto sights on the wrong end of the sight plane. I, for one, have highlighted the front sight of all my pistols with bright orange emergency warning tape. It offers a contrast that is large and bold and I feel is the

reason that I can recall my sights during high stress events.

THE RIGHT STUFF

Another area that I address with the people I interview is the subject of bullet effectiveness. Like many, I am interested in whether one caliber is better than another or whether hollow point ammo is more effective than full metal jacket. Truly, the most important thing in all this is where you hit your opponent. I have spoken with a little old lady who severed the aorta of a home invader with a FMJ .32 while, at the same time, talking to a police officer that could not stop a knife-wielding assailant with five rounds of .45 ACP hollow-point. As a matter of fact, many of the people that I spoke with continued to fire until the threat was no longer in front of their gun. Think about the time it takes for gravity to pull a 200-pound male to the ground. As a matter of fact, time it for yourself.

Lay a mattress on the floor and just collapse on it. It will take between one and two seconds to hit the floor. A lot of rounds can be fired in one to two seconds. Dr. Vincent DiMaio, a noted pathologist and author of the book *Gunshot Wounds*, has been quoted as saying the stopping power comes from, "Where you hit the person and how many times you can hit them."

Interestingly, few people remember taking notice of any immediate effects of their bullet strikes. Some reported that they expected small chest explosions like they saw in the movies and were surprised when that did not happen. Some recall the suspect's shirt puckering or moving, but most have no recollection of any bullet strikes. Most of the people I spoke with remember shooting and then their opponent "just not being there any more." At the same time, gunfight survivors who are shot vary greatly in their recollection of what happened when they were shot. People, who are shot in the leg, unless a bone is hit, take less notice than other areas of the body that are hit. People who are shot in the chest remember being slammed or being punched at the time. How they handled the impact seems to fall totally on how much anger and resolve they felt at the time they were shot. Doctors and emergency medical technicians have told me over the years that if you are not killed instantly by a gun shot wound (a vital organ being hit) or bleed out in a few very short moments, you probably will not die from your wound.

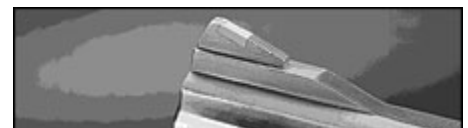
The most dramatic wound that I ever personally saw involved a woman who was shot in the head by a .357 Magnum. I was a patrol deputy and responded to a public housing project on the report of a shooting. I arrived at the same time as the medic crew and found a white female sitting on the sofa with a dimpled hole in her forehead.

There was a similar wound on the back of her head. As I spoke to her at the scene (to find out who shot her, not to further my personal research) I was told that she had been in an argument with her live-in boyfriend when he picked up a snub-nosed .357 revolver and shot her in the forehead. She advised that her head, "Slammed back and I fell back onto the sofa. I have been sitting here ever since. I have a big head ache." It later turned out that the 158-grain jacketed semi-wadcutter bullet used in the shooting had spilt the lobes of her brain finer than any surgeon could have hoped to. The bullet left a hole in the rear of her skull, which was patched in some way. This victim was released from the hospital and then refused to testify against her boyfriend. ("I still love him.") He was prosecuted anyway. This incident remains one of the strangest things that I have ever seen.

It is safe to say that the larger the bullet, the more effective it will be. I do not feel that it is a real dramatic difference, but bigger is better. At the same time, it is safe to say that hollow-point ammo is more effective than ball. This seems to be the result not of expansion, but from the bullet's energy being dumped in the body and not exiting.

While not trying to place a percentage on how often they will be effective with one or two shots, I have seen certain rounds be effective over and over again. They are the .38 Special 158-grain lead hollow-point; 9mm +P+ jacketed hollow-point; .40 155- and 165-grain jacketed hollow-point; .45 ACP hollow-points; .223 55 grain FMJ and hollow-point; 12 gauge 00 buckshot; and 12 gauge rifled slugs.

The various phases of body alarm reaction that have been discussed over the years such as tunnel vision, slow motion movement, loss of digital dexterity and the like, were all recalled by the subjects interviewed. None of the people I spoke with remember suffering all phases, but everyone remembers suffering at least one of the sensations listed under the category of body alarm reaction. Those that



understood what was happening to them better handled the sensation during the encounter versus the people who did not. Without a doubt, forewarned is forearmed.

REFLECTIONS

Finally, how did these people feel after the incident was over and they were the victor? Again, a wide variety of responses are reported. There are those who survived only by sheer luck and actually had little input into their own survival. These people were "horrified" by what happened and what they had to do and will never be the same person that they were prior to the incident. These folks all seem to share one common trait--they thought that nothing could ever happen to them. They are life's sheep and felt that criminal attacks happened to others or to society's underbelly. It should be noted that some "gun shop commandos" or "gun bullies," regardless of their outward bravado, fall into this category.

The other extreme, those who are totally comfortable with what they did, have no doubt in their justification to do so and have suffered no side effects whatsoever. These people tend to be those who are confident and well adjusted in their everyday life. They took the time to think about what may be, without dwelling on it, and made proper mental and physical preparations. The majority fall somewhere in the middle, what I call the compassionate survivor.


These folks regret having to take action against another human (it is not normal in the animal kingdom to prey on one's own species. Mankind seem to have the patent on this), but they realize that if they had not, they would have been seriously hurt or killed. Some have a period of physical and mental distress, but it passes and they go on to live productive lives.

Where most survivors are taken off guard is what happens in the court system. Few (including police officers) are prepared for the grand jury and court system. While they think they understand what will happen, few actually do. Others are amazed that the relatives of "the lowlife" who attacked them are suing them. The process is, "Hey, I am the good guy here. This person attacked me and I just defended myself. How can these people possibly sue me?" People can sue for anything and they will--be prepared for it.

Take this information for what it is worth. I'm not trying to dispute research that has already been published, nor am I trying to take on any specific group or theory. This is merely what I have been told by a little fewer than 200 survivors. Take it for what it is worth and use it as you please.

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The author believes one reason why many do not see their sights in a gun fight is because the low profile front sights of many of today's auto pistols (left) are not as prominent as those of revolvers (right).