

Is your firearms program complete?

By Bret Pagnucco



Have your agency's firearms programs been scrutinized recently? Is the program preparing officers to win a gunfight or to simply pass annual agency and state qualifications? From the basics of recruit training, to specialized units such as SWAT, is the firearms training provided by your agency based on the concept of ensuring that officers are sufficiently prepared for the realities of a gunfight and can win?

Annual weapons qualifications are not training — period. Annual qualifications are first and foremost a legal obligation. They typically have little or nothing to do with preparing an officer for an exchange of gunfire with an armed assailant. It is akin to believing that passing a road test is sufficient preparation for winning the next Daytona 500. Historically, many armed professionals,

both military and police, have discovered the hard way that their firearms training did not provide the necessary preparation for a lethal threat encounter. The ability to demonstrate a passing marksmanship score on a static square range does not translate to the ability to win at armed combat.

The development of force-on-force training options such as simulation weapons with marking cartridges and shoot-back cannons for computer simulators has certainly helped to close the training gap between the demonstration of marksmanship ability during a qualification course and the realities of armed combat. These technological advancements have exponentially increased the ability of trainers to prepare both military personnel and law enforcement officers for many types of lethal threat

engagements, including gunfights. Computer simulators and force-on-force simulation training continue to provide the opportunity to develop and test an individual's judgment and promote the appropriate response/weapon selection. Properly administered simulation exercises will introduce responders to the stressors associated with the "fight, flight or freeze" response that arise with a lethal threat encounter. Submitting responders to these stressors in a controlled environment allows many to obtain a degree of inoculation against the negative effects of flight or freeze.

Stress inoculation is effective when the student is stressed by the realism of the exercise. Today's police officer has likely played laser tag as an elementary student and attended a paintball facility in high school or college. Additional countless hours on "computerized simulators" such as Xbox or Playstation can result in a reduction in the impact/stress experienced during simulation exercises. Many students have been or are readily desensitized towards simulation training, because the training appears to be an extension of their prior gaming experience. Simulation training typically allows for remediation and a repeat of the exercise until the student is successful. This is a best practice, as we cannot teach that failure is an acceptable outcome. Immediate remediation in decision-making and a positive outcome is required for the training to be successful. This unfortunately can reinforce the gaming attitude, and a repeat can subconsciously be seen as a simple "reset."

Simulation training, safely administered, is still clearly one of the most modern and effective methods to train and inoculate students against an unsuitable stress reaction to a sudden violent attack. Force-on-force training with simulation weapons is a critical component to any firearms training program. It is complementary to live fire training, not a replacement. The heavy resources required to put each individual officer through simulation exercises makes it difficult to maintain a regular program, particularly during these times of tight budgets and cuts to training programs.



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On the upside, the effectiveness of simulation training has led us to identify weaknesses in live fire training. Why does a student who has demonstrated acceptable marksmanship proficiency with his firearm as well as sound decision-making during simulation exercises inexplicably fail a simple unpracticed live fire drill? The answer lies in the apparent disconnect between simulation training with marking cartridges and modern live fire training. This disconnect becomes evident with the implementation of live fire stress drills.

Stress drills are simply live fire exercises that include a physical and/or mental stressor for the weapon operator before and during the course of fire. Simply conducting a timed, unrehearsed live fire drill on the range is often a stressor for the uninitiated. Stress drills can also test equipment and doctrine by creating stressors and environmental conditions associated to actual gunfights. One of the immediate benefits of including stress drills in your regular firearms program is that they can be safely designed to permit as many officers to participate in the drill as target positions available. Courses of fire can be designed to include a combination of activities that induce some degree of stress into the exercise.

A gunfight is essentially a physical and mental competition. The physical component is comprised of speed and accuracy with the delivery system or weapon. The mental component is the proper recognition of a threat(s) and threat management through the proper selection and prioritization of shielding, distance and movement

while initiating physical countermeasures and return fire if required. The most critical component in this competition is time. It is not the first round fired that counts but the first well-placed hit on target. In an actual gunfight, the physical and mental stressors can be interlinked. Needless to say, being injured at the outset of the attack can be both an extreme physical and mental stressor.

The concept of "fight, flight or freeze" is well documented. The accompanied loss of cognitive mental ability under the high stress associated with perceived imminent death/grievous bodily harm is also well-proven. The challenge, during training, is to simulate this type of stress during an exercise and observe and correct the student's reaction. Through exposure to similar stressors as those found in a lethal threat encounter, most students become inoculated or mentally prepared against having a failure related to flight or freeze. Experience — having *been there, done that* successfully — is the best preparation for future encounters with armed assailants.

Mental stress can be induced through cognitive thinking exercises and problem-solving conducted before and during the live fire exercise. The single greatest mental stressor on the range is time, particularly if it is a fixed time exercise. In a competitive environment, even if the race is only against the clock, time, or perceived lack of time, produces stress on the shooter. As often occurs in a real gunfight, the officer is behind the reactionary gap that occurs when we do not initiate the action but are reacting to a threat. Traditional marksmanship training

has very generous time allotments that are in fact ridiculous when compared to what occurs in a real gunfight. Targets are always directly forward of the firing position and do not need to be located or identified.

Therefore, the stressors that an officer can expect in an actual lethal threat situation are rarely realized on the live fire range. If the same officer is required, on command, to conduct a simple math problem that produces a target number, then locate that target and engage under a realistic time constraint, some degree of mental stress will be realized. The officer will be required to multi-task to solve a problem, then locate and identify the threat presented and engage it, all the while preoccupied with the knowledge that his time is running out. Multiple targets and no-shoot targets create further mental stressors. Combined with physical exertion or better yet, physical discomfort, the drill begins to simulate the multiple stressors environment of a gunfight.

Physical stress can be induced through a simple run, burpees or similar physical activity. Placing operators in non-traditional or improvised firing positions, disabled drills or firing from the support side can also create real world physical stressors. The accelerated heart and respiration rate caused by physical exertion attempts to simulate the exertion an officer might require when responding to the type of occurrence that may result in a gunfight. A moderate increase of physical exertion, conducted on the line in a controlled manner, will in most cases have the desired effect without causing injury. The level of physical stress can be incrementally increased up to and including running an obstacle course with a gas mask before the course of fire. Recognizing your class composition and assignment, combined with common sense, will of course determine the level of physical exertion desired. Remember, safety is the priority throughout any firearms training. Firing a weapon following a period of physical exertion is rarely experienced during typical qualification course firearms

NTOA Conference Advanced Tactical Carbine Track

The Advanced Tactical Carbine track at the 2010 Annual NTOA Conference included numerous multi-stress drills. These time-restricted drills included improvised firing positions, target identification, proper use of cover, moving targets, simulated loss of the dominant eye with related physical discomfort and exposure to detonating IEDs during live fire exercises.

Attendees were scored throughout the four-day track, with the Conference Top Gun awarded to Sr. Trooper Grant Rowe of Georgia State Patrol SWAT, followed closely in second place by Larry Ferrilli of Pittsburgh SWAT.

Special thanks to Fred Laughlin of OPFOR Munitions who provided the simulated IEDs for training throughout the track. The OPFOR products provided safe and realistic training in reproducing numerous scenarios including a Mumbai terrorist attack live fire simulation on the range. (sales@opformunitions.com)



Students engage targets downrange as OPFOR munitions simulated IEDs detonating across the range.

training, but is a common occurrence before, during and after a gunfight.

Proper course of fire design can permit this type of dynamic training with an operator at each firing position. This, of course, is much less resource heavy than simulation training. The number one priority is *safety*. Through innovative target and course design and minimum angles of engagement from shooter to target, safety can be realized while providing a more realistic training experience. The course of fire must take into consideration the variables of range facility, personnel and equipment, but generally can be conducted following a qualification session with minimal additional resources. Programs start simply and gradually, introducing more realistic and multiple stressors simultaneously. A simple test always proves the benefit of

experience. Run the drill, score the targets and repeat later in the program. Scores are almost always better on the second attempt, because officers have experienced the drill and know what to expect.

In the next issue, course of fire design considerations and suggestions for stress drills and team exercises will be examined.

Remember: Hit first, hit right, repeat as required. ◀◀

About the author

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