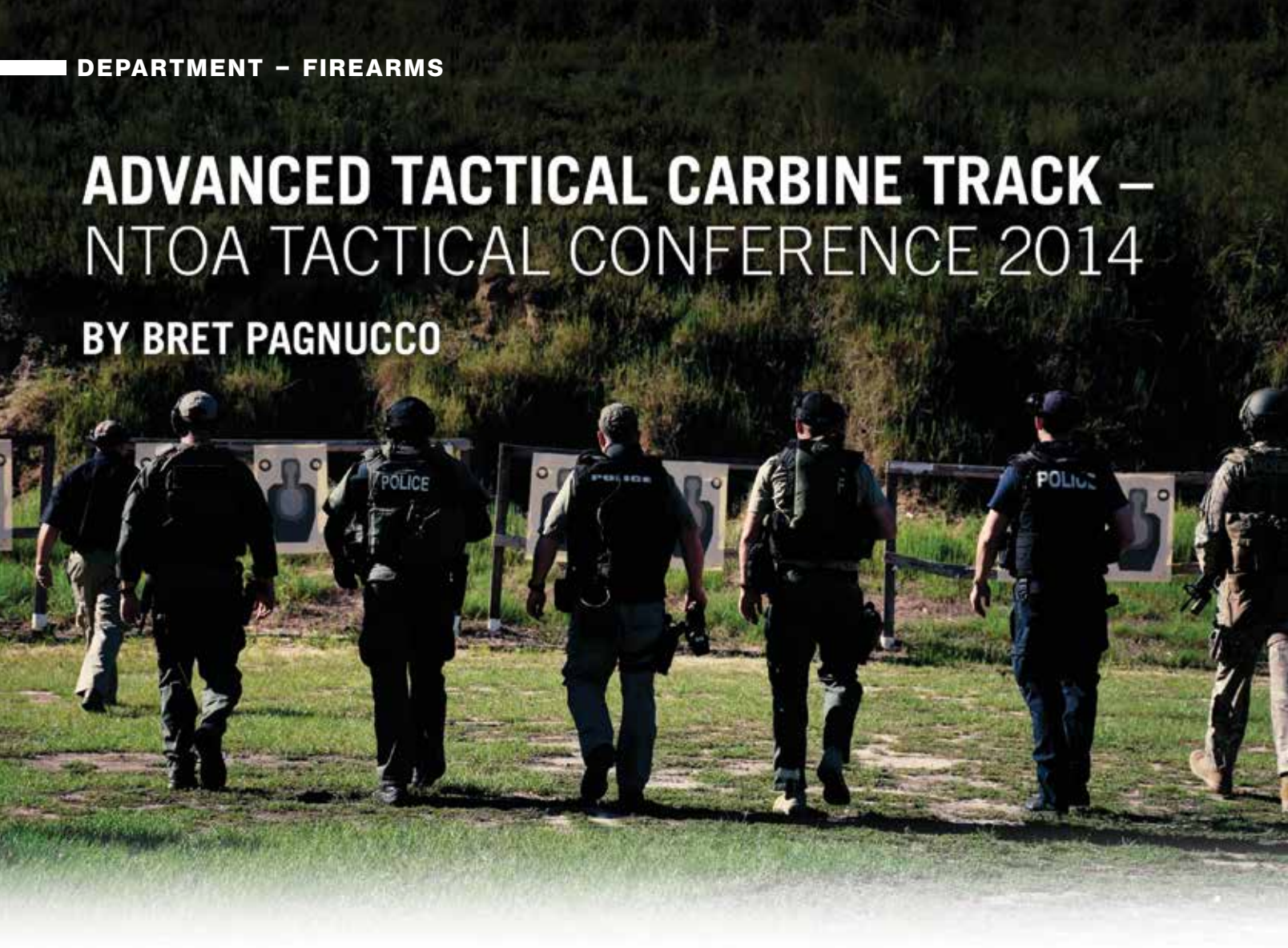
ADVANCED TACTICAL CARBINE TRACK – NTOA TACTICAL CONFERENCE 2014

BY BRET PAGNUCCO



Operators, equipment and doctrine were thoroughly tested over four days of physically and mentally challenging courses of fire and drills during the Advanced Tactical Carbine track at NTOA's 2014 conference in Mobile, Alabama. Unlike typical range practice or qualification courses of fire, operators were subjected to physical and mental stressors designed to simulate real threats experienced in a gunfight. Competition courses of fire were scored each day and the results were tabulated to determine the "Top Guns" of the conference.

Every gunfight is a competition, and the opponent who hits first and then keeps hitting until the opposing threat is stopped, wins almost every time. As with all things in life, chance, fate or bad luck often become deciding factors that are beyond our control, working for or against us, and cannot be relied upon to go either way. Because we train for every eventuality, we have the ability to overcome a less than favorable circumstance like a weapon malfunction, a partially disabling injury or an opponent with a tactically superior position.

Because we train for every eventuality, we have the ability to overcome a less than favorable circumstance like a weapon malfunction, a partially disabling injury or an opponent with a tactically superior position.

As in years past, failing to transition to the sidearm on a weapon malfunction proved costly to some operators. Those practicing the "proximity doctrine," in which distance to the target determines immediate action or transition, failed again. This occurred because they were not prepared for the failure and were then unable to make a cognitive decision while also facing several external stressors. The proximity of a target only works as the deciding factor when you have the cognitive ability to make a decision, loaded dummy rounds and an expectation that a decision-making challenge is imminent. *Always train to transition, no matter what the distance to the target.* If you transition at 100 yards from the target rather than conduct an immediate action drill, you can almost certainly recover. If you fail to transition 15

feet from an armed assailant, then it is almost assured that you will not have an opportunity to recover.

Several operators arrived with their issue M4 rifle sighted in at 25 yards, per agency doctrine. Needless to say, they were unable to hit point-of-aim at 100 yards when engaging a partial target that simulated an adversary using cover. These operators and their agencies were unfamiliar with the ballistic properties of the weapon and cartridge. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. Incorrect doctrine can have a significant impact in reducing efficiency in hitting a target at extended ranges. A 25-yard zero with the M4 typically results in a bullet strike six inches high at 100 yards. To their surprise, the operators utilizing the 25-yard zero failed to strike the simulated threat when firing from a window 100 yards away, as the rounds went over the exposed head of the target. Conversely, with a 100-yard zero, the bullet strike at 25 yards is 1.5 inches low.

Ballistically speaking, taking the head shot in this situation still results in a hit, albeit minimally lower than intended. As we get closer to the target this point-of-aim/point-of-impact differential increases due to the offset between line of sight and the bore axis of the weapon. All operators with the 25-yard zero immediately recognized the benefit of having a properly zeroed weapon.

Failure to deploy with iron backup sights made marksmanship a challenge for those operators who had a simulated optic failure. It was equally challenging for those operators who found they could not remove their optic in a timely manner as an obstructed lens did not permit the use of their backup sights. The operators with integrated backups on the optic or the ability to quickly dismount their optic utilizing a quick release mount designed for just such an occurrence were not hindered in their ability to strike the target accurately and in a timely manner.

***Always train to transition, no matter what the distance to the target.* If you transition at 100 yards from the target rather than conduct an immediate action drill, you can almost certainly recover.**

Several operators fired their weapon without the ability to activate the weapon light, given the position of their hands on the weapon. When directed to activate the light during a string of fire, many had to reposition their support hand to facilitate light activation. This, of course, is counter-productive to timely, accurate fire on target, as your hand position should naturally be the same no matter the light condition. Practicing a technique repeatedly in preparation for a championship competition, then needlessly forcing a significant alteration to that technique at game time can lead to disaster. A vertical grip provides the ability to maintain hand position in the same location for all firing positions while also allowing ambidextrous activation of the weapon light. Properly positioned, it can also be used in conjunction with the support hand to form a monopod for a supported position when prone.

Rifle sling type and use varied greatly. Operators with a less-than-optimal sling were often forced to remove the sling to fire from a support side or improvised firing position. In some instances, a simple adjustment resolved the issue. However, some slings were simply inappropriate for tactical application. Properly adjusted, the new convertible single/two-point sling systems seem to encompass all the best features of both systems.

Finally, several operators were observed utilizing the competition "C clamp" grip of the rifle. The theory behind using this style of shooting is that it will allow the operator to transition targets faster, reduce muzzle rise and shoot faster, while maintaining a sight picture on target. The potential obstruction of iron backup sights and loss of support side peripheral vision can become problematic with this technique.

"Top Gun" winners (l-r) Third Place: Sgt. Scott Hanks, Mobile SWAT; Second Place: Insp. Beau Bartel, US Marshals; First Place: Officer Travis Arase, Maui SWAT

Many thanks to ATK for their support in providing Top Gun awards.

The primary issue for real world application is comfort and fatigue.

In competition and range drills, you walk to the line and shoot — that's it. Call outs do not work quite that conveniently, and we may have to clear a structure or stand on point for a period of time before engaging a threat. Having the support side arm locked out with the support hand clamped down on the forward end of the forestock for an extended period leads to arm fatigue. It was noted that those shooters employing this technique were unable to sustain it for the entire training day, despite numerous opportunities for rest. If the new firing technique results in operator support arm exhaustion after clearing a large two-story structure, is it really practical for deployment in the real world?

The key concept reinforced during the Advanced Carbine Track is the importance of fundamental marksmanship skills as the foundation for winning a lethal threat encounter. This year's top operator, Officer Travis Arase, clearly demonstrated that marksmanship is a skill that must be developed and maintained, not purchased. Utilizing iron sights, he consistently posted higher scores than operators with red dot sights and magnifiers, and ultimately he achieved the best overall score. Remember, it's not the rifle that wins the fight, it's the rifle operator who makes the difference. ■

In competition and range drills, you walk to the line and shoot — that's it. Call outs do not work quite that conveniently, and we may have to clear a structure or stand on point for a period of time before engaging a threat.