

# **Surviving a Violent Encounter: Are you Prepared?**

By Brian Fitzpatrick

As the owner of a firearms and tactics training school, I have found that most of our students—at every level of instruction—mention self-defense, or defense of home and family as their primary reason for seeking training. We also get customers who list as their motivating factor for instruction, a desire to learn about firearms safety, to exercise their Second Amendment rights, to enhance their recreational shooting ability, or to just have a fun day shooting in the great outdoors. None of these motivations are mutually exclusive however, as individuals from the latter groups often admit that, whatever their reason for training, they can also envision various scenarios in which they could potentially need to defend themselves against a violent criminal.

I tell people to be prepared, not paranoid. But in modern society, the list of possible threat profiles is endless. Active shooter/killers (whether disgruntled employees, mentally ill, disenfranchised students, ex-romantic interests, or homicidal/suicidal psychopaths), domestic violence situations, street/ATM robberies, violent sexual assaults, residential burglaries, home invasion robberies, car jacking, road-rage incidents, gang violence, and domestically radicalized or strategic level terror attacks, to name just a few.

Regarding preparation, a wise law enforcement trainer once said, “When the time to perform has arrived, the time to prepare has passed.” This message is certainly true to many endeavors (emergency preparedness, academics, competitive sports, performance arts, etc.), but when applied in the self-defense context, it can easily make the difference between life and death.

Learning to shoot isn’t a monolithic answer to all of the above threats, although for gun owners, it’s a very important tool. Shooting skills are perishable so frequent and varied practice is critical, as is training in basic tactics, designed for civilians and conducted by experienced instructors. And since you’ll be training to survive violent encounters, it makes sense that you would seek instructors who have worked in the field and have themselves survived multiple violent confrontations.

## **Violent Confrontations—A Strategic Approach to Preparation**

Since the early 1970s, the “Officer Survival Movement”—an educational, training, and procedural renaissance in American policing—reacted to the dramatic escalation of violent and deadly assaults against law enforcement officers during the preceding decade. During this time, police officer safety training expanded and evolved into a broad range of knowledge, protocols, ideas, and strategies, all designed to help police officers prepare for, recognize, and defend against violent

threats. For learning purposes, this global approach to survival preparedness was graphically depicted as a two-dimensional pyramid and referred to as the “Officer Survival Triad.” Each of the pyramid’s three sides represented a separate, critical component (“Physical Fitness,” “Firearms Proficiency,” and “Tactics”). The additional depiction of a curved line, completely encircling the Triad pyramid was often added to the symbol. This circle represented the overarching component, “Mindset.”

Since each of the four components of survival preparedness symbolized by the triad and circle image could easily be the subject of a separate article, I’ll try to give brief explanations for each.

### **Physical Fitness**

Without some degree of physical fitness—both circulatory (cardiovascular) and muscular strength—all other survival components will likely diminish to dangerously low levels. Not to suggest that you must be an Olympic class athlete in order to defend yourself. But bear in mind that during times of threat induced stress, a common human physiological response—known as “fight-or-flight syndrome”—will negatively affect many physical functions and senses that are necessary for survival. These may include fine motor skills, short-term memory, night vision, depth perception, critical thinking and overall cognitive acuity, hearing, endurance, strength in the arms and legs, and other issues caused by reduced circulatory, respiratory and muscular efficiency.

Given the choice, you won’t want to fight one-on-one with an assailant, but what if you need to disengage from a threat by running and/or hiding? This will require fitness. As a lawful firearm owner, you’ll need the strength to hold your weapon steady to challenge a threat, and if necessary to save your life, to shoot accurately.

If you don’t already have a lifetime fitness, exercise and nutrition plan, then definitely seek medical and professional approval and guidance as necessary. But whichever type or level of workout plan you choose, a good guide is to make it roughly half cardiovascular and half muscular strength. Start slowly, building strength and endurance gradually over time.

### **Firearms Proficiency**

First and foremost, firearms are deadly weapons, which can accidentally kill or seriously injure someone if not handled safely and properly. Take firearms safety seriously by learning and living the four Cardinal Rules of Firearms Safety, both on and off the range:

1. Always point your firearm's muzzle in a safe direction (downrange), and never at anything that you're not willing to shoot, destroy, or kill.
2. Always keep your finger off the trigger and outside of the trigger guard, until you're gun is on-target and you're ready to fire.
3. Always treat every firearm as if it were loaded. Assume that every gun is loaded and treat it accordingly. Always double-check a gun's condition.
4. Always be aware of your intended target and the background beyond it.

Additionally, learn about safe and lawful storage and transportation of firearms, both generally and in compliance with your state laws.

Seek quality and regular training from knowledgeable instructors. I can't count the number of times that prospective students have volunteered that they've owned guns for decades, have had no formal training but their father or uncle taught them everything about shooting. Upon seeing them on the range, however, students with backgrounds like this commonly must overcome a myriad of bad habits and other problems with shooting and unsafe gun-handling skills.

Before moving on to more advanced skills, you should master the six fundamentals of marksmanship (grip, stance, sight alignment, breathing control, trigger press, and follow-through/trigger reset). These are perishable skills so regular practice (both dry-fire with an unloaded weapon and live fire at the range) is essential. Accuracy and recoil control are your primary goals. Work toward achieving small groups of hits at varying distances (five to twenty five yards and beyond with handguns). Only fire follow-up shots as fast as you can hit your target accurately. Speed will come on its own with repetitive practice. There are many other components of a shooter's skill-set that will enhance your survivability in an armed confrontation but you must first be proficient in these basics before advancing to higher levels of training.

You should learn and practice shooting, gun handling and manipulation, and tactical skills gradually. Most experienced instructors will teach incrementally over time, first teaching you to perform simple skills that will later build into more complex techniques.

When practicing (both dry and live fire), regularly shoot with your supporting hand, without using your dominant hand for support and keeping it over your chest. Why do this? What if you suffer a catastrophic injury to your dominant hand or arm during a gun battle? If you've trained to shoot accurately with your "weak" hand, then you'll be able to stay in the fight and defend yourself and others by transitioning your pistol to your non-dominant hand. Later, in more advanced training, qualified instructors will teach you to perform other skills with your

supporting hand. These include drawing from a strong-side holster, reloading, and malfunction clearing.

Another important training goal is stress inoculation. I admit that it would be impossible to completely “vaccinate” yourself against the negative effects of the acute stress you’ll experience in an actual gunfight, knife attack, or other armed confrontation. You should, however, interject both psychological and physical stress into some of your shooting drills. Work with instructors who will run you through live fire training scenarios designed to incorporate various levels of stress. If your only live fire practice is leisurely shooting at a paper target on a square range, then you’re not preparing yourself for actual defensive situations.

There’s an old saying, “Bring the street to the range, not the range to the street.” Don’t take shortcuts on the range for convenience sake because they can imprint negative muscle memory. When practicing shooting or firearm manipulation, do it like it’s for real. When reloading on the range for example, you should dump your empty magazine, letting it fall to the ground as you bring your fresh magazine up for the reload. If you take time to find a place for the empty magazine (pocket, bench, or range bag) to avoid later having to pick it up from the ground or clean it, you’re likely to reinforce bad behavior that will slow your reloads and draw your attention away from the threat.

Additional firearms skills that will enhance your survivability are too numerous to describe in this article but many involve handgun manipulation. These include combat (speed) reloads, tactical magazine exchange reloads (retaining partially used magazines), immediate action drills for clearing failures to feed, fire, extract, or eject), holster work, shooting and reloading while moving, turning to contact threats that present in different directions, prioritizing and engaging multiple targets, proper use of cover, shooting from low (prone and supine) and intermediate (kneeling and sitting) positions for better cover, low-light shooting techniques, two-gun (handgun with rifle or shotgun) shooting techniques, paired shooters and small unit shooting tactics.

## **Tactics**

“Tactical” is probably one of the most overused words in the English language. However, tactics is really just another word for procedures or techniques, as well as decision-making ability that you will utilize to accomplish a mission, which in this case is surviving a violent or armed confrontation.

As with firearms proficiency, seek tactical training from experienced and knowledgeable instructors. Preferably those with first hand experience. There are many retired military special operations or law enforcement (patrol, tactical team, K-9 Unit and firearms training cadre) types out there doing this type of training. I

think that it's valuable if your instructors have actually "been down range" to use a common idiom for having been in a gunfight.

Use caution in choosing your training sources because they aren't all good. In contrast to the quality instruction mentioned in the previous paragraph, I recently viewed a video advertising "Tactical Firearms Training" on the web site of a local indoor firing range. It featured two of their in-house instructors shooting from behind a cardboard barricade (simulating wall cover) and also shooting while moving from one barricade to another, all with the obligatory hard rock music soundtrack.

My initial viewing proved that, while these two instructors might be okay shooters, they knew little to nothing about tactical shooting. One of the instructors predictably exposed himself from cover as he repeatedly emerged and fired from the exact same position on the barricade wall. He paused and/or reloaded in between bursts of fire, and then rolled out most of his upper body from the same spot on the wall, thereby allowing an assailant (if one had been down range) to anticipate on multiple occasions, exactly where the instructor's head would pop out and present a nice juicy target. The second instructor, while firing on the move from one cover position to another, stopped in the open to reload, thereby sacrificing his advantage of movement and making himself a stationary target with an empty gun while nearby cover was available.

The moral of this story should be obvious. If you're willing to spend your hard earned money on firearms and tactical training, make sure to research the school or training company. Check references and pre-interview your instructors or a representative of the school.

As the previous anecdote illustrates, your knowledge, recognition and use of cover are critical skill sets that can greatly enhance your survivability in an armed encounter. Your instructors' ability to teach you these and other tactical skills will be of great value. Can you differentiate between cover (something that stops bullet penetration) and concealment (something that hides you from view)? Which of these terms best describes most interior walls in your house? If it became necessary, would you know how to shoot from cover without telegraphing your location or unnecessarily exposing yourself?

In the event of an unlawful intruder in your home, it's best practice to have your family shelter and dial 9-1-1 from a pre-designated safe room. It's never a good idea to search your house on your own. That's the police department's responsibility, for which its officers are trained. You might know your home's floor plan better than anyone but you're probably not trained or equipped in building search and room clearing techniques. If, however, you decide to disregard this advice—maybe as a last resort because one of your children is unaccounted for—your survival might depend on your knowledge of how to tactically clear a doorway and move through an interior space without silhouetting (backlighting) yourself, or marking yourself

as a target through improper use of your flashlight. To develop these advanced skills you must seek continuing tactical education from qualified instructors.

## **Mindset**

Mindset refers to your overall worldview, awareness, and inclination to act in certain ways in response to problems or threats. I know people who on outward appearances, lead innocuous lifestyles and work in mundane careers but beating inside each of their chests is the heart of a warrior. It isn't that they're super heroes but instead average citizens who have taken the time to prepare themselves—mentally, physically, and in skill-sets—for a day that might never come. But if that day does come, they will be ready. To use an analogy coined by author and military/law enforcement trainer, Lt. Colonel (Ret.) Dave Grossman, people like this have a “sheepdog” mentality.

If you have such a mindset, you are almost always aware of your surroundings and of potential threats that may exist. When you enter a building or enclosed area, you almost subconsciously identify at least two exit points and the presence or absence of available cover (an object or architectural or terrain feature that offers protection from bullet penetration). It would be impossible to predict future events with specificity, however, the sheepdogs of the world have used visualization techniques and studied historical events to prepare themselves on how they would respond to various general categories of threatening situations, such as ATM robberies, car jacking, home invasion robberies, among others.

Warrior/sheepdog mindset people are familiar with federal and state use of force laws and know the parameters set by “Graham v. Connor” and other case law as it relates to defensive uses of force.

And most importantly, people with a survival mindset work to remain current with their perishable skills, whether in firearms proficiency, tactics, fitness, and possibly a martial arts discipline. Those who have been issued permits to carry a concealed weapon (CCW) remain current, not only in perishable firearms and tactical skills, but in the gun laws, which change significantly after every legislative session. The sixteen-hour CCW qualification course is just the beginning in acquiring the knowledge and skills that you will likely need to survive a gunfight.

## **Mindset for the Non-Firearm Owner**

After so much discussion about firearms, I don't want people who have chosen not to own guns, or can't lawfully carry in public to feel that they lack tactical options. Critical thinking and sound tactical judgment should always guide your decision making in any emergency or critical incident.

If you're present during a crime in progress, such as an armed robbery inside of a business, you should try not to directly involve yourself or intervene, even if you are armed. Be a good witness and get a suspect and vehicle description for the responding police. Try to position yourself behind or near cover in case someone starts shooting. Devise an impromptu escape and evasion plan and look for available improvised weapons in case you'll need them. If you only see one suspect, don't rule out the possibility that there might be others. Robbery suspects, for instance, sometimes work with a "lay-off man," a partner who anonymously watches over the scene without making himself known, but who is prepared to intercede with force if the primary suspect gets into trouble.

An excellent opportunity to prepare is to take a civilian active shooter response course that's designed to develop a survival mindset, and which teaches you how to recognize the common early warning signs of an active shooter, the active shooter profile and timeline, and a complete range of civilian survival strategies. If you work in an office, school, business, or in any other employment that offers a potential captive victim population, then ask if your employer has an active shooter response plan. If your employer's active shooter policy consists solely of a "lock-down" plan, then it's antiquated and not consistent with current standards. If that's the case, or if they don't have a plan at all, then suggest that they seek assistance in formulating one and training the employees and staff.

### **Conclusion**

I think that the earlier adage, "When the time to perform has arrived, the time to prepare has passed," pretty much sums up this entire article. Many years ago while a recruit in the police academy, one of my drill instructors described regular, ongoing training as "similar to depositing money in your bank account." When that violent life and death encounter happens to you, and you need to make an emergency withdrawal, all that will be available to you is what you've deposited over the years, through your ongoing fitness regimen, training, skills practice and study of tactics.