

21 Feet

14 Feet

10 Feet



knife Attack

BY SCOTT REITZ

It is imperative to understand that within the American psyche lies a deeply imbued sense of fair play, rooting for the underdog, and a compassion for those perceived as, "not fairly matched." In testifying on behalf of officers in both Federal and Superior court, I find that juries both want and need to know why an officer resorted to deadly force utilizing a firearm towards a suspect armed with "just a knife"—even if the suspect's violent act could be stopped in no other manner. If you are casually dismissing the foregoing you are delusional as to the role of the judicial system in such matters.

In any application of deadly force you will be questioned, challenged and held accountable over an extended period of time for actions carried out in mere seconds, and it will be these actions and decisions upon which you are judged. Laws differ from state to state so, to avoid extensive deliberation, let's agree that deadly force may be used to prevent imminent great bodily injury or death to one's self or others based upon the "reasonable man" standard and the totality of the circumstances. With this in mind,

it would be prudent to understand, in depth, the dangers and limitations imposed when confronting a suspect armed with an edged weapon.

What are the dangers of edged weapons? Having seen the results firsthand on many occasions in the field I can honestly relate that it can be nothing short of catastrophic. A seemingly insignificant puncture wound can result in significant internal blood loss that anyone short of a full surgical staff on site would be powerless to abate. Slashing wounds not only cripple and eviscerate tissue, but the attendant blood loss can result in death in short order. Firearms have been employed by man for a very short time in the scheme of things. Edged weapons, however, have been utilized since the dawn of man. Modern society has distanced most of us from the offensive use of such tools to the extent that their effectiveness and destructive potential is far from appreciated by the vast majority of the populace resulting in the, "He's only got a knife" frame of mind.

The twenty-one foot rule is fairly standard throughout law enforcement and

many of us have taught around this model for years. However, recently at International Tactical Training Seminars in Los Angeles, California we constructed the real-world, knife attack target system seen in the accompanying photos. Training many hundreds of military, law enforcement and civilian personnel on this system over the last year has been eye opening. This system has also been used by I.T.T.S. to defend officers in court.

First, this is a training tool and as such is subject to certain limitations, though the benefits far outweigh the deficits. When officers train on this they realize this is a training evolution. They have eye and ear protection. They have evolved through earlier firing courses in the day to the level that allows them to safely engage the mover. They have been instructed throughout these evolutions what to expect, the speed with which the targets will be encountered, how lag time will come into play and yet they are still astounded at the speed at which the targets close the distance from a standing stop to a nose-on position mere inches away from their muzzles. The one over-

7 Feet

4 Feet

3 Feet



K!

this sequence: As the target advances, the shooter's hands come together in a two-hand grip and the pistol is brought to bear center mass of the target, which is now a mere four feet from the shooter. Shots are usually discharged at a distance of three feet and in, leaving no margin for error for the shooter through the entire evolution. The entire run was at a distance of twenty-one feet with an accomplished shooter.

Rethinking the 21 Foot Rule

whelming comment seems to be, "No way is he going to be that fast." Wrong. We always place randomly selected students side by side to the targets to, "race the rail" and they will either tie or slightly pass it in the final inches.

Timing numerous runs, we find the average time to be around 1.2 to 1.6 seconds from standing stop to final closure. In this time the officer must either come up from a low ready position and press a singular or perhaps multiple shots or (a decidedly more difficult phase) must execute a flawless draw and accomplish the same within the same time parameter. Most skilled tacticians can draw and fire in about a second and a half on a static target at a reasonable distance on an auditory cue, but in this scenario you are going off a visual cue—and there is a difference.

This is what will transpire in the field with visual cueing: by the time your hand even begins to move towards the pistol, the target has already moved six to eight feet towards the officer (lag time). By the time the pistol has been grasped, the retention device released and the pistol started towards count

"two," the target is about ten to eight feet from the shooter. When the shooter actually fires the weapon the target is, on average, only three to four feet from the muzzle, a most decidedly uncomfortable distance.

Remember that in training the officer is waiting for the target to aggress him, he expects it, he has been instructed in what will transpire and in fact it has been demonstrated in real time and he knows it is a live-fire drill. Put an individual into the field—into an unexpected and unrehearsed real world scenario where he may or may not have to discharge his weapon, may have to resort to alternate methods to control the situation—and the twenty-one foot rule may very well prove fatalistic.

All street officers must, by the very nature of their assignment, close the distance to a suspect in order to control the situation. I have done it, my partners have done it and in retrospect I felt safe at fifteen feet if the suspect was armed with an edged weapon. (This drill has altered that misconception.) However, officers must concern themselves not only with the suspect's level of threat,

but with the background of the target, the use of force continuum, shot placement, communications and control of the suspect's action on what will in all probability be a high-speed, moving target that rapidly alters its configuration as it forces the issue. This is now a multi-tasking evolution and improperly trained officers may find themselves reacting with inappropriate responses, which will always be subjected to intense scrutiny.

There is as well, a definite and very real psychological factor that computes into all shootings. No matter how much one trains or prepares there is always the fleeting thought of, "I can't believe this is happening" or "My gosh! This is it!" Most well trained officers get past this in a nanosecond, but some do not and that critical lapse in response is all that it takes for a controllable situation to be rendered chaotic.

For every violent confrontation in the street there are literally hundreds (if not thousands) of stops made in the same situations that do not escalate to such a level. The officer makes perhaps a dozen or so potential felony stops week after week, year after year and just as many

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observational arrests without much problem. Now we have the ex-con, with a five-year tail or third striker who, unbeknownst to the officer, has no intention of going back. He is stopped at thirty feet, complies and calmly closes the distance to twenty or fifteen feet—and then charges nose on. The officer is now pressed into a real world critical response and the judgments, physical actions and appropriate threat response must be dealt in fractions of a second. How then does he deal with this effectively and within the constraints of the law?

Let us first predicate that in this particular scenario it is one where the use of deadly force is warranted and justified. Whether the officer is at the low ready with his handgun, at position two just above the holster, or is in a holstered condition, he must act decisively in bringing his weapon to bear on the target. If he is at low ready then he must bring the pistol straight up mid-line on the largest portion of the target which is afforded to him. If he over or under travels in this or he is off center laterally there may well be little, if any time to correct the error. If he is holstered, then the pistol must be presented in the cleanest manner possible so that it comes to bear center on the largest portion of the target presented. If the pistol is to be discharged from the weapon retention position (just above the holster, but well below eye level), the angle of the muzzle to center mass of the target must again be fairly precise. It should be an effective straightforward process that is neither fanciful nor embellished with superfluous motion or excessive rounds. It must be clean.

The question arises, "Do I use sighted or unsighted fire?" In such a rapid scenario getting the sights aligned perfectly before pressing off a shot may not be feasible. A flash sight picture wherein the sights are there—on the target somewhat centered and somewhat aligned—is more the norm than not. Completely unsighted fire has resulted in complete misses by some and at distances of less than five feet on more than one occasion in this training. So yes, you do utilize the sights, but in a much more compressed time frame and in a much coarser manner than is allotted when one is afforded the time to do otherwise.

One factor which is clearly evident is that the individuals who have worked on their draw stroke again and again so that the pistol is where they want it when they want it perform demonstra-



Here, as a "suspect" initiates his attack, the shooter begins his draw stroke and simultaneously breaks ninety degrees off the line of attack. This buys a little time, as the suspect must change his direction and speed.

bly better than those that do not. (Much of life is like this I suppose.) In other words when the attack is commenced they have brought the pistol to bear on the target so cleanly and effectively that they are simply simultaneously verifying the sights as they press off the shot(s).

The target may be crouched low in a lunging configuration or perhaps in a more upright fashion. If the assailant utilizes a downward thrusting motion, the target may be angled towards the shooter and if a fencing motion (such as a straight thrust) is utilized then the very arm that thrusts the edged weapon may block the most effective area of the target. These are all mitigating factors that may come into play and in theory having a game plan for each configuration sounds great—but in the world of reality the straightest line to center of the largest target mass will most probably be the only viable method of effectively stopping the threat within the small time constraints. If the target were to charge forward head down, this may very well mean a shot placed in the center of the back.

One effective technique in conjunction with live-fire is to step ninety degrees from the line of the attacker as he closes the distance. This forces the assailant to bleed off speed as he makes a mid-course correction. Continuing to do this further bleeds speed and if deadly force is necessitated then the assailant continues to incur hits throughout the attack. Stepping rearward, however, may not be the best option as it places the shooter off balance and his rearward momentum works to the attacker's advantage. With a number of shooters, if their feet remain

stationary while engaging the target system illustrated in this article, their upper body leans rearward as the target rapidly closes the distance. While this seems to be a natural response, it places the shooter in an unbalanced and untenable position. Shuffling to the rear, however (neither crossing nor bringing the feet together), in a rapid fashion while maintaining a stable firing platform may in fact prove to be a very viable option.

The defender may find himself utilizing his support arm to ward off the assailant or trap and control the attacker while simultaneously engaging the suspect. The real possibility exists in this configuration that one may strike oneself with his own fire in a particularly violent and closely tied up affair. Utilizing a forward thrust kick in conjunction with live-fire to momentarily thwart an aggressor's attack may prove to be an effective technique as well. Again, however, the real possibility exists that one could be struck by one's own gunfire in the maneuver. Other scenarios run on the knife attack system include an onrushing attack from either side to one that initiates directly from the rear. Each of these simply places the officer at a greater disadvantage with less response time. Pivoting and sidestepping the attacker is once more the better response as opposed to remaining static.

One question that arises from time to time is whether or not it is feasible to strike the suspect in the legs, hips, arms etc. If you were off the scales in ability I suppose one could, but I have never seen anyone so skilled. Highly skilled shooters have their hands full just hitting center mass at a distance of twenty feet.

Shorten this to fifteen, ten feet and even closer and it is simply ridiculous to ask anyone to accomplish such a feat. At the distance of ten feet and within, the shooter must utilize a combination of the speed rock and weapon retention just to render a single shot center mass—and this is at a very advanced level of skill. To ask of the shooter to perform precise shot placement is a little much. Headshots are equally as difficult to pull off to be sure. With numerous runs and with enough practice one may eventually make it, but in the real world there are no warm ups, no rehearsal's and one simply cannot afford a miss or peripheral hit. It is far better to stick to the larger target, fire fewer rounds which are centered, and move from the threat if feasible to do so. If one were afforded the time to place a definitive single shot that would stop the problem, then by all means do so—but you probably will not have that latitude.

Simunition training supplemented with live-fire on the range can be effective in illustrating the difficulties posed in fast movers closing the distance on an officer. One should be aware, however, that when real rounds strike real bodies things break and cease to function and the dynamics of the assault can radically change. That being said it takes the role player or bad guy a certain amount of discipline to replicate what may or may not happen when struck by gunfire, and this is anything but an exact science. When queried by students as what to expect when an assailant is struck I tell them to expect nothing. I have seen everything from immediate incapacitation to a sudden reinvigoration of the attack. Short of a definitive headshot one can never tell.

After quite literally many thousands of runs on the I.T.T.S. mover the one overwhelming conclusion by all the students, my partner, Brett McQueen, and myself is that the twenty-one foot rule leaves little margin for error. Placing cover or extending the distance between oneself and a potentially armed suspect utilizing an edged weapon may be the more judicious tactic. If this is not obtainable and the suspect does charge, then everything will transpire in an incredibly short period of time and the techniques used to counter must be clean and decisive. ☉

Scott Reitz is a twenty-seven year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department and the director of the highly acclaimed International Tactical Training Seminars. Course information and schedules are available at their website at www.internationaltactical.com or by email at itts@gte.net.

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