ACHIEVING TACTICAL MATURITY:
 A few thoughts…

By Paul Howe

I just finished up another Active Shooter Instructor and Operator course and want to share a few thoughts and observations. Over the years I have watched old and new techniques used by young and seasoned professionals. Some move fast, some move slow, some move efficient. I want to write about being efficient in tactical training and response.

Training

Training is usually the first thing given up when other missions or duties come to the front plate. For most departments, I have watched motivated individuals seek their own training to ensure they had the skills and tools needed to survive. Some individuals think that if the department does not pay for it, they don't need it. This mentality will catch them one day and will cause them to fall short when the tactical situation arises.

Tactical training is a perishable skill. You mind may think you can do it, but without routine repetition, your body and muscles may not accommodate the task at hand. Develop and maintain a simple system of shooting and hand combat that works in any situation.

History

I began my career over thirty years ago in the LE field in a small department. The academy was 345 hours and did not cover much tactical material in depth. The firearms training consisted of the FBI course of fire with the revolver and the primary long gun was the shotgun. Tactical scenarios were one shot deals, either do it right or just be told what to fix with no remedial training. The town that I worked for was a small sleepy community and the experience I gained was limited.

I entered the military when I was 21 years of age and did not learn real tactics until I went to Special Operations. Yes, we went to the field during my early years of service, but 98% of the training was blank fire with little or no opponent response. As for live fire, I did not get exposed quality weapons training until later in my special ops career.

Technical Maturing

Technical Maturing refers to the safe use of the firearm. I was fortunate to have instructors who taught the use of the mechanical safety on the pistol, rifle and shotgun. The safety was on at all times unless you were actively engaging a target. This also prevented accidental discharges during movement, etc. It was a great start to my tactical career. I have watched many a shooter develop "trigger creep" when involved in high-stress/risk situations. They are not confident with their speed and try to make up for it by moving their finger to the trigger and sometimes bypassing the mechanical safety.

Through years of personal range fire and tactical scenarios to years of teaching new and old students, I am satisfied the system I use is safe and the most efficient out there. I try and learn from new and old students alike, listening and watching new techniques. Some are fads that have made their way around the training circuit a second or even third time. I try and evaluate each new system or tactic on their own merits and ensure they go from dry to live to scenarios to the street with no changes. Will they work in 100% of the scenarios? They must to keep the training simple.

Developing Tactical Maturity

My special operations training consisted of both range and shoot house drills. Also, paint marking scenario based training with live role players was mixed in. It was important to keep the range fire tactics and techniques in line with your tactical based training. Using live role players and paint marking rounds validated these techniques as being safe.

I learned about Speed during this training process. I learned about how fast I could draw and hit a target and then could apply the same speeds to my opponents. I knew that if I could not make the hit, they probably could not either. This applied to weapons at the low ready, pistols in their hands and in the holster.

I developed a simple rule for engaging threats when I was moving in the open. If I have the drop on them, I would stop, plant and shoot. If they had the drop on me and were postured to shoot or do shoot first, I move to a covered position and then engage.

Next, I developed a simple rule for engaging people in a room. Enter the room and look for people. In other words, go toward people first. See fast and then move accordingly. If you are seeing your corner from the outside of the room as the number one person and it is clear, the threat has to be the other way. "Read and React." Don't move faster than your eyes/brain can absorb the information. Further, don't let guys behind you push or pressure you to move too fast. They are stuck with my speed and need to key off my movements and visual input speed.

Seeing

Most tactical folks wait too long to see. The further out you can see a threat, the more you can ready yourself and your tactical situation and the reactionary gap is in your favor. Many tactical officers wait until they are in the room, moving to their point of domination to start looking and seeing. The reactionary gap is now not in your favor and you must continually scan to ensure a weapon does not come out late as you are now closer to potential threats and their OODA loop is working again.

Can you see intent? You bet. For example, you can scan suspects with a gun to their head and see many things. First I will track trigger fingers and see its posture on the weapon. Is it straight or is it on the trigger. Is it depressing the trigger at all? These are all indicators of intent and also

their action time and my response time. When I see the suspect's finger on the trigger and skittish movements, I might seek more cover when talking to them and preparing for the shot I will probably may be forced have to take. Practice seeing and interpreting relevant data.

Distance and the shot required

This is a rule that applies to individuals. Each person's capabilities with the rifle and pistol vary. Each person needs to know the proper position for the shot required. For outside venues, if they need to go kneeling to make the shot because of the distance, then do so. If they need to go prone, do so. If they can't make the shot, don't pull the trigger.

If doing CQB and a hostage taker is masking their body with a hostage and the shot is too tight, the officer has two choices. Don't shoot and then distract the suspect (so another team member can make the shot) or move to where you can make the shot. This can be taught on the flat range or by incorporating role players and paint marking weapons or with the use of masking targets.

As a responder, you can create or maintain distance from your target or you cut the distance, depending on your goal. If I were to see a suspect at a distance that I could not discriminate or see if they had a weapon, I might post up and prepare to shoot, while other officers or my team closes the distance. If the suspect shoots, you are already posted up to make the shot and have the angle on the bad guy. This is the most efficient way to get rounds on target in a rapid manner. This same technique can be used when crossing danger areas or obstacles. It is up to you to create your own security.

Shooting and Moving

The only shooting on the move I do would be to clear a breach point when entering a room. This normally entails engaging a threat 2-3 feet away when pushing through them so you don't create a bottleneck in the breach point. This also enables other team members to enter and assist you. Some instructors want you to shoot while moving to your point of domination. I don't recommend this. Why? While engaging a target to your front, half of the time you are sliding into a corner that you have not cleared and are focused on and attempting to accurately hit. This will catch up to you one day and you will find another bad guy screwing a gun in the side of your ear. Further, you are moving slow and the threat is a stationary target. They have the easier shot.

I don't recommend shooting and moving straight to your corner on a threat. This becomes a one-on-one gun fight as no one behind you can shoot. You are also closing with the threat, making their accuracy just as deadly as yours. Instead, take two-three steps into the room and post up one step off the wall. This maintains your distance from the threat, moves you slightly off line and allows another team member to come to your side and assist you. Remember, if you charge the person, their body may not be affected by your first few rounds, all the while you are moving directly to a muzzle.

Posturing for a Shot

During tactical encounters you know the situation is not right (needs detail as to what this means…not right as it is a threat situation but the threat is hidden or not clear), but cannot articulate why. In these cases you can casually move to a point of cover and prepare for the fight. You can covertly posture your rifle by screening half your body so as to rapidly get into the fight. You simply set up on your opponent using cover and wait for them to take action. This can also be accomplished while waiting for other officers to arrive and better address the situation.

Creating "Reactionary Gaps" in your favor is part of tactical maturity. This can be done in civilian clothes and in uniform. Sometimes it is better to watch a situation for a few seconds to sort things out before rushing in. Again, this buys you time and does not force you to make a rushed decision.

When conducting active shooter scenarios, have officers breach a door into a hallway filled with chaos. People screaming, injured people on the ground crying for help, runners and one shooter moving slowly across or in the hallway with their weapon at a low ready. There is a great deal of information to process. Officers who rush in put an enormous amount of stress on themselves trying to sort out all the information while on the move. If they have to shoot, now they are trying to do it while negotiating the chaos and obstacles on the ground. This is tough.

An easy solution is to pop out a few feet back from the door and absorb the information with their weapon below eye level, so they can see. This way they take a second or two to sort out the information and not rush into the chaos. We must remain separate (apart from the chaos) from it.

Past Experiences

I have covered suspects during movement as part of a team and when going hands on. During a fast moving daylight operation, we burst into a massive courtyard easily 100 x 100 meters and I spotted someone running toward us from the opposite corner as we were breaking right and left to our areas of responsibility. His hands were waving frantically and I could not see what was in them due to the distance involved. I took this as offensive action and stepped forward a couple of steps (to clear the breach point) and went to a knee. This non-verbal communication let everyone know I saw a potential theat. I placed my front sight post on his chest, rolled my safety and contacted the trigger with my trigger finger. I kept both eyes open looking for a muzzle flash as he moved closer. My eyes finally found and focused on his empty hands. He stopped in a few short steps realizing his forward movement was about to cost him his life.

Is this the action I would teach today to law enforcement or civilians? Yes, except for the safety and trigger finger part. During that era, we had trained to levels that under the stress and chaos, we would not pull the trigger unless we needed to. We had unwritten rules about not bumping another operator when they were preparing to make a shot. At that time, the stress of the situation did not affect me, it was black and white. See a weapon or muzzle flash, I shoot. If I did not, I would not pull the trigger.

Another point I need to bring up is that I had engaged a bad guy two days prior at night under NVG's. I spotted him as he came out of the alley. I sparkled him several times during his

movement toward me and rolled my safety and contacted the trigger, going through several mini-scenarios during his movement toward my position. He did not see me, but we had other friendly personnel in the area he might see and engage. If he saw them, it was my job to eliminate him first. Further, behind him was another position and I knew my bullets would go through him into that position, possibly injuring or killing a friendly soldier. I sparkled him two to three times with my laser during his movement preparing to shoot, but not engaging him. I finally waited until he was perpendicular to me with a hard wall behind him before I engaged him. During his movement, my finger had contacted the trigger each time, but I did not shoot.

In the above cases, I had trained through the scenarios in the past and consciously thought through each part of it, weighing the threat level, the safety of the shot, etc. I know there are cases today where officers move to the trigger and back off several times during a scenario. The most probable is the "suicide by cop" where you have hard cover and are attempting to talk a subject with a gun to surrender during the first few minutes of a scenario that is playing out. We must train them through these type scenarios.

When to shoot/not to shoot

There were times in my life where we had to run several "check points" in a single day. We might have to go through a government controlled check point to begin with, a "thug" or criminal and then a rebel check point to get to our final destination.

Each check point held a different alert posture and weapon status. The government check point might contain soldiers who were rattled or on edge by rebel advances. They would have weapons pointed at you, some through the window of your vehicle and their fingers might be on the trigger. Your job is not to shoot, but to deescalate and move through without incident.
The next check point might be a "thug" or opportunist check point where they shake victims down for cigarettes or goods. Their weapons may be concealed and your objective is still the same, to quietly pass through.

Finally, you might pass through a "G" or guerilla check point, again weapons pointing at you. Once you reach your destination, you must pass back through all the same check points on your way back home. The key points I learned was to look, learn, assess and not shoot unless it was absolutely necessary.

Overseas, everyone has guns. Learning how to visually sort out who is going to use them is what is important.

Importance of Role Players

Using role players in training allows you to put all the flat range, movement, discrimination and tactical components together to build an easy shooting solution matrix. This also allows officer to move into a shooting posture and then have to back out of it on a moment's notice. For example, an officer may engage a threat in a hallway and go to the shoot mode, but fails to safe the weapon when the situation deescalates because they have not trained to do it on demand. They are locked into a hard focus on the suspect for too long. A hostage may bolt from another room

while the officer is in this condition and they may be shot because the officer is still in the fight mode with their finger on the trigger.

The training and safety problems I see with many officers today is that if they have not done enough role player/paint marking training. Once they contact the trigger, they tend to stick their finger to it no matter what the actions or compliance of the subject. They cannot pull back from the hard focus they have and see the entire picture. Officers must learn to be fluid in going back and forth from fight to safe, to covering on a moment's notice.

Physical Conditioning

A good physical condition allows an officer to tactically and technically mature at an accelerated rate. I found that the better shape an officer is in, the longer they can train and keep their mind on the points of instruction and not just think about how tired or out of breath they are. If you are out of shape in training or in real life, you will not be able to deal with the tactical situation as efficiently as someone who is in shape. Your lack of cardio fitness will not let you run as far as fast or as long as someone who is in shape. Poor muscle strength will not let you hold the weapon as firm or as long as needed to train or to resolve a tactical situation that draws out.

CONCLUSION:

Train officers to be efficient in their tactics and training. Get in shape and train for the fight that will one day come. Create reactionary gaps that put the suspect in an unfavorable position and the officer in a superior position. Practice safe and mature technical skills that will work on in all the battle space the officer may respond to.

About the Author
Paul R. Howe is a 20-year veteran and former Special Operations soldier and instructor. He owns Combat Shooting and Tactics (CSAT), where he consults with, trains and evaluates law enforcement and government agencies in technical and tactical techniques throughout the special operations spectrum. See combatshootingandtactics.com for details.