

SPARTAN TACTICAL

By Brian Puckett

WHEN I was asked to join a group of Marines taking Spartan Tactical's "Carbine Instructor Course" to cover it for *Combat Tactics*, I had to think it over. For various reasons, I hadn't shot an AR for over four years. In fact, I hadn't done much shooting at all lately, and had no chance to practice beforehand. Put simply, I didn't want to embarrass myself.

However, I'd put thousands of rounds through my own rifles in the past, so maybe I could fan those embers into a respectable flame. Ultimately, I said yes. I couldn't pass up a chance to train with the Marines, and with Spartan Tactical's owner and lead instructor, Jim Smith.

Sure enough, I had some difficulties during the course. But I'm intrigued, even fascinated, by things going wrong—by problems with strategies, tactics, machines, or personal equipment. This ties in closely with one of Spartan Tactical's primary functions, teaching what works and what doesn't work regarding equipment, technique, and actions. This gave me a lot to think about—and write about.

The training took place at the North County Shooting Association range, a few miles north of Escondido in southern California. I drove there a day early, on a rain-soaked Sunday afternoon, and spent a couple of hours loosening up with my borrowed rifle, a virtually new Colt Sporter lower mated with a Bushmaster flat-top M4 14.5" barrel upper.

There was only one other person at the range— John Fish, former Marine and assistant instructor for Spartan Tactical. He demonstrated the reload technique we would be using. I practiced this for a while, then roughly zeroed my rifle's red-dot sight, an Aimpoint CompM2.

As it turned out, the Marines couldn't come to the range on Monday, which was even colder, cloudier and rainier. We would be compressing a five-day course into four days,

Jim Smith's carbine training works on— then works out— skills, techniques, and equipment

For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can endure to face the blood and the slaughter, go close against the enemy and fight with his hands.

—*Tyrtaeus of Sparta, 630 B.C.*

which was no problem for me since it afforded another chance to practice.

John gave something else to practice— thumbing off the safety when raising my rifle to shooting position, and thumbing it on again as I lowered it to high-ready or low-ready, with the goal of making this an automatic action.

I practiced this as I shot for a while, but the rain was coming down so hard it made seeing the targets difficult. I headed back to my motel not long afterward, where I spent some time cleaning my rifle and re-arranging the pouches, pockets, and straps on my borrowed plate carrier, a cummerbund-style from BDS Tactical.

Starting With Basics

The sun was out when the Marines arrived. They hustled around unloading equipment, setting up targets and getting their gear ready. Jim delivered the first of several fast-moving lectures that ranged through basic safety rules, combat and rifle-related tips, the Marines' night-vision equipment, weapon maintenance, sling types, the advantages of magnifying and non-magnifying sights, and teaching tips for these students, who were themselves instructors.



The author's blackened and blistered shooting hand after a full day of training the Spartan way. (No sniveling allowed.)

After the lecture we zeroed our weapons at 100 yards and spent the remainder of the day working on basic shooting and weapon manipulation skills, including shooting from prone, sitting, kneeling, and standing positions. The Marines used non-magnifying EOTech red-dot sights and shot them very well.

We started the second day by checking our 100 yard zero, followed by more live-fire drills. There's no point in detailing everything we did, but the goal was clean up and smooth out our fundamental shooting and handling techniques, everything from trigger control to reloads to chamber-checks.

The shooting was interspersed with brief lectures, which held true every day. The very word "lecture" makes most people's eyes glaze over, including mine, but Jim cut out the pontificating and moved fast from one point to the next. He also tossed out random technical questions to the Marines, and they always came up with the answer, fast. As noted, these young guys were instructors; I could see why.

When we finished our 100-yard work we re-zeroed at 200 yards and ran through basic shooting positions, doing "walk-ups"— 10 rounds prone at 200 yards, 10 seated at 150 yards, 10 kneeling at 100 yards, and 10 standing at 50 yards, with a one-minute time limit for each position. Eventually the targets were set up at 300 yards, and the longer-range drills plus a couple of speed-lectures took up the rest of the day.

Walk-Back Drill

The day's final event was a "walk-back" competition. We started about 220 yards from a steel plate about four feet tall. Everyone shot from a standing position; hit the plate and you shoot again from the next farther distance, two misses and you're eliminated.

Normally I'm pretty good at this sort of thing, but my first shot hit the rim of the berm we were shooting over. Either I jerked the trigger horribly or the height difference between sight and bore had fooled me, since the berm was only a few yards away. I moved to higher ground at the right of the firing line, shot again, and missed again. Right out of the gate, I was disqualified.

I was mystified the misses. The day before I had pro-

duced some erratic groups at 100 yards, but I attributed them to lack of practice, perhaps rusty trigger control and an inconsistent sight picture. But the 200 yards baffled me.

If you shoot enough, you can usually tell when your shot is on target and when you bobbled it. I felt good about 95 percent of the shots in every position— steady hold, relaxed breathing, red dot centered in the window, smooth trigger pull and break, even with the one-minute limit. And shooting prone in the zeroing session showed, I was dead-on at 200 yards.

But during these walk-up drills I would get a nice group of 10 rounds clustered in the black, with the other 30 rounds displaced vertically, sometimes in a new group. I checked my sight; it was attached rigidly to the rail.

Maybe recoil was throwing the shots high when I changed from the solid prone position to the others. I tried everything I could think of to fix it, but the wandering zero plagued me until I got home and took the rifle completely apart. The lesson learned isn't flattering, but we'll get to it shortly.

Despite my personal disappointment in the walk-back competition, I couldn't help but note the final extraordinary results. The Marines kept the game going, moving back in approximately 100 yard increments and gradually losing "contestants" along the way, until the winner hit the target at 540 yards as measured by a laser rangefinder. Remember, this is shooting offhand with a no-magnification red-dot sight. Yow.

To The Barricades

More decent weather. We repeated some drills to drive home basics and observe improvement. The most interesting was a skill/strategy shoot-off, similar to the walk-up but with a new wrinkle.

You start with four magazines— one loaded with 15 rounds, two with 10 rounds, and one with five rounds. You decide which magazine to use at each of four shooting positions and distances: prone at 300 yards, sitting at 200, kneeling at 100, standing at 50. One-minute time limit at each position.

The trick is assessing your own skill. Should you use the 15-round magazine prone at 300 yards? Sure, prone is more stable, but the target is farthest away and the one-minute limit means you've got less than four seconds per shot once you include going prone and settling in.

Or should you hold the 15-round mag until you're 50 yards away, much closer but far less stable? Or maybe five prone at 300, 15 seated at 200 and... you get it.

When the smoke clears, you add up your 40-round score based on the target rings. The Marines did fine. I



A platoon of Force Recon Marines goes through a Spartan Tactical work-up just before deploying to Iraq in 2007. Lead instructor Jim Smith (top, in black) emphasizes real-world techniques in his military-only classes. That said, range rules still apply (below) as this young Marine "shows clear" after shooting a drill.





Jim Smith combines lecture with plenty of trigger time. When the facilities permit (top) Jim usually shows an unclassified video of his dramatic survival and firefight following the real "BlackHawk Down" (see sidebar four pages over).



had the wandering zero problem— some shots right on, some way high, others way high left— and some feed problems that I attributed to worn magazines.

Later we went to the barricades. We had two sets, one erected on the left side of the range, the other on the right. Each set was two separate plywood walls about five feet wide, erected a few feet apart, the taller one with a window to simulate shooting from inside a house or building.

Briefing us on technique in advance, Jim advocated resting the rifle forend, or the hand holding the forend, directly on the wall you're shooting over, and keeping your feet well back in a wide stance. His reasoning: your exposure is almost exactly the same as less stable positions that don't use the wall, and it's better to get off one good shot that hits an enemy rather than a bunch that miss.

The same principle applied to shooting around a corner, where he advocated putting a hand against the wall, or even pushing your sling swivel against it, to get a steady rest. Again, your exposure will be virtually the same as alternate positions further back from the wall, but contacting it provides a much more valuable accurate shot.

Exposed Elbows

The most common error in shooting around a corner is exposing an elbow or knee. I learned the painful way, in training that used Simunitions and paintball carbines, so I'm usually good about keeping things tucked in. But in combat, "usually" isn't good enough. A bullet through the knee or foot could ruin your day.

The Marines occasionally poked out body-part targets, as did I. It takes a lot of repetition and negative feedback to completely eliminate this bad habit. It helps to learn a simple rule— whether shooting around a left or right corner in the kneeling position, the knee closest to your cover should be up, and the other down. This will automatically keep your torso and both legs behind the wall. All you have to remember, whether standing or kneeling, is to keep your elbow tucked in when you tilt out to shoot.

The most difficult challenge was shooting from behind the barricade while lying down, as if engaging the enemy from behind an extremely low wall or horizontal object. Exposing the least target to the enemy requires holding your rifle sideways, which changes your sight's normal windage and elevation setup.

If you hold still a moment and apply your spatial visualization abilities, you can figure out how to compensate for this. But if that ability might suffer a bit under stress, then you need a memory aid. Mine was an imaginary "A" superimposed on the barricade, its legs ending at the barricade's lower corners.

Lying on my right side, and shooting from the bottom right corner of the barricade, the slant of the nearest A-leg indicated the direction I needed to adjust my aim— up and left of the actual target. Lying on my left side, and shooting from the bottom left corner of the barricade, again the slant of the nearest A-leg indicated the direction I needed to adjust my aim— this time up and right of the actual target.

The amount of aim adjustment depends on the distance to the target, which has to be learned by experience. Regardless of how it was being done, everybody got pretty good at making hits from this sideways position.

Malfunction Junction

That afternoon we got a lecture and demonstration on various types of malfunctions and how to fix them. The worst malfunction— a case stuck in the chamber with its rim or entire cartridge base ripped off by the extractor— is rare.

Less rare is another bad one, the so-called "bolt-over" jam, where a cartridge or case gets stuck between the receiver walls and the bolt. The cure is to find cover, drop the magazine, and pull or press the bolt carrier back as far as possible. If the cartridge doesn't drop free on its own, you reach through the mag well and pry it loose.

The problem is getting the bolt carrier to move rearward. If you can't move it by pulling on the charging handle, you can augment your efforts by banging the rifle butt on the ground. If that doesn't work the next step is pushing directly on the carrier with a makeshift tool, like the corner of a magazine, adding more butt-banging if necessary.

I'd never experienced a bolt-over jam, and I recall thinking it would be nasty to get one in the middle of a firefight. Shortly thereafter, in the middle of doing one-handed shooting drills around the side of a barricade to simulate an injury to the other hand, I had that exact malfunction. Not once, twice.

I cleared the stoppages one-handed by tugging the bolt carrier rearward with the tip of my index finger while simultaneously whacking the butt into the dirt, reaching through the magazine well to pluck out the loosened cartridge, then reloading a new magazine and cranking a new round into the chamber. Both times it went a lot faster than I thought it would.

Let me interject something here. If you read enough true accounts of combat, from Julius Caesar to the present, an operating principle of combat reveals itself. It is that when things go to hell, never give up. Again and again, in both individual combat and large battles, staying in the fight has turned apparent defeat into success, often at the last moment.

It is well documented that soldiers and lawmen will do in combat what they learn in training, so good

instructors teach this principle of staying in the fight. With weapon malfunctions, this translates into working on fixing it until your gun is up and running and you complete the drill. The exception is when your instructor orders you to stop, which he shouldn't do unless absolutely necessary.

Keep Talking

The remainder of the daylight was used for team drills at the barricades. We lined up, then one man moved forward to the barricade and shot from three positions— over to top and from both sides— then moved laterally to the next barricade while a new man moved to the first, a constant rotation. An emphasis in



Back-up drills start at the 3-yard line and work back. Most of the Marines in this Force Recon platoon had PEQ 2 infrared lasers, Aimpoint M68s and SureFire M951 WeaponLights on their M4s.

these drills was communicating with teammates, using short, clear, loudly-spoken messages.

"Moving up on your [right, left, or rear]!" is used when approaching from the rear or side.

"Coming out!" is used when exiting a building or an area where you've been out of sight, minimizing the chance of being shot by a startled teammate. In the drills we yelled this out when moving from the barricades back to the line.

"Reloading!" is used when reloading and "I'm up!" is used when you're ready to shoot again after reloading or clearing a malfunction.

"Malfunction!" or "Stoppage!" is used when your weapon is jammed. In a combat environment, I think "malfunction" is better because the word is distinctive



Force Recon Marines, being more or less hand-picked troops, are allowed some flexibility in their weapon set-up. This devil dog chose a MagPul pistol grip, Tango Down vertical foregrip and Schmidt and Bender Flash Dot scope. The plate carrier is as-issued, from Eagle.

and fold down over one eye.

I didn't take part in all the night training because I didn't have the same type of equipment. I used my down time to observe, doing some of it through a NOD and an NVD-equipped rifle Jim loaned me. This technology never fails to amaze me; it's not perfect—everything's green and slightly grainy—but the difference is like, uh, night and day. In this case, there were special effects thrown in with a dozen laser dots whipping around the range and crawling over silhouette targets as the Marines co-aligned their lasers and red-dot sights.

I joined a couple of drills by using an Aimpoint 3X magnifying attachment clamped behind my red-dot sight. It's nothing like using a NOD, but much better than the naked eyes at night.

During some drills the Marines flipped on their weapon-mounted white lights, and for this I used a SureFire X200A handgun light attached to my rifle's forend. Using a forefinger on the momentary-on switch, I could see light-colored targets well enough to hit them out to 100 yards.

An ammunition note: The first time I shot my rifle that night I was using the 3X magnifier clamped behind my optical sight, producing a makeshift night-vision setup. My magazine was loaded with a mix of ammunition brands, and while running through a string of shots my world suddenly turned white, and for a few seconds all I could see was a big round spot in front of my eyes.

This is a reminder that some commercial ammunition produces serious muzzle flash. I checked on the Marines; their issue M193 ammo produced only a dull red jet of gas, even through their short-barreled M4's.

For the last drill, Jim split the Marines into two groups, one on the left side of the range and one on the right, and gave them a brief assignment: run a simulated attack on enemy insurgents downrange, represented by all steel targets on their side. They got on it.

Silently hustling forward from staging areas, the Marines set up behind the barricades, selected targets, and suddenly opened fire, sending masses of orange sparks exploding into the dark as steel-penetrator bullets connected with steel plates. I have to say these pyrotechnics had a hypnotic sort of beauty, though I'm sure the charm would vanish in an actual firefight.

Something the night training underlined was Jim's prior reminder: you must know your gear intimately, and practice with it often, if you want to function safely and effectively in the dark.

Close Encounters

The last day started with repeating the walk-up and barricade exercises, continuing to perfect technique and smoothness. Personally, I never got tired of this.

and its meaning is unambiguous, while "stoppage" is less distinctive and can be confused with a command to halt in position or to quit doing something.

In a timed competition based on these drills, failure to communicate any move or action meant automatic disqualification. Under the added stress of time, this happened more than once.

The last daylight activity was another walk-back competition, shooting offhand at a mini-torso steel target with a final distance of about 290 yards. I used my one allowable miss, giving me second place to a Marine with no misses. Considering all the trouble I was having with erratic accuracy, my performance seemed a fluke, but I took what I could get.

Shots In The Dark

We stayed late for night training. While waiting for darkness, Jim gave one of his compressed lectures, this one on sighting in the LA-5/PEQ ATPIAL, the laser pointer/infrared illuminators clamped to the top front of the Marines' M4s. He reviewed the basics of using them in concert with NODs (night observation devices), which clamp to the front of a helmet

Mag Changing The Spartan Way

Before you can change mags, you must have a fresh one readily at hand, so the first thing is to make sure that the extra magazines in your pouches can be pulled out and inserted into the rifle in a smooth, secure and efficient manner. This means that most right-handers should carry magazines upside-down, bullet tips facing left. Experiment to see what works best for you.

Here is a step-by-step breakdown on the Spartan mag change procedure that Jim teaches:

1) Maintaining your pistol grip hold and keeping the rifle butt against your shoulder if possible, flick the safety on and pull out a loaded magazine, getting a solid "beer can" grip on its bottom half.

2) Press the magazine release button to drop the current magazine. If performing a tactical reload, don't drop your current magazine until the new one is ready for insertion.

3) Tilting your magazine well inward slightly, glance at it while smoothly and forcefully inserting the magazine until you feel it lock in place. If your previous magazine didn't fall out, fix the problem now—not before, which wastes time—by pulling it out with the thumb and forefinger of your magazine-holding hand. Remember that if your rifle bolt is forward, as when performing a tactical reload instead of an empty-gun reload, it will take significant pressure to lock in your new magazine.

4) Crucial! Pull on the new magazine to make sure it's locked in place! You can perform the pull-test by pressing upward against the well lip with your forefinger while pulling down on the magazine with your thumb and other fingers, which minimizes rifle motion and strain on your support arm.

Pull-test the magazine before releasing the bolt (next step, below). If you release the



bolt on an improperly seated magazine you can get a misfeed or jam and the magazine may be jostled out of the weapon. Even if it simply falls out with no jam, you'll have to pick it up, bang out dirt or debris, re-insert it, and re-rack the bolt.

5) Slightly loosening your grip on the magazine after the pull-test, extend your thumb and slide your hand upward until your forefinger stops against the rifle receiver, then press the bolt release lever with your extended thumb.

This step isn't necessary if you're performing a tactical reload with a cartridge in the chamber and the bolt forward, but if you practice enough you'll automatically press the release lever—probably not a bad thing.

Ideally you'll now slide your support hand forward to its proper position before re-engaging, but that brings up a point. There are many good reasons for not using the commonly taught bolt-release method of whacking the release lever with the heel of your hand.

You can miss the release lever by hitting too low, too far in front, or too far behind. If you're wearing a heavy glove, it can interfere with proper lever contact.

If you have a flat-top rifle with optics mounted on the rail, the rail clamp mechanism (either thumbscrews or camming lever) may prevent proper lever contact.

The palm-strike jars the rifle, which can disrupt your rifle grip and head/rifle alignment.

Following a palm-strike, you must reposition the striking hand in order to regain effective aiming control of your rifle. But with the thumb-press method your support hand is automatically in a workable two-hand shooting grip. So if you're in a hurry to shoot someone—for example, an enemy rounding a nearby corner—you can get off fairly well-aimed shots the instant the bolt slams forward, even if you haven't shouldered your rifle.

During the day's training, two foul-ups occurred that were good learning experiences. While we were about halfway downrange during a 300 yard walk-up, the bolt on one Marine's gun sheared a lug. He had to jog back to the vehicles to replace it.

During this same drill, another Marine accidentally poked his weapon's muzzle into the muddy ground. With nothing handy to clean out the barrel, he had to run back for a cleaning kit.

Because this training was focused on other things, neither Marine was carrying every piece of his equipment, but both incidents were reminders that in the field, you need to carry a parts replacement kit that includes a new bolt (since cracking off a lug is certainly not unheard of), and a cleaning kit that includes at least a pull-through bore cleaner.

After lunch we set up for "flat range" work, so called because at the shorter distances we were shooting— usually less than 100 yards— bullet trajectory was

effectively a straight line. This included shooting from various positions, moving and shooting, and reloading while moving.

Again, a key part of the training was maintaining verbal communication with teammates. Because many of these drills involved a partner standing or walking to the rear, watching for mistakes and preventing you from moving past a stopping-point, we added "Standing!" to our verbal alerts.

The shooter shouted it when he wanted to rise from a prone or kneeling position, and waited for the go-ahead response "Stand!" before doing so. In a combat situation, popping up without warning in front of a teammate firing over your head could be fatal.

My rifle's erratic accuracy didn't matter so much at this point since we were so close. However, I had more misfeeds and another bolt-over jam, all dealt with pretty quickly since I had a lot of practice and two hands to work with this time.



Gunny Buck Doyle (below, far right), the platoon sergeant, addresses his Marines during Spartan Tactical's pre-deployment work-up. Gunny Doyle was later wounded by an insurgent sniper while he was pulling another wounded Marine from this very platoon to safety.



Meet Jim Smith: The Real Deal

THE scene was surreal, a grainy black and white film of a dragonfly buzzing in the air. The picture jumped and skipped, choppy like a bad home movie. The dragonfly bucked and twisted in flight, then spiraled down like an invisible hand had plucked off a wing.

The insect hit in a plume of dust and an ant scurried out of the dragonfly's belly. Puffs of dust popped around the ant like someone was throwing little dirt clods at him.

"That's me," said Spartan Tactical owner and chief instructor Jim Smith as he narrated the film. "The BlackHawk went in hard. I had a concussion and damaged legs, although I didn't know it at the time."

The film was shot by a circling C&C aircraft thousands of feet above the hovels and huts and back alleys of Mogadishu. The dragonfly was the BlackHawk made famous in the movie and book, the first bird to go down in that dramatic incident.

Jim was a Delta Force operator at the time and riding in the BlackHawk as an airborne sniper. Jim was particularly good at shooting out of a bird; in fact the opening scene of the movie of a guy hunting a warthog out of a BlackHawk was based on Jim's favorite Saturday afternoon R&R activity— shooting warthogs from the air. He says the wild pigs made for a great barbeque.

When the BlackHawk went down, Jim's first thought was to secure the crash site. The pilot was dead. Bullets began to ping off the crippled chopper and Jim became the ant, running to cover by a wall the BlackHawk had slammed into as it crashed.

The eerie video clearly showed the pock marks of bullets hitting all around Jim. He was taking fire from two angles, and he returned fire as he moved to a better position. Suddenly, the ant hunches.

"That's when I got shot," Jim pointed out matter-of-factly. "It wasn't bad, it hit my shoulder. I stayed right in the fight."

Leaning around a corner, Jim saw two enemy and killed them both. The ant then runs around the corner and we lose sight of him for a moment until he comes crabbing back toward us dragging another ant. It was another soldier. Jim had run directly into the enemy's fire to pull the wounded man to safety.

The bouncy camera shifts and we see several Rangers from a nearby blocking position pull up with more ants. The scurry around the BlackHawk and fan out around the crash site. The ant that is Jim is swarmed by other ants, and then the video fades to black.

"That's the actual footage from the real BlackHawk down," Jim says with a peculiar sense of detachment in his voice. He laughs the laugh of a grave robber.

"It's weird to watch myself like that. It seems so unreal, but it sure wasn't a dream when those AK rounds were hitting all around me," said Jim.



Jim was awarded the Silver Star for his actions that infamous day. The man he dragged to safety in the line of fire later died, but Jim had done everything he could to save him, including taking a round himself. He was also awarded the Purple Heart.

Jim has an extensive combat and teaching background. He has served as an Airborne Ranger, Special Forces engineer and a member of Delta Force, the elite commando unit patterned after the British SAS. Jim has participated in several direct action raids and worked high-threat security details.

After leaving the Army, Jim has been employed overseas both as a contractor on protective details and as a corporate security manager.

During his 25 years in tactical firearms instruction, Jim has achieved certification as an FLETC Firearms Instructor, a SOTIC-trained Sniper Instructor, an FBI combative instructor, and a Pressure Point Control Techniques Instructor (PPCT). He's also a trained breacher with years of explosives experience.

Jim has conducted training for many U.S. Army and Marine units, including Army Special Forces and Rangers, as well as for numerous state, federal and local law enforcement agencies and several foreign military units. He was a key contributor to the Federal Air Marshals' training program, and for nearly five years was responsible for their training.

Jim is a recipient of the Legion of Merit for career achievement in addition to his combat decorations. He remains an avid hunter and operates a guiding operation in Alaska in the hunting season. Jim can be reached at spartantactical@yahoo.com.



Major Lessons

Taking Spartan Tactical's "Carbine Instructor Course" was both stressful and rewarding. The stress had nothing to do with the course itself, which was well-run, relevant, and consistently relaxed but serious. It came from the problems I had, caused variously by my rifle and related issues, by lack of practice, by communication mistakes and (admittedly) by garden-variety stupidity. Yet I don't regret these problems because they generated much of my learning.

And I don't mean learning mechanical things or techniques only. Functioning efficiently and effectively with a firearm— moving, shooting, dealing with problems— isn't simply a matter of rote action and "muscle-memory." It also requires focusing, remaining calm, and controlling your impulses.

I got a wake-up call in the head department, too. Let me give you a couple of examples. First, I didn't know the status of the battery in my red-dot sight and didn't have an extra, so I occasionally turned off the sight during breaks. Twice when starting a drill I raised my rifle to shoot and... there was no dot. Distracted by figuring out how I would run the upcoming drill, and how I would compensate for my rifle problems while doing so, I had skipped over the rather key issue of having my rifle ready. I did a couple of dumber things, but I don't think I'll "share" them.

The bottom line is that my long break from shooting— suddenly ended by four days of relentless training— had the effect of more distinctly exposing my weaknesses, more clearly emphasizing that shooting well requires regular practice. If your job requires you to carry a gun, or if you view expertise with guns as a basic survival skill even in a "civilized" society, you should seek out this type of experience regularly.

This brings up another point: the multi-day duration of the course, along with its physicality, was also a great learning enhancer. By physicality, I mean that instead of just standing and shooting from a line, we constantly moved around and got into various positions. This not only increased general confidence, but also it often revealed skill-related and equipment-related problems that would have otherwise remained hidden in more static situations.

In retrospect certain lessons learned (or re-learned) stand out. Some are implied in things I've discussed above and some are fairly obvious, but it won't hurt to list them.

- Knowledge of shooting fundamentals is one thing; putting these fundamentals into practice smoothly and automatically is another. Shooting well is a perishable skill.

- Practice extensively with the actual firearm and

accessories you're going to use in an upcoming course, on your job, or in combat. This includes clothes, tac vest, magazine pouches or holders, rifle, sights, sling, magazines, ammo, replacement forend, and weapon light.

- Set aside your problems and mistakes while running drills; focus on what's happening and what you're doing right now.

- Being fully prepared for combat requires extensive practice shooting with either hand, shooting safely and accurately from all sides of your cover, and clearing malfunctions two-handed and one-handed.

- Using an M4/M16 with non-magnifying sights, it's possible to hit a target from a hell of a lot farther than you think.

Wandering Zero Is Found

The cause of my rifle's wandering zero? A loose barrel. How did I miss the problem when I looked for it? Because I discounted the possibility of a new rifle having a loose barrel. Therefore, I made a cursory check a few times, trying to move the barrel with one hand while holding the receiver with the other as I watched and felt for movement, but I never checked properly.

The cursory checks were foiled by the fact that AR upper and lower halves can flex considerably, as can the handguard, delta ring, and the rear part of a collapsible stock. All this flex can— and did— mask the visual and tactile input I was testing for.

A serious barrel-looseness check involves separating the upper from the lower and holding the upper perfectly immobile while tugging up and down on the muzzle. An even more serious verification would be re-torquing the barrel nut, a more complex task.

But the truth is that after finally eliminating the other main suspects— the red-dot sight and the aftermarket Picatinny rail forend, the latter designed in a way that could affect the zero— I should have accepted the fact that, however unlikely, a loose barrel had to be the problem. My failure to unequivocally put the matter to rest caused me several days of stress.

This incident recalls an erratic zero problem from years ago, involving a Colt Sporter equipped with a scope mounted on the carry handle. After methodically eliminating every other possibility, there was only one crazy possibility left, which I looked for and found: a hairline crack extending from the mounting hole in the carry handle, virtually invisible when the sight was removed.

It pays to check everything.

Destiny Strikes

If destiny exists, Jim Smith is one of its poster children. He certainly seems destined to teach shooting. He was consistently focused, calm, directly on point, solicitous of individual problems, and respectful of

the students. But no stiff; he joked around when appropriate.

He consistently tested, and demonstrated, his own impressive skills by taking part in our timed drills. He was clearly concerned with the safety of his students, both on the range and in a future combat zone. The goal of this particular course— producing smoother, more efficient riflemen able to pass on their knowledge to others— was certainly achieved.

Spartan Tactical offers a few courses that are open to non-military people, including Basic Carbine, Intermediate Carbine, Advanced Carbine, Tactical Patrol Rifle, and Law Enforcement Precision Rifle. If you can attend one, I would recommend doing so. One point— as with learning a language, longer-term immersion in an activity produces better and longer-lasting results, so take a recommendation for longer

courses whenever you can take them.

The Marines I trained with impressed me. All young guys, they were serious, sharp, focused, well-informed, enthusiastic, competitive as hell but supportive of one another. An incident exemplifying the latter trait stands out in my mind.

One of the Marines missed a timed competition due to equipment problems. When he learned who won he jokingly said, "He won because I wasn't shooting!" But a couple of seconds later he said, "No, I take that back. He won because he's good."

Finally, assistant instructor John Fish went out of his way to check on how I was doing, offer advice, and make sure I was getting the most from the course. He is also a born teacher. My thanks to all of these men for letting me join in. Training with them was an honor.



Spartan Tips

JIM Smith performed the same drills that everyone else did, and most of the time he shot better and faster than everyone else. Combined with his combat experience, that makes his suggestions worth paying attention to.

The hardest thing to teach is situational awareness.

When you're operating in a 360 degree battlefield plus the "up" dimension, such as someone above you in a building or on a natural high point, it is exceedingly important to stay aware and not target-fixate.

Keep both hands on your weapon whenever possible so that you're ready to act or react instantly.

Red dot sights are not parallax-free, no matter what Aimpoint tries to tell you, so practice keeping the dot centered in the sight window.

Use infrared lasers and flood beams as little and as briefly as possible, and don't assume you're invisible in the dark. Enemy troops are increasingly equipped with night vision devices.

Keep your support hand well forward on your rifle's forend when shooting. This will produce a natural inward pull on the weapon, steadying it and taking some strain off your support arm muscles.

When possible, always "wrap into" your sling for longer shots, whether prone, seated, kneeling, or standing. Again, one careful shot that kills the enemy is better than a bunch of shots that don't.

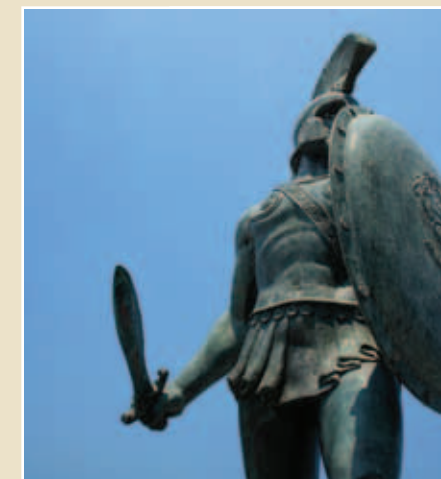
A quick wear-test for your AR's gas rings: clean your bolt and bolt carrier thoroughly, then drop the bolt into the carrier. If the bolt doesn't drop free when the carrier is held vertically, the rings are probably okay. Be sure to de-align the bolt ring slots before re-assembling your weapon.

A quick wear-test for your AR extractor: drag it across your inner forearm skin. If it leaves two distinct tracks from the outer edges of the extractor tip, it's probably okay.

A quick wear-test for your AR ejector: after making sure it plunges in and out smoothly, hook an empty case under the extractor and, using one finger, pull the case base flat against the bolt face and then let it fly. If the ejector flings the case several feet, it's probably okay.

Don't forget to clean carbon deposits from the front of the disk-shaped stop on the firing pin, and from the corresponding interior surface of the bolt carrier. Also clean the curving conical part of the bolt and its corresponding interior surface.

Learn the length of a new buffer spring so that you'll know when yours has collapsed enough that it needs replacing.



Keeping the Faith With Our Wounded Warriors



By Brian Puckett

ONE of the contestants in the 2007 Arizona Ironman Triathlon ran the entire 26.2 miles of the marathon leg carrying a full-sized American flag. The contestant was Major Andrew “Andy” Christian and the flag was recovered from a Marine Corps vehicle that had been ambushed in Iraq, an attack that resulted in the death of Staff Sgt. Jay Collado, Andy’s friend and colleague. He carried the flag to honor Jay, to remind us of sacrifices made by other Marines, and to publicize a way we can help repay them—the Semper Fi Fund.

When American military personnel are wounded, it can cause tremendous financial stress for their families. Taking time off to visit a recovering loved one can mean lost income, even job loss, just when money is needed for travel to a hospital, lodging, food, child care, and paying the normal household bills. And later, after coming home, the injured may need special equipment to adapt to a new and different life.

Few families are prepared for the financial strains involved, which can extend over months or years, and the government doesn’t generally cover such financial “collateral damage.” Fortunately for Marines, sailors, and other service members

assigned to Marine forces, the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund takes up the financial slack.

The Semper Fi fund was established in 2004 by a group of Marine Corps spouses centered in California. The name comes from the Marine Corps motto, Semper Fidelis, Latin for “Always Faithful,” often contracted to Semper Fi. The Fund rapidly became a national program, working with the Marine Corps, the Navy, and military hospitals nationwide to assess the needs of specific families, distributing money to meet those needs where possible.

The Semper Fi Fund relies on donations to do its great work, so the more people who know about it, the better. Which is where Andy comes in. I asked the Major about his devotion to publicizing and raising funds for this cause.

First, can you give a brief outline of your deployment to Iraq?

AC: I spent 13 months as part of a team of Marines advising the Iraqi army, and led 11 direct action raids during my tour. I returned from deployment in November of 2006.

But one particular event led you toward your present involvement with the Semper Fi Fund, correct?

AC: Yes. We were ambushed by insurgents in Iraq. In the attack, 1st Lt. Justin Waldeck suffered a severe hand injury, Staff Sgt. Chris Claude ended up losing his leg, and my friend Staff Sgt. Jay Collado was killed. The team decided that we should do something for Jay’s six-year-old daughter, Kaiya.

Which led to your first fund-raising efforts.

AC: Right. I decided that raising money for Kaiya’s college scholarship would be a good idea. Competing in endurance events was a fund raising method that I thought would be successful. And it was—I helped raise about \$30,000 dollars for her.

What about the Semper Fi Fund?

AC: We heard about all the good things the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund was doing for our injured teammates. We wanted to give back and support this cause, so we started raising money for Semper Fi.

And you’ve kept the ball rolling with more competitive events and through the donations website you started?

AC: Right, through marathons, triathlons, 24 hour mountain bike races. But I didn’t start that website until I was signed up for Ironman New Zealand. Before that I solicited donations personally.

How have your fundraising efforts worked out?

AC: To date I’ve raised \$93,000, all of it going directly to the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund. I’ve tracked the results of my own efforts by the web page, by the checks people sent me that I mailed to the Fund, and by some of the corporations that donated directly on my behalf. Of course, it hasn’t been me alone. None of it would have been possible without the support of friends, family, and many other good Americans.

What were your personal highlights in Ironman New Zealand?

AC: The swimming leg was first, of course. My time was 1:01, putting me at 337th place, and then I immediately jumped on the bike. The wind was gusting 20 to 30 mph, but I managed to pass several pro triathletes. The Specialized Transition bicycle I used was amazing. I posted 4:58 for the 112 mile ride, the second fastest bike time for amateurs and

16th fastest overall, which moved me up to 52nd place in the race. The marathon leg was tough. It was raining hard and blowing hard. My legs started cramping at about 22 miles, but I pushed through it by focusing on the crowd’s energy and thinking about everyone who’d supported me and the Semper Fi Fund. I finished with a total time of 10:10:46, which was a new personal best.

Congratulations on that, Andy.

AC: Thank you, but it’s not about me, of course. This race project raised over \$21,000 for injured Marines and sailors and their families. I want to thank Specialized Bicycles, SureFire and the Force Recon Association for their support in the training, equipment, and travel costs.

It’s our turn now: If you want to show your appreciation for our wounded Marines, and for Andy Christian’s efforts in fundraising, you can donate through:

www.active.com/donate/ironmannzsemperfi/majorchristian. Or you can donate directly at www.semperfund.org. As Andy says, “If one reader donates we have made a difference in the life of a wounded Marine. No donation is too small — it all adds up.”



Major (then Captain) Andrew Christian briefs a group of Marines at the Special Operations Training Group prior to a live-fire helo assault at Camp Pendleton’s MOUT training facility. After Andy’s deployment to Iraq when one of his Marines was killed in an IED ambush, he has worked tirelessly to promote the Semper Fi Fund to benefit the families of Marines lost or wounded in combat.