

A man in tactical gear, including a tan t-shirt, a tan tactical vest with multiple pockets, and a tan baseball cap, is shown from the side, aiming a rifle. He is wearing large, black, over-ear headphones and a white wristband on his left arm. The background is a wooden wall.


# S T R E THE DIS

**"Shooting is the most perishable skill that human beings have," according to Gregg Coker, assistant instructor for Spartan Tactical.**

**G**regg is also a combat veteran with experience with the 101st Airborne Division and as a Little Bird helicopter pilot with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, so we listen carefully to what he has to say. This set the tone for the three-day Spartan Tactical basic carbine course.

Spartan Tactical is run by Jim Smith, a man who has over 20 years experience serving in various elite units including the Rangers, Special Forces, Asymmetric Warfare Group, and 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta. It was with the last unit that he served in Mogadishu in 1993 in the incident portrayed in the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. Jim was one of the snipers in the helicopter designated Super 61, which was shot down in that engagement.

After leaving the military, Smith performed contract work overseas. In the aftermath of 9/11, he helped develop the Air Marshal shooting program, and to this day continues to instruct mili-



« Smith shoots from behind barricade.

## SPARTAN TACTICAL CARBINE CLASS

# SECRET CHINING DISTANCE

» BY ED LAWRENCE

tary and law enforcement personnel, Federal Flight Deck Officers, and private citizens. He has applied his military instructing experience to start a firearms training business and has also utilized his arctic warfare and outdoor survival training, along with his experience being stationed in Alaska, to launch an Alaskan hunting guide business, Alaska Extreme Adventures & Safaris.

But Jim Smith's main activity is instructing marksmanship to the military. He strongly believes that shooting should be used as a vehicle to teach thinking and complex problem solving. In this capacity he has instructed various personnel of the 82nd Airborne and 101st Airborne divisions. After his training, both units reported an increase in both lethality and survivability. Spartan Tactical has also provided training to dozens of battalions throughout the Army and various Marine units.

He brought this same methodology to our carbine class, which was composed of a mix of civilians and law enforcement personnel. One student had enlisted in the Army with a Special Forces contract, which puts him in the pipeline for the required Special Forces training program. He was going to ship out shortly, so he took advantage of this opportunity to get some extra preparation.

Everyone in the class except for me used some variant of the AR-15, with the majority using some form of optic, be it electronic or magnifying. Jim went over a variety of optics and had several Leupold samples available for students' use. These included the Leupold CQT 1X3 and the Mid Range Tactical MRT 1.5X5. This was a nice touch that several students availed themselves of. At least one student got to learn the intricacies of dealing with the offset of a scope mounted on a carrying handle and how that af-

fected his holdover at short range.

For this class I used a Steyr AUG, which seemed to shoot Black Hills tighter than other brands of ammo—once I got the gas piston on the right setting. This was the first time I had used this relatively new (to me) carbine in a class, and it highlighted the importance of having a correct and detailed manual for reference when using a firearm with which you don't have any formal training. It is not enough that the gun goes bang—you need to know why it goes bang and what can cause it not to do so.

But we've seen issues like this before. A gun may run fine when you take it to the range to shoot by yourself. But when someone else dictates the rate of fire, course of fire, shooting positions, manipulations, magazine changes and number of rounds fired within a set time period, guns often behave differently. Formerly reliable guns malfunction or even go down. Guns that had

formerly proven to be reliable show otherwise. And you become acutely aware of shortfalls that had not previously caught your attention. In this case, it was no more serious than me becoming the proverbial "that guy."

The class began with an intro by the instructors and a discussion of ballistics, trajectory, and zeros. This was the first of several lectures we received over the three days of the course. We were treated to in-depth discussions on rigging the carbine, optics and accessories, as well as longer range shooting including effects of wind, altitude, humidity, temperature, and even interior, exterior and terminal ballistics. When covering the latter topics, Jim's background in sniping became especially apparent.

After the safety briefing, the instructors went over the fine points of the prone position, and the class fired several ten-round groups to get set at 50 yards before moving to 100 yards. We used bullseye targets to foster more precise aiming.

When engaging paper targets, ten-round groups were standard practice for much of the class. Since they require more precision and focus than groups composed of a lower round count, we would often fire that number of rounds from each position before changing shooting positions or moving forward. When Smith explains shooting positions, he likes to use a triangle to explain the pros and cons of the various positions. Mobility, stability and survivability make up each of its legs, but it is not an equilateral triangle, since all aspects are not equal and some positions emphasize one attribute over another.

Prone, for example, is much higher on stability and survivability than on mobility. Whatever position we used, our instructors reminded us that it was not about one shot, but about *multiple* shots. This was especially the case with offhand. But there would always be a wobble zone, so they went over ways to reduce that zone, including breathing, sling use and natural point of aim. But the two most important factors in accurately placing a shot, Smith stressed, are sight alignment and trigger control.

As the first day progressed, we covered prone, kneeling, sitting and stand-

ing. We fired a four-position shoot that consisted of ten rounds fired from each position. We began at 100 yards prone and ended shooting at 25 yards offhand, stopping on our way down to shoot from sitting and kneeling. We repeated this course of fire several times each day.

We also shot from the maximum distance possible on the range—180 yards. But since Smith likes to have his classes shoot at longer distances than this, he used reduced-size silhouettes, with the net effect of engaging a man-sized target at 360 yards.



➤ Firing line going prone.

Over the course of the three days, we practiced shooting from cover using different positions while engaging LaRue mechanized pop-up targets along with MGM E & BC C-Zone steel metallic silhouettes set from about 130 yards to 150 yards away. The LaRue targets employed upper body silhouettes that were about two feet tall and one foot wide and dropped when hit. Each target contained a base, motor and portable power source that allowed them to reset themselves. Thus, the targets were entirely self-contained and could be set down anyplace to create a reactive target range. The Spartan instructors made good use of mixing them and stationary metallic silhouettes to create various courses of fire.

When shooting from behind cover, Jim stressed to never rest the rifle's barrel on the cover, because that could al-

ter the point of impact by as much as 21 inches at 100 yards. What you rest on cover depends on the cover itself and your shooting position—it might be the rifle's forearm, it might be your own forearm supporting the rifle, or it might be nothing, since you were firing from a short distance back from the cover. "Do what you need to do to make the shot," was the mandate.

Once we were set shooting the metallic silhouette targets from behind cover, Smith added some twists involving specific courses of fire, engagement se-

quences often limited to the rounds in our magazines, and specifying movement between cover and changing shooting positions.

This mandated several reloads in each shooting sequence. Fast and smooth reloads are an important part of Spartan's curriculum, not just because it is a core skill, but also because many troops whom Spartan trains are not equipped with sidearms. Jim pointed out that if you are practiced enough, you can execute a speed reload with an AR as fast or faster than you can transition to a handgun. This opened a discussion about when one is better off executing a speed reload on a rifle or transitioning to a handgun. Smith explained that determining factors include the distance to the threat, available cover and whether or not you are operating as part of a team. If you are operating as part of a team, it generally

makes more sense to get your most effective weapon—your longarm—loaded and back in the fight than to transition to a handgun. Times when Jim thought it might make more sense to transition to a handgun would include if operating by yourself, if the threat was inside of 25 yards and if there was no cover to drop behind to reload your rifle.

We later incorporated team tactics and implemented them by rotating through shooting positions while moving and interacting with others, and covering someone's area of responsibility while they reloaded. The big takeaway for someone who has not done this before was how much easier it was to overlook something and/or to make a mistake by not paying attention since there was so much going on.

Owing to the emphasis on precision, Smith saved the rapid-fire, close-in work for the afternoon of the last day, after the precision base had been built. Here he covered everything from various ways of engaging targets with multiple rapid shots, to handling multiple targets and shooting on the move. This brought into focus something Jim had presented earlier about the need to train your eyes to the fight. This is especially critical when engaging multiple targets, where you need to work with the sights and train your eyes to be as flexible as possible to move from one target to another. With non-magnifying optics, you would generally use your firing eye to transition from target to target while peering through the optic. With a magnified optic, using your non-firing eye to assist your firing eye to transition is generally quicker and more efficient. This underscores the importance of shooting with both eyes open. Thus it is necessary to be aware of this and to practice so it becomes your normal habit. Too often people get used to taking their firing eye off the scope to find their next target, and Smith points out this is a slower and less efficient way to run the gun and could be a tactical Achilles heel.

Whether close or far, Jim's method for running the rifle involves what he described as "shooting as much gun as possible." This basically means using the full length of the gun for maximum effect—holding the forend as far for-



Jim Smith begins magazine change from behind cover.

ward as comfortably possible, as it provides more stability and control and the ability to transition between multiple targets faster. It also means having any collapsible buttstock extended correctly for the height of the shooter, which Jim has found also aids in transitioning from target to target.

Shooting at longer ranges, as this class entailed, generally means fewer overall rounds fired, given the time it takes to go back and forth to the target. Even still, we fired around 1,200 rounds over the three days of the course. And to develop the skills to engage longer range targets and to tune your marksmanship, it is certainly worth it, since the principles covered in this class apply to running a carbine at any range.

Spartan's three-day Tactical Carbine Class covered a great amount of material and we spent a lot of time honing our shooting skills. But above all, our instructors stressed that what they had given us was only an overview. If we hope to improve or even maintain our skill level, we need to continue to practice and train. Because, after all, shooting accurately is a perishable skill. ●

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