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Shooting on the Move; Using Your Instincts

Learn to work with, not against, your instincts.

By Michael T. Rayburn

According to FBI statistics, almost 95 percent of officer-involved shootings (OIS) occur at 21 feet or less, with approximately 75 percent occurring at 10 feet or less. It is also a fact that well over half of all OIS occur at 5 feet or less. With this being said, how much actual cover can there be between you and the felon who is trying to take your life?

In the vast majority of OIS, there is no cover available to the officer. Or if there is cover available, oftentimes the officer hasn't been trained in the mechanics of properly moving to cover. Since the majority of OIS are up close and personal, with no cover available, movement becomes an essential element in any gunfight.

But how do you move properly? Some practitioners or self-proclaimed experts in firearms tactics and training would have you contorting your body this way and that. Others would have you walking as if your legs were made of rubber. Others still would have you performing the old "stomp and drag." I don't think any of these methods applies when you're in a fight for your life.

Don't Relearn How to Walk

The only way to move in a gunfight is to move exactly the way you're going to move in a gunfight. Sound confusing? That's because so many "experts" in the field of firearms tactics and training make the issue much more complicated than it needs to be. Some of these so-called law enforcement experts have never even walked a day in our shoes, let alone had to deal with the dregs of society that we deal with on a daily basis. Yet we tout these people as experts because they've come up with some type of tactic and named it after themselves. I'm automatically suspicious of any tactic named after the person said to have invented it.

As far as I'm concerned, fancy tactics are unnecessary. It is natural and instinctive for us to walk and run with our feet shoulder width apart. We've been doing this since we were small toddlers. Why all of a sudden when you put a gun in your hand should you have to learn how to walk all over again? Because some "expert" says so?

OIS are rapid, traumatic events that happen so suddenly a large percentage of officers involved in them say they were caught off guard. When this happens you fall victim to the action vs. reaction phenomenon, playing catch up to the suspect's actions. The way to turn this around to your advantage is to move and move quickly. This forces the bad guy to play catch up to your action, your movement.

When you're involved in a shooting you're going to want to move or run as quickly as you can from point A to point B to avoid getting killed. It's that simple. With little time to react, your body will respond by moving and running the same way you've been doing it all your life, with

your feet shoulder width apart. Why would you want to fight this perfectly effective instinctive response? If I find myself in a gunfight, you certainly won't find me stomping and dragging my way across the room so slowly that my adversary can run right up on me and take me out at close range.

Nationally, the average hit ratio for law enforcement officers, standing static shooting at a paper target, is 90-plus percent. Yet when an officer becomes involved in an OIS our hit ratio is somewhere around 12 to 18 percent. Obviously, some of the loss in accuracy can be attributed to stress and the fact that, in most cases, the officer is firing second in reaction to a shooter. But a large percentage of the difference can be attributed to the fact that an officer's instinctive reactions, in most cases, directly oppose the way he or she has been trained.

Since your body is most likely to react a certain way when threatened, why not go with it and practice using these same techniques so you'll be better prepared when the time comes?

Know Your Instincts

Anyone's first instinct is to run with feet shoulder width apart. The easiest way to find shoulder width when training is to put your feet together as if you were standing at attention. Now spread your toes out as far as they will go followed by your heels. That will be shoulder width for you. Maintain this distance during training because this will be how you will walk or run during a real shooting incident.

Besides having your feet shoulder width apart, there are a couple of other instinctive reactions you'll have when you become involved in a fight for your life and your fight/flight reaction kicks in.

Your knees will bend slightly and you'll bend slightly forward at the waist. This is due to the fact that your body is subconsciously getting prepared to fight. You are bracing yourself for any type of impact and preparing yourself to react.

During an OIS, you'll also automatically protect your windpipe by lowering your chin. You can't fight if you can't breathe. Years of evolution have taught us to protect our windpipes so that we can have the air we need to fight— or, in some cases, to flee. Your brain will automatically lower your chin when it recognizes the body is being threatened. Don't forget to do the same in training.

The Triangle Stance

Another natural instinctive reaction you'll have during a gunfight is locking your arms and wrists straight out in front of you. Some people argue about using this, the isosceles stance, versus the Weaver stance, which unrealistically involves bending the elbows. Every officer I've ever spoken with who has been involved in a shooting has told me that they used an isosceles stance. Some of these officers were never trained in the use of an isosceles stance, but when they became involved in a gunfight they automatically went into this position. We have instincts for a reason.

The interview stance is another bone of contention among firearms instructors. The interview stance, where your gun side is bladed away from a subject you're talking to, is a good sound officer survival tactic. This tactic should be used when interviewing subjects— but only then. It is meant to protect your firearm from a surprise gun-grab attempt by the person you are interviewing. That's it, nothing more. It is not a shooting stance.

Practice in Position

In most cases officers are trained in some type of static line sighted shooting– not shooting on the move. When the shooting starts you're going to want to move and move quickly. If this is the case, then why not train that way all the time? Every time you go to the range you should be practicing shooting on the move. Is it more time consuming? Yes, it is, which means it's more costly. But nowhere near as costly as it would be to replace a fallen or injured officer.

When you're at the range, forget the Weaver stance or whatever other stance you've been trained in. If you're not going to use it under the stress of an actual OIS, then don't waste your time training with it.

From the position your body instinctively takes, you can walk backward, forward, and side-to-side with ease. Start off slowly at first and dry fire it a few times to get the feel for it. For safety reasons you should always be training with a partner. Take advantage of this situation and have your training partner take hold of your collar as you move. This way you don't have to worry about falling. Not that you would, because you're walking the same way you always walk: naturally and instinctively.

The trick, and there really isn't a trick to it, is to maintain a solid shooting platform with your upper body as you move. Keep your arms and wrists locked out straight and focus on your target. Start off slowly taking small steps and advance yourself up to moving quickly. But maintain that solid shooting platform with your upper body. You not only want to move during a gunfight, but also to shoot accurately while doing it. If you maintain a solid shooting platform with your body you'll be able to do this.

While you should always be thinking about cover and using it properly, when there is no cover available the next best thing is to move. By moving you accomplish several things. First, and most importantly, by moving you can make yourself a more distant target to hit. Since 95 percent of OIS occur at 21 feet or less, moving out of the kill zone will greatly enhance your survival. By moving you are also cutting down on the action vs. reaction time lapse and you are making yourself a much harder target to hit.

The FBI has interviewed a number of cop killers and discovered that very few have had any type of formal firearms training. Which means that even fewer, if any at all, have had any type of training in shooting at a moving target.

If you're still not convinced you should be moving in a gunfight, consider this last statistic. Almost 95 percent of officers who are able to reach cover in a shooting survive the incident. If you're still not convinced, grab your training partner and head out to the range and try this tactic. After a few rounds you'll convince yourself of how vital moving while shooting is to your survival on the street.

Mike Rayburn is a 17-year veteran of the Saratoga Springs (N.Y.) Police Department and is the author of two books: "Advanced Vehicle Stop Tactics" and "Advanced Patrol Tactics." Mike is also an adjunct instructor for the Smith & Wesson Academy in Springfield, Mass.