R&SN
POLICE AND SECURITY NEWS
THE INFORMATION SOURCE FOR
LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HOMELAND SECURITY

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007 PUBLISHED BY DAYS COMMUNICATIONS, INC. VOL. 23 ISSUE 6

By John T. Meyer, Jr.
Team One Network

A shoot house is not just another kind of range.

A shoot house is a laboratory where patrol officers who have mastered the basics of combat firearms can hone their skills in a venue which approaches real-world conditions. It is a venue in which tactical teams, using live ammunition, can develop the choreography which allows them to overwhelm a target using speed, surprise and violence of action; or silence, stealth and covert movement. Because a shoot house is not just another kind of range, before you think about conducting any live fire shoot house training, you must ensure that the prospective trainees have mastered every one of the shooting basics which are taught on the range.

Before You Come to My House

Let me be specific. Before you take anyone into a shoot house for live fire training, you should make sure that your students are able to clear stoppages, perform double taps, and deal with multiple threats. Students must be capable of successfully dealing with shoot/no shoot situations and transitioning from their long gun to a secondary weapon. They must understand –and be competent in – proper movement with a firearm and the use of cover. They must grasp the concept of "scan and breathe."

Participants must also be able to communicate effectively – using verbalization directed at the threat and communication between themselves and the other members of their team or unit. They must know how to safely cover a suspect in a confined area and be knowledgeable in emergency procedures – officer down situations, for example, and the rendering of first aid.

Only after students can confidently perform all of these procedures on the range is it time to put everything together in live fire shoot house exercises.

Ship's Captain

This is why a competent, well trained Shoot House Instructor (SI) is imperative. The SI is responsible for the overall safety and control of the training and the environment. No matter what level of competency our students may have attained, our goal as instructors is to improve attitude, skill and knowledge of all of our students. The SI must understand every aspect of the tactics which will be deployed during training. His (or her) scenarios must be practical and realistic.

The SI must also know all of his (or her) department's tactics. They must have a clear understanding of departmental policies, procedures, and doctrines. This is critical. An SI who is not aware of departmental procedures for a special unit, for example, could create a dangerous situation by not being prepared for the student's reaction in a scenario.

An example of a dangerous situation is a student moving directly at a threat while engaging, then "getting off the tracks" and shooting at an angle to the left or right. If the instructor is not aware of this tactic, it could create a hazardous situation if the targets are placed in a position which would create a cross fire.

The Way It Was

Shoot houses didn't always look like the ones we use today. Many of us started by building a door frame on the range and, then, we practiced opening the door and shooting at targets on the other side. The next step was urban terrain facades so we could practice Military Operations on Urban Terrain (MOUT) ops – an unsophisticated version of the FBI's "Hogan's Alley" training facility. From there, it was a simple step to create bare-bones "rooms" which we did often by using plywood, black plastic, or curtains.

As you can imagine, curtains and plywood do not stop bullets so we developed new and safer techniques. We built hollow plywood walls and filled the empty space with pea gravel. That experiment turned out to be a nightmare because the seams between the plywood sheets would separate and the gravel would leak out of the bullet holes.

The shoot house instructor is responsible for everyone's safety, as well as being in control of training and the environment.

Only authorized targets should be used.

Next, we made our walls out of railroad ties. That technique still exists. You stack the ties in columns, staggering the seams and hiding the nails. But, there's a problem: Rounds will often bounce off the ties at extreme angles even with seams staggered and nails hidden. Also, since not every round will be absorbed, you can fall victim to the dreaded ricochet.

Some of the first military shoot houses were made of tires. A few still exist. They were built by stacking new tires which had blemishes on top of each other, holding them together by placing a 4 x 4 or 6 x 6 in the middle, then filling the tires with sand or gravel. Tires also allow the bullets to bounce at extreme angles – blowback is common – and also creates maintenance problems because of wear and shifting sand and gravel.

Present-Day Designs

Today's shoot houses can be constructed in a number of different ways. All of them are preferable to the old styles. One of the most common designs is steel with plywood facing. Shoot house walls are built with plywood attached to a 2 x 4 which is mounted to the steel walls. This creates a gap of 1 1/2 inches. Bullets pass through the plywood, then break up and are captured behind the plywood which reduces splatter. With this kind of construction, care must be taken to replace plywood regularly and inspect the steel to make sure it remains stable.

Another design employs steel-faced walls with rubber belts or sheets. This is accomplished by hanging the rubber so there is a gap between it and the steel plates. The bullets pass through the facing and are captured behind the rubber which, of course, also reduces splatter. Just like the plywood-faced steel I mentioned above, it's important to replace the rubber facing and inspect the steel regularly.

Then, there is steel to which rubber blocks are attached. This is an interesting concept in which the steel inner wall is faced with rubber blocks which can range from two inches to one foot in depth. Here, the bullets are most often captured by the rubber blocks and don't penetrate as far as the steel. The blocks should be inspected regularly and inspection of the steel is also mandatory. The rubber block technique can also be utilized with reinforced concrete walls instead of steel.

Finally, there's the latest development for shoot house construction. It is called SACON™. SACON is shock absorbing concrete. It's made of foamed, fiber reinforced concrete, formed into tapered, log-like elements. The SACON "logs" reduce ricochets and also trap the bullets and debris, making removal easy.

The Rules

Whatever kind of shoot house you decide to build, there are a number of important factors to consider before your first training session. The number one consideration is safety. Every shoot house which Team One Network uses posts the "Four Cardinal Rules of Firearms Safety" where all the trainees can see and read them.

Regardless, it is imperative that the SI read these rules before every training session. Here they are:

Rule One: Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.

Rule Two: Point your firearm in a safe direction – one where an unintentional discharge will cause NO HUMAN INJURY and, at most, minor property damage.

(This rule is also known as "The Laser Rule.")

Rule Three: Keep your finger off the trigger and outside the trigger guard, indexed along the frame or slide until you are on target and have decided to fire.

Rule Four: Be sure of your target/threat, backstop, and beyond.

At Team One, our SIs follow up the reading of the "Cardinal Rules" with a secondary talk about the additional safety precautions which must be followed before engaging in live fire shoot house scenarios.

These are Team One's shoot house instructor's talking points:

- Wraparound eye protection, gas mask, or face shield are MANDATORY.
- Ear protection is MANDATORY.
- Hats (brimmed headwear) are MANDATORY.
- BODY ARMOR is MANDATORY.
- Long sleeved shirts are recommended.
- Authorized firearms instructors must be present any time the shoot house is used.
- Prior to live fire exercises, the shoot house will be inspected for any safety issues, such as gaps between tires (in a tire house), exposed steel walls, protruding nails, etc.
- Prior to live fire exercises, rooms must be checked to ensure that no personnel are present.
- Targets will be placed so that all rounds will hit the impact area.

Everybody wears body armor – no exceptions!

Proper target placement is critical to safe training scenarios.

- Only authorized targets will be used.
- Only authorized ammunition will be used (check the approved list).
- Instructors will review all targets and angles of deflection before beginning live fire exercises.
- All damage will be reported without retribution.
- The SI should identify the location of the first aid kit and fire extinguishers.
- The shoot house will be cleaned before the end of the training exercises.
- The SI should also cover any additional host agency safety rules.

Target Placement

One of the most critical elements shoot house instructors must face is target placement because where you position your targets is crucial to conducting a safe training scenario. It's a matter of simple physics: Where the target is placed affects where the bullet strikes. Of course, the most important element is the shooter's position(s). For instance, will the position of the target be okay if the shooter is standing or kneeling? Once you've determined that, you can deal with the other factors, such as the distance from the wall; the target height; the possibility of deflection caused by the environment (furniture, appliances, etc.); and the possibility of cross fire. If you are going to use a moving target, make sure that the shooter's angles of fire remain safe. And, we've found that putting targets in the corner of a room can lead to excess wear of the walls. The placement of furniture or other objects can also help dictate student movement in order to control early movement.

Keeping a Close Watch

Equally important is for an SI is to monitor student reaction. How do your students react to shooting from different heights? How comfortable are they when faced by multiple targets? Will they move around the targets? Could they create a cross fire situation?

The SI must also always remember that the shoot house is a teaching facility. As an SI, it's your job to watch each trainee to make sure (s)he is scanning and breathing as they move through the shoot house, because, if they don't scan and breathe, they'll get tunnel vision which could prove fatal in a real-life situation. And, pay particular attention to the shoot/no shoot locations. If all you're doing is checking the targets for accuracy, then you're missing the concept of shoot house training.Our objective is to develop officers who can handle situations – not just weapons.

To teach students how to handle situations, Team One uses scenarios which have been created from real-world situations. The object of a scenario is not to mess with a student's head; it is to teach practical lessons which will keep the officer alive. So, the scenario itself is just one of the teaching elements.

Break It Down

As an SI, you'll need to break down each practical shoot house exercise into five components for evaluation purposes. They are the preoperation briefing; the prior to entry check; the eyes on evaluation during the scenario; the postscenario check; and the final debrief.

We use the preoperation briefing to explain the scenario, outlining the mission and giving the students whatever intelligence we think they should have – the number of threats, for example. You can sketch a diagram of the target area on a whiteboard so they'll have an idea about rooms, doors, and hallways. We let them know whether the targets are reactive or nonreactive. We let the students know how we expect them to verbalize among themselves and to the threats. We talk about safety concerns. We tell them where the instructors will be. We also make sure that everyone knows what to say if the scenario has to be shut down because of emergency or injury.

The SI's prior to entry checklist should include the following:

- Weapons loaded;
- Finger off the trigger and indexed;
- Is the safety ON or OFF? (what does your SOP say?); and
- All necessary equipment stowed or carried.

When the students are ready, the SIs should check their firearm positions; they should make sure they're applying the "Laser Rule"; that the team is making eye contact or have their hands ready for a "Touch Up" so they all go at the same time; and that they're moving on command.

What to Watch For

During the exercise, don't concern yourself with how many hits the students get in the X-ring, or how many head shot double taps they can do. You can do that later. What's more important for you as an SI is to evaluate their weapons positioning – the "Laser

Rule" again – how they move; how they act when they come upon a threat; what kind of fire discipline they are observing; how competently they transition from subgun or M4 to secondary weapon; how they deal with immediate threats; and how they verbalize to those threats – and to their partners and team members. If you have programmed active countermeasures into the scenario, you'll need to see how they transition, employ the countermeasures, then cover the threat in such a way so they're not going to shoot one another.

After the Smoke Clears

So, once the area has been secured and the student team leader declares, "All clear," it's time for the SI's after action evaluation. Did the team report by radio once the location was secure? Did anyone need medical attention, and was it called for? The SI should ask each member of the insertion team what threats (s)he saw and how they dealt with those threats. What about sight picture? How many rounds did each team member fire? In real life, all of those things will be hugely important.

Finally, there's the debrief. As an SI, you take the team back over the mission point by point. How do they feel they did? Were they good – or were they just lucky? What were the positive issues – what went right? And, just as important, what were the negatives or what can they improve upon? Did Mr. Murphy of Murphy's Law fame rear his ugly head? And, if he did, how did they adapt and overcome the situation? Do they feel their shooting was accurate? What about their tactics? How would they evaluate their communications skills during the operation? These are all defining questions. And, as SIs, it is your job to elicit honest and passionate responses.

Final Thought

It is critical that the SI always remembers in detail every single facet of what takes place before, during, and after the live fire scenario. Because the real teaching – the stuff which sinks in and will keep your students alive in the real world – only comes after the exercises are over.

Why? Because the shoot house is not just another range. What the shoot house is really about is the opportunity to gain realistic experience, in real time, with real equipment in a somewhat realistic environment. At the end of your training exercise, always ask what were the lessons learned.

About the Author: John T. Meyer, Jr. is President of Team One Network, LLC, a company established to test, evaluate, train and market various manufacturers' products to the law enforcement community as related to officer survival. John spent 15 years with Heckler & Koch, Inc., ultimately rising to the position of Vice President of Sales and International Training. John led a team of instructors who pioneered the integration of formalized training doctrine with practical field experience. These cutting edge, realistic tactical training courses have become an industry standard.