



# IN THE LINE *Of Fire*

By Mike Conti

## Close Encounters of the Cutting Kind

*All types of combat can be divided into two phases, offensive and defensive.*

*Knowledge of both is necessary to any fighting man. In training for warfare, the emphasis is usually on the offensive. In the case of the military police or civil law enforcement officers, the emphasis should be at least equal. Only the local situation, as it affects himself personally and his mission, can determine which type of combat a police officer should use. At times, he will have to resort to extreme offensive measures, because they may be his only means of defense. In other situations, only simple defense and restraint methods may be necessary. The judgment of the officer will determine which tactics he must use.*

— Colonel Rex Applegate  
“Kill or Get Killed”

There is a common saying among police officers and others who bear arms for a living: *Only an idiot would bring a knife to a gunfight.* While the basic premise may seem logical, the problem is that it takes much for granted. First, it presupposes that all of the involved parties will be aware that they are about to be engaged in a fight. Second, it implies that the gun-armed individual can't be defeated with an edged weapon.

Both of these assumptions can—and have—proved fatal.

In the early days of World War II, Col. Rex Applegate was tasked with training operatives for assignments behind enemy lines. His first step was to follow this directive: *Learn all there is to know about close-quarter combat.* It was believed that in order to teach, Applegate and his staff would have to be well-versed in all close combat techniques themselves. In this way, they could teach their students not only how to employ these techniques when needed, but also prepare them to recognize the subtle threat cues exhibited by their opponents. The ultimate objective was to provide operatives with the best possible odds of survival.

Having long studied the written works of Applegate, and having had the privilege of regularly speaking and corresponding with him during the months before his death, I had no doubt that his simple, yet extremely thorough

approach is the right way to go.

That is why when I was recently assigned to organize and develop a new Firearms Training Unit for our department, I was determined to do more than simply institute a firearms qualification factory. I believed that we needed to take a new approach to use-of-force training in general—an approach grounded in simplicity and common sense, and based upon an integrated use-of-force model.

Since the objective of the training is to prepare officers to deal with the realities of the environment they operate in, instead of the controlled scenarios they encounter on the firing range, I felt that staff members needed to know as much as possible about the many threats lurking in the real world.

By taking a reality-based approach, I hoped to be able to prepare the members of our department not only to properly employ their weapons when needed, but, as Applegate did, prepare them also to recognize threat cues and defend against them. By taking this extra step, I reasoned, we could instill in our people more self-confidence and control. This



**Sigarms Academy Adjunct Instructor Michael J. de Bethencourt (center) providing running commentary while students practice folding knife drills. De Bethencourt provides a vast array of training knives for use in the course.**

would enable them to respond faster to perceived threats while allowing them more time to determine the appropriate level of response.

Because the knife is one of the most compelling threats confronting American law enforcement officers today, I felt that one of the first things to learn was exactly what types of knife training programs were currently being offered to the public—law abiding and otherwise.

Following Col. Applegate's example, I reached outside of the traditional law enforcement circle and invited an expert in to train myself and the other members of my unit in the use of a knife.

The course, currently being offered by the Sigarms Academy in Epping, New Hampshire, was titled, *Defensive Folding Knife.* The instructor, Michael J. de Bethencourt, is a 39-year-old ex-carny who has been studying the martial use of the knife for more than 15 years. Though I had heard about Michael and his course from other officers, the first time we actually met was at a firearms training program at the Sigarms Academy.

To be completely frank, I did not have any high expectations prior to meeting him. I had heard that, yes, he absolutely knew his stuff, and yes, his techniques were fast, efficient and practically impossible to defend against. “But,” I was told, “no cop could ever use these techniques without getting sued!”

In addition to this, I also knew that Michael was not a police officer, hadn't been in the military, and was basically self-taught. My initial assessment? Another hack.

Then I met him.

My first impression of Michael was that he was indeed a bit odd. He habitually displays a wide, teeth-clenching grin that is both amusing and somewhat unsettling. At times he talks with the rapid-fire patter of the carnies; his sentences are peppered with good-humored barbs—most directed at himself. One thing he said really got my attention because it clearly illustrated his ego-free attitude: *“I try not to take myself too seriously. My work, however, I take very seriously.”* And he does. As I got to know him a little better, I began to see the depth of his intelligence and devotion to his craft behind the show biz veneer. (As it turns out, Michael did work as a carnies for years, while alternately attending college, studying martial arts, and traveling the world. He eventually earned a degree in political science and a Hemingwayesque knowledge of the world.) Having perceived him originally as strictly an edged-weapon aficionado, I was both surprised and impressed with his pistolcraft skills as the week progressed. By

the end of the Sigarms course, I was impressed enough with Michael and his skills to invite him to train me and my staff in his special discipline. Michael graciously agreed, and a few weeks later, he and his assistant put six members of my unit through an enlightening two-day course.

Due to the sensitive nature of the course—and the fact that some of the techniques would be considered extreme by many—I feel it prudent not to go into detail here. Suffice it to say, the incredible speed of his knife techniques made us all appreciate just how vulnerable an officer would be should someone get close enough to employ them.

Polling the members of the unit after the class was completed, it became clear that we all agreed on several significant points. First, the primary techniques that Michael taught in his class would meet with an incredible amount of resistance should any United States law enforcement agency try to incorporate them into a police academy curriculum. For even though the damage that can be inflicted with the knife is no less devastating than that which can be inflicted with a bullet, Americans are overwhelmingly predisposed to view the knife as a criminal's weapon—not as an acceptable police officer's survival tool.

Second, we agreed that our eyes had been opened to a threat many of us had greatly underestimated. As instructors, we agreed that we would now be better able to convey this sense of danger and need for knife awareness to the members of our department.

Finally, we agreed that having this type of knowledge was critical, for as Michael pointed out the first day of the course, there are currently at least 65 people in the United States teaching edged-weapon fighting skills to anyone who wishes to learn.

In summary, I believe that the benefits of police instructors taking this course far outweigh the uneasy feeling that some will experience while practicing the brutally simple techniques with what many consider to be a thug's weapon. For as history has repeatedly illustrated, the greatest single enemy to survival is ignorance.

The Sigarms Academy's Police Instructor Defensive Folding Knife Course takes two days or 16 hours. Tuition is \$250. For further information, contact Sigarms Academy Corporate Park, Dept. GAH, Exeter, NH 03833; (603) 679-2003.

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