

IN THE LINE Of Fire

By Mike Conti



Attending S&W's Advanced Instructor's Course for Cops on the Use of the Tactical Shotgun

In 1998, two significant changes occurred at the Smith & Wesson Academy. The first was the opening of the new \$3 million National Firearms Training Center. This new wing is connected to the existing Academy building and houses several ranges, classrooms, a museum and a retail store. Various advanced and instructor-level training programs are currently being conducted there, and for the first time in the Academy's history, comprehensive firearms and self-defense training courses are being made available to qualified members of the general public.

The second major change that took effect in 1998 was the retirement of the Academy's second Director of Training, Lt. Colonel Robert E. Hunt. The Colonel retired after 16 years at the helm of the prestigious institution, passing the torch to the new Director, Gilbert A. "Bert" DuVernay. Bert, whose background includes 24 years of police service, has been a member of the Academy staff since 1990.

It was in the Academy's new wing under the auspices of its new director that I attended the five-day Shotgun

Instructor Course that was conducted August 30 through September 3, 1999.

THE CLASS

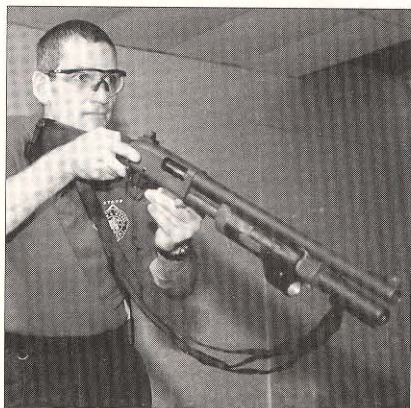
The class was somewhat smaller than average, consisting of seven law enforcement officers from the US and Canada. This was looked upon as a good thing by all involved, for fewer students in a training program generally translates into each student receiving more individual attention from the instructors. A smaller class also allows a well-versed instructor to include more material and additional drills than would be possible with a larger group. Such was the case here.

Participants in the program included a constable from the Edmonton, Alberta Police Service, two tactical team officers from New Jersey, training officers from Connecticut, Maryland and Massachusetts and a member of the U.S. Marshals Service.

THE CADRE

The primary instructor for the week-long program was Brent Purucker, an eight-year member of the Academy staff. Brent served for 16 years as a member of the Michigan State Police. He employs a relaxed, though by no means low-key teaching style, and intersperses humor at appropriate moments to help keep the atmosphere congenial.

Assisting Brent during the class was Jens P. Heider. Jens, (pronounced "Yens"), whose background includes work in both the private and corporate security sectors, was, until recently, in charge of the S&W Academy European Division. He has now permanently transferred to the U.S. Academy. Jens, who can best be described as "Yang" to Brent's "Yin," comes across as driven, completely focused, and apparently consumed with the training mission. While his intensity can be a little off-



Sustained fire loading: In the ready position, the support hand is used to top off or load the magazine after any number of rounds have been fired.

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putting to some American students, I found myself enjoying his no-nonsense teaching style.

The two instructors' distinct personalities provided for a very balanced, stimulating and informative program.

THE COURSE

Day One: The class began at 8:30 a.m. Brent briefed us on the curriculum and what would be required in order to successfully complete the program. This included passing a written, closed-book test and scoring 80 percent or better on a specified course of fire. At this time we were all issued a 178-page instructor's manual that would be used throughout the course and later when we returned to our departments. Each of us was also given an official S&W hat, mug and three meal tickets that we could use at the nearby S&W Factory during the week. I mention this because these are nice perks that the Academy stopped providing for many years and has only recently reinstated. Safe weapons carry and handling was then covered, after which Brent asked each member of the class to introduce himself and describe his training background. Brent then began the lecture segment of the course. In addition to covering the fundamentals of shotgun operation and employment, other subjects that were discussed included shotgun versus carbine considerations, ammunition concerns, shotgun types and configurations, and less-lethal ammunition alternatives.

After lunch, Jens took control of the

class and put us right to work on the firing line. Jens explained and demonstrated the various shotgun carry positions that the Academy recommended for use. He also covered loading and unloading drills, and then had us demonstrate the techniques back to him. Once satisfied with our dry-fire drills, he had us load our weapons and engage in live-fire training drills for the rest of the afternoon.

It was during this block that fellow New England police officer and writer Ralph Mroz stopped by with a prototype of a new Mossberg pump-action patrol shotgun. Ralph had just completed an evaluation of the gun and was eager to show it to us. Though the gun was set up with excellent ghost ring sights, synthetic stock and Parkerized finish, the feature that attracted all of our attention was the trigger group. After years of development, Mossberg had finally produced a pump-action shotgun that employed a double-action-only trigger group. This shotgun, the Model 590DA, is quite a gun, and we all had an opportunity to put the 590DA through its paces. Taking just a bit of getting used to, the double-action-only trigger worked really well and performed as fast and reliably as the standard single-action triggers. The pull, which was a little heavy on the prototype, (approximately 16 pounds), was smooth. Pull on production models is expected to be a little lighter. Personally, I don't know why it took so long for one of the major companies to field a double-action trigger group, because I believe it will absolutely provide a greater margin of safety for officers employing the shotgun in the field. The word from the company is that the trigger actions will be "retro-fittable," allowing departments to update their inventory of existing Mossberg pumpguns with the new trigger groups at minimal cost.

After a full afternoon of shooting, the class broke at 4:30 p.m.

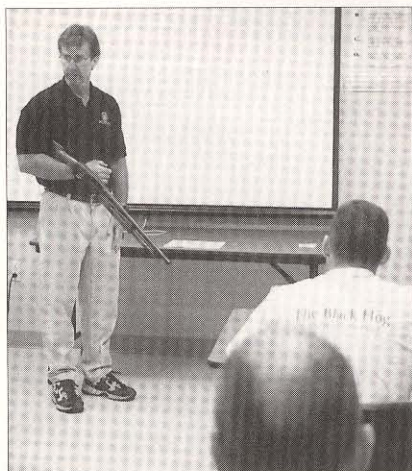
Day Two: Day Two convened at 8:30 a.m. with Brent at the helm. Liability in all its forms was the subject matter. Unless you're a member of law enforcement or the legal profession, you're probably not aware of just how critical proper police training is—especially in regard to use of deadly force issues. Liability generally travels upstream, and more people (read: lawyers) are following it all the way to the source when lawsuits are filed. This fact makes it in the administrator's best interest to ensure that proper training is provided to the front-line officers. Brent



This 00 buckshot pattern was produced at 20 yards by an S&W Model 3000 pump set up with an 18-inch Vang Comp Systems modified barrel.

addressed this issue from a realistic perspective, having been personally involved in several deadly force situations as an on-duty trooper. The discussion took us up until noontime and chow.

After lunch we headed back to the indoor range facility and broke out the shotguns. Several of the students had brought their own guns in order to train with them. The Academy also provided a number of different models in various configurations for use. We again began by performing dry-fire exercises. Once everyone was comfortable with the techniques, we then loaded up and went "hot." In addition to repeating the previous day's drills, we experimented with the individual guns and different types of ammunition to observe the patterning that the combinations produced. While going through these exercises, the general rule of thumb for 00 buckshot patterns—that the pattern will spread approximately one inch for every yard of travel—held true. For police combat applications, this generally limits the effectiveness of the 00 buckshot round to approximately 18 yards. Notable exceptions to this rule were observed however, when using shotguns that had been modified by Vang Comp Systems (VCS). This patented process to modify shotgun barrels improves accuracy, reduces felt recoil, and reduces muzzle rise to a significant degree. The reduction in the spread of the 00 buckshot rounds was impressive to say the least, with patterns averaging less than 15 inches at 25 yards! I would highly recommend inquiries to the folks at VCS if this type



Day One: Smith & Wesson Academy cadre member Brent Purucker demonstrating in the classroom.

of performance is important to you (Vang Comp Systems, Dept. GA, 234 Orange Ave., Goleta, CA 93117, (805) 964-7956, www.vangcomp.com).

Stoppage clearing drills were also discussed during this block. The primary drill stressed did not involve clearing the shotgun, however. As this was a class geared to the combat/tactical use of the shotgun, the emphasis was on making a transition to the handgun should the shotgun fail for any reason. Sometimes referred to as a "New York Reload," this type of drill is crucial and must be practiced enough to make it a conditioned response.

Day Three: Another 8:30 a.m. start. We began by reviewing the student performance objectives we had covered to this point. Then we moved on to instructor development issues. Any good instructor certification program must address the issues of lesson plans and instructor development. To put it bluntly, if these issues are not addressed, then the instructor certification more than likely won't hold up under close scrutiny in a court of law, jeopardizing not only the credibility of the instructor, but that of the agency as well. Brent covered these subjects thoroughly during the morning block.

In regard to lesson plans, Brent stated that not only must the program be well documented, but also that "the training itself must be based on how the weapon is actually used in the field." Case law was then cited that supported both of these opinions.

After lunch the class convened again at the indoor range under the direction of both Brent and Jens. For the rest of the day we worked out with the guns practicing multiple shot techniques, pivots and turns, and shooting while on the move. All of the drills were well structured and carried out safely. The class was completed well after 5 p.m. Since we were all there to learn as much as possible, no one complained.

Day Four: We arrived earlier than usual and met outside the Academy in the parking lot. This had been arranged the day before, as we were to caravan to an off-site, outdoor range for the morning segment. Jens was the primary instructor for this block. Focused and disciplined as always, his march-or-die attitude kept us moving along smoothly. Drills practiced included firing from the low and high ready positions, underarm assault technique and multiple target engagement. We also fired the proficiency examination course during

the morning, which required each of us to score at least 80 percent of all hits within a designated area on the silhouette shaped target. This course was conducted at ranges from 5 to 15 yards using nine rounds of 00 Buck and one slug round, so fire had to be accurate. The entire pattern, (not including flyers more than 2 inches from the main pattern body), had to be on the target in order to obtain a score for that shot. If too many pellets were outside the designated target area, the student would fail the course. When the smoke cleared, everyone had enough holes in the target to pass.

We completed the outdoor range segment with a "Flying M" drill. The "Flying M" saw the entire class competing against one another in two-man shoot-offs. The objective was to engage and solidly hit three different

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targets with two rounds each and then emergency load with a single slug and fire and hit a balloon stapled to a fourth target. The students stood on line approximately 15 feet apart. Each student had three targets in front of him, the fourth target being centered between the other three. Whoever got two solid hits into each of his own three targets first would then engage the center target. When the balloon was hit, the heat was over. As always, smoothness in working the gun resulted in speed, and the smoothest operators consistently won.

After a late lunch we returned to the Academy and the classroom. We reviewed a tape of ammunition penetration tests and then had a class on weapon maintenance. Some of the points Jens made during this class included a warning against using carburetor-type cleaners on firearms as all of the oil is flushed from the pores of the metal when this is done. This can result in parts becoming brittle and failing if they are not properly relubricated. Jens also cautioned against over-tightening extended magazine tubes, not wearing eye protection while cleaning weapons, and failing to inspect for bent, broken or missing parts when servicing the weapon. After cleaning and performing function checks on the guns, the class was dismissed.

Day Five: Final day of the program. Jens passed out the written test and then waited patiently as we completed them. Testing is done by the numbers at the Academy, with no open books, help or "lifelines" from fellow students or the instructors. After the tests were corrected and passed in, Jens administered another classroom segment, this one dealing with reduced light operations and considerations. Tactical flashlight techniques, the use of lasers and muzzle-mounted lights were addressed during this class. We then went back to the indoor range and performed some reduced light shooting drills. These included engaging targets with flashlight-mounted weapons, while a partner was illuminating the target, and close-in using only available ambient light. Once these exercises were completed, we cleaned the

weapons and secured our gear. We then returned to the classroom where we filled out critique forms and were issued our certificates. Unlike in days gone past when instructor certifications were deemed good for ever, the instructor certificates that we received had expiration dates on them that indicated they were valid only for three years from the date of issue. This practice is fairly common in the industry today and is, I believe, a good idea. For even though the cynical among us may believe that this is done simply to insure future business for the entities issuing the certificates, the fact is that the acquisition of knowledge and skills is a continuing process. Liability considerations also make it necessary for instructors to constantly be updating their training programs and their resumes, so both they and the training they provide will stand up under examination.

Again, this is especially critical in today's litigious society and may spell the difference between a jury finding that a police department has met the huge responsibility of providing the best training it can for its members or that it has failed to meet that responsibility and has acted negligently.

In summary, I found the S&W Academy Shotgun Instructor Course to be a good program, well rounded, well grounded and highly recommended.

The Smith & Wesson Academy Shotgun Instructor Course is five days/32 hours. Tuition: \$675. Write to Smith & Wesson Academy, Dept. GA, 299 Page Blvd., Springfield, MA 01104 or call (413) 846-6462. Fax: (413) 736-0776.