

INSTRUCTORS AND QUALIFICATIONS

I read a great deal about Instructor Ratings, Tier Instructors and so on. I thought I would simplify and clarify a few points.

Before I start, I would like to state that I have learned something from almost every instructor I have trained under. As a current instructor I continue to learn from other instructors, students and mistakes that I make. I always believe in learning, no matter the source. I may ruffle some feathers with my writings, but it is what it is....

Tier Instructors-Military

I spent 20 years in the military and 10 in special operations. I spent a total of six-years as an instructor, two at the end of my special ops career and four in the Army as an ROTC instructor. Currently I have been teaching in the civilian sector for 12 years.

There is a ladder or “food chain” in the military as far as tactical units go. Each branch has their own ladder or food chain while Special Operations has theirs. Some say it is determined by funding. No, it is determined by operational capability. In those operational units, they have dedicated instructor assignments that are filled in various ways. Some require a successful tactical tour for several years so new students see an instructor fresh from the fight and who they can have confidence in.

Further, the military and spec ops contracts civilian instructors, LE instructors, former military instructors to teach them just as law enforcement agencies and their tactical teams do. During my time in special ops, I probably trained under at least ten instructors or schools to include “in-house” instructors.

Civilian Instructors

Civilian instructors range from NRA certified to Law Enforcement (traditional and SWAT) to competitive Masters and Grand Master instructors. All have their specialty and place. First, one must understand that shooting is a “technical skill.” Civilian instructors are generally brought in to teach a technical aspect and not a tactical.

When in special ops, I probably learned 10-20% from each “World Class” Shooting Instructor class I attended. It was not that I did not pay attention; it is that only certain things they taught applied to my training and missions. The skills they taught had to work when I wore gloves, when I wore light gear, tactical gear, jungle gear, etc. It had to work daytime, nighttime white light and then under NVGs. If the technique or drill did not work in all the areas, I preferred not use it. I needed to keep my tool box simple. Also regards to tactics and gear, he cannot teach me what he has never done or worn.

Discrimination is another key factor in shooting. If the ready position did not allow me to discriminate, it was useless. We must see before we can shoot. Holsters were another factor. We had to be able to use concealed holsters, tactical holsters and sometimes chest mounted holsters. All the fundamentals had to be the same.

The shooting drills they taught had to prepare you for combat and not the weekend match. This means I have to solve one problem at a time, discriminate and do it again and again. Most speed drills do not support this thought process. Problems we ran into over the years were that we taught people to shoot faster than they could discriminate and see. This caused many problems with fratricide and friendly fire. You see speed shooters don't have to discriminate; they may only look for a "brown" target where I have to look at whole person and find both hands and then waist line. In the end, the faster I can see and interpret data, the faster I can service threats. I cannot walk through the stage of a match and "war game" it before I shoot it. I can plan targets, but in my day, I never had a floor plan of any target I hit.

Organizational Subject Matter Experts

One of the problems I see with organizations is when they place weekend shooters or competitors in charge of shooting and equipment programs. Many times these internal trainers will bring in instructors that will help them personally shoot better for weekend matches and competitions vs. building a solid tactical program for their organization. Also, they will order the latest gadget for shooting instead of keeping it simple. In my day, after Somalia, we had an equipment meeting and wanted larger caliber rifles, enclosed firing pin pistols to address operational problems. Other folks wanted "square" triggers on their 1911's so they could get a supposed consistent trigger pull. They were still in the weekend shooting game thought process and not what was practical or needed for combat. We did not want 1911's because of the exposed firing pin issue and the fact that you had to strip the gun all the way down after getting dusted with one helicopter infil.

Competitive Shooting vs. Combat Training Instructors

If I want to learn combat techniques, I would go to an instructor that had a police or combat background who had shot people.

If I want to learn how to shoot fast and compete, I would go to competitive shooters who win matches.

Both trainers will get you to a certain level of proficiency. One will take you on a course that will save your life. The other will take you on a course that will help you win a match. One has combat mindset, one had match mindset. They are two different animals.

Matches will help you control stress, channelize anxiety and nervous energy, so will combat operations. I have shot in both, both are different stresses. Combat will help you control your fear. This fear cannot be replicated in a match.

Equipment is different for both of the above instructors. One uses downloaded ammo and special guns. The other may wear gloves, vests, helmets or patrol belts and level II/III holsters. I need to learn one stance that will work for tactical gear, patrol gear, civilian, etc. This equipment has to be able to work in jungle, arctic and desert environments along with urban settings.

If an IPSC or IDPA national champion cannot show me one stance that will work with a jungle rig, urban rig or low vis uniform, the information is not very useful to me. If he cannot tell me how gloves will affect my shooting or how to best draw from or wear a tactical holster, I am not getting what I need. If he cannot tell me how to best fit my vest, my mag pouches, my aid kit, breaching tools, I am only getting part of the solutions I need. This is where a tactical instructor can fill the void.

I shot IPSC for a couple of years and it helped with my draw, presentation, multiple shots and multiple targets. It did not help me with use of cover, tactical movement, tactical thinking, discrimination, etc. In the end, I moved to tactical training only. My simple shooting systems needed to encompass all these aspect and not just one narrow bandwidth of shooting a pistol. I cannot promote speed over safety or proper discrimination or proper use of cover.

Problem solving is different for competition and combat. Matches are geared to shoot as fast as you can with minimal use of cover. Combat shooting should teach maximum use of cover and solving one problem at a time.

Selecting a Combat Instructor

I have watched many an instructor come from the special ops community that was an exceptional shooter and individual service member. Some could teach, some could not. Some could entertain and that kept students happy, some had no personality and drove students away. The ones that are successful had stair-stepped programs that were structured and defined. They are in the business for the long haul and not a quick buck. They have a passion for their profession and focus on the basics and not just the fad of the week. Find out which ones stress safety and discrimination in your quest.

As for styles and different teaching methodologies and tactics, all will vary a bit and I think that is great. If you learn Kung Fu, or Tae Kwon Do or Karate and the system helps you stay alive on the street, it is a good system. If you do minor tweaks from the dojo to the street to enhance the system, this is also good.

In the end, most combat instructors did their job as a chosen profession which means that they dedicated their life to their profession. They did not get a reserve job on a police department so they could pad their resume to teach.

Further, next time you are at a match, conduct a poll as to how many combat vets, LE or Mil shoot matches. What I mean by combat vets is those who have actually pulled the trigger on another human being. Once you have taken a life, you might realize that IPSC or IPDA is a train that you might not want to ride for one reason or another.

Finally, use IDPA and IPSC as a training vehicle to make you a more technically proficient shooter. But know the difference between tactical and technical.

Conclusion:

If you wanted to be a fighter pilot, go to war, shoot down other planes and blow up ground targets, I would look at two ways to get there.

I could go to a school with pilots who may have trained for combat but were never actually there and put gun cameras and lasers on modified planes and worked in controlled air space and ran drills and scenarios they thought applied to combat.

Or I could go to a school ran by pilots who had shot down other planes, blown up ground targets and geared your training to do just that.

In the end, which one would you choose if your life was on the line?

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