

SHOTGUN BREACHING: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Shotgun breaching is creeping ever so steadily into the tactical officers breaching toolbox. Nightly newscasts from Iraq show soldiers employing this technique overseas to gain access to denied areas. Is it a safe and viable technique for tactical officers in the United States? I believe it is and I will state my case in this article.

Currently I instruct both Shotgun breaching and Shotgun breaching instructor classes throughout our nation. I began using the shotgun as a breaching tool in the late 1980's while assigned to Special Operations. There I breached as many as seven doors on a single hit and used it to destroy or disable equipment that was too heavy or cumbersome to carry out. I used the shotgun both as a team breacher and as a Team Leader without inducing any injuries to innocents or friendly personnel. With that said, I have seen a few problems arise from the improper employment of the shotgun.

SAFETY:

- Carry
- Employment
- Over penetration
- Inducing gun fire on a target

Carry

Many movies of our era show the hero with a shotgun in a holster mounted on his back. This is an unsafe technique that usually requires two individuals to re-secure the weapon once it has been drawn and employed. I personally do not like the thought of trying to "fish" for a holster on my back with a loaded weapon, especially one that makes such a large hole on entry.

I prefer carrying the shotgun as a dedicated weapon or in a short-barrel pistol grip configuration on the front in a holster. With the use of the holster, shotgun can be draw and employed with ease and can be re-holstered while in total control of the weapon system and absolute muzzle awareness.

Employment

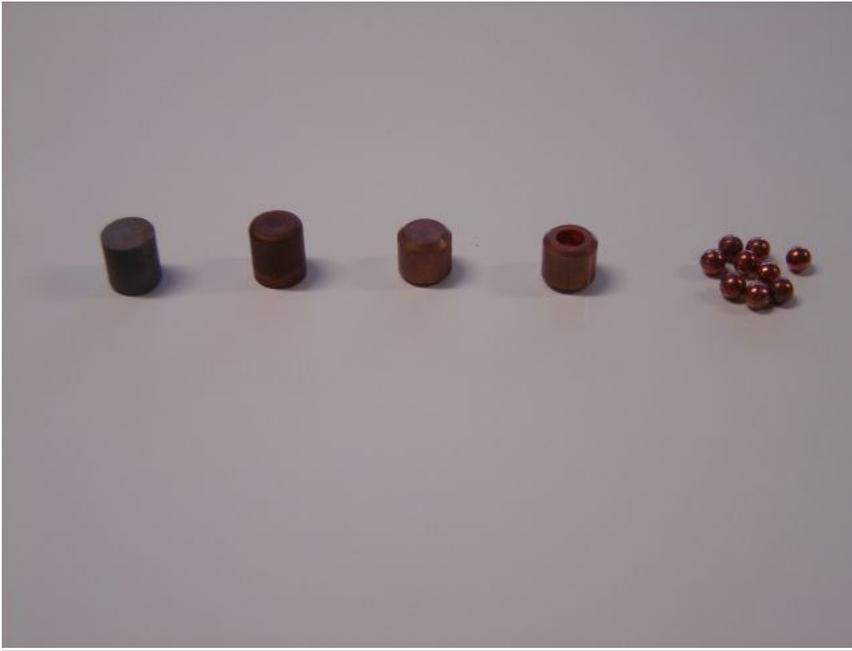
The shotgun must be kept on safe when not in use. A military member with a shotgun mounted under his strong side with an "X" harness found out this less the hard way. He successfully breach a door, charged another round and did not put it on safe. The weapon hung under his arm until he reached the next door. While reaching for the weapon's pistol grip, he found the trigger first and discharged a lock buster round downward into the back of his calf. This is a showstopper by any interpretation.

Over Penetration

Safety must also be addressed when looking at over penetration concerns when employing the breaching shotgun. Over penetration has been virtually eliminated with the use of dedicated lock buster and frangible rounds.

In the “old days,” #00 Buck and #4 Buck were used as a primary shotgun breaching round. Hatton rounds were available, but many soldiers preferred to have one round that would breach a lock and could also be used to engage a threat target. On more than one occasion, I took “frag” off a lock from a shotgun breach with no penetration of the skin. On one such occasion, I took a hit in the leg from less than ten feet from a #00 buck round while covering a link-up point. It stung a bit, but did not draw blood.

Slugs are the most dangerous and tend to ricochet once they pass through the locking mechanism and will skid down concrete floors through several rooms. For this reason, I only recommend frangible slugs for breaching but still prefer frangible buckshot.



All the above rounds are frangible to include the buckshot

Inducing gunfire on a target

As my final safety note, shotgun breaching induces gunfire on a target. First, the entire assault force needs to know that this technique is to be employed. They should have already been exposed to it in training so as not to induce “gunfire hysteria.” Further, members of the perimeter team needs to be briefed that shotgun breaching is to be used. The last thing the assault force needs is perimeter folks rotating selector switches and safety because they feel they are being shot at.

SHOTGUN BREACHING MECHANICS

- Tactical Employment
- Breaching Shotgun Set-up
- Wood vs. Metal Doors
- Back-up breaching tools

Tactical Employment

Shotgun breaching should have an established place in the team’s breaching sequence. For example, check the knob with your hand, shotgun breach and then mechanical breach should the shotgun breach fail. I teach students to check the knob first prior to employing the shotgun. Once they feel the door is locked, they should employ two rounds against the primary bolt, safe the weapon, check the knob and then employ two more rounds if they find the door is still locked. If after four rounds, the door does not open, another breacher must be ready with manual tools to attack the door. This must be a rehearsed action and must happen rapidly.

Breaching Shotgun Set-up

Having experimented with various breaching configurations, I prefer a short shotgun with a pistol grip and tactical light. The pistol grip makes the weapon easy to employ and when using the Remington 870 weapon system. In addition, the safety is easy to disengage with the trigger finger or employ with a flick of the wrist and the firing thumb.

For illumination and discrimination purposes, I top the breaching shotgun with a tactical light. The light allows me to illuminate the door knob without the aid of another assaulter and should I need to use the weapon in a defensive role, I can illuminate and discriminate my target.



Wood vs. Metal Doors

I also instruct students to attach the locking bolts with two different angles, one for wood door and one for metal doors. For wood doors, I prefer to dump as much of the energy into the frame as possible. This is an added safety factor for those inside the room.

When breaching metal doors, I teach students to fire straight on and down through the door. Metal doors and frames have the tendency to expand and twist metal together, especially with metal frames. This sometimes had caused the door to become stuck with the frame. Using the straight on technique, the metal from the door and the frame is less likely to intermix.





Back up Breaching Tools

No breaching technique is 100 percent reliable. The same goes for shotgun breaching. I have found a 90% success rate to be on average when shotgun breaching is employed correctly. This is why I stress the importance of having breaching tools ready when shotgun breaching is employed.

SUMMARY:

In my experience, when performed correctly, shotgun breaching is a safe, reliable and efficient tool in the breaching arsenal. While I do not promote any one brand of ammunition for shotgun breaching, there are several exceptional products out there that will get the job done in a safe manner.

Finally I would say do not take my word for it. Buy some shotgun breaching rounds and under supervision, shotgun breach real doors on a real building. Find one that is due for destruction and shoot as many different types of doors as possible and record the results for yourself. Also, put up witness boards to determine how much secondary debris is coming off the locking mechanisms.

Doing this will build your faith in the system and the rounds that you are using. Also, don't forget to have your manual breaching tools ready.

BIO:

Paul R. Howe is a 20 year veteran and former Special Operations soldier and instructor. Paul currently owns Combat Shooting and Tactics (CSAT) where he consults with, trains and evaluates law enforcement and government agencies in technical and tactical techniques throughout the special operations spectrum. See www.combatshootingandtactics.com for details.