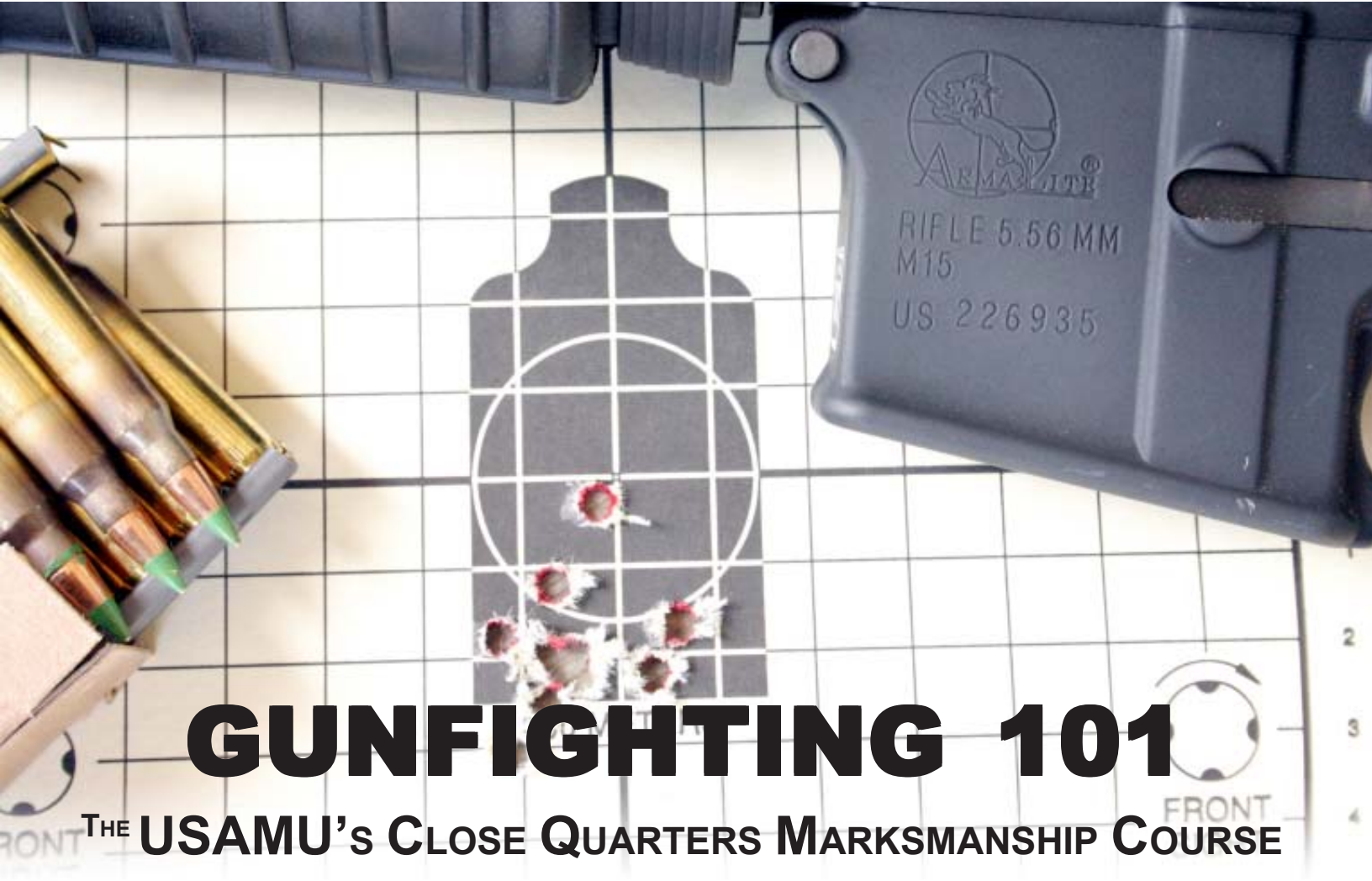

GUNFIGHTING 101

The USAMU's Close Quarters Marksmanship Course

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The U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit (USAMU) at Fort Benning, Ga., is changing the way we think about close quarters marksmanship (CQM) with a course that I've described as "Gunfighting 101."

The Close Quarters Marksmanship Course is a "train-the-trainer" course, and is the Army's **High Performance Shooting** school. Here, they don't teach you to shoot a gun, they teach you to *drive* a gun! The focus is on marksmanship. No tactics are covered, as they feel this is better reserved for the Infantry School.

Some of the topics covered in the course include basic shooting positions; engaging targets after 90-degree and 180-degree turns; recoil management; rapid and accurate follow-up shots; engaging multiple targets at varying ranges; transitioning from rifle to pistol; and dealing with malfunctions.

The goal of this course is to help Soldiers "put steel on target" faster than the enemy can. It's action shooting at its best! If you've been keeping up with the Warrior Tasks/Battle Drills on the Commander's Training Tool, this training feeds directly into the "shoot" and "urban" tasks.

About the Tools in My Toolbox

You may notice that in the accompanying photos there were all kinds of shooters and all kinds of weapons used during the course. While at the range, I scanned the range racks where other shooters stored their rifles; I saw Colt, FN, Noveske, and Bushmaster in one rack. Mine was an ArmaLite. This rifle has a tactical chamber and tactical trigger, and I was eager to try both aspects of the gun under some punishing conditions.

Each shooter is likely to run more than 1,500 rounds through his weapon by the end of the course, and the weapons can endure some pretty austere conditions, with high heat and sand being the prevailing environment at Fort Benning in August when I attended.

Shooters can also try out different gear to see what works and what doesn't. I like the large "Tac Latch" on the charging handle. A fellow Soldier at Benning commented that to him it feels like it is a big coat hanger, snagging everything on his gear. I move my MOLLE gear to the side so I can get low in the prone, so the Tac Latch works for me. The large latch helps me with *"weak hand press check."* If you don't know what that is, you need this course!

We arrived at 0700 and entered the USAMU classroom where we met our lead instructors and support staff. The instructors are "President's Hundred" and know the science of putting rounds on target. The first hour or so began with instruction covering the fundamentals of shooting (much needed for some) and safety (always needed by all).

This is a "big boy's course" meaning there's no rodding on and off the range. Each shooter is expected to bring a high degree of competency with his assigned weapon and to be safety conscious. I have to stop here and say just how nice that is. I enlisted more than 20 years ago, and I cut my teeth on "no brass, no ammo drill sergeant!" — and being rodded on and off the range. In those days, sometimes we felt like robots. At the USAMU's school, you

have to think on your feet and be your own critic. The "Rules of Firearms Handling" have been around a while — sometimes I hear them referred to as COL Jeff Cooper's Rules. No matter who came up with them, the staff here live by them since the range is run as a "hot range" where students are locked/loaded/safe most of the time. Here are the rules:

1. All guns are always loaded!

2. Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy!

3. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target!

4. Always be sure of your target, and what is behind it!

After the briefings, all shooters drew weapons from the USAMU arms room and then got on the bus to go to the range. We began with a range in-brief. The students consisted of Regular Army, National Guard and Reserves, as well as multinational Special Forces personnel from allied nations and other personnel. My CQM class was not full — there were unfilled seats which are available to Soldiers/Sailors/Marines in leadership positions, E-5 and above. An important note: this course is designed to be a "train-the-trainer" course. After you come here as a student, you are expected to be able to return to your home unit and relay what you learned. You've probably heard of viral marketing. The USAMU's Close Quarters Marksmanship Course is **viral training**! Send your leaders here — and when they return to your unit, the knowledge they've gained spreads like a virus.

Training Priorities

So who gets to go to this course? If you are in a leadership position and you have to ask that question, then you don't get it... Everyone needs Gunfighting 101. Outside the forward operating base, everyone is a trigger puller.

While students should be either E-5 or above OR in a leadership position, you'll see quite a few E-7s, junior officers, and some field grade officers and command sergeants major (CSMs). Remember, when the shooting starts, lieutenant colonels and CSMs don't hunker down in the back of a HMMWV and wait for the shooting to stop ... they are expected to engage with their primary or secondary weapon and win the gunfight.

The CQM Course is not some specialty school that the sergeant major can hand out as a reward for being Soldier of the year. CQM training is not "specialty" training, and therefore must have the widest dissemination possible. Here is where resources normally come up ... How much does it cost? Would [fill in the blank] have been better served if we had sent [insert your rank here] to the course instead of "higher ups?" I was accompanied by three CSMs, and two master sergeants from my unit to the course, all of whom (including myself) are in a primary training role and have the ability to facilitate training in other units. Leaders won't support training if they don't understand it. There must be a "buy in" by middle management or the folks who sign the school orders/ travel vouchers.

For those that have to look at costs and resources — you have to ask, how much does your life cost? This is one week that may make the difference in getting Mr. and Mrs. Jones' son back alive. How much is *that* worth? If I were speaking with the folks who controlled the money, I'd say think of it this way — you know that new piece of Rapid Fielding Initiative Equipment (RFI) we may/may not get/squabble over? Keep it. Instead, send all Soldiers E-5 and above to the CQM Course to learn how to survive a gunfight. The most dangerous weapon an American Soldier has is his mind.

This course teaches you how to teach someone how to drive a gun ... like a Formula 1 race car! You'll hear over and over, "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast, fast is deadly..."

A few words about "kit" — what we used to call gear or equipment. For the course, each shooter has quite a bit of leeway to set up his placement of magazines, water, and mission essential gear. Most of the troops in my class were either about to deploy or were going to be direct trainers for those that are deploying. Today, there is considerable freedom to choose your kit and set it up the way it works for you. I saw a lot of different pieces of gear being tried out, and tactical training is an abusive environment to see if it will break, tear, fail, or just not work. It's better that it breaks in training than while deployed. But it hasn't always been that way...

When I first enlisted, the rule was "Dress Right Dress;" meaning everyone had to look the same, as if we were all going to march in a parade at any given moment. Now, the general rule is shooter's preference. The only exceptions are that medical gear and mission-essential equipment should be carried according to the unit's SOP.

The CQM Course is a five-day class, with each day building on the skills learned the day before. Non-military types may say this looks similar to some high-speed civilian courses that have been taught for years. For "Big Army" this concept of bringing gunfight survival training to the troops is new. This is the first time we have succeeded in bringing modern-day gunfighting

Author's photos

The author and his team practice "Ready, UP!" drills during the CQM course.

marksmanship to regular troops.

Shooters are invited to bring their own assigned rifles and pistols with them, but the school issues weapons to those who do not. Magazines for both pistol and rifle are always in short supply, so students should bring a basic load of rifle and pistol magazines. They also have a limited amount of holsters and tactical slings for students to try out. This is not the place to have magazine-induced malfunctions, so bring quality gear!

Students practice engaging targets after completing 180-degree turns.

Having a Rifle in Your Hands Doesn't Mean You Can Operate It

We too often make the assumption that if you give a Soldier a Basic Combat Training education — and a rifle — he can accomplish any combat mission. The part of the equation we miss is that no Soldier was born to be a shooter the same way that no Soldier was born to be a paper-pusher. We make ourselves into one or the other. This is why everyone needs immersion training on modern-day gunfighting. So few of us can naturally shoot well without this kind of training, and even fewer of us can teach what we know. I've said before and still believe that shooting is a science not an art. And science can be taught. Revamping your unit's gunfighting ability should start with this train-the-trainer course.

We've known for years that it's counter-intuitive to engage the vital zone of a human being with a rifle. LTC Dave Grossman explains in his book *On Killing*, that when the critical instant comes to fire, most men hesitate. An example cited is that Civil War muskets have been recovered having over a dozen projectiles recklessly stuffed down the barrel. This course helps make engaging the enemy intuitive.

Our challenge now is that we labor under an artifact of the "precision aimed fire" doctrine emphasized in the late 19th century. Tough realistic training for combat shooting needs to be rapid semiautomatic fire or automatic (burst) fire within 25 meters.

Somewhere, in the name of expediency, the Army traded real marksmanship for a pop-up range where we are defensively reacting to pop-up enemies that have a vital zone 20 inches wide and 40 inches high. An enemy pops up, you shoot, it falls ... you wait. An enemy pops up, you shoot again … and the target falls.

How in the world did we get here? Our defensive ranges were created for the ease of construction and management, and the safety of the range officer's career. A close quarters shooting range is tougher to run but much more productive and realistic. It also better meets the needs of a modern force.

We need shooters that seek out targets… shooters that effectively engage targets in a realistic vital zone, then move by covered/concealed routes to dominant terrain, then reload, engage again ... and repeat. The "defensive range" was always out of place in modern combat training; it's just that we now can see how it has left us unprepared. A defensive strategy has never been fully adequate; according to Sun Tzu, "You can prevent your opponent from defeating you through defense, but you cannot defeat him without taking the offensive."

Some Fundamental Lessons Learned

1. **About reloading** — always reload "in the pocket." The pocket is the area that fills up an imaginary beach ball held under your chin. Empties should drop free and clear. (if they don't drop free from the weapon, remove that magazine from circulation — there's a special tool on the heel of your boot that works fairly well at removing defective aluminum magazines from circulation ...)

Never take your strong hand off the pistol grip. Your non-firing hand (left hand for most shooters) should pull a fresh magazine out of your load carrying gear *from your weak side*. Look at the magazine well while inserting the magazine, then eyes back on target. After the engagement when you are reloading/cross-leveling, all other magazines stored in other locations are topped off, and rotated over to your weak-side pouches so that your weak hand always has access to a full magazine for a quick reload. Magazines should be stored so that they don't have to be turned or flipped to be inserted into the weapon.

2. **Types of reloads** … There are two general kinds of reloads — those you *want* to do and those you *have* to do. These can be broken down into administrative reloads, tactical reloads, and combat reloads. Administrative is what it sounds like; tactical is one round prior to bolt lock; and combat is after the magazine runs dry and the bold locks to the rear.

3. **Weapon Presentation** must be fluid, accomplished from any position or angle, and must be aggressive and still provide maximum control of the weapon and shots. When engaging multiple targets, DRIVE the gun from target to target ... most shooters "float" the gun up or over, costing time. Also discussed were "bowling" and "fishing." Bowling is bringing the gun up to the target like bowling a ball, and fishing is when the shooter brings the gun from a higher position down to the target as in casting a fishing line.

4. **Why a controlled pair?** *Because anything worth shooting … is worth shooting TWICE!* The "double tap" (also called "the hammer") may have its place, but in most engagements at the ranges we are seeing (more than 7 yards), double taps end up costing accuracy. Instead, place a controlled pair of rounds into the vital zone of the target. Both are aimed shots. (*A brief word about aiming:* An important part of this training is that you aim every shot. The techniques, which are easier shown than written about, encourage rapid aiming

naturally… not target-shooting aiming, but no shots fired without eyes behind the sights. There is an intriguing body of analysis and research on rapid semiautomatic fire that is deserving of discussion in a later article.)

The recoil control techniques they teach at the USAMU's Close Quarters Marksmanship Course enable the second shot to be rock solid; so if you chose to hammer two rounds instead, you could.

5. If you're not shooting, you're moving to cover. If you're not moving, you're reloading. When moving the body three steps or less, keep the weapon mounted; if it's more than three steps, break weak hand hold and run to cover or dominant terrain.

6. **The "Groucho Walk."** Have you ever seen Groucho Marx walk? If so, you need no further explanation of the Groucho Walk. This is moving while keeping a stable shooting platform, nothing more. Shooters visualize holding a full cup of water out in front while walking down range. The picture at right shows my "Groucho Walk."

7. **The "sympathetic finger."** If you curl your weak-hand index finger as in picking up a heavy object, your trigger finger might struggle to do the same thing! Couple this with a failure to keep your trigger finger off the trigger, and this might result in negligent discharge incidents that could have been prevented. An additional benefit of keeping the non-firing hand index finger pointed is it aids in driving the gun to the target.

8. **Gross motor skills**. While certain actions require fine motor skills, such as *smoothing* the trigger and ejecting the magazine, you should train with as many gross motor skills as you can in all of your drills. For example, when pressing the bolt release lever, use (for example) the heel of your palm, not your finger or thumb; the rationale is in a firefight you lose fine motor skills and resort to gross motor skills.

9. **The weak hand/strong hand**. Your shooting or "strong hand" always stays on the pistol grip, weapon on safe, finger off the trigger unless you have a sight picture. The weak hand, which is normally the left hand, inserts the magazine into the rifle; then that same weak hand drops the bolt and then retracts the charging handle slightly to reveal the presence of a live round in the chamber. This is called a **Pres. Check.** (Checking for the "presence" of a round in the chamber.) The weak hand reaches over the top of the gun, slaps the forward assist, closes dust cover and the weapon goes on safe. It takes practice to use your non-firing hand for all of this! *(The risk with the Pres. Check is that too much force ejects a round, and failing to tap forward assist may leave the weapon out of battery.)*

10. **Slow is smooth ... smooth is fast ... fast is deadly**. The USAMU's focus is not the number of hits or the number of rounds fired downrange per minute, but the number of rapid semiautomatic hits per minute. This is not a measure of accuracy alone, or speed alone, but represents a point in the curve where the two overlap.

Here's what I mean ... On "ready up" drills with six-shot strings, those students who delivered a high rate of fire that produced excessive "misses" were told to slow down. Those students that simply took too long but had nice tight groups were told to speed up. The key is to coach students to find their prime rate of semiautomatic fire that maximizes the number of hits per minute.

So what we're not doing is taking your time to make every shot count, which is a remnant of the days of heavy-recoiling or even single shot rifles; rather, you are using a rate of fire that maximizes hits and minimizes overall time. Most shooters at the course erred on the side of shooting too fast and missing the vital zone. As a consequence, most were told to slow down and find that "sweet spot" of hits per minute.

The author demonstrates the Groucho Walk.

11. Slings and holsters. Effective use of the sling is as important as trigger control and cheek-to-stock weld. The most effective sling for weapon stability while also allowing transitions to the pistol was clearly the two-point sling. There are many commercial offerings, including the two most popular among shooters at the course — "Vickers" by Blue Force Gear or V Tac. (No one carried the single point slings, which are great for standing around guarding something, but not very effective for stable shooting platforms or transitions to pistol.) I'm not particularly partial to the V Tac brand, so I made my own from tubular nylon and the slip link from a ruck sack shoulder strap. The name brand slings are around $30 up to $45, so a lot of our guys are making their own, for just a few bucks in parts and materials, and using old rucksack shoulder strap slip-links. If I had to buy one, I probably would have gone with a two-point Vickers based on what I saw.

I had a chance to try out the Vickers "Blue Force" brand — the material is more substantial, doesn't wrinkle/crinkle/deform under high heat and sweat. The Vickers also seemed to adjust quicker once I got the hang of it.

The prevailing holsters were the Serpa and the Safariland. Whatever brand you choose, the type of holster that failed was the soft-sided holster that proved unable to hold the weapon in the

same place. The best holsters had a hard curved drop leg panel that held the weapon in the same place for a consistent draw time after time.

12. Malfunctions. The instruction covered malfunctions drills, clearing all types of malfunctions and getting back into the fight. My problem is that I didn't have any malfunctions … My ArmaLite was new and just didn't give me the opportunity to practice any remedial actions. In all the events, the students' time does not stop — students are expected to react to the malfunction appropriately and bring the gun back into battery quickly.

13. The close quarters pyramid. Perhaps the most important intangible a student will take away from the USAMU's CQM Course is the close quarters pyramid. It has three cornerstones: mind-set, gun handling, and marksmanship.

A. **Operational mind-set** — this is the real key, since without it, all you have is a gun and some rounds. Plan your shoot and shoot your plan. This is where the concept of "shooter immersion" comes into play. On the final day of the course, shooters are given a live-fire shooting scenario where they have to think about each move, plan their shooting, moving and reloading, and execute that plan with time pressure.

B. **Gun handling** — This is the ability to employ the gun, present it, transition from it, reduce the possibility of malfunctions and correct those malfunctions that occur, and to direct your immediate environment, all while operating safely.

C. **Marksmanship** — Essentially, this is the ability to place rounds in the vital zone faster than your opponent can. The key is mastering rapid semiautomatic fire.

How the Course Is Organized

Day one is mostly "static" shooting, getting acclimated to shooting while standing, using a sling, and there is a lot of correction by the staff regarding correct posture, weapon presentation, and handling.

Basic shooting positions. The instructors showed a shooting stance that allows the shooter rapid follow-up shots, providing incredible recoil management, with the feet shoulder width or wider, one a little farther back, leaning into the gun, with the non-firing hand far forward on the rifle.

We also practiced doing a 180-degree turn and then engaging with a controlled pair.

Day two covers shooting while moving. Much of what you will see is "Groucho walking" or shooting on the move.

The "changing gears" drill requires the shooter to engage with a controlled pair at 50 meters, 20 meters, then 30 meters. Students then move downrange to see who shot the best groups.

Day three deals with shooting behind cover. Instructors teach students how to lean forward, which helps absorb recoil and allows the shooter to deliver controlled pairs to the vital zone.

Day four covers pistol presentation and transitions from primary to secondary weapon, in our case the Beretta M-9. We also covered "fishing" and "bowling."

Students practiced rapid reloading and worked on recoil management, a necessary skill for controlled pairs.

Part of this day's training included a steel plate match, a competition to the last man standing.

Day five is the Steel Challenge! The course culminates with shooting tactical scenarios on a very engaging course. Students are given limited ammunition, must use a given number of magazines, engage reactive targets from behind cover, and move from cover to cover.

Also covered on Day 5 is combat shotgun operations for those troops who have the shotgun as their primary or secondary weapon.

The facility and the personnel who run this school are able to support high intensity, realistic training that is on the cutting edge of what intense immersion training is to firearms. The only fault I found in the course is that it needs to run week to week all year long.

Supporting close quarters marksmanship training at the USAMU should be a top priority for the Army and will go hand-in-hand with the tactics taught by the Infantry School.

"Of every 100 men, 10 shouldn't even be there, 80 are nothing but targets, nine are real fighters... We are lucky to have them... They make the battle. Ah, but the One, One of them is a Warrior... and He will bring the others back."

— Heraclitus
Greek philosopher

How to Attend the CQM Course

For more information on the USAMU's Close Quarters Marksmanship Course, visit www.usaac.army.mil/amu and click on "Schedule Training." SFC Michael Buss, USAMU S3 Future Operations Planner, can also be contacted at (706) 545-7174/1410.

All the course materials are available online through AKO. Log into AKO; click on the "Groups" box at the top, type in USAMU in the box and click "Find."

CSM Ralph Dorner fires his weapon from behind the barricade.

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