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THE GUNSITE EXPERIENCE

Anyone interested in training themselves in proper use of firearms for defensive purposes or otherwise owes themselves a trip to Gunsite once in their lives. After spending a week there last February shooting their Defensive Pistol Course #250, I can see it being at least a yearly trip. I have always been interested in firearms of all vintage and their application to hunting. When I was young, I would voraciously read everything I could get my hands on over and over. (They actually had books on guns and hunting in the school libraries then.) Long before I got into law enforcement I was reading General Jeff Cooper's work on defensive use of the handgun and always grabbed opportunity to study his work. Now after a career in law enforcement I was finally attending his famed shooting school he founded in 1977 near Paulden, Arizona. I always did do things backwards.

I arrived at the facility Sunday evening before the class and found the gate open welcoming me into the fully modern and comfortable camp area. Two other students were using the campsite with me and the evenings were serene with some good company. I don't know if it was coincidence or if they actually planned it to make me feel at home, but the evening coyote serenade and the morning chatterings of the desert quail sure put me at ease in the high Sonoran desert. About the third day I couldn't take it anymore so I pulled out my howler (like my pistol, I always have it with me) and gave the coyotes some back lip. That sure got them going. I turned in early with a little anticipation of the week ahead.

Introductions started promptly at 0800. The teaching staff consisted of Charlie McNeese as rangemaster and coaches Lamonte Kintsel, II Ling New, and Steve Hendricks. I found them to possess qualities of patience, humor, and high level of skill

and knowledge in the material, giving them the confidence to be excellent instructors. The first part of the morning was lecture, but we were shooting within a few hours of starting class. You got to love it. The material was covered quickly, but Charlie's style of teaching made the material stick easily. After introduction and range orientation we dove right into the four firearm safety rules. One thing that impressed me is that Gunsite is a hot range. At the end of each shooting session, while on the range, the shooter is given the opportunity to holster his or her handgun as they wish to carry it off of the firing line.

The teachings are based on Jeff Cooper's Modern Technique of the Handgun or Pistolcraft which was distilled from good pistol handling techniques of many shooters such as Thell Reed, Eldon Carl, Jack Weaver, Ray Chapman, and Cooper himself. In using the handgun for personal defense it is proven that speed, power, and accuracy will quickly solve the danger and the Modern Technique combines mindset, gun handling, and marksmanship in achieving this goal of accuracy, power, and speed or DVC (Diligentia, Vis, Celeritas).

Unlike the last training I attended, Gunsite teaches the Weaver Shooting Stance. I have used this stance since I started training in the police academy. I found it to be more versatile with other weapons and movement than the isosceles or "FBI crouch" and more comfortable to maintain for longer periods of time. When lowering the gun to guard to assess dangers it keeps the body naturally centered and balanced. From this position the draw, or presentation, is facilitated in five counts or movements. This was practiced repeatedly as almost all drills started from the holster. Charlie said at the beginning of the class that by the end everybody will be drawing and firing one head shot at 3 yards in 1 ½ seconds and I believe some were a little faster. All the coaches were right there on your butt making sure that a bad habit wasn't repeated excessively. I say that with great respect because they don't want you to take a bad habit into a gunfight with you.

Speaking of habits, Lamonte asked me very early in the training where I was a police officer. I kind of wondered how he knew as I didn't mention it to him, but I guess even after many years it doesn't rub off. Lamonte, being a retired policeman, could tell from my shooting habits how I was trained. Some of what I had been trained to do conflicted with the teaching of Gunsite which is bound to happen at any training facility.

I went into Gunsite, as I do with any training, trying to free myself of prior experience so I can fully absorb the teaching that I am attending. By learning it without prior prejudice I can fully understand it and it can melt into my shooting practice so it becomes useable. I even shot the course with a gun that was unfamiliar to me so I could concentrate on the teaching and not revert back to previous habits. My point is, what ever your skill level, if you go to Gunsite with an empty cup you will be rewarded with a tea of information and training that will add a definite improvement to your shooting ability.

During the days at the course, there was time to visit the other facilities the range offers. Gunsite has a Pro Shop with all the essentials a person needs to enhance their shooting ability. As we all know equipment is as important to performance as just plain “looking good”. Shelli Rasar runs the Pro Shop and is very knowledgeable in the products along with a very pleasant personality. Developing a usable carry holster and magazine pouches that are practical for daily use is important and having the shop there to make adjustments in equipment made it nice to shoot the course with the right stuff and not develop habits with equipment that may be changed later. Each student shot between 1000 and 1200 rounds the week we were there. That’s plenty enough to form a bad habit.

I couldn’t wait to visit the gunsmith facility being a bit of a smith myself. I was greeted by Susan Davidson who introduced me to Corey Trapp the gunsmith. The shop is fully equipped with machines and tool to do any job and Corey keeps busy working rifles, pistols, and shotguns with Gunsite enhancements. The classes also had him hopping because with 19 people shooting 1000 rounds apiece, things are going to happen. There were also other shooters at the range participating in other courses. I really enjoyed our conversation as he was very knowledgeable at his trade.

The teaching at Gunsite builds every day on what was learned the day before. Learning the presentation the first day and starting all new exercises with presentation from the holster gave the repetition necessary to make the draw feel more natural and by the middle of the week students were effortlessly meeting the timed requirements of the drills. Each day other drills were added in such as the quick reload and tactical reload and you had to keep track of the drills and the rounds expended to keep your handgun ready for action. Charlie ran the targets by remote control and when they turned, you

better have a full pistol or you wouldn't have time to put a few on the target before it turned. It really made you aware of the condition of your pistol so you would enter each situation with a full magazine. Occasionally he would run you out of ammo so you had to do a quick load but if you stayed on the ball you could slip in a tactical reload and be ready.

We then went to malfunction drills and practiced them until there was some proficiency starting to develop. All pistols are subject to malfunction. This is not as serious of a problem if you can automatically clear it and continue the task at hand. Even after setting up the pistols to malfunction to practice the drills, there were numerous malfunctions that occurred normally from firing the number of rounds we went through. My Sig worked flawlessly, but started to stovepipe because it got too dirty from shooting so much. A quick cleaning got it back on line. Everyone occasionally had some malfunction but cleared it and kept shooting, which is the whole point of a gunfight.

As the class progressed we went to moving and changing positions. Turning left and right and about face, drawing and firing at targets that were exposed for only seconds. We practiced 3 types of kneeling positions and prone shooting. Prone is normally the most stable shooting platform because the shooter is closest to the ground. The problem is when you are forced into the prone position it is usually to avoid incoming lead and haste to get to the ground doesn't always put you in optimum position to return fire. By practicing drawing into the prone position the shooter can have some training to revert back to and go into prone properly and automatically. We also practiced moving off of the line of attack and returning fire. I can see where this course is prepping the student for more advanced movement techniques in higher level classes.

Other drills included El Presedente, and the failure or Mozambique Drills. The El Presedente was a little different than we practiced on my departments S.W.A.T. team in that the distance was 10 yards instead of 5 but all the other rules applied. Four hits in center mass of each target in 10 seconds was considered proficient. We also altered the drill and instead of putting two, two, and two on each target and coming back after the reload and doing it again, we would do one, one, and two and one each on the way back. This helps train the student to get at least one shot on each target in case there isn't enough time to put two on each. The Mozambique was two to center mass and one to the

head. If two shots to center mass fails to stop the aggression, one to the head is considered plan B to end the danger. We know that bad guys sometimes wear vests and the pistol is at best a minimum man stopper so this is a necessary technique to have in the toolbox.

Thursday night was the no light low light shoot. We used 3 techniques to hold flashlights and shoot. Each helped utilize a different type of flashlight. The Harries which works with both buttons on the rear of the light and on the side near the front of the light. The only difference is which finger you use to push the on/off button. The Rogers technique needs lights with on/off buttons at the end and the Chapman for lights with the button on the side. I have lights of both configurations and it was good to learn different options for both. Some of the students had gun mounted lights also and had opportunity to use them in the drills. The object was to learn the three light techniques so everybody was required to shoot the drills with a detached light. One thing that was interesting was everyone shot tighter groups at night because in the dark they only could see center mass and didn't have all the other distractions. What a fantastic way to learn that lesson!

Towards the end of the week as everybody was getting a bit sharper we started preparing for the man on man shoot off. The shoot off was done with steel reactive targets, and the tactical simulators, which to me is the ultimate test of what was learned. The Fun House and Playhouse are buildings set up so that the student can address tactical situations with live fire. It's like shooting guns in the house. When we were standing on the range in the ready position or with our hands up waiting for the targets to turn it was like Dodge City and a shootout with Matt Dillon. But that doesn't happen in real life today, and probably not that much in those days either. But working through the house full of bad guys and the problems that presents is conditioning for possibilities in today's world. Whether you are in law enforcement or trying to get your family to safety in a home invasion this is where it all comes together.

The shoot off shows handling and marksmanship achievements along with all the practice drills. The simulators give a person the opportunities to perform these functions while thinking of important things like threat assessment or blind corners and trouble spots. The use of distance was emphasized when going around corners so as to be able to

see the bad guy before he can see you. The instructors set up the tactical so you had to use good tactics to clear the house properly. The only thing that I know that is a bigger rush than the simulators is actually clearing a house in a real situation. The simulator give the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them.

The week I spent at Gunsite was so intense and full of learning it would be impossible to write a book and cover it all. There was so much more we did and learned that could not be covered in the space here. It is definitely a great experience for any level shooter and a person can continue training in advanced levels or different weapons. Check their website for all the courses they offer. There is something there for every training regiment and he people you will meet are top notch both staff and students. I know I will return soon in my continuing quest or DVC.