

# Crisis Resolution Training Consultants

## Self-Defense Handgun Level III

By Tiger McKee

"Everything you learn in this class," Bennie Cooley explained at the start of his Level III pistol course, "is on the far end of the spectrum." The students gathered in the classroom of the San Leandro Rifle & Pistol Range sat focused, absorbing everything. "You must understand the mental aspects of fighting." Ink pens scratched across notepads as the class quickly jotted down key phrases and ideas. "If you give in to fear," he warns, "you will lose control and become a reactive fighter." The writing stops as everyone glances up. "Fights can only be won," Bennie declares with emphasis, looking from student to student, "by controlling your emotions, employing aggressive actions and maintaining a proactive attitude."

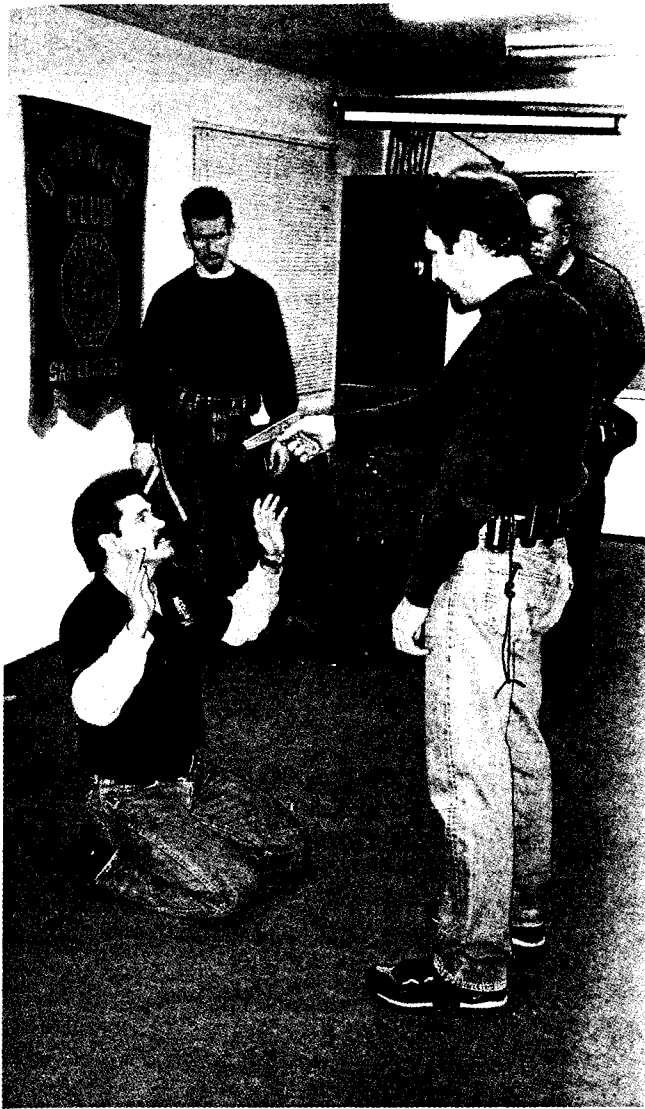
For the next two hours Cooley, president of Crisis Resolution Training Consultants (C.R.T.C.), explored the complexities of personal combat. In detail he explained the mental and physical skills mandatory when using a pistol to engage multiple threats in low-light environments from "realistic" distances. A training session on the range shooting two-dimensional targets is serene and sterile compared to the explosive and brutal nature of any fight. Focusing on your front sight and performing a smooth trigger press is extremely difficult when an armed predator materializes

suddenly from the darkness. The purpose of C.R.T.C.'s 40-hour Level III pistol class is to place students in "realistic, high stress situations" where time and distance are extremely compressed. Here the students learn to solve combative problems immediately and "with the least amount of force necessary."

Assisting in our fighting education was Pete Italiano, who began working with Bennie in 1987. Both Bennie and



Cooley lectures on aspects of disarming suspects.



**Italiano, on his knees, prepares to disarm attacker who is standing.**

Pete are highly accomplished combative operators who truly understand the dynamics of fighting. Bennie, a member of Idaho's Department of Energy Special Operations Division, has spent the last 18 years training in counter-terrorism and SWAT techniques. In addition to being recognized for his innovative training programs, he holds numerous competitive shooting titles, is a three time SOF 3-Gun World champion, and one of the most intense instructors you will ever train under.

Italiano, also an accomplished shooter, has immersed himself in the world of martial arts and holds black belts of various degrees in several disciplines. During an informal interview, I asked about his combative background and our conversation soon developed into a general discussion about fighting, weaving back and forth between subjects such as Ju Jitsu, knives, swords and firearms. It was immediately apparent that Pete's qualifications as a firearms instructor includes years of study and training in a variety of fighting arts.

Training with C.R.T.C. is a unique and eye-opening experience, deviating from the path followed by most firearm programs. For instance, the typical school of thought is that there is only one method of employing a firearm: obtain a sight picture on the threat, apply pressure to the trigger and repeat as necessary. C.R.T.C. believes that the pistol, or any other firearm, can and should be used as an impact weapon for lethal and non-lethal strikes. Merely knowing how to fire your weapon severely limits your fighting options.

Why strike or hit an opponent when you could just shoot? Even the most reliable firearms malfunction, and generally at the worst possible moment. In most conflicts the short ranges involved provide no time for an operator to clear a malfunction. The same can be said for reloading. C.R.T.C.'s immediate action drill, should your pistol cease to function, is to close the ground separating you and the threat, typically only a few feet, and use your weapon as an impact instrument.

Also remember that not all participants in an encounter may warrant the use of lethal force. A non-lethal strike can quickly convince the uncooperative to obey your commands, or it can be used to knock someone out of your way.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the pistol is anemic when it comes to stopping power. In the event of a failure to stop, C.R.T.C. advocates resorting to brute force, attacking, striking and physically breaking down the threat.

Using the pistol as an impact weapon isn't a skill developed without guidance and practice. Telegraph your intentions and the element of surprise is lost. If you have an improper hold on the weapon you risk injury to your hands and wrists or the possibility of an ineffective hit. Strike the wrong part of a suspect's body, or apply too much force, and instead of knocking them aside the trauma may result in their death.

Italiano worked diligently correcting our hand positions and grips, educating us on anatomy and the strike zones of the body, and demonstrating the finer aspects of barrel and slide strikes. For hours the walls of the classroom, temporarily transformed into a dojo, echoed with the slaps of pistols striking against the heavy bag and padded targets. At one point, Pete proved his dedication as an instructor by donning protective gear and let the students go full force at him.

Defensive fighting is normally a reactive arrangement where you are forced to wait for threatening behavior before initiating counter actions. You may not have time to present your weapon during the initial stages of an attack. For this reason, a significant portion of the Level III class was dedicated to learning unarmed responses. At first an armed assailant may have the upper hand, but if you are properly trained and mentally prepared, the attacker's advantage is only temporary.

While most disarming techniques focus on the assailant's weapon, C.R.T.C.'s system concentrates on controlling both suspect and firearm. Imagine expertly stripping a pistol away from a thug, and while standing



Cooley discusses the fundamentals of the "barrel strike."

there admiring your handiwork feeling his knife slam between your ribs. Disarming someone reduces their options for attacking, but never ignore the fact that unless physically restrained they are still capable of aggressive actions.

The C.R.T.C. disarming methods are simple, versatile and rely on technique and speed rather than muscle or force. Regardless of whether the attacker is holding his weapon with the right hand, left hand or both, attacking from behind, or attempting an assault while you are inside an automobile, the basic principles are the same. Using the body's design to your advantage, applying leverage, technique and surprise instead of brute force or pain, you restrain the suspect, curb his ability to do damage, then take control of any weapons.

The one stipulation is that you must be within arms reach of your opponent. In this situation distance is a deficit. This means you may have to trick the attacker, create a reason for them to approach you, or in Bennie's words, "play the victim." The less distance between you and the threat the easier and quicker

you can apply your techniques, suddenly switching roles and turning the would-be attacker into the prey.

On the firing range, instruction began with a series of review drills involving moving and shooting in low-light environments, with and without the aid of our flashlights. Working the firing line, Bennie supplied tips and recommendations to each shooter for improving their techniques. Since this was a Level III class, only a few repetitions of lighting, moving and shooting were necessary before we advanced into instruction on building clearing.

By combining a unique stance and ready position,

with a blend of stealth searching and the surprise of dynamic entry techniques, Bennie has created a clearing procedure that allows the lone operator, if all other options have been exhausted, to locate and successfully engage multiple threats. The final two days of Level III were spent testing our clearing abilities.

Using training ammunition, the students faced



Cooley steadies heavy bag while student prepares to practice striking technique.

adversaries played by fellow classmates in force-on-force tactical challenges. Imagine lying in bed, it's the middle of night and a disturbing noise awakens you. Silently you rise, acquire your weapon and flashlight, and proceed to investigate. This was the script for our first scenario. In the next drill you arrive home only to discover evidence of forced entry and intruders within. Over and over we ran through scenarios, each one more challenging than the previous. When attempting to solve one of Cooley's tactical problems the only thing you can be sure of, just as in reality, is that there is no way to predict what actions will be necessary to triumph over your adversaries.

Simply displaying your firearm and issuing verbal commands diffuses some incidents. Another altercation may require you to employ non-lethal physical actions. Then there are confrontations where survival demands the immediate use of deadly force. An armed individual, civilian or professional, must be capable of instantly assessing a situation, determining the level of force required and applying the appropriate techniques.



The author utilizes the "Sul" ready position during a building clearing exercise.

It was at this point in the course that I realized how conflicts or engagements each have a unique rhythm—a pattern composed of both strong and weak elements unlike any other. I came away from C.R.T.C.'s Level III course with pages of notes on disarming methods, striking techniques, and clearing tactics, but the force-on-force confrontations created situations where you learn to identify combative or hostile rhythms and patterns. This ability allows you to recognize the windows of opportunity existing within the rhythm and act when your probability of success is at its peak. This is what Bennie calls "fighting smart."

For example, during my first clearing exercise I searched until locating the threats, positioned myself in the doorway and immediately entered the room to engage my adversaries. Afterwards Bennie explained, "Sometimes you have to resist the temptation to attack immediately, because it could be better to wait." He then suggested that since I had remained undiscovered during my search and there was nobody in immediate danger, I could have waited undetected, observed the threats and obtained valuable information concerning their capabilities. Then, when conditions were most favorable, entered the room dynamically and engaged. The slow steady tempo of this situation contained plenty of opportunities.

At the other end of the spectrum the tempo is lightning quick. An explosive confrontation will occur when you least expect it. The action is fast and furious—your chances to react are few and extremely short in duration. Hesitation is disastrous.

In any violent encounter there are fine lines separating good and better, right and wrong or victory from loss. Learning the differences requires a reality in training achieved only when you are forced to interact with living threats who are free to act out their part with any response they feel appropriate. It doesn't take long to realize fighting is an art that requires blending your mental and physical capabilities into one efficient package. There is no such thing as being too good.

The C.R.T.C. Level III handgun class is one of those rare learning experiences you could repeat over and over, always improving your skills and adding to your knowledge. C.R.T.C. prepares their students for success by exposing them to the combative possibilities existing outside the boundaries of traditional firearms training. They teach the mechanics of personal combat, but more importantly they guide you towards discovering the fighting spirit within and the unlimited potential it offers. As Bennie says, "The only thing defensive about a fight is that you didn't start it." ●

**SOURCE:**

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