

Final Exam

The National Tactical Invitational is the pinnacle of combat training — as close as you can get to a real life shoot-out.

— by Andy Stanford

Given all the hoopla surrounding the birth of the International Defensive Pistol Association, many seem to forget that there was already a venue for the truly tactical at heart. When all is said and done, the National Tactical Invitational goes well beyond any conventional competitive format when it comes to testing gunfighting prowess.

My schedule didn't allow me to attend in '96 and '97, but when an invitation from American Tactical Shooting Association (ATSA) director Skip Gochenauer arrived in the mail earlier this year, I decided the time was right to see how the NTI had evolved since 1994 when I captured first place. What follows should give you a pretty good idea of the current condition of this combat comprehensive exam.

NTI History

Before examining the latest incarnation, it's probably a good idea to examine the roots of this unique event. Conceived as a means of validating various tactical training theories— basically a broad spectrum test of fighting skills—the NTI is not really a shooting match at all. (Participating shooters are not “competitors” or “contestants,” rather they are “practitioners.”)

Shooting ability and gunhandling prowess are important elements of combative competence, but they are not the only important skills. Surviving a real world violent encounter requires adherence to sound tactical principles when your adrenaline is flowing freely, plus appropriate interaction with assailants, allies and the authorities. In short, you'll need to shoot, move, and communicate while under duress. The NTI tests all of these attributes.

Originally created by a collaboration of Walt Rauch, Chuck Davis and Skip Gochenauer, the first three NTIs were held in central Pennsylvania. Number Three gained notoriety as the “Nightmare on NTI Street”— every stage was shot wearing DeSantis night simulator goggles.

In 1994, the event moved to Gunsite

Ranch, where it remained for a total of three years. Around the time of the second Gunsite NTI, two of the original triumvirate left the ATSA staff to pursue private sector firearms instruction. “Grandpa” Rauch moved on to found the Advanced Tactical Group (he's also a major player in IDPA) and Chuck Davis began his own training center, Comtac, at Warrior Ridge in Pennsylvania.

During this period, participation grew significantly, with a total of 150 shooters. The Paulden, Ariz., school certainly facilitated some nifty stages, but flying the ATSA staff from Pennsylvania was expensive.

It was also difficult to run so many people through the complex, subjectively graded stages in the time allotted. Hence, for reasons that were both logistical and economic, the NTI moved east again in 1997, and scaled back to a maximum of 100 shooters.

Some might assume that this downsizing diminished the event. In fact, quite

the opposite occurred. The 1998 NTI was at least as elaborate as those at Gunsite, and post stage feedback to participants improved significantly. Let's take an in depth look at the particulars.

ATSA Village

One thing that sets NTI apart from other handgunning events is the inclusion of several force on force scenarios, at NTI II with military MILES gear and since then using Simunition FX marking cartridges that fire paint bullets from specially modified handguns.

For the past few years, this portion of the event has taken the form of “ATSA Village”: a mock town complete with a retired sheriff acting as the Sheriff and his Deputy, in addition to numerous residents who harbored intentions both fair and foul. Each practitioner spent approximately an hour in and around the dozen mock buildings. From discussions with others, my experience was fairly typical.



Special Forces medic and NTI VI Shootist John Holschen moves bystander target out of the way during house clearing. Author considers Holschen's hand-to-hand combat system to be the best such system around.

First I was accosted by a drunk, who wanted me to share his libation. Assuming an assertive body posture, I smiled and said "no thanks," and he went outside. However, as I walked next door, the same gentleman suddenly fell against me, then accused me of tripping him. "No sir, it was you who fell into me," I declaimed while moving through a nearby doorway, thinking the incident over.

'Twas not to be; the drunk returned shortly, backed up by two friends who stated belligerently, "You pushed our friend. We're gonna kick your ass." When one of them raised a liquor bottle to hit me, I drew the 2" barreled Colt Diamondback I'd been issued and shouted "Back off!" while aiming at my assailant's pelvic girdle. Fortunately, the combination of command voice challenge and gun muzzle had the desired effect, and the errant trio departed muttering curses. My actions were ruled justified by the Sheriff.

Next, while I was browsing in a "gunshop," a frantic individual ran in screaming that the building was engulfed in flames, then ran out just as quickly. I exit-

ed too, only to discover that the fire alarm was a ruse; the perpetrator and a friend were waiting just outside to rob me. As the first guy pulled a knife, I shot him once in the chest, then turned and placed a pair of rounds into the heart of his accomplice, who was in the process of drawing a handgun. A clearly justifiable shooting.

Lastly, my trip to the post office was interrupted by a domestic dispute during which the husband pulled a pistol and ran

out the door. I pulled mine too, just in case, and exited in the opposite direction. The Sheriff scolded me about unnecessarily brandishing my gun. Next time, in similar circumstances, I'd probably still draw but keep the weapon hidden under my jacket.

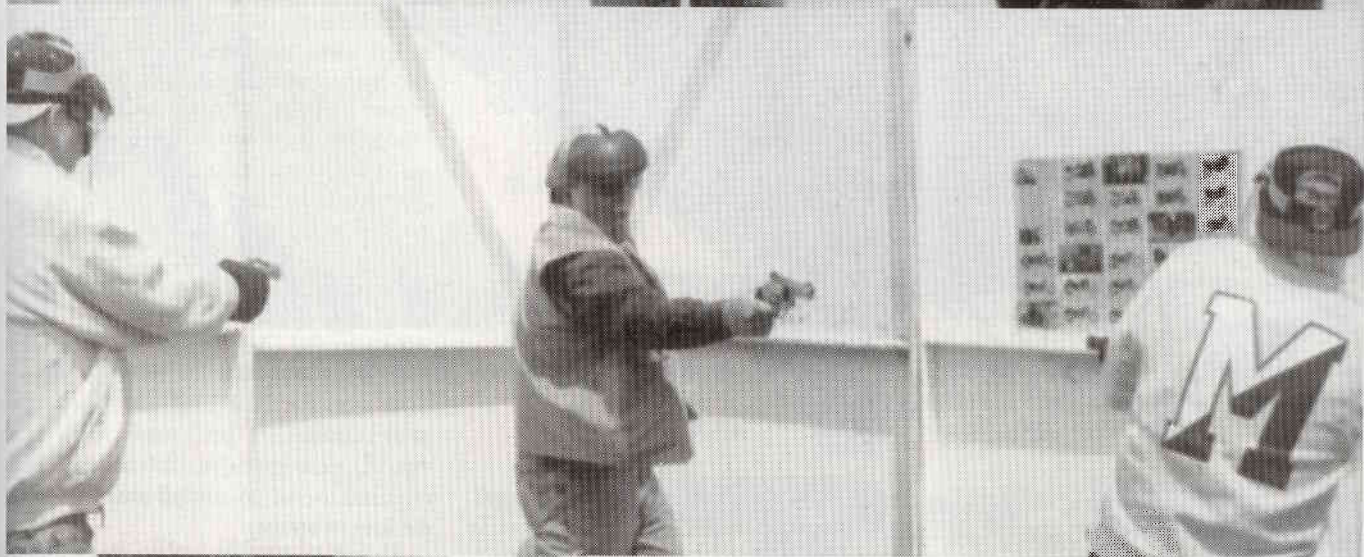
Combat Clearing

Five of the stages involved structure clearing, and a sixth ("The Trees") required maneuvering on adversaries in an ersatz



Top to bottom: Insights Training Center Director Greg Hamilton engages a hostile target in "Honey, I'm Home." Former Army Ranger Hamilton engages multiple targets in "Cornered."





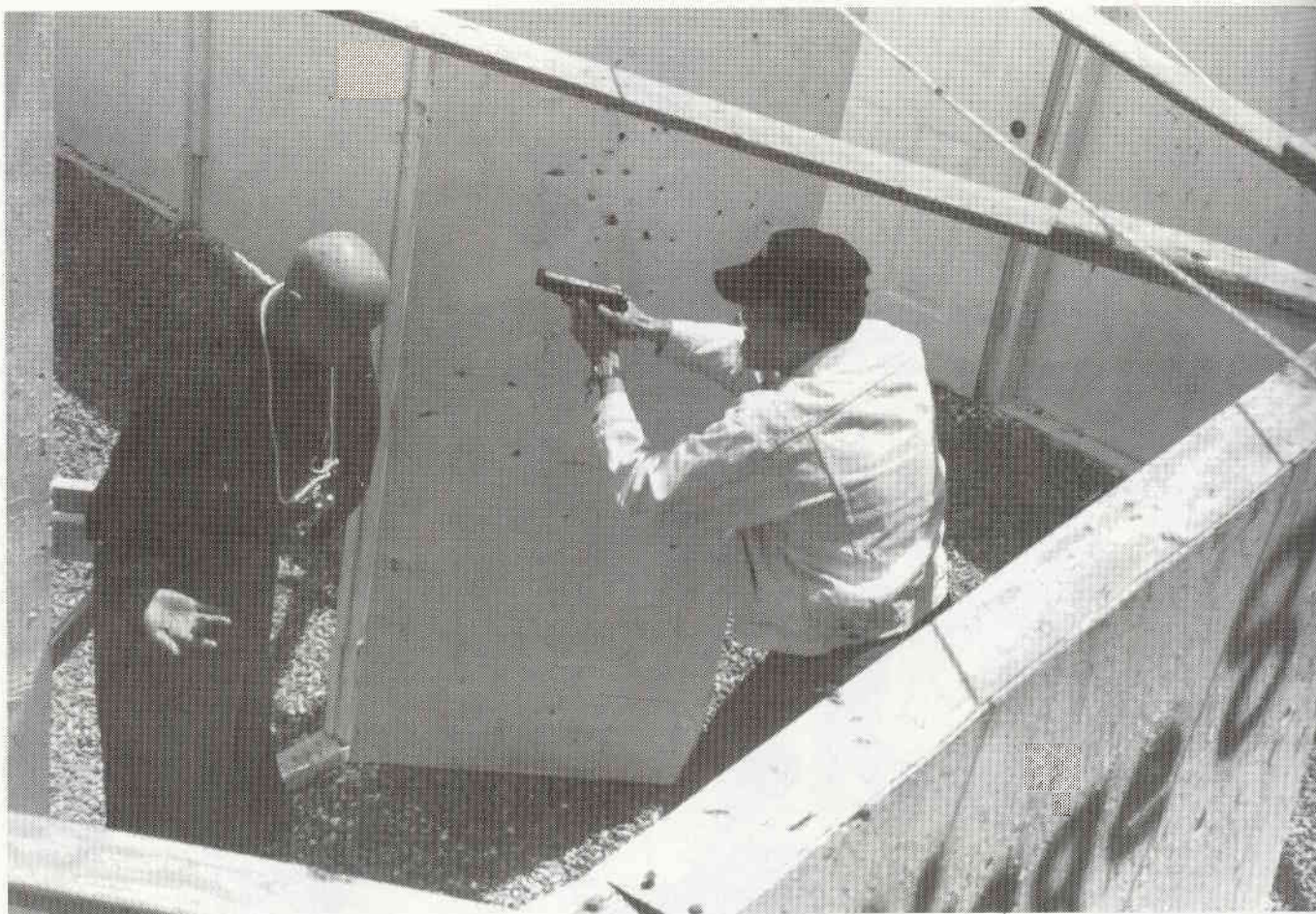
Top to bottom: Defense Tactics Incorporated Director John Farnam attempts to verbally de-escalate close quarters confrontation in ATSA Village. When the balloon goes up, Weaver stance advocate Farnam fires one handed, a phenomenon observed many times in force on force training with Simunitions. (Maybe the late, great Colonel Rex Applegate was onto something?) Farnam confronts a knife wielding assailant. When the distance is something over 10 feet, people are more likely to use their two handed stance.

forest made of 55 gallon drums stacked on top of each other. This type of exercise tests an individual's ability to apply tactical principles in real time under pressure, and is thus a staple part of the NTI program.

In "Doug's Dance," practitioners searched a mock abandoned hotel for a missing child. Waiting in the rooms off the central hallway, hostile and no-shoot targets appeared and disappeared, activated by an

elaborate hydraulic target mechanism. One of the bad guys was strategically placed to back shoot anyone who dropped their guard after finding the stuffed teddy bear "child." Most, including me, fell victim to "target 7." Live and learn.

The threat of international terrorism was alive and well at NTI VIII; two stages, "Rats!" and "Double Rats!" were based on the premise of an all out attack by fanatical urban guerrillas. I moved like a bat out of hell through these, since the pre-start briefing stated that terrorists were killing people to the shooter's six o'clock, and that an explosion had already rocked the building. Rounding the last corner on four terrors about to set off another bomb, I ran to slide



Dr. Mike Shertz clears corner in live fire scenario. Shertz, who finished third overall, gave an excellent wound ballistics lecture. The bottom line? Carry a reliable gun and learn to shoot it well!

lock after six rounds, having neglected to reload my Glock 19 during my dynamic escape. Another valuable lesson—always reload when you have the chance.

The next two stages found our hero coming home after a hard day at the office and announcing “Honey, I’m home” only to find that armed men have invaded said domicile. Again, the hydraulic humanoids did their best to raise the ambient stress level, assisted by the loud-speaker voice of ATSA official Ann Berry in the role of the female significant other.

Despite my entreaties to “Just Say No To Drugs!” the pot growers in “The Trees” stage refused to surrender. They loosed their dog on me, but I didn’t shoot, mistaking it for a mad cow. My only alternative was to neutralize the half dozen or so hostile reactive targets. This stage was fired with scoped FN/FAL 7.62 rifles, supplied by ATSA. (Previous NTIs have required that the practitioner use other battlefield pick up weapons including bolt and lever action rifles.)

Non-Standard Exercises

Although skill at arms comes third in the hierarchy of survival factors—behind 90

tactics (second) and mindset—the ability to operate your firearm reflexively under stress is still extremely important. Hence the NTI has traditionally included one or two tests of gunhandling and marksmanship prowess. The ’98 NTI was no different, featuring a couple of such exercises. These were not, however, your typical static qualification courses.

The “DTI Dance” was a variation of the graduation drill from John Farnam’s Defense Tactics, Inc., with the added complication of mandatory lateral movement during the required malfunction clearance and reload—hence the title of the exercise. Specifically, this string consisted of five live rounds fired from a magazine that necessitated a “tap, rack, bang,” then reload the empty weapon and continue firing until the target goes down.

“ATSA standards” comprised a series of short strings fired at three 3-D turning targets. The range officers programmed one of the mannequins at random to present a badge, and therefore shooters didn’t know exactly targets which were to be shot from string to string. Ranges varied from 3 to 15 yards, with instructions that

required use of cover and movement off the line of attack.

Practitioners were expected to verbalize whenever appropriate. Typically, shooters shouted “Don’t move!” or “Drop the weapon!” upon drawing, then “Call an ambulance! Call the police!” when finished.

The Death Squad

Due to lodging and transportation considerations, I found myself squaded with fellow firearms instructor Greg Hamilton, Director of Insights Training Center in Washington who also teaches at Gunsite. Additionally, our group included Insights staff members John Holschen—NTI VI Shootist and hand-to-hand combat guru—and Dr. Mike Shertz, resident wound ballistics expert. As things turned out, I could hardly have been in better company.

We were the first squad to enter ATSA village, and we all came out unscathed. In addition to my own experiences, related above, I witnessed Hamilton yelling at a mock adversary, “Put that knife down or I’ll put a bullet in your head! Do you want a bullet in your head?” The blade-wielding ersatz assailant did not comply, and the result was (you guessed it) a bright splotch

of dye in the center of the bad guy's protective face shield. Neither Holschen nor Shertz fired a round, having verbally de-escalated all of their confrontations.

I also got to watch Greg's performance on the "Honey, I'm Home" stage and came away highly impressed with his tactical acumen. Having noticed the name on the dog house painted on the exterior wall, the Seattle area tactical trainer moved through the structure shouting, "Sic 'em, Charlie! Kill! Kill!" followed by "Honey, get the submachine gun out of the safe!" (Needless to say, Greg isn't the shy type.) Glock 19 in hand, he then proceeded to perform a subtle combination of systematic and dynamic maneuvers to successfully engage the mannequin home invaders.

We completed the DTI drill next, then the half dozen clearing exercises, arriving last at the ATSA standards. This stage required a minimum of 26 rounds but no maximum—like real life, keep firing until the threat goes away. To a man, our squad employed the modern dynamic isosceles stance used by top IPSC shooters. The resulting fusillade resulted in an average of 36 hits per person, Holschen leading the pack with 42 hits out of 44 fired from his SIG P228.

When all was said and done, the members of our group gave a pretty good account of ourselves. Holschen was fifth overall, Doc Shertz third, myself second—and the NTI VIII Shootist was none other than Greg Hamilton. From what I saw, he definitely earned his 15 minutes in the limelight.

Learning, Not Winning

But the real purpose of NTI is not score sheet accolades, rather it provides a venue for hard-core combat shooters to test their mettle and share their knowledge. In fact, except for the top five, results aren't published.

The week also provided ample opportunity to attend seminars by top trainers from around the country. During the weeks before and after the NTI, the crew from Insights offered several full length courses including Individual Survival Tactics, Defensive Knife and Close Quarters Confrontations. I took the latter two and can personally vouch for the fact that Hamilton and company are on the cutting edge of self protection.

With all the seminars, courses, and the event itself, the National Tactical Invitational proved once again to be an unequalled opportunity for acquiring knowledge on the subject of personal defense. If you are a trained combat shooter who wishes to test what you've learned while learning even more, I can think of no better place to do

so than the NTI.

