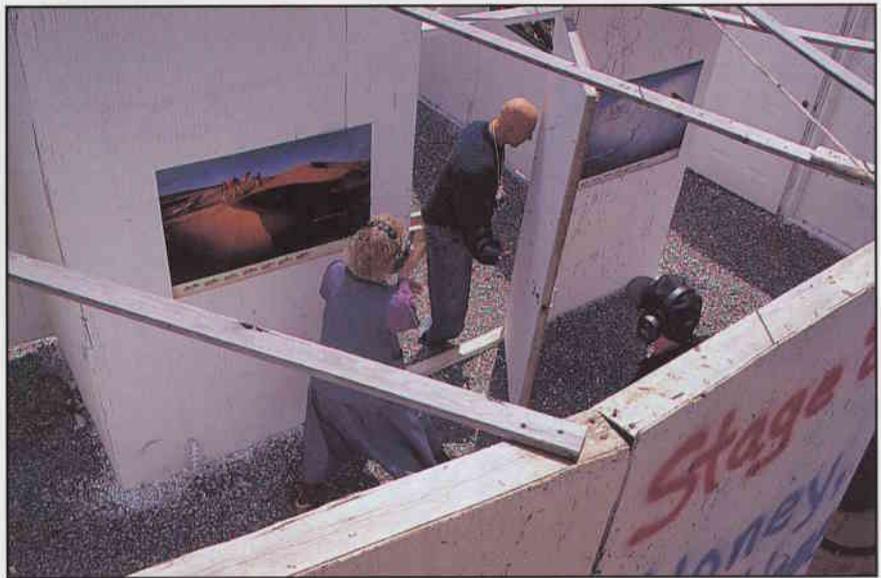


New Participants Learn Tactical

By Lyn Bates,
Contributing Editor

“The National Tactical Invitational (NTI) is a learning experience and a teaching tool,” says Skip Gochenour, director of the American Tactical Shooting Association (ATSA) and inventor of many of the diabolical scenarios in this year’s event. “We hope that you will learn about your skills, your chosen equipment, your training, and your judgment in situations of interpersonal confrontation.” The NTI bills itself as “the most thorough test of your tactical and survival skills possible,” and it lives up to that promise.

Most of the NTI is shot with live ammunition from concealed carry holsters, using clothed IPSC targets, steel targets that fall when hit, or humanoid targets that fall when hit. Three of the NTI stages take place in ATSA Village, where participants, stripped of all real weapons, are given modified revolvers loaded with special paint-spattering ammunition so that they can be used against real human beings in scenarios that involve real life activities (going to the bank, the video store, the pizza place, the bar) and require interaction with



Shoot, or don't shoot? This bird's eye view of an NTI scenario shows Lyn Bates making that judgment on the "person" she has just found by opening that door.

real people. ATSA Village is populated with role-players, most of whom are drawn from local police SWAT teams. The role players move, converse, and act just like real people (some good, some bad), and you have to handle the situations that arise just as you would in real life. Just as in real life, everything that happens in NTI scenarios is a surprise—there are no walk-throughs.

This year three women shot the NTI for the very first time, and this article focuses on their experiences, and the lessons they learned. (My perspective on my own performance is in the Defensive Tactics article elsewhere in this issue.)

The women were Chris Aydelotte, a firearms instructor from northeastern Pennsylvania, Pan (short for Panchita) Woods, a mother

of two from Virginia, and Martha Chiarichiaro from Massachusetts, who works in the Human Resources area of a large medical center.

Regular readers of this magazine may recognize Martha as the model for Roger Lanny's article on tactical reloading in a recent issue of W&G; indeed, that article was written while Martha and her husband Bill were preparing for the NTI. The tactical reloading technique Martha practiced that day at the range was exactly what she needed for the NTI. Her firearms instruction included classes from Lethal Force Institute and AWARE. In addition to nearly weekly range practice for a couple of months, Martha, who does not normally carry concealed, acquired from Galco a new belt, mag carrier, and Combat Master holster; and a new L.L. Bean vest hid her S&W 3913.



Coming upon a drug dealers' camp in the woods, Martha moves cautiously, holding the unfamiliar rifle of her "injured friend."

Photos, this feature, by Lanny Photographic.

Lessons at the NTI



Safely far from the door frame, Martha is “clearing” the room ahead of her before entering it. Having the gun at low ready (instead of high ready as is often shown in the movies or on TV) is safer because it reduces both the chance of an unintentional discharge and the opportunity for someone to try to grab the gun.

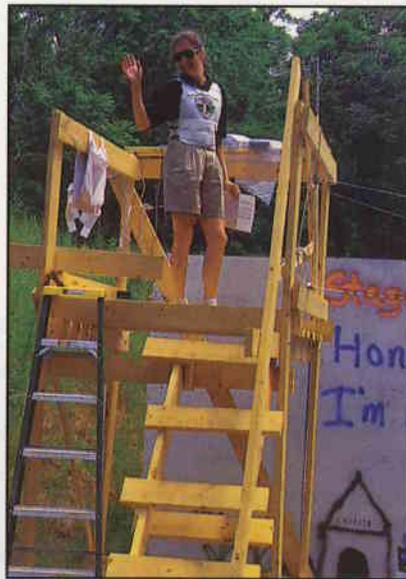
Chris carried her Glock in a Del Fatti holster that Matt Del Fatti had just made for her to use at the NTI. Because Chris is very shortwaisted, he made the holster with only a 2” draw. Chris says, “Del Fatti holsters are as good as Rosen’s, at half the price!”

Pan put her Glock 30 in a Del Fatti holster that she has had for at least a year. She likes the slight muzzle forward cant, and had used this gun and gear for IPSC and IDPA shooting, as well as the NTI.

The NTI takes place over a 4-day period, but each shooter does all of his or her shooting on a single day. The weather on Wednesday, May 28, 1998, the day Martha and I were squaded to shoot together started out perfect for this type of shooting: 70s and cloudy. Before noon, it got sunny and hot (80s), but there was usually a slight breeze to keep everyone comfortable.

The very first stage was the DTI Dance. The stage judge inserted a dummy round randomly into one of Martha’s magazines. This is virtually guaranteed to cause a stoppage when that round is reached. There’s a single

target, a humanoid, at 5 yards. The object is to shoot until the target goes down. Because (unlike most of the NTI stages) the downing of the target was controlled by the judge, he could ensure that no matter how good the hits were, the target would not go down until



Ann Berry prepares to be the interactive “spouse” voice on “Honey, I’m Home,” acting calm, terrified, or hysterical to add realism and emotional pressure to the scenario.

enough rounds had been fired to encounter the stoppage, clear it, keep firing, do a speed reload, and keep firing. And the smart shooters didn’t just stand there flatfooted, but moved back and forth to get off the line of force while shooting, clearing, and reloading.

Martha stepped up confidently to the line and loaded the doctored magazine. She fired 3 shots, encountered the stoppage and cleared it effectively, then 5 more shots, a reload, and 2 more hits! She remembers to move! She is laughing after the stage



Chris uses a retention position (gun close to body) in the close-up part of the Skills Demonstration stage as she assesses which targets must be shot.

—her natural ebullience, or a reaction to the stress of the event? Afterward she commented that her extreme concentration and focus made her unaware of the surroundings, even of her own movement, though she said, “I could hear the gravel under my feet, so that was good; I knew I must be moving.”

“Were you nervous?” I asked, after it was over. “Only when I actually stepped up to the line to shoot, not when waiting for the stage to begin,” Martha reported. This was a good start to the day! Lesson: Ad-



Pan's Glock 30 in her excellent Del Fatti holster.

vance practice in basic gun handling and tactical movement pays off!

The only rules at the NTI are:

1. No stupid gun handling. This covers all aspects of safety.

2. No boorish behavior. Politeness is expected of everyone.

3. No sniveling. Everyone must accept the consequence of their actions without complaining or making excuses. This last is the hardest



At beginning of “Honey, I’m Home,” Panchita hears her “spouse” calling for help as she prepares to open the door.

rule for some folks to follow, particularly if they have had experience with some other shooting events where whining is habitual.

Scoring on the live fire stages is partly objective (using the Palidan system that requires on A zone hit or a combination of hits which total 7 points on IPSC cardboard targets, which are dressed in clothing) and partly subjective (based on the judge’s assessment of your tactics). If you are in a line of sight from a hostile target (that is, a target displaying a weapon) that you do not neutralize within 3 seconds, you are judged to be shot and severely penalized, but you may finish the stage anyway. Shooting targets that do not need to be shot (targets without weapons, or with a badge) also incur substantial penalties, as do fumbled reloads, poor use of cover, leaving partially loaded magazines on the ground, and a host of other tactical no-nos.

Scoring in ATSA Village is almost entirely subjective, based on the judge’s decision as to the rightness of your actions in the dynamic context. ATSA Village judges are looking for your ability to handle yourself safely, to accurately determine the degree of threat posed by the scenarios, to be aware of your environment, to take control of your environment (verbally and physically) when needed. You are judged on how

well you move, whether you use cover, whether you avoid crowding cover when you use it, whether you maintain vigilance after a situation appears to have been resolved, whether you handle your equipment appropriately, and so on. The judges make some fine distinctions, such as when you read your environment you have “No Clue,” or are “Overwhelmed,” “Tentative,” “Mechanical,” “Aware,” or “Seamless.”

The next stage was Doug’s Dance, a typical NTI house-clearing scenario where the goal was to find and rescue a child who is somewhere in the T-shaped house. You must enter at the bottom of the “T,” then go through a long area with doors and/or windows on each side, find the child (a doll hidden in a closet in the short left arm of the T), and get out of the house through a door at the end of the right arm of the T.

In a new NTI invention, non-hostiles outside the building (for example, people who were visible through windows) ran away if you yelled at them. This is much more realistic than simply noticing that they seem to be non-hostiles (no weapon showing) and leaving them there as you go through the house.

Of course, there is always a catch. In this case, several. In an attempt to make the stage even more realistic, one of the hostile targets had a gun that could fire blanks under the control of the stage officers. The intent was to provide some auditory reality and confusion as the participants moved through the building.

In actuality, many, perhaps most, of the participants did not hear the blanks being fired. This was not because they weren’t loud enough—people far outside the scenario heard the BANG. It may have been the result of diminished hearing that 88% of people experience during critical incidents, according to Dr. Alexis Artwohl in her excellent book, *Deadly Force Encounters*.

When Martha went by that target, she did not consciously hear the BANG as the blank went off, but the judge saw her jump in unconscious response to the noise.

Martha found and rescued the baby, but ran out of ammo before getting safely out of the building.

Lesson: Sometimes, 25 rounds seems like an awful lot, but sometimes it isn’t enough. Make every shot count.

Every year, Skip and his large team of stage designers, builders, and judges manages to make the event



Part way through the stage, one bad guy is on the ground. Pan is evaluating whether the target in the white shirt needs to be shot, or not.

even better than before. This year the scenarios were more complex, requiring more thought, analysis, and fast decision-making. There was even more realism in the non-human targets. And, best of all, there was a lot more feedback from the judges immediately after each stage, which made the whole experience incredibly valuable. Every teacher knows that the sooner you give feedback on performance, the easier it is to improve that performance. By



Nearing the end of the scenario, Pan carefully negotiates a corner from a safe distance.

giving each shooter a detailed, personal walk-through immediately after each scenario, and giving the shooter a clipboard with a diagram of the shooting environment to take notes on, the whole emphasis of the event continued to evolve from the competition it used to be to the unparalleled learning experience it is now.

Where else can you get on-the-spot instruction from judges who have seen hundreds of people attempt the same difficult tasks (and make the same mistakes you do)? Suggestions for improvement are delivered with sensitivity and respect; praise is unstinting when it is deserved. Without a doubt, the quality of the feedback is what makes the NTI an unparalleled learning experience.

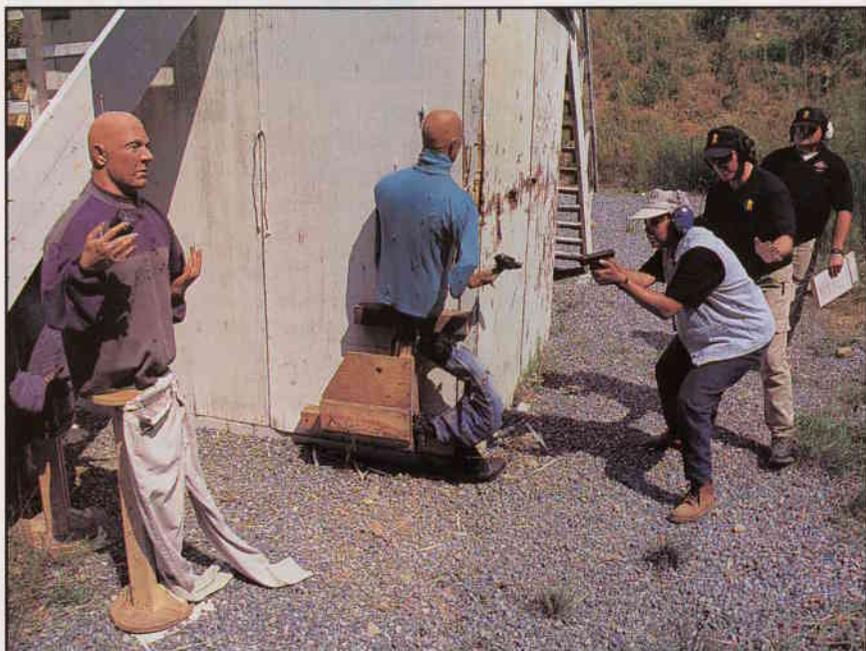
On the Trees stage, each participant was given an unfamiliar rifle to fire—a little self-loading FN/FAL, beautifully smithed by Don Johnson. The scenario was that a friend of yours owned the rifle, and on a walk in the woods with him he injured himself enough so that

you have to carry the rifle. Worse, there are reports of a gang of drug dealers nearby.

Martha really gets to use her command voice on this stage, constantly shouting, “Get down!,” to innocent targets as she was blasting the armed ones. Later, a man several stages away reported that he had heard her yelling. “I’d get down!” he said, obviously impressed with her volume and intensity.

On another stage, Martha lucked out when one target fell down without her shooting it. The judge said it died of natural causes when he heard Martha yell!

Lessons: You can protect yourself with an unfamiliar gun if you are well-grounded in gun safety and shooting basics. Command voice is not something you need Y-chromo-



Pan saves her “spouse” with good tactics and accurate shooting!



The top finishers in the 1998 National Tactical Invitational. L to R: Skip Gochenour (ATSA Director), John Holschen (5th), Lyn Bates (high woman), Greg Korduba (4th), Andy Stanford (2nd), Mike Shertz (3rd), Greg Hamilton (1st), Jim Garthwaite (pistolsmith). Not pictured: Walt Rauch.

somes and lots of testosterone to achieve, and it is effective!

“Honey, I’m Home, and Cornered” was two back-to-back stages that revolved around a single premise: You arrive home to hear your spouse calling desperately for help. A gang of thugs has broken into your home and taken him hostage. You must go through the house looking for any of those thugs you can find, and rescue your spouse. Oh, yes, although this is a live fire scenario, you can actually carry on a conversation with him if you want to. This interactive conversation was a new NTI feature this year. The voice of the “spouse” was provided for male NTI participants by Ann Berry, and for female participants by Hersh Gooden; they stood high up on a platform that gave them a safe view of the entire shoot-house, where speakers had been placed to provide the spouse’s side of the conversation.

Most people said things like “Don’t worry, honey, I’m coming!” But when Chris Adyellotte was making her way through the houseclearing, her “spouse” repeatedly and continually pleaded for her help. Frustrated, she finally yelled, “Use your own damn gun!” a response that amused the

stage judge considerably.

Lesson: Talking when using a gun is considerably more complicated than walking and chewing gum at the same time. Practice what you will say in a variety of situations, and it won’t take so much cognitive energy when you have to do it for real.

Another back-to-back pair of stages, “Oh Rats! and Double Rats!,” provided an adrenaline-pumping house-clearing opportunity with lots of targets that had to be carefully distinguished between hostile and innocent. The NTI is not one of those matches where the amount of fun you have is proportional to the number of rounds fired—here you can get through the entire match on little more than one box of ammo—the fun comes from the decision-making and the use of tactics.

At one point in this building, a mirror mounted high in a corner provided a way to peek around one very sharp corner, if you took advantage of it. Many people failed to even notice the mirror, but Martha saw it, and used it!

“I did much better on this stage,” Martha said. “I used what I learned on the previous stage.” That’s exactly what the NTI organizers love to hear.

Despite the multiplicity of targets, Martha did not run dry, and her good command voice got quite a workout!

The judge had a wicked plan for the end of this stage. He intended to give each participant a firm push to make them step outside the last door and into a close quarters conformation with four targets. But Martha dug in her heels and simply refused to be pushed! She scraped her arm on the doorway rather than be pushed where she did not want to go. She thought the judge was playing the part of innocents who were trying to urge her to get out quickly, but, she thought, unsafely, so she effectively resisted.

Lesson: Have a plan of your own, and follow it regardless of what pressure there is to do otherwise.

The Skills Demonstration stage, also known as the Standards, tests a participant’s ability to perform, on command, precise subskills that are some of the building blocks that are needed in the rest of the NTI.

This year, the Standards involved three turning targets, each of which might or might not have a badge in addition to a gun. You had to shoot specific strings of fire from specific positions, always judging whether a

**See Resource Directory,
Pages 63-64**

target needed to be shot or not.

Martha did just fine on this part, despite having a bit of trouble with the safety on her gun. She did not shoot any innocent targets at all, and showed fluid movement back and forth from one side of the low cover to the other.

The mark of a good student is not one who never makes mistakes, but one who learns from them. On the Standards, Martha once crossed her left thumb over the right hand behind the slide, but fortunately did not get hurt by the slide on her next shot, and also realized her mistake and corrected it immediately. She also crowded the cover at first, then realized that it didn’t feel right and

a tactically superior position!

Lesson: If you are aware of your actions, you can detect and correct many problems instantly.

As realistic as the live-fire stages seem, ATSA Village surpasses the other stages in this regard. Nothing is more realistic than moving, breathing, talking human beings who interact with you in interesting ways. The Village is a large collection of buildings, streets and alleys, where you interact with role-players under the watchful eye of a judge.

At home, Chris Adyelotte lives 45 minutes from the closest police assistance, and is well-versed in self-protection skills, and experience. She once single-handedly defused a situation involving a dozen teenage boys trying to have a fight outside the store where she works. Like most of us, she wondered what it would be like to shoot (albeit a modified revolver fitted with paint pellets) at a

human being; twice in ATSA Village she found out. She learned that she had no hesitation in pulling the trigger when it was warranted, and she also found the experience to be quite emotionally intense.

Martha also had memorable ATSA Village experiences, one when she viewed a domestic fight in a restaurant that quickly escalated to violence, and another in a bar where she was attacked by a gang with knives. In the latter scenario, she instinctively defended herself as she would in her day to day life—with her hands. Her paint-pellet-loaded revolver went unused until it was too late, not because of any reluctance to use it, but because she does not carry a gun regularly, and so has not developed the habit of thinking of her gun in a defensive situation.

Lesson: We all revert under stress to what we have done before. Fortunately, the NTI offers the opportu-

nity to learn new habits.

Will these women be back next year to experience the NTI again? All of them say they will! If you would like to join them, contact Skip at the address in the Resource Directory and ask for information about the NTI.

Skip honored Martha with special mention at the banquet for her spirit and overall wholehearted performance. Hersh Gooden, one of the match organizers said, “We decided it would be OK to have Martha on our side in a gunfight!”

Lessons: The NTI is a fantastic learning experience for anyone who has basic tactical handgun training and who takes this level of self-defense seriously. You don't need to be Wonder Woman to come through an encounter unscathed. Confidence comes from competence, and the NTI is the place to build both.