

Firearms Research & Instruction's Level II Defensive Handgun Course

Bruce N. Eimer, Ph.D

Close retention position, strongest point of resistance against disarm attempt.

Other retention positions don't provide as much leverage in defending against an attempted disarm.

Photography by Bruce N. Eimer, Ph.D

As an individual that carries concealed weapons, when you seek defensive handgun training, what are you going to look for? Ponder this question for a few minutes, then read on.

If your goal is to learn skills that will improve your ability to defend yourself with a handgun, then there is a three-day course that can help you achieve this goal. It is Firearms Research & Instruction's (FR&I) Level II Defensive Handgun Course taught by Steve Silverman.

In this article, I will provide an overview of this excellent class as I experienced it. The class changed the way I think about the use of the handgun as a defensive tool. I completed the course realizing that I had learned a foundational set of skills to practice, that in time, with diligent practice, will help me develop lightning fast reflexes with my handgun. Furthermore, 90 percent of the skills taught in this class can be safely dry practiced at home with an empty pistol!

First off, who is Steve Silverman, you might wonder? Steve is a veteran firearms instructor who has trained over 5500 students since 1987. He has taught federal, state and local police officers, licensed security professionals, as well as the general public. He has almost a decade's experience as a licensed private detective, has worked as a bail recovery agent since 1991 and is a reserve police officer. Steve is a firearms instructor for his department.

He is also a court recognized firearms/use-of-force expert and has provided expert consultation in firearms related legal cases for over 12 years.

Steve has developed an integrated defensive handgun system, the "FR&I System", that has been field tested both on the street and in force-on-force training exercises. It is built around several key concepts: "body mechanics", "body indexing", "economy of motion", and "handgun retention". These concepts form the foundation for the entire skills set taught in this class.

"Body mechanics" means that all handgun skills and practice drills (e.g., the draw from concealment, reloads and malfunction clearances) emphasize training the body to do what it does smoothly and naturally--utilizing the way the body works. This leads to the next key concept which is "body indexing". This means that if one part of your body is in contact with another part of your body, then your brain knows where everything is! So, you can shoot with your eyes closed! Actually this isn't so far off from the truth, although it isn't recommended. The point is that each skill that is taught emphasizes natural body movements that keep the involved body parts in contact so that you remain centered and balanced.

This in turn, leads to "economy of motion", meaning that there are no excess, or unnecessary, motions. Excess motions

are undesirable because they waste time—something you don't have much of in a fight for your life. Economy of motion saves time and that's how accuracy and speed with a handgun are developed. The mantra that Steve uses here is: "Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast".

"Handgun retention" means that you cannot shoot quickly and accurately unless you hold onto (i.e., retain) your handgun. Thus, the entire FR&I System is also organized around the principle of protecting your handgun against gun grabs at all times. Steve pointed out that most handgun retention positions taught (e.g., the so called "third eye", and the close retention position), biomechanically speaking, do not really provide adequate resistance against Mr. Bad Guy's or Mr. Stupid's attempts to take your gun away.

Steve demonstrated this point in one-on-one drills with a plastic training gun until everyone was thoroughly convinced. When we attempted to protect our gun from the "third eye" retention position, we would have gotten shot with our own gun. When we employed the FR&I close retention position, Mr. Bad Guy would have gotten shot. Most of the drills and positions taught in the FR&I System, such as the four-point draw, scan and search and combat ready, are organized around the retention principle. This facilitates body indexing and economy of motion.



FR&I also teaches you how to shoot accurately, quickly and safely from a retention position at close in distances of 3 yards or less. This makes it just about impossible for Mr. Bad Guy to relieve you of your gun.

Preparing for the Reality of A Criminal Attack

If you are attacked by a bad guy, you have to react to his actions. Playing catch up places you at a disadvantage, so it is advantageous to train to counter a physical attack reflexively because a reflex is faster than a reaction. Mr. Bad Guy typically will not be expecting a lightning fast, vicious, counter-offensive. So, if you are able to launch one as a reflex, you will throw him off course by forcing him to react to you!

While marksmanship might be important for surviving a lethal encounter, tactical skills are more critical. That is because Mr. Bad Guy will not behave anything like a square paper target. To effectively defend yourself with a handgun, you must be able to move, shoot and communicate! Accordingly, while FR&I's Level II class teaches the fundamentals of marksmanship, it is much more than a marksmanship course. It teaches drawing from concealment, gun handling, tactics, defensive hand-to-hand skills, conflict avoidance and tactical movement.

In Your Face.

In reality, most criminal attacks are close quarter events that occur within a space of nine feet and within time spans measured in seconds! So, you may not even have the time to draw your concealed handgun before Mr. Bad Breath is in your face, or on top of you! FR&I is unique among defensive handgun schools in that

it integrates defensive hand-to-hand skills with gun handling skills, both of which are critical for surviving a close quarter attack. The hand-to-hand skills taught include techniques for disarming and disabling an attacker who has a knife or gun in your face and warding off attempts to disarm you.

FR&I's Level II Curriculum

Most students begin their FR&I training at Level-II. Level-I is a one day basic handgun class, comparable to the NRA Basic Personal Protection class. In order to make certain that students have enrolled in the correct course, Level-II begins with the Level-I test. After confirming that all students are in the correct level class, the Level-II course begins.

FR&I is a traveling firearms school. The course I am reviewing, which I took as a student, occurred on Labor Day Weekend, September 3rd, 4th and 5th in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the Rivanna Rifle and Pistol Club. RRPC is equipped with an indoor range, a classroom and numerous outdoor ranges. There were six students in the class, and Steve had two assistant instructors, so we were able to get all the individual attention we needed.

Day One

0900 — Class began. Everyone introduced themselves. Steve delivered an interactive lecture which reviewed the Level-I material. This included going over the fundamental rules of gun safety. Then, the class and range safety rules were clearly laid out. After going through the Level-I material, students took the Level-I test in their workbooks, and the answers were orally reviewed. Following a short break, Steve began his Level-II lecture.

1100 — The legal and moral aspects of lethal force were discussed. Steve presented a model for deciding when the use of lethal force for self defense is justified -- in a nutshell, only In Defense Of Life (IDOL), when you are in immediate fear of death or great bodily harm. At the time of the attack, the attacker must be deemed to have the Ability and means and the Opportunity and intent to cause you great bodily harm or death, such that you are in immediate Jeopardy. Lethal force is justified when the above conditions are met and there is nothing else you can do to Preclude taking such action in defense of life (IDOL). These criteria are summarized by the acronym AOJP (Ability, Opportunity, Jeopardy, and Preclusion).

The point is that we don't shoot unless we have no other choice, but when we have no other choice, we must shoot like our

life depends on it, because it DOES. So, as a student of the handgun, you must ask yourself whether or not you're prepared to take a life in the defense of your life. If, for whatever reason, you are not, you need to think about whether or not it makes sense for you to carry a handgun for self defense.

1230 — Jeff Cooper's color codes of situational awareness were discussed and made applicable to heightening our mental preparedness for defending ourselves. Scenarios and practical considerations were discussed to provide examples of the use and progressive escalation of these color codes.

1315 — The concept of the "OODA loop" (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) was introduced. This is the perceptual cycle from noting a threat to reacting to it. To gain the defensive edge, one must interrupt the bad guy's OODA loop and force him to begin another OODA loop, so now he is reacting to your actions, and having a very bad day. Scenarios were discussed providing examples of ways to shorten one's own OODA loop while keeping Mr. Bad Guy OODAling.

1345 — Next, steps to take during and immediately after employing lethal force were discussed with examples. Boiled down, the drill is: (1) shoot until the attacker is down while moving off Mr. Bad Guy's line of attack; (2) as you are backing away, seek and utilize available cover; (3) reload if you are able to do so safely; and (4) from the protection of cover, establish the security of the area; and (5) plan your next move. The point is that these steps need to be done immediately. Accomplices might be nearby. Mr. Bad Guy's neighbors or friends might be unhappy. Mr. Bad Guy might be playing possum!

Steve's "Rule of +1". "If there is one bad guy, assume there are two, if there are two, assume there are three. If Mr. Bad Guy has one gun, assume he has two." And so on.

1415 — The differences between "cover" and "concealment" were explained. The main difference is that "cover" stops or slows down bullets, while "concealment" hides your location. We learned how to use different types of cover effectively. We were shown the drawbacks of improper use of cover, examples of good and bad cover, and the good and bad uses of automobiles as cover. We learned that automobiles, except in Hollywood, don't provide great cover.

1530 — Lunch Break

1630 — At this point, we left the classroom and went to the outdoor pistol range. Steve's four-point draw from open carry and from concealment was modeled, explained

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and practiced with doubly and triply confirmed, unloaded guns.

Safety Note. Steve runs a very safe range. On the range, while instructing, he carried a plastic training gun (Glock 23 replica). He never had live ammunition on his person on the range. If he was demonstrating with his carry Glock 23, he always publicly, doubly and triply verified that it was unloaded and safe. Steve also runs a “hot range”, so the “hot range safety rules” were gone over, and Steve made sure everyone understood.

The Four-Point Draw. What’s unique about Steve’s four-point draw is that it adheres to his body mechanics, body indexing, economy of motion and gun retention principles. We spent about an hour practicing the draw. We were coached to start slowly, sub-vocally counting the steps as we did them. We were wisely reminded that speed comes in time, and to remember that “slow is smooth and smooth is fast”.

1730 — At this point, we shot several courses of fire (total of 120 rounds) during

which time Steve assessed each student’s marksmanship and gun handling skills, as well as safety awareness and behavior. The drills included shooting two-shot strings at stationary IALEFI Q-P targets (sold by Law Enforcement Targets, Inc.), two handed, strong handed and weak handed, from the low ready and drawing from the holster, at 3, 7, 15 and 25 yards. We were also instructed on how to shoot from behind the cover of a barricade strong handed and weak handed.

1930 — Class adjourned for the day.

In Days Two and Three, we put the fundamental concepts to work on the range, and learned and practiced new skills. We were helped to diagnose our strengths and weaknesses, and encouraged to spend more time practicing the skills we were not so good at.

Day Two

0900 — We met on the outdoor range and reviewed and practiced our four-point draws with unloaded guns. We discussed the

difference between “high center of mass” (HiCOM) and “center of mass” and the benefits of shooting HiCOM.

0945 — We began live shooting. Each course of fire added a new concept. We covered drawing and shooting, the scan/search position, shooting from that position and “ocular window” and “pelvic girdle” shots. We then began moving off the line of attack during the draw stroke. We also discussed and practiced (on the range) proper and improper ways to shoot around cover.

From this point on, we were required to move and shoot. We were also required to scan after each string of fire. It was explained that scanning and searching breaks tunnel vision and auditory exclusion brought on by body alarm reaction in a fight.

1100 — We learned about alternative sighting methods. We practiced close in shooting (up to 9 yards) using the “flash sight picture”, the silhouette of the rear of the slide and the “geometric point” method wherein you sight down the top of the slide.

1230 — We learned the four types of reloads (administrative, emergency, speed and tactical). We discussed using body indexing and economy of motion on our reloads, and with empty guns and magazines, we learned the proper way to do reloads. We then got some repetitions in.

1330 — Lunch.

1430 — After lunch, we reviewed and practiced our draw and the reloads with empty guns and magazines.

1445 — We shot more, continuing to incorporate the techniques that we learned. The instructors continued giving each student individual suggestions and tips to improve his or her skills. Steve added prone and kneeling shooting, and discussed the pros and cons of each. Likewise, we discussed proper body position for both, and individually learned the best prone position for each of us, based on our physical characteristics.

1730 — We discussed the various flashlight techniques and tried each of them on a cold range. We then shot with flashlights in hand. We discussed proper utilization of a flashlight. We then shot a little more.

1900 — We went to the indoor range, turned off all the lights and did some night shooting. Before shooting, we discussed what we did and did not need a flashlight for. We then discussed the anatomy of the eye, what we do and do not perceive at night and how to maximize the benefits of darkness – since we can make it, essentially, concealment.



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Day Three

0900 — Normally, defensive tactics (hand-to-hand) are covered on Friday and Sunday (learn the techniques and practice them on Friday and then get more repetitions on Sunday). However, because Rivanna's rules say no shooting on Sunday before 1:30pm, we did twice the reps on Sunday, instead.

We covered unarmed encounters and discussed how to resolve the situation, taking into account wherever on the force continuum we find ourselves. We covered defending against gun and knife confrontations from the front, the back and the hostage position. We discussed defending against knife attacks with the attacker holding the knife in overhand, underhand and reverse grips. We also covered defending against the charging, overhand knife attack (typically associated with emotionally disturbed persons, i.e., EDPs).

1315 — We practiced (dry) the draw and the reloads.

1330 — We went back to live firing. We added multiple targets, and we shot from unusual firing positions. We also shot

extensively from retention. We practiced moving and shooting. We basically incorporated all that we had learned in the first two days.

I AM NOT GOING TO #%\$@&!% DIE! Steve drove home the point that, to survive a violent attack, your mindset must keep you in the fight no matter what happens to you. With this premise, he originally coined the FR&I mantra, "I AM NOT GOING TO #%\$@&!% DIE!"

He emphasized that, in a fight, the only essential condition for a good shooting position is that the shooter be aligned with

Courses of Fire

Another unique aspect of Steve Silverman's training is that he hand picked his courses of fire from the qualifications courses of some of the country's premier law enforcement agencies (e.g., FBI, U.S. Customs, Federal Air Marshals Service). As the class progressed, and we learned new skills, the courses of fire grew more demanding. So, for example, if you earned a score of 85% on the first course of fire, and then earned scores of 85% on the fifth and sixth courses, this meant you were getting better!



the target (hence, body indexing). The basic principle is: shooting is simple. You put your front sight on the center of your target, in any plane you are on or position you are in (e.g., whether you are upright, laying prone, on your side, upside down, etc.) and press the trigger smoothly. Debates over whether it's better for the shooter's muscles to be comfortable and relaxed as opposed to rigid and locked do not figure into surviving a lethal encounter when you're knocked on the ground with a busted hand, busted leg, your eyes soaked in blood and sweat and Mr. Ghoul coming at you! This means, you must never give up no matter what.

1830 — We took the written final examination.

1900 — We shot the final practical examination. This course of fire incorporates the key elements taught in the course: situational awareness, the proper draw from the holster, marksmanship, moving while shooting, the proper use of cover, reloading and malfunction clearance. Everyone passed!

1930 — We discussed final thoughts, questions, concerns and called it a class.

As a court recognized firearms/use-of-force expert, for legal purposes, Steve keeps students' performance records for every class, in the event he ever has to testify in court for a student. His rationale is that if, for example, you scored better than 90% of FBI trainees on the FBI qualification course, then you could be considered at least as competent in shooting skills as that group. This makes sense to me.

Summary

In sum, I found this training to be the best I have ever taken. Steve diagnosed my marksmanship problems (too much trigger finger on the trigger, anticipating the shot, jerking the trigger, and lack of follow-through), gun handling problems (not enough body indexing on reloads and malfunction clearances), and movement problems (stepping over my own feet), and helped me correct them. The result is that I'm shooting more accurately, handling my Glock 23 and Glock 27 more smoothly and with greater speed (recall that smooth is fast) and moving less like a klutz.



Photograph above: Defending against a gun in your face.

Photograph on the right: Shooting from the ground one-handed.

Photograph on the bottom: Class shooting close up from retention.



Your Holster Must Fit Your Gun and Your Lifestyle!

Steve checks the appropriateness and safety of each student's holster and belt gear well before the class's first trip to the range. Rule #1 is your holster must fit your gun! With this as a premise, Steve helped several students solve their concealment gear problems. He permits students non strong side belt holsters (e.g., cross draw or fanny pack) if this is the best concealed carry solution for a student given his or her body structure and lifestyle. The vast majority of other trainers will not allow cross draw rigs or fannies on their ranges. For example, the one female student in the class learned how to perform a proper four-point draw from her preferred mode of concealment--her fanny pack. In fact, after a day of dedicated practice, her draw times were as good or better than several of the guys with strong side holsters!

Train With Your Carry Gear

The importance of training with what you carry was discussed. The problem a lot of students have is that they take to class or to the range a kydex holster that is easy to draw from and easy to re-holster with, but they don't wear it on the street because it doesn't conceal adequately. One solution to this problem is offered by Jeff Behrnes of RM Holsters. Jeff makes one of the most concealable kydex holsters on the market. It's an IWB called the "Low Rider". This is what yours truly wore throughout this class and it worked great! Several other students including Steve used Jeff's kydex "ECP" Paddle holster. Both holsters are true examples of form following function.

Steve also explained and demonstrated the desirability of carrying a small, reliable, back-up gun in your pocket, such as the outstanding Kel-Tec .380ACP 3AT, in a functional pocket holster. Both the instructor and this author use the excellent, wallet flap style pocket holsters by Jason Schafer of JS Holsters. This holster isn't pretty, but it works! It actually stays in your pocket when you draw the gun, and it doesn't print G-U-N!



RM Holsters Low Rider IWB



RM Holsters ECP Paddle Holster

Perfect Dry Practice

Since 90 percent of the skills taught in FR&I Level-II can be practiced at home with a safely unloaded gun, I now have a dry practice routine I can drill with at home to keep my skills sharp. However, I learned



Drawing a Kel-Tec from a JS Holsters Pocket Holster

that practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect [read "correct"] practice makes perfect! So, when you perform a drill, do it correctly, because if you repeat it incorrectly, it will be imprinted into your muscle memory incorrectly.

Want to learn more? Then you're just going to have to take the course. It will be well worth your time and money.

Acknowledgments

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