

Gun Versus Knife

And the winner is...

By Eugene Nielsen

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According to statistics, 80 percent of the criminal miscreants that you encounter will be carrying some kind of edged weapon. But, you have a CCW and are quite proficient with your handgun. So, what do you have to be concerned about? More than you may think!

Twenty-one feet has been widely accepted by the law enforcement community as the minimum distance necessary to survive an edged weapon attack with an armed response. The 21-foot rule is intended to provide a sufficient reactionary gap to draw a firearm and survive the attack. However, even this distance might not be enough.

The adequacy of the 21-foot rule has come into question. Some recent studies show that 21 feet may be inadequate. One such study was conducted by Florida police officer Steve Ribolla, Defensive Tactics and Physical Training Coordinator for the George Stone Criminal Justice Training Center in Pensacola, Florida. Ribolla reported the results of the study in an article, titled "Is 21 Feet Enough?" published in the May/June 1998 issue of The Law Enforcement Trainer, the journal of the American Society for Law Enforcement Training (ASLET).

The study was conducted over a two-year period (1995 -1997). The participants included 128 basic recruit officers attending the George Stone Criminal Justice Training Center. The participants were placed in a square in the middle of a room. The participants were attacked by one of two assailants from 45 degrees off either flank at distances of 3, 5, 10, and 21 feet. The participants were equipped with standard duty gear (pistol belt, holster and training firearm).

The participants were instructed to start in an interview stance and when attacked to draw, fire two rounds at center of mass and then move out of the path of the attacker in an attempt to evade the attacker's momentum. If a participant cleared the path of the attacker, he or she was considered to have survived the attack. If a participant fired, but was unable to move out of the path of the attacker, he or she was considered not to have survived the attack.

Data was collected at each distance. At distances of 10 feet or less, none of the participants survived the attack. At 15 feet, only one of the 128 participants survived the attack, correlating to a .8 percent survival rate. At 21 feet, the number of survivors was still extremely low $\frac{1}{4}$ just 8 participants or 6.3 percent survived the attack.

Variable information was collected to describe the demographics of the population tested. These independent variables included: "class (law enforcement or corrections), sex, age, fitness level, previous knife defense training, previous firearms training and mind-set (to shoot or use physical control)." According to Ribolla, multiple regression analysis found no significant relationship between any of the independent variables and survival at each distance.

Action is always quicker than reaction. There are four distinct stages that you must undergo to react to an assault: 1) you must first perceive the threat; 2) you must then evaluate the threat; 3) you must then formulate the response; and finally 4) you must initiate motor action. On the other hand, there are only three stages that an assailant has to undergo to assault you: 1) the assailant has to identify your relative position; 2) formulate the assault; and then 3) initiate the assault.

Early identification of a threat is essential for you to have adequate time to formulate an appropriate response. Training and experience are important factors. You must know what to look for and how to respond appropriately. Distance is another important factor. Distance buys you time to react.

However, no matter how experienced you are, the early perception of a threat is not always possible. Normally you will not be aware of an impending assault until after it has been initiated. You will only be in the beginning stage of the psychomotor reaction process when your assailant has already entered the last stage. This obviously gives your assailant an enormous advantage.

When attacked by an assailant armed with an edged weapon, you will probably instinctively go for your gun. Although the use of deadly force to defend against an assailant armed with an edged weapon may be legally justifiable, it may not be tactically sound.

In most instances you won't have the necessary time to draw, fire and evade the attack. Most edged weapon attacks are surprise assaults initiated at close range. Even if you shoot an assailant through the heart, he will have enough residual oxygen to remain conscious for up to 15 seconds. Although drawing and firing your handgun is a natural response, it could be a deadly response for you.

Ribolla's study makes it clear that you must first utilize a defensive maneuver such as a sweep and disengage to evade the line of momentum of the

attacker. Only after you have cleared the path of your attacker and are out of the kill zone in the opposite direction of the attacker does it become tactically sound for you to draw your firearm. If the attacker redirects the direction of the attack and re-attacks you, there will be sufficient time to make the decision to use deadly force.

Ribolla admits that his study may be difficult to correlate to real-world situations because of the many uncontrollable variables. However, as Ribolla points out, it clearly does emphasize the need for an increased awareness of the dangers posed from edged weapons.

Is the 21-foot rule adequate? Ribolla's study would indicate that it's not adequate. Some have suggested that the 21-foot rule should be replaced with a 25-foot rule. However, from a practical standpoint, whether or not the 21-foot rule or a 25-foot rule provides adequate reaction time is more often than not a moot issue. Most edged weapon attacks are initiated at well under 21 feet.

Ribolla's study and similar studies confirm the current philosophies in defensive tactics / combatives: that one must first employ unarmed physical control before using a firearm against an assailant wielding an edged weapon.

Grabber 1

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Grabber 2

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