Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network, LLC
eJournal
Our Twenty-first Issue — October, 2009 — Now In Our Second Year

Ken Hackathorn: Training for Real-Life

by Gila Hayes

Preparation for self defense takes many forms, including the aspect that Network members have recognized: their legal defense. One element in explaining your self-defense actions is the extent of your training and how it influenced your decisions.

If one name consistently surfaces in discussions of reality-based training, it is that of Ken Hackathorn who is notorious for challenging the conventional limits on firearms training. Earlier this summer, while visiting with Ken, I explored his historical perspective on the evolution of defensive firearms training, and his opinions about how to train for armed self defense. (We've added occasional Internet links for readers to whom some of the "old names" may be unfamiliar.)

Ken is imminently qualified to relate this history, first as a student in one of Jeff Cooper's earliest handgun classes, and later as one of the American Pistol Institute's primary instructors for that pioneer. In intervening years, contracts to train military and police units as well as classes teaching private citizens armed defense have added to the seriousness with which he approaches the topic of training for armed self defense.

This is a long interview, and we hope you'll enjoy the perspective of one who pushed armed defense training for citizens beyond a time when only police and military received formal training in small arms use to the vital enterprise it now is.

Let's go now to our interview with this influential trainer.

eJournal: For readers not yet familiar with you, let's start by asking about how you got started as a trainer, Ken.

Hackathorn: Like a lot of folks, I grew up with an interest in firearms. In high school study hall, I was looking at *Guns and Ammo* magazine while other guys were looking at *Sports Illustrated*. I was a firearms instructor in the military and when I got out I didn't know what to do so I became a deputy sheriff. My grandfather had been in law enforcement and my dad had been for a short period of time, so it was natural. While I was a deputy sheriff, my boss sent me to the NRA police firearms school at Camp Perry for two weeks. That was a big step, early on in my life.

Unfortunately, law enforcement pay was extremely low in the early 1970s in Appalachia. I got married and started a family and quickly realized that I couldn't make it as deputy, so I quit and went to work for Union Carbide. The sheriff I worked for was a really good guy and he convinced me to come back as a part-time deputy, which meant that I worked whenever I liked or when they needed me. During that period, I was always involved in firearms training.

eJournal: Was there something that catapulted you beyond training for the sheriff's department?

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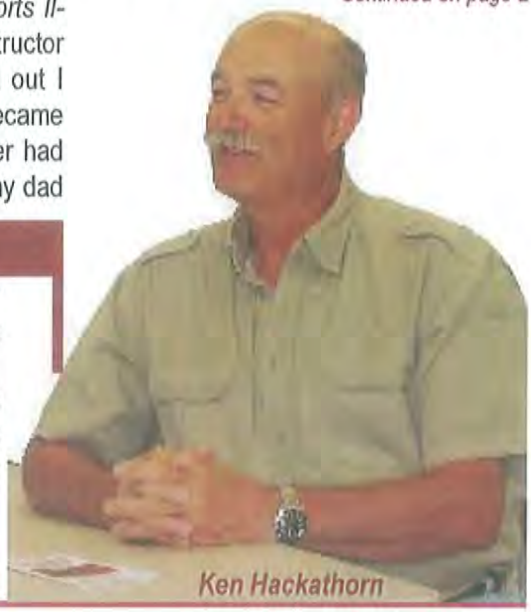
Ken Hackathorn

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Hackathorn: In about 1974, I got ahold of ***Jeff Cooper*** when he still wrote for *Guns and Ammo* magazine and I said, "How can I find out more about this combat shooting stuff that you're involved in?" He wrote me back and said, "I'm teaching a school at the Larimore County (CO) Sheriff's department, and if you want, come and take the school."

I decided it was a good idea and drove to Colorado and went through Jeff's class. This was before ***Gunsite*** existed. He still lived in California, but he planned to relocate and to start his own shooting facility. He'd already started teaching some in Europe, Central America, and around the western United States.

Hackathorn stresses a point during our interview.

eJournal: Before leaving California, Cooper was involved with what became practical shooting competition, an activity which would not too many years later play a big role in your life. Was this class the beginning?

Hackathorn: Wednesday of that week, after the night-fire phase, we all retired to a local watering hole to discuss things. Jeff was quite the entertainer, and he was expounding on the World According to Cooper, when my friend Dick Thomas, who I met there, said, "Jeff, why don't you come back to Missouri and teach an advanced combat pistol class?" Cooper, to his credit, said, "I wouldn't know what an advanced pistol class is." About a year and a half later, Jeff got ahold of Dick and said, "Why don't we do that class in Missouri that you were taking about? Here's a list of people I want you to invite." (For more about the Columbia Conference, check out ***this link***.)

eJournal: Were you on that list?

Hackathorn: I was. What we didn't realize was that Jeff had the idea of forming something called IPSC (***International Practical Shooting Confederation***). In the mornings, in the conference room of the local Holiday Inn, we would go over forming a shooting organization. In the afternoon, he would take us to the range, which constituted the advanced class, and was his way of pacifying us so we actually got some training!

When this thing was complete, we had formed an organization and we really believed we had defined combat pistol shooting.

eJournal: But for that era, you had!

Hackathorn: Yeah, we had for the time. Probably for the first three or four years it was state of the art. We were doing things with pistols that no one had ever dreamed of doing. It was a dramatic step forward. Before then what we'd called combat shooting was things like the PPC (Police Pistol Combat) course.

eJournal: And as a deputy, wasn't that the course on which you qualified?

Hackathorn: That was *the* standard. You shot at one single, silhouette target, 50 or 60 shots depending on which version. You had fixed times which were very liberal: you could practically take a nap at some points. Then Jeff comes along with his emphasis on speed and shooting multiple shots per target and shooting multiple targets!

In the early IPSC matches guys were shooting guns that you carried every day. We didn't know what competition guns were then! And then we started to see guns manufactured that were purely designed to win an event. By the early '80s, we ended up with guns with compensators, special barrels, and the holsters looked like something an orthopedic surgeon had made. You couldn't bend over and pick up a magazine or empty cases off the ground without concern your gun would fall out.

eJournal: What did Cooper say?

Hackathorn: To Jeff Cooper, God bless him, the world was either black or white. To his mind, we could not put any limitations on IPSC to see how the best techniques and equipment would evolve. What evolved was the best equipment and techniques for winning matches. Unfortunately, it had nothing to do with the real world.

eJournal: Yet, despite voicing your reservations about the direction the sport was taking, you won IPSC championships; you were on the World Team.

Hackathorn: In the early days, I believed that IPSC was the ultimate tool for training and that competition had great benefits. I still think that at the time it was. I went to the European championship in '79 on the U.S. team. I worked hard at it and over the first six or eight years of

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IPSC competition, I did quite well. I wasn't the best, but I was often up there. Back then, the best shooters were the guys that had the financial ability to shoot the most.

eJournal: Oh! You weren't pulling a reloader's handle?

Hackathorn: No, I wasn't pulling the handle – that was prior to ***Mike Dillon***. The Star loading machine was the only popular progressive reloader then and cost about $1,000. That was a big investment. And then you still had to buy the bullets, the primers and the components, so the guys that could afford to shoot 1,000 rounds a month in practice were the guys that tended to be the better shooters. At the time, I wasn't making a lot of money, so I was limited to shooting probably 500 rounds a month, which back then was considered a lot of ammo.

eJournal: That sure has changed! Now, we'll shoot 500 rounds in one weekend and think nothing of it.

Hackathorn: Absolutely! The one thing, more than anything else that produced accurate pistol shooters in America was Mike Dillon and the Dillon reloading machine. It made reloading and shooting affordable for the average guy. Despite arguments about the improvements in guns and equipment, it was quite honestly the ability to manufacture your own ammunition and shoot a high volume that really made the big change.

eJournal: Going back to shooting matches: you later helped set up another competitive shooting organization, ***IDPA***. Why?

Hackathorn: Well, by the late '80s, most of us had seen ***USPSA*** (United States Practical Shooting Association), that's IPSC in the United States, go off on an extreme tangent that had very little to do with reality, in my opinion. I was fed up with it and I disassociated myself from it. Even ***Bill Wilson***, whose company has made a lot of money based upon the 1911 and competition shooting, finally said, "This is ridiculous. I'll start my own organization," and he called me, along with some other people, and said, "We're going to get [competitive shooting] back on course. Are you with me?"

Bill, myself, Dick Thomas, Walt Rauch, John Sayle and Larry Vickers were the original founding board members of the International Defensive Pistol Association (***IDPA***). We wanted to get back to where you used real guns, the guns you carry for self defense. The end result is that IDPA today, from a competition standpoint, is probably the most relevant of all the self-defense type pistol shooting sports, I think.

But it's *all* good. I tell people if you're shooting cowboy action, at least you're out shooting. If you're shooting IDPA, you're shooting; if you're shooting USPSA, you're shooting; if you're shooting Steel Challenge, you're shooting. Bowling pins? At least you're out shooting and you're enjoying yourself. But if you were to ask me, "OK, I carry a gun for self defense, which of these activities is the most relevant to my needs?" I would probably say, "You should try IDPA."

Learning Skills and Tactics for Armed Self Defense

eJournal: I've been thinking about something you said earlier linking skill improvement to quantities of ammunition fired. To really improve as a shooter, how do you balance dry fire or Airsoft guns against a substantial amount of live fire training?

Hackathorn: I think when you first start learning to shoot, dry firing is very beneficial so your subconscious mind understands aligning the gun with the target and pressing the trigger straight through. Unfortunately, when you put live ammo in the gun, it behaves dramatically different than when you're dry firing and that changes everything because now you've got recoil and muzzle blast. The reality is, you've got to pull the trigger with real ammo.

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Once you begin to develop your skills, most get to a plateau and you want to stay in your comfort zone. A lot of times I'll walk behind a student and they start falling apart. So, I'll ask them why. "Well, I had problems because I knew you were right behind me, and I got nervous and I started jerking the trigger," and I go, "You know what? If the target was shooting back, I guarantee, it would be a lot worse. You need to learn to deal with it."

You've got to learn to stay under control and follow the fundamentals. Good, effective training is where you get an instructor who can explain to you what happened, and say these are the things you need to practice in order to break that bad habit or get beyond that particular problem.

eJournal: Is trigger control more important than sight picture, what you called aligning the gun with the target?

Hackathorn: Sight alignment as we preach it, is really of minor importance. Given proper gun-to-hand fit, pointing the gun at the target is pretty much a natural task. It's the action of pulling the trigger that causes the gross misalignment of the gun and the bad shots. Remember when people would be shooting badly, and the instructor would say, "Front sight, front sight, front sight"? It's not the problem. It's the fact that they're jerking, or snatching or slapping the trigger. What you've got to be telling to them is, "Press the trigger straight through, straight to the rear."

It took me around 35 years to learn how to press the trigger straight to the rear, and now I'm at the age to where I can't see the sights so you know it's really all about trigger manipulation!

First off, when you combine the recoil and the muzzle blast, the brain says, "Look out!" and you get an involuntary reaction, what we call a flinch, where you want to make it go off and get it over with, which results in jerking the trigger. Add to that that under conditions of stress, you're going to have some degradation of fine motor skills, and pressing the trigger straight through is a fine motor skill.

We've got to learn through practice how to minimize the effects of the loss of fine motor skills. That's why I tell people, "Training is great but training only teaches you what to practice. If you don't practice, guess what? You're never going to be very good!"

eJournal: How does this all apply in an emergency? What are the chances that we can perform correct trigger manipulation when facing danger?

Hackathorn: Only if you have practiced it! For example, most of us get in our car and stick the key into the ignition by feel alone. We've done the repetitions so many times that our subconscious brain controls the electrical nerve impulses to our muscles, and our hand manipulates it and it goes right in.

In the case of the self defense handgun, if you only go to the range and practice shooting once or twice a year, and then all of a sudden you're thrust into a life and death encounter, your ability to perform the simple manipulation skills to fire that gun effectively, let alone the trigger press, isn't going to be very good. If you're going to go to the range and practice with your weapon only once or twice a year, you've got to be realistic: you're gambling that you're never going to need that gun.

eJournal: I understand that the shooter must learn to run the gun; don't they also need training in tactics?

Hackathorn: Look at firearms and self-defense training as a package. Phase one is the selection of a gun that suits your needs. You want a gun that is safe; you want a gun that is easy to fire effectively; you want a gun that will match your life style. Then the second thing is to learn how to use it effectively. Once you get your CCW, you should say, "I need an instructor to teach me not only how to shoot

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effectively, but also show me the basic fundamental tactics and who ingrains those into the training."

I've always taught and trained using what I call a "crawl-walk-run" theory. If you start with people that can only crawl, you've got to teach them to walk and once they can walk, you've got to teach them to run. Once you can shoot effectively out to ten yards–and by that I mean you can shoot the target center of mass and cover your shot group with your hand–your marksmanship skills to survive are more than adequate.

The next two things you need to integrate? Shooting on the move and shooting in limited, low light. Let's be realistic: people don't defend themselves on a nice, sunny afternoon. Then you say, "But it's the middle of the afternoon," but when you go in a parking garage, it is limited light. When somebody tries to break into your home or business or assault you as you come from the restaurant to the parking lot, it's generally in limited or low light. You need to learn shooting techniques in limited or low light.

We have guns in our homes to protect ourselves. Well, the odds are you'll need that gun during the night. Wherever your gun is, there should be a flashlight, because your first job is to locate the threat and most importantly identify it. Is that a bad guy? Is that my drunken neighbor who tried to get into the wrong house? Does that guy standing in my kitchen have a gun in his hand or is that a cell phone? You need to know and without knowing that, you've no justification using lethal force.

That means, number one, you've got to have a flashlight, and number two, you've got to know how to use it and a gun together.

So I would say low light shooting and shooting on the move are two skills that are critical to the tactical application of self defense.

eJournal: Your name is inextricably linked with shooting while moving. What made you decide to start teaching shooting on the move?

Hackathorn: I'm probably one of the first instructors in this business to go out on a limb and say we've got to learn to shoot while we're moving. When I first started doing that in the late 1980s, a great many people took umbrage and said, "What you're doing is unsafe." Well, in the real world when the shooting starts, nobody stands still.

In the mid-'80s, we started to see surveillance videos, from stop-n-robs, banks and in some cases, dashboard cams. Once, I was at the FBI academy doing a class and somebody had collected volumes of these surveillance videos. I had some time to kill, so the guys said, "Hey, we got a bunch of cool videos, you want to watch them?"

Like most gun enthusiasts, I was trying to see what kind of guns everybody was using. Later, I thought, you know, I'd better go back and look and see what the actors were doing. I saw real quickly, the common denominator was that nobody stands still in a perfect Weaver or Isosceles stance and exchanges gun fire with the bad guys. It doesn't happen! People naturally move in the direction they perceive will get them away from the danger.

Handgun-based conflicts do not take place at 25 yards! They take place at really close range and the video shows it. 10 yards is a long shot in the real world! The more I watched, I thought holy cow, here we are as instructors spending a great deal of time telling students, you've got to have the perfect stance and the perfect grip. All these things that we dictated as The Right Way were quite often meaningless.

And I thought, I can either continue the dogma that I've been taught, or wake up and realize that we need to teach people to survive the real world. We better teach them the techniques that will work. And that's when I started saying, OK, I'm going to look at shooting on the move in all directions, forward, backwards and left and right, and try and come up with techniques that are not only the easiest to shoot effectively, but are the most natural. In other words, are people going to shoot in motion, with the footwork that I show? Can they replicate it when the bullets are flying?

eJournal: Since that hadn't been done before, you had to start thinking about how feet move – heel-to-toe…

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Hackathorn: Interestingly enough, we had from the early days of IPSC a famous champion shooter by the name of ***Ray Chapman***–you remember Ray?–who had learned how to shoot on the move to be the best to win the matches. So the techniques he developed were the ones I looked at right away because these were proven to work better than anything else.

Do you remember the "Groucho Walk" from the early days? You had to bend your knees, otherwise you tend to bounce around a lot. So we integrated that as one of the fundamentals to shooting on the move. And there are other things now, but the point of it is, that I started working with it. I made some mistakes but I learned and changed and I started really preaching at the Church of Hackathorn, that you've got to learn to shoot on the move. Now, about everybody teaches people how to respond [with gunfire] while they're moving.

eJournal: Once we've got low light and moving mastered, what's next? A maintenance program? What's a good guideline for the armed citizen?

Hackathorn: Some people are going to say, "Look I'm going to continue seeking out more instructors to get more diverse exposure." That's great! If you can afford it and you have the inclination, I highly recommend it.

If you don't, at least you should put together a practice regimen. Some people say, "I only have the time and ability to go to the range once a month." And realistically, for most people, that probably means they will only take 100 rounds out. OK, within that 100 rounds of ammo, why not put together a 50-round practice regimen that is relevant to your self-defense ability: drawing from concealment, shooting on the move, reloading, shooting from behind cover? And it can be very simple, but say, "I'm going to do this so I don't get rusty." Remember, under conditions of stress you will rarely attempt any task you don't have confidence in your ability to do.

Take shooting on the move. So many people's confidence is built around standing still and shooting at the target. So you get them moving, and suddenly they get the signal to shoot or the target pops out. What do they do? They stop to shoot because their confidence says, "I have to be standing still to shoot effectively." Well, the reality is, to survive, you need to keep moving to get to cover and shoot effectively while you're doing it. Practice out of your comfort zone until it is comfortable. When you reach the point you can shoot as well or nearly as well moving as you do standing still within that ten-yard limitation, you're there. Then you can move on to something else.

eJournal: In closing, then, what thoughts would you leave us with?

Hackathorn: You've got to identify which priorities you find most important. You may say, "My major threat is in my work environment, in my home, in my social environment, when I take my wife or family out to a restaurant or theater." Where am I most likely to be exposed to a threat? And then address those requirements.

For example, I ask people who keep guns in their homes, "Have you ever practiced what your defense would be if somebody broke into your home? Where would you gather the family? How would you search and clear your own house?" They tell me, "Well, I'm going to call 9-1-1."

Think about it! Most of the time when you get awakened in the night, you don't know what it is! Typically, you're going to take your gun and flashlight and you're going to go look and see if there is someone in the house, or did the cat knock something off the dining room table.

So be realistic and practice and learn where the problem areas in are your own house and how should you go about searching and clearing to make sure you're in the best protected position and the home invader is in the most compromised position. You need to think about it and do it! Under stress, the conscious, analytical brain doesn't work very well and making plans then doesn't work.

eJournal: You must work out the plan ahead of time.

Hackathorn: You've got it.

eJournal: Good advice, Ken! This has been illuminating, as speaking with you always is and I sure do appreciate your time and what you've done for self-defense gun owners. ●

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