



## **RangeMaster Combative Handgun Course- Tom Givens**

Assisted by: Lynn Givens, William Aprill, Craig "SouthNarc" Douglas

Review by Brannon LeBouef, [NOLATAC Firearms Training](#)



*-A good instructor is first and foremost an eternal student-*

On Feb 19-20, 2011 I attended the Combative Handgun Course taught by Tom Givens and his wife Lynn, owners of [RangeMaster](#), out of Memphis, Tennessee. The course is designed as a basic level handgun course that reinforces the fundamentals and works on diagnosing shooter opportunities. However, the class also includes a fair amount of classroom work surrounding the realistic and legally appropriate use of force involving firearms based on real-life case studies involving over 50 real incidents where actual RangeMaster civilian students were involved in use of force encounters...**and prevailed**. Only two known RangeMaster students have met their fate as victims, and both students had one thing in common...**they did not have their gun on them when attacked**. All other cases where the students were armed, the students prevailed, meaning they lived to debrief and pass their stories and subsequent lessons learned to others.



Now, I have to be honest and say that while we can all use a little polishing on the fundamentals, this class was a little more basic of a class than I would generally take at this point based on the course description, but I did have ulterior motives, and they were two-fold. Other trainers whose opinions I respect have long told me about what a phenomenal instructor Tom Givens is. I mean hell, he should be, he has been doing it since baby Jesus wore Pampers. ;) Secondly, I had long heard of the body of data that Tom has been able to collect throughout the roughly 40,000 students he has trained to date. Now that includes civilian, law enforcement, and military, but still, that is quite a statistical population to draw data from. Given that he has a body of over 50 verified and self reported civilian use of force incidents, calling that body of research unique is somewhat of an understatement. So, while I am always ready to tweak my skills or learn a new way of doing something, I was there primarily to poach whatever mojo made Tom Givens such a great instructor and to glean as much relevant data as I could from his unique perspective garnered from his students' first hand encounters.

I think it best to break this down into a series of what I call...**GIVENS**...as in if Tom said it, it is a Given. (Tom, feel free to use that for future promotional endeavors free of charge, ©NOLATAC 2011. LOL)

### **DAY 1- CLASSROOM**

**"Take multiple classes from a broad spectrum of instructors."**- Tom was speaking to my heart with this one and directly to the reason I was there. In my opinion, any instructor worth his salt will push students to broaden their intellectual horizons by drinking from many wells...not just theirs. Any instructor that tells you their way is the only way is most likely more concerned with lightening your wallet than with enlightening your mind. Besides, two guys can teach the exact same thing, but differences in presentation styles and personalities may make one thing from one guy stick whereas it did not from the other guy.... as I would quickly learn from Tom.

**“You do not shoot AT, you either shoot or don’t shoot. There is no AT.”**- Tom spent the better part of a half hour going over safety as it relates to firearms. Tom brought up some interesting points that many may have heard, but it was apparent many had not. His explanations of the “whys” about safety were acutely punctuated with real life stories he had seen throughout his years as a trainer. He closed it with reminding us, **“Safety rules are not range rules they are lifestyle rules. You live them everyday no matter where you are or what you are doing.”**

**“Terminology is important because words create images in the mind.”**- This went far beyond the difference between a magazine and a clip. Maybe it is because of having the importance of nomenclature beat into me in the Marine Corps, but I agree with Tom on this one. While it may be a simple faux pas to call a magazine a clip, using the wrong terminology can hardwire certain perceptions and images in one’s mind that lead them down the wrong road. The problem is that it is a subtle invasion of misdirection and not a kick in the sac. Because of that, we most often do not realize it. Think how the term “assault rifle” has come to be used and how careful we as responsible gun owners must be to not use it unless specifically appropriate. Using the proper terminology to convey the thoughts and ideas we truly intend to express goes far beyond simple semantics and creates the path that our actions follow. In the unfortunate event we find ourselves in court defending ourselves, it is then that we will see the severe importance of the right terminology when explaining the how and why of what ~~we chose to do~~ were forced to do by the actions of our attacker. See what I did there?

### **FUNDAMENTALS:**

This concept of proper terminology lead into the discussion of fundamentals and the proper “stance.” Tom conveys, and I agree, the proper term should be “platform”, as stance suggests standing still while a platform allows for mobility. As most know, in an actual armed encounter, movement on your part is a given as you either move to cover or at minimum attempt to get off the line of attack. Tom explains that your goal is to avoid **“bullets, blades, and blows”** while **“keeping your nose above your toes.”**

When it comes to grip, Tom is not a fan of the thumbs forward grip that is currently taught in a lot of courses. He says for many, it inadvertently engages the slide release. I have personally never had that problem, but I also have hands like an obese leprechaun. However, I am almost positive I heard him diagnosing it for at least one person on the range during the course. He says that technique is designed for those who will rack the slide after a reload no matter what, and he emphasized the importance of proper weapon fit so that the bone structure of the arm is aligned behind the gun to help with recoil management. Having shot thumbs forward for quite some time, I made an honest attempt to try it with flared thumbs, and while I could find no discernable improvement in my shooting, I intend to give it more time.

In regards to grip, Tom had a very simple way of explaining the way pressure should be applied in a grip that never crossed my mind. He described the proper grip as one that exerts pressure like a pair of pliers, in a linear front and back squeeze, rather than like gripping a beer can or something cylindrical and squeezing. This is due to the generally square design of handgun grips. I think I will call it **“tighten the pliers”** vs. **“choking the chicken.”**

He made a point throughout the class and range time driving home the point that you **MUST** establish a firing grip when you first reach for the gun. Anything less is setting you up for failure. When it is time for the gun to come out, you need it **“right f%#^ing now”**, so there is no time to adjust your grip. Get it right the first time.

Trigger finger placement should be such that you ***“put your fingerprint on the face of the trigger.”*** Keeping with the fundamentals and proper terminology, Tom advised you should ***“PRESS the trigger, not squeeze, and not pull, but PRESS.”*** Keeping with the image created by terminology, squeezing tends to produce low 6:00 hits and pulling the trigger tends to produce low 7:00 hits, as does crashing through the trigger press.



**Trigger finger bicep-** Tom makes reference to the area of your trigger finger at the third joint that acts like a “bicep” when you flex your finger in a trigger pulling motion. He used this to thoroughly explain the issues many, I would say MOST, people experience with Glocks and the infamous Glock frame drag. He explained how important it was for your finger to only touch the trigger, and for those who still couldn’t get it, he broke it down Barney style. **Your trigger finger should only touch the trigger, not the frame, or it would be called the frame finger, right?”**

In regards to sights and sighting, Tom attempted to dispel the often-touted reference; “Focusing on your front sight will make your target blurry.” He says that is BS, and while I understand what he was trying to convey to the class (you can still see your target more than enough to accurately engage it), I think it was slightly misleading because the target will in fact be blurry relative to the sharpness of the front sight and more so than the rear. I use that same explanation as a way to bring emphasis on the importance of focusing on the front sight and accepting that not everything in your field of vision will be crystal clear. He further explains that the whole purpose of the sights, regardless of design, is to align the muzzle to the target. They help us get the hole where the bullet comes out in front of the spot where we want the hole the bullet makes going in to be. They are reference points to aide with putting the muzzle where we want it.

For those who say that you do not have time to see your sights, Tom had this to say, **“In a fight you do not have time to aim; BULLSHIT, you do not have time to miss.”** He also had a very interesting and enlightening experiment to prove that it only takes less than 5/1000ths of a second or less for you to not only see, but to also read, analyze and call the shot. I won’t spoil it, but it is definitely an eye opener- pun intended.

He closed off the discussion of fundamentals by reminding us that **“Your handgun is nothing more than a drill with a really long drill bit. It’s about more holes or bigger holes, but you need holes. A 9mm hit is better than a 12guage slug past the ear.”**

## RANGE TIME Day 1-

We began where every gun fight begins....with the draw. Tom spent a great deal of time breaking down and detailing the draw so that everyone had a solid draw to work from for the remainder of the class. We did a fair amount of dry-firing to establish the draw and first shot sight picture. We also worked on:

- One handed drills
- Multiple shots one handed
- Reloads- ***'Tactical Reloads are a dance I wish was never invented.'*** He further explained this by supplying data on the lack of reported tactical reloads in civilian or law enforcement documented armed encounters.
- Lateral movement
- Some scored courses to establish a baseline to measure performance increases or decreases throughout training. Tom also explained that while some courses prefer not to do scored events as they "make the customers feel like they suck.", the reality is that they also highlight points to work on later, allow for skill specific training, and if documented, provide proof of training for future litigation.
- Specific target areas on the human body we are shooting for—the centerline and eye-box.
- Overall focus was on making sure you followed the front sight throughout the shot and into the next shot.

After lunch, we spent a little more time in the classroom where Tom went over FBI statistics as they relate to the kinds of officers that offenders choose to kill- fighters vs. non-fighters. This was Tom's version of a combat mindset lecture and it was quite impactful.

He broke it down into two basic kinds of people and what goes through their mind as the fecal matter goes through the rotating blades...

- (NON-FIGHTERS) I can't believe this is happening to me-* guess what genius, you do not have to believe it for it to happen. **"Accept the reality that you might have to shoot someone."** I will add that if you cannot accept that reality, you should pawn the gun and use the money to buy extra cell phone batteries, as you only make yourself and your firearm a liability to yourself and others. Consider yourself a gun delivery service for bad guys. ***"You basically get shot trying to figure out why would someone do this to me, when the whole time, why does not even matter."***
- (FIGHTERS) I can't let this happen to me- "I can't let my partner down." "I can't let this bastard get to my family."* Simply put, fighters have accepted the reality and quickly move on to dealing with it. This allows them to focus on survival rather than dwell on their disbelief with their current reality.

The reality is that if you have not already, you need to do a serious personal inventory and decide which type of person you are. If you are an A, then a simple graze on the arm or a loud bang will put you out of the fight as you contemplate if you deserve a window or an aisle seat on the ride to heaven. If you are a B, then you have already made the decision that just because you have been shot, even more than once, you are not dead and cannot afford to stop fighting until the threat to you, your family, or your partner has been eliminated. Simply put...failure is not an option for you.

## What the F^%&?

This is one of the several gems that I will without reservation, compunction, or guilt, steal from Tom and use gratuitously in my classes (with proper credit of course.) What some instructors call “timeframes”. Tom calls **WTF’s**. Basically, in order to get the upper hand in the OODA loop cycle, which for the CHP holder you will almost always be the reactor and thus behind the action curve, you need to make the bad guy go WTF at least twice.

To illustrate this, Tom used among other things, the physiological concept of tunnel vision. We often hear it from the perspective of the good guy as a bad thing because we in theory cannot see threats or innocents in our peripheral. However, have you ever thought about it from the point of view of the douche bag?

This is most likely an equally as stressful event for him, so it is highly probable that he is experiencing tunnel vision also. What does this do for you? This is where those lateral movements come into play. Pookie Jenkins points his gun at you and demands your wallet. As his heart rate elevates, vascular constriction sets in and he starts to experience tunnel vision. As you draw and side step, you suddenly disappear like magic. WTF? Because of his tunnel vision, your lateral movement has moved you outside of his field of vision—ABRACABABRA Holmes! Suddenly, there are 3-5 loud bangs and a burning sensation in Pookie’s upper center chest. WTF#2...game over.

Tom quoted William April to express the very simple point when it comes to a gunfight. ***“There are only two places that the bad guy can shoot--either at me, or not at me. I prefer not at me.”***

## DAY 2- CLASSROOM

We started in the classroom again, where we discussed more about how important it is to see your sights and use them. We also started to delve a little into some of the statistics involving shootings from both the law enforcement side of the house and the 50+ documented incidents involving RangeMaster students. Tom explained that while law enforcement shootings are where we get most of our statistics and data from, since they are the only organizationally tracked events of that nature and the use of police dash cams, there is very little that is directly related to the CHP holder due to the dynamics of police work.

Tom claims the FBI specifically is the most relevant due to the fact that all of their officers wear plain clothes and over half of their agent-involved shootings occur because the bad guy did not know they were an agent. As such, they are basically under the same situations as a CHP holder.

We also talked about those places and circumstances where one is statistically most probable to find themselves using their firearm. Considering only about 15% of these encounters happen inside the home, that leaves a whopping 85% that happen everywhere else, with the most likely being in the parking lot of a business, most notably as you attempt to enter or exit your vehicle. This led us into more discussion about victimology and situational awareness. ***“Use your head a little more, and you will have to use your gun a little less.”***

The remainder of that classroom portion was spent dissecting 10 case studies from the 50-person population to demonstrate a wide cross section of issues, myths, misnomers, and fallacies people had

about what really happens in a gunfight. We discussed training, distances, caliber, number of rounds fired, and all sorts of things that come up in these dynamic encounters.

I will not ruin it by telling the specifics, but trust me in saying that hearing the accounts and Tom's analysis of the events was worth the price of admission alone. To know this happened to normal people going about their daily lives with what most would consider minimal training is quite eye opening.

The classroom portion was closed by deep analysis of the North Hollywood bank robbery and the Miami FBI shootout incident involving several FBI agents. We looked at how those incidents changed police work, the firearms industry, gun fighting tactics, and what we could glean from them as general lessons learned.

## Day 2- Range

While on the range, we focused on lateral movement drills engaging multiple target areas from the concealed draw. We did so under time and as competition against each other. Utilizing target specific drills that Tom has designed, we worked on more precisely placing the shot exactly where we wanted it, most notably in the eyebox.



Some of the competitions were more speed oriented on the balance of speed and accuracy scale, while others were more accuracy focused. The competitions made for an added layer of stress and realism, not to mention fun.

We finished up with another qualification course fired for time and score. I forget exactly which targets we used, but we also worked on target identification and decision making under stress with Tom calling out specific number and color combinations with pre-determined round counts. I was mind racking to say the least.

## Conclusion-

All said and done, I think the class was great. Not only were my training goals met in finding Tom Givens *mojo* (I'll never tell) and getting invaluable data about citizen involved shootings, but I also polished up on some fundamentals, enjoyed some great shooting with great people, and got to wring out my new Smith and Wesson MP Pro.

Tom Givens reputation deservedly precedes him. He is one of the few remaining pros of the old guard. Granted, he is from the freshman class of the old guard, but the old guard nonetheless. LOL. -the likes of Cirillo, Cooper,

Ayoob, Farnam, and others that are true treasures to the shooting community. Through his training at RangeMaster, Tom has compiled an unfortunately extensive and invaluable body of data as it pertains to civilian defensive shootings. That data, coupled with his analysis based on years of experience makes for a boiled down stock of irrefutable *GIVENS*.

I have already made plans to attend the RangeMaster Instructor development course as soon as I can. I believe there is still a lot left to learn from Tom Givens, and I intend to make the most of every opportunity. Needless to say, Tom Givens and RangeMaster come highly recommended for shooters of all skill levels.



**NOTE:** A special thanks to the Louisiana State University Police for providing the training facility and Paul A. for hosting and organizing the course and providing a tasty lunch.

### **[Tactical Training Conference / Polite Society Invitational Match](#)**

I tend to judge a man at least partially based on those with whom he chooses to surround himself with. That said, when you look at the body of up and coming yet established instructors that credit Tom Givens as a mentor, and that Tom has placed his stamp of approval on, I think it speaks highly to the man's ability to judge talent and character. The fact that he had three of them, including his wife who is an accomplished instructor in her own right, to assist in the course was almost like getting 3 courses for the price of one.

Tom Givens, and his team at Rangemaster, host at least one, but normally two, yearly training conferences that are specifically geared towards the "average" legally armed citizen. These conferences, called the Annual Tactical Conference / Polite Society match, bring together some of the most established trainers like Massad Ayoob and John Farnam and up and coming names in the defensive shooting community such as Southnarc, William Aprill, Paul Gomez, Mike Brown, Steve Moses, to name a few. These conferences are primarily scenario driven with both live fire and force-on-force. Various instructors also provide lecture classes. This is most definitely a don't miss training opportunity for those who take their defensive training seriously. You will not find a more talented collection of instructors in one place for such a low price. Do yourself a favor and plan to attend.

--Brannon LeBouef is owner of NOLATAC Firearms Training located in the New Orleans, LA area. He is an 11-year veteran of the USMC and a 15-year veteran of law enforcement. NOLATAC specializes in personal defense classes and hosting world-renowned instructors of various disciplines among other things. Brannon can be reached at [Brannon@nolatac.com](mailto:Brannon@nolatac.com) or <http://www.nolatac.com>.