

Use of Cover

This article was written by WO2 M. After significant operational military experiences, he was posted into a position to provide close combat training and mentoring to soldiers, with particular emphasis on close quarter battle and urban operations. This provided an opportunity to reflect on how best to teach the information that soldiers needed to know to survive and succeed in combat.

‘Use of cover’ is a topic that should always be considered and revised when developing a training program for your soldiers. The reason for this is that most casualties on the battlefield occur within 200m of your enemy, and the closer you get, the more these statistics rise. Soldiers must be provided with the skills and knowledge to determine an optimum balance between lethality and survivability. This article will focus on tips not generally covered during conventional ‘use of cover’ lessons.

PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF COVER

Off-handed shooting (ambidextrous)

Tip1: Learn to shoot off-handed so that you expose less of yourself when having to shoot while using cover. Half the world’s cover is off-handed, so it makes sense to be able to shoot off-handed. You will potentially lose some accuracy and speed at range, but you will enhance your survivability, and you’ll still be in the fight. That is the balance we are trying to find. The skill to fire off-handed must be well drilled to ensure it becomes a combat behaviour. Once mastered, off-handed shooting will enhance your survivability by allowing you more tactical options to engage, communicate and manoeuvre while remaining mostly behind cover.

Off-handed shooting should not be limited to assault rifles. Trainers should look to train their soldiers to fire weapons which can be fired ambidextrously. Weapons such as pistols, F89 Minimi, MK48 Maximi, HK417, and the Mag 58 are suitable.

Muzzle clearance

Tip 2: The height of a sight above the barrel needs to be considered when firing in, over or around cover. This tip could prove a challenge as soldiers may not naturally consider the height of your sight above the bore of the rifle. While your sight will have a clear line to target, your barrel may not. This is because the barrel sits about 70mm (some differences depending on sight and weapon) below the sight on an F88 Austeyr rifle. Firing when the sight has a clear line to the target, but the barrel does not can cause a number of sub-optimal outcomes:

- You miss an opportunity to kill or incapacitate your enemy as the round you fire strikes the cover.
- You give your position away with the dust/debris you just created by the round you fired striking something that you did not intend.
- After passing through your cover or some other medium, the round, deviates and strikes something it shouldn’t such as civilians or friendlies.
- You injure yourself through ricochet, frag or splashback.
- Any combination of the above, any of which is clearly not optimal.

Using fire as cover

Tip 3: Shooting on the move will often be your best form of cover, particularly in the final stages of an assault as you close with your enemy. Understanding how, why and when to fire on the move will greatly enhance your survivability. Considerations such as obscurity¹, air support, use of high explosives and flanking fire are reduced or limited in application the closer you get to the enemy. At times like this you can only rely on yourself or your immediate battle buddy for cover. Timing, speed, movement, shooting on the move and rates of fire will be critical to your success. All of these elements will require specific component training to provide a greater assurance of success.

A clever and determined foe will have chosen their position well. Their own use of cover may preclude effective covering fire from anywhere except within his own fields of view and fire, a position you may inadvertently find yourself in.

Come out from your cover ready to fire

Tip 4: Whether you are exiting cover or trying to acquire a target from your cover, you should be ready to fire. This means your weapon needs to be up and just below the horizontal, your eyes just over the sight and scanning and safety catch off².

Profile

Tip 5: Your height is a form of cover. The smaller you are then the harder you are to hit, but like all things combat related there will be a compromise. Reducing your height can also reduce your situational awareness, fields of observation and fire as well as your ability to communicate. Always look for a balance.

Tip 6: Modern combat shooting techniques are designed with lethality and survivability in mind, and several positions have been developed to reduce a firer's profile. Your profile in relation to your chosen cover is important with regard to your ability to effectively employ your weapon system and at the same time reducing the amount of your body that is exposed to incoming fire. Learn, practice and become good at these positions. Annex G to Chapter 9 of *LWP-G 7-7-8 Train the Battle Shot* provides some good examples of these positions.

Firepower demos

Tip 7: Go to firepower demonstrations that demonstrate own and threat force weapons and ammunition in order to reinforce and educate yourself on the terminal ballistics affects. Know what happens when rounds are fired through different mediums, such as brick walls, sandbags, glass, vehicles or other potential cover materials. See rounds skipping off flat surfaces like roads or walls. All of this will demonstrate how good your chosen cover is, and how long it will last with

¹ The state of being obscured.

² See also 'Low Ready Position' photo at *LWP-G 7-7-8 Fig 3-36*.

repeated round strikes. This visual and realistic perspective will have a lasting impact on your ability to assess and apply cover.

NON-PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF COVER

Light

Tip 8: The use of light as cover can greatly enhance your lethality and survivability. The same situation or cover but with different light (i.e. different time of day) may require a different course of action. Understanding the use of light, the differing levels and transitional light from a tactical sense, will open up your options significantly.

For example, consider yourself outside a structure or natural object where it is dark inside, but light outside. Those hiding within would have the advantage; reverse the situation, light in and dark out, now the advantage is yours. Both will require a different course of action.

Depth - distance from you to your cover

Tip 9: Being too close to cover, or ‘crowding’ it, can have adverse effects. It can severely limit your situational awareness with vision blocked to one side, essentially shutting down one side of your senses, also limiting your ability to communicate. It can also limit your ability to fully utilise your weapon system because you are hard up against the cover and weapon manipulation is compromised.

Your depth will aid in you in your concealment from view and protecting your muzzle blast. Combining the use of light and depth will further assist in concealment.

Tip 10: Using your arm in cover can be a useful aid in determining depth. Simply extend your arm to full extension and touching your cover will provide appropriate stand off in most circumstances. Use that as your guide and adjust accordingly until it becomes instinctive – this can be dry practiced, even through visualisation, as you move about your daily workplace.

Range – distance from the enemy

Tip 11: Range can be a form of cover, the further you are away from your enemy, the more difficult you become to hit, conversely the closer you are the easier you are to hit. The range to your enemy should have some effect on your choice of cover, the levels of exposure you should be comfortable with, and your ability to manoeuvre between cover.

Tip 12: Being able to accurately interpret ‘crack and thump’ will enhance your tactical use of cover and, more importantly, your ability to manoeuvre between cover to close with your enemy. Crack thump is a tool used to determine the range to an enemy firing at you. The crack is the sound of the projectile travelling at supersonic speeds as it passes you, and the thump is the rifle report obviously travelling at the speed of sound. The difference in time can help to indicate range.

Some simple rules to remember are:

- If the difference between crack and thump is half a second or less, your enemy is 300 to 500 m away. Consider crawling, staying low and utilising covering fire between cover.
- If the difference is around one second or longer then your enemy is at around 700 – 900 m, which means follow-up shots have a low probability of hitting³. This helps inform your choices to manoeuvre.
- If there is no crack, but rather an ‘angry bee buzzing’ noise then the round has gone sub-sonic and puts your enemy at extreme range, which further increases your ability to manoeuvre.
- Any crack and thump greater than 1.2 seconds indicates a large calibre weapon being employed over 1000 m away. There will be a reasonable time of flight, so stay low and move fast, and give consideration to your chosen cover’s ability to absorb large calibre rounds.

Psychological and physiological aspects of covering fire

Army generally accepts that a position is suppressed if one round in one second is within one metre of the target. This is a helpful and easy to remember metric, but when we explore the psychological and physiological aspects of being on the receiving end of that covering fire, we can enhance our understanding of what good covering fire is, and how and when to apply it.

My own experiences with rounds passing or striking close to me have taught me that it is very difficult to determine whether the round that flies by is within one metre or five metres. Both are equally scary, and will serve to limit my movement. However, when those rounds strike anything within my close proximity, it reinforces, both psychologically and physiologically, that it is indeed me they are firing at and how close they are to striking me as a target. This can be overwhelming and have a profound and limiting effect on your cognitive decision-making abilities. So from this experience, the following tip can be determined:

Tip 13: A mixture of rounds ‘snapping by’ overhead, striking the ground, vegetation and other cover will produce effects on your enemies psyche.

Additionally, it will instil confidence on any friendly troops that are manoeuvring as well as providing them with target orientation as they do so.

Adjust according to the circumstances. The lone, semi-trained enemy may be ‘suppressed’ by a round in their general area every time they stick their head up (which could be every 10-15 secs or more). A trained enemy may require more precise or more intense fire⁴.

³ Unless the enemy is a sniper.

⁴ This tip was provided by MAJ Rynne, AKG.

Fratricide

Tip 14: Your personal use of cover combined with good situational awareness will assist in mitigating against fratricide. Throughout history, fratricide⁵ has always been a part of combat. The more complex and confusing the battlespace, the more likely it is that this may occur. Any training that seeks to mitigate against fratricide should be explored.

Simply put, all stakeholders involved (the shooter and the soldier being shot at) share the responsibility for these incidents; the shooter for not fully appreciating what lies between and beyond their target and the recipient for putting themselves into that position. Perhaps a little simplistic, so let me explain.

The choice of cover taken belongs to the soldier on the ground. In a 'simple' gunfight, where enemies face each other over open terrain, your consideration for cover is somewhat simplified. However, in complex terrain such as urban streetscape, or thick close country, fronts and flanks become very hard to distinguish. In these cases it can be very easy to put yourself in a place you did not want to be: in front of flanking troops or in a position where their fire may affect you.

Consider a place like Timor Leste where the structure of the buildings is light. Misplaced rounds will easily penetrate the walls. You think it is okay to take cover adjacent to a building while your mates enter it. It is possible that the position of the enemy could be between you and your mate which puts you in your mate's line of fire. Situational awareness and an understanding of terminal ballistics passing through differing mediums will assist in mitigating fratricide.

Conclusion

The art of close combat is complex, often contradictory and full of compromises between lethality and survivability. Your use of cover will be no different, and the balancing act will be affected by innumerable variables that can only be determined by you at that time and place. A thorough understanding in the use of cover, and the variables related to time, space and the environment will enhance your decision making ability and your utilisation of cover. In short, this will enhance your ability to kill without being killed.

Training in the use of cover needs to become a combat behaviour, one that is almost instinctive. Train your skills so that regardless of the situation, and how dire the circumstances, you can stay in the fight.

⁵ Also known as 'blue on blue'.