

A PRESIDENT, A COLONEL, AND TWO TRADITIONS... **MAKE THAT INSTITUTIONS**

BY MIKE FOLEY, RD6



The fog was thicker than I'd ever seen in the high desert. It reminded me of the thick fog we'd see in the mountains in Kentucky on a cool spring morning after an overnight rain. It seemed out of place, but comfortable to me, unlike for some of the other motorists moving cautiously on the road. As I turned off the main highway, I caught the glimpse of a large, dark bird flying around to my left near some adobe structures. At first I thought I was imagining it, but at second glance, it was indeed a raven. In a few minutes, a second raven appeared. Could it be Huginn and Muninn sent from Odin on a reconnaissance mission, or just an overactive imagination reflective of my own thought and mind about my destination for the week?

Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper, USMC Ret., was the first to define and stress the Four Basic Rules of Firearms Safety, created the Modern Technique of the Pistol, and was one of the founders and first President of the IPSC. He was a Charter Life Member of USPSA. In one way or another, I've been reading, watching, and listening to the works of Col. Cooper since I was nine years old. That is when I was first obsessed with firearms and shooting; prior to that I was just casual about it. That said, I cannot begin to tell you how honored I am to be the current steward of Cooper's experiment,



in the country where it all began. While I had shot USPSA Area 2 Championship/Desert Classic matches in Arizona for over ten years, it was Cooper's other experiment that found me there in March.

As I approached the gate at Gunsite, I have to admit I was emotional. I wasn't quite as emotional as I was the first time I drove into Yellowstone National Park from the West Entrance, but it was definitely a feeling of awe as I neared the place where I'd dreamed of training all those years ago. It is a sort of mecca to dyed-in-the-wool gun guys. It is also the longest continually operated training facility in the world that is open to civilians, military, and law

enforcement. Operations Manager Ken Campbell told us during orientation, "Welcome to Disney World for gun guys!," but those words, if taken out of context, could potentially cheapen the actual experience, in my opinion.

How'd this come about? Most of my friends in practical shooting don't know that I walk in two worlds, tied together by a common desire, but different in a way few understand. It was just a coincidence that Jake Martens and I were in line for lunch at the SHOT Show when Buz Mills got in line behind us. We turned around and introduced ourselves, as is common within the firearms community. You can imagine my surprise when Buz invited us to Gunsite for the 250 class. Buz is an alumnus and current owner of Gunsite, and lives on the property, as did Col. Cooper. The conversation was short, and we exchanged business cards. The next week I received an email from Rikki Newell at Gunsite to schedule my class, and I did just that.

This wasn't my first training class by any stretch of the imagination. On the defensive pistol, rifle, and shotgun side, I'd trained with Ken Hackathorn, Larry Vickers, Rob Haught, and Joe Barnsfather on numerous occasions. I attempt to train with my small training group six to twelve days a year, when work permits, and shoot drills, cold, with my carry pistol every time I go to the range. On the competition side, I've trained with Dave Sevigny and Manny Bragg, read books, watched videos, and paid attention



to everything Rob Leatham has written or said. I've taught several training classes and lessons myself, though I do not pretend to be as astute or accomplished as those mentioned previously.

By 2005, I'd made Master in a few USPSA and IDPA divisions, won some state championships in USPSA and 3-Gun, been picked up by Wilson Combat for their shooting team, and was accomplished in the eyes of my peers in Kentucky and beyond. In 2008, my friend Joe Barnsfather asked me to attend a pistol class where there were prizes for those who finished first on simple drills. He convinced me I could show up and basically take all of the prizes. I was sure he was right; after all, I'd already won several guns among a much tougher field, or so I thought. What I learned that August day was that I didn't know how to shoot. I didn't win a single drill. Joe had led me astray, and for my own good. We joke today that it is the only time I know of that he ever lied to me.

At Gunsite, the 250 class I was in was full with 18 students, four ladies and 14

gentlemen. Included were two soldiers there from the United States Army, a retired Army Special Forces operator, and a couple of full- and part-time law enforcement officers. There were also civilians from all age groups and various professions, including two married couples and a father-and-daughter duo. It was a true cocktail of people from all walks of life, all levels of experience, and all ages. The firearms used were as diverse as the students themselves, including 1911s, DA/SA autos, striker pistols, and one revolver.

I'd hoped to attend this class under the radar, without much mention of my experience or my employment. I'd hoped that I could just work on the drills, learn everything I could, evaluate the experience, and report here in USPSA's *Front Sight* magazine. To that end, as blasphemous as it seems, I did not take a 1911 to Gunsite. While I am known for shooting fine Wilson Combat CQB Elite .45s regularly, I decided to take a pair of Walther PPQ M2's in 9mm. It stood to reason that 1,000 rounds of Federal Syntech Action Pistol 9mm in five

days would be gentler on my body, and no one could say that it was the finely tuned, expensive pistol doing the work. Cooper often stated, "It is the man, not the gun" to students at Gunsite who did well despite their obvious ignorance that 1911's are far superior fighting pistols to everything else.

With my desire to "lay low", and my striker-fired polymer production pistol on my hip, I made it nearly two hours into the experience before I was busted. One of the instructors for the week, Paul Garcia, recognized me from past USPSA Area 2/Desert Classic matches we'd shot together at Rio Salado Sportsman's Club in Mesa. Paul asked me several times why I was there. The only reply I made was, "To take the 250 class", and after a couple of attempts, Paul realized I wasn't about to give a different answer. I survived the rest of the day working on drills and learning with Paul keeping my secret. Day two brought about another series of lectures and drills. A nice lady from Tempe chatted with me at one of the breaks. "You seem to be quite advanced compared to some of the rest of

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satisfactorily; Marksman 1, indicating outstanding demonstration of knowledge, performance, and skill; and Expert, indicating a high level of commitment and performance all week, with emphasis on pushing yourself to increasingly high levels of excellence and surpassing the standards in every exercise while striving for peak performance each time asked to demonstrate skills under stress. Experts should be appropriately humble. Rangemaster Charlie McNeese shared that very few classes have an Expert grade in them, and that he hadn't given one for five or more classes. It was at that moment that I decided that I would not settle for anything less than Expert.

The second day offered more range exercises and lectures, but also included a fast-draw contest with students paired up and eliminated until one stood victorious. I made it to the last round, and was to go head to head with one of the younger, faster, fitter soldiers from the US Army. It took four rounds, but he beat me and got a really great coin to take home. I was disappointed

us, are you actually benefiting from this class?" I replied, "Yes, with every press of the trigger".

Most Gunsite classes are graded as a measurement technique to let students know how their learning experience fits into the wide range of performance seen

at the school. These grades are reflected on certificates given out at graduation. The course grades are: Course Completion, indicating basic comprehension of the material; Marksman, indicating a good knowledge of the material, and ability to perform the range drills and simulations

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Verlon Rector, Paul Garcia, Mike Foley, Charlie McNeese, Eric Ingersoll

at my loss, but congratulated him and continued to work on myself, which is the only reason to ever attend a training class, in my opinion.

The third day began with the Army guys busting me at the beginning of class by asking if I'd been hiding at the other end of the range, and why I hadn't shot my Wilson Combat pistols. They had "Googled" me the night before, and had watched some of my shooting videos on YouTube. I was amused, and a little embarrassed. I was still committed to my experience and employment not being a distraction to others in the class, or to my own training. To this end, I continued to work on drills as if I'd never done so before.

On the fourth day, shoot-house work began, in addition to the Donga, an outdoor-scenario based training utilizing natural terrain. This exercise was a real eye-opening experience for me. I have lots of hours logged in various shoot houses, but they are mostly structures set up like dwellings, with flat floors and furniture. The natural terrain made footwork more difficult, as the rocks and debris in the wash were more intensive to manage, and the lack of hard corners made each engagement a challenge. Every potential threat was more difficult to identify; with the brush-covered slopes and angled banks of the tributaries in this terrain, you could literally see targets for some time before you knew if you could

engage them. This day ended with flashlight techniques in the dark.

It is challenges like the shoot house, Donga, and low-light work that separate competition from defensive shooting in the most dramatic way. There is no walk-through, no separation of shoot and no-shoot targets by pre-defined colors. The old argument here about speed and accuracy blur the lines even more. You don't know what to expect, and you must rely on sound problem-solving skills that you can't develop without training in this type of environment. It is also important to note that one-person defensive clearing is much different than aggressive team clearing taught in some military units. You are literally on your own, or with a second person at best, often with family and neighbors in the area, so barging into the room wearing armor and dominating the offense with firepower isn't an option.

The fifth and final day offered more shoot-house and Donga training, and the tests. The tests were drills that had been taught and practiced all week, called school drills, and an El Presidente drill. This was followed by a man-on-man shoot-off that featured two steel plates and a popper cut in two with the sides overlapping one another when down. The first person to knock down both steel plates, perform a speed reload, and drive their popper to the bottom won, the other was eliminated.

The El Presidente drill sounds a lot like the classifier stage we shoot in USPSA, and it is, to the extent that it is three targets shot from an up-range facing start, with two shots per target, a mandatory speed reload, and two rounds per target. Where this "El Prez" differs is in the way it is performed and scored. A particular emphasis is put on the turn, step, and draw, based on what I perceived to be sound footwork and safety when training in large groups. Any rounds outside the upper chest area are penalized at three points each. A time of over ten seconds is penalized at five points per second, while a time under ten seconds is rewarded at five points per second. The school drills were a mix of draws from three to fifteen yards on turning targets with tight, but achievable, par times.

The shoot-off went well, and everyone seemed to enjoy it as the last range exercise before graduation. It was interesting to see how major power factor pistols performed against minor power factor pistols. Consistent with other age-old arguments, the most notable example was a 1911 in .45 ACP against a Glock in 9mm. The Glock shooter was faster at the drill, and hit his popper first. It was obvious to the class the 1911 shooter was behind, as the popper shot with 9mm was falling when he transitioned to the popper and hit it with the .45. The .45 pushed the popper down with enough force to get it ahead of the other one,

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making the 1911 shooter victorious. The crowd went wild. I shot this drill with little emphasis on trying to be insanely fast, but rather on making good draws, reloads, and trigger presses. This worked well for me, as I won the shoot-off.

It was graduation that made me emotional for the second time this week. The class was presented their certificates in alphabetical order, having the opportunity to get congratulations and give thanks to the instructors. Oddly, my name was

skipped. Anticipation built on my part with each name called. When I was called to the stage last, I didn't know what to expect. The Rangemaster presented me with an option. He explained that I had earned Expert, which came with a gold pin, but that I had a decision to make because I'd won the shoot-off which came with a silver pin. It didn't take me a millisecond to respond, "I'll take the E-ticket, sir!" Again, I was overcome with emotion because I had wanted to make Expert

so badly. The shoot-off was not part of the evaluation process. Though it was fun, and I did want to win, the shoot-off wasn't why I was there.

After graduation, we were invited to the Sconce, the home of Col. and Mrs. Cooper. Mrs. Cooper still lives there today. I'm not sure if I should tell a lady's age, but she seems proud to be ninety-seven and a half. I suppose you start counting halves again at a certain point, but don't let that fool you. Mrs. Cooper is a wonderfully articulate and pleasant lady, who talked with me at length about practical shooting, IPSC, the J-ladder, Col. Cooper, and the structure of her fortress-like domicile. It was at this point I had my third struggle with emotion. She served brownies and lemonade, and opened Col. Cooper's office, library and armory to me, and others who accepted her gracious invitation into her home. Col. Cooper's IPSC President pin, National Match Director pin, and USPSA Life Member pin were prominently displayed at the entrance to his armory from the library. It was a quiet walk to my rental car, reflecting on the week, the Coopers, and my own dreams and goals recently realized.

If you ever find yourself in a position to train at Gunsite, don't hesitate to go. If you think you don't need training like this, and carry a pistol, I urge you to go. If you think it is too basic for you, I dare you to go. Over the years, I've heard people say things like "they are stuck in 1976..." or "they only teach the Weaver stance..." or "that's just a basic course...". I can report that none of this is true. In retrospect, none of the people who said that to me have taken a class there, and I now have. I found the instruction to be modern, relevant, and useful. The Rangemaster told us that they would teach us their way, but that they fully recognize that it is not the only way. I was able to reinforce some of my training, and I learned some new things as well. I still walk in two worlds, and those worlds were both born in the shadow of Col. Jeff Cooper. The Gunsite tradition is alive and well, modern and relevant, as is practical shooting. I'd call that a legacy we can all be proud of. ■

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