ON THE LOOKOUT

In an age where people live much of their lives online, situational awareness couldn't be a more vital self-defence skill.

By Paul Cale

There is a lot of talk in the martial arts about various ranges when fighting - long range, close range, grappling range, striking range, clinch range, ground fighting, etc. - and the techniques best suited to each. Regardless, even the most range-suitable techniques will be rendered useless if you are lacking one simple trait: awareness. Your awareness of a threat or potential threat is your greatest defence - without it, a would-be aggressor can move through all your ranges, preferred or otherwise, without challenge.

The second part to awareness is recognising that there will inevitably be times when it slips. It follows then that you must also do the hard training needed to give you the ability to regain the initiative if ambushed

or caught unaware. If you are unaware of a threat, your first 'range' will be at whatever distance the aggressor has dictated, or the physical position you find yourself in after the initial attack. So how can we deal with this?

In the Army, we use 'contact drills' to train soldiers to react instinctively in a way that will give them the best chance to recover from a surprise attack and retaliate. Contact drills are used in 'close country' such as the jungle, where the likelihood of not seeing the enemy first, or at least seeing him late when already in close proximity, is much higher than in open country. They are simple drills that initiate an immediate response from the soldiers involved and give the commander a chance to appraise the enemy and situation. The drill ends once the commander calls out an order; that is, when he has made a decision to act outside of the drill.

Just like the soldiers, we as individuals need to develop contact drills to deal with surprise attacks. More important than the technical structure or style of your contact drill are the principles and considerations that govern the development of an effective drill. It must be simple to apply, relying on gross motor skills, for if we survive the initial attack and are still conscious - maybe just barely - we will be in a state of shock and may also be wounded, so we'll need to deal with the effects of combat stress. We need to train our contact drill over and over again and pressure-test it via multiple scenarios, the whole idea being to instill an ability to respond to that pressure automatically without thought. This allows us to deal with the initial effects of combat stress and gives us a chance to look for an opportunity to apply our own pressure against the attacker and thus regain the initiative.

Drilling the skills required to deal with an ambush is a must when developing an affective self-defence arsenal; however, this is not the first line of defence - which brings us back to awareness. Situational awareness is the most effective defensive measure, coupled with correctly estimating potential threats - and never underestimating the threat that anybody can pose. For example, more than 90 per cent of close personal protection operations involve gaining situational awareness and denying information that would give any potential threat the chance to plan an effective attack. We protect information, avoid routine, and deploy decoys. We do all we can to deny the enemy awareness and in turn, do all we can to gain it.

Learning to be aware is a skill in itself and you can start developing it now if you haven't already. To begin with, avoid all distractions when in public, such as walking while looking down at your phone. If you are going to take your eyes off your surroundings, you should move yourself to one side, preferably so you have a wall to your back, and then check the phone. Similarly, if you walk around with earphones in listening to music, you are removing one of the most important senses that enable you to identify a potential threat. These are a couple of very simple things that you can do now to better help you gain awareness. The next step is to practise awareness by beginning to look for things in people; look for behavioural cues such as agitation, actions that indicate frustration or anger, etc. Also, to get a sense of how a predator sees the world, look for people who are totally unaware of what is going on around them because they are deliberately distracting themselves from their environment.

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That being said, the detail of what you need to be aware of isn't so important - often your instinct or 'gut feel' will let you know when it's 'go time' - but rather deliberately being aware. Are you?

About the author

Paul Cale has been involved with the Australian Army for thirty years either as a soldier or currently as a preferred contractor with the majority of that time being a member of Australian Special Forces (SF). Paul's company draws its specialist contractors from the two pinnacle SF regiments being the 2nd Commando (2 CDO) and Special Air Service (SAS). Paul himself is a founding member of 2 CDO and drove new capability forward by rewriting the SF Close Quarter Fighting (CQF) course and co-founding the 2 CDO Integrated Combat Centre (ICC). Paul deployed five times as a Commando to Afghanistan and Iraq with his personal hand to hand combat experience and that of his Commando Regiment guiding the core development of Kinetic Fighting. Paul also created the Infantry Integrated Combat (IIC) Course now being used by the entire Australian Infantry Corps.

Recently, Paul was appointed Head Coach of the Australian Defence Force Martial Arts Association (ADFMAA) and is continuing his work enabling soldiers to develop their unarmed combat skills

Paul is also a Specialist Consultant to the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and co-founder of the AIS Combat Centre. Paul currently maintains a position on the Combat Centre's leadership team.

Paul has been involved in combat sports and martial arts since the beginning of the eighties and holds a total of eight black belts being Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Kudo Daido Juku, Kyokushin Karate, Yoshinkan, Tomiki and Gyokushin Ryu Aikido as well as the Olympic combat sports of Judo and Tae Kwon do. Paul was the first Australian to earn a Kudo black belt and heads the International Kudo Federation Australia (IKFA) as Branch Chief.