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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release 17-04-03/001
April 3, 2017

Airmen learn self-defense shooting tactics from local sheriff's office

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – Air Force Airmen undergo extensive training on the proper use of firearms, especially when they're preparing to deploy downrange. The training program is aptly called Combat Arms Training and Maintenance, and it focuses on the specific characteristics of each weapon, how to effectively operate it, and basic marksmanship.

For the most part, military CATM is geared toward battlefield operations.

But for an Airman who may face a more domestic-type of firearm situation, battlefield training may not necessarily fit the bill.

Col. Steven M. Gorski, commander of the Air Force Technical Applications Center here, wanted to know more about self-defense tactics with his personal handgun. He knew enough about how to operate his own .9mm semi-automatic, but felt there was more to learn. So he reached out to the Brevard County Sheriff's Office to inquire about a class the county offers its citizens.

Called Self Defense Through Tactical Shooting and Decision Making, the course is designed to give civilians the opportunity to learn safe gun handling skills as well as the legal aspects of gun ownership. It also gives attendees the opportunity to undergo "shoot-don't shoot" simulator scenarios, where split-second decisions must be made in a self-defense domestic situation that involves a handgun. Additionally, those enrolled expend 100 live rounds under the close supervision of range deputies.

Gorski encouraged members of his staff to join him, and on Saturday, March 25, more than two dozen AFTACers met at the BSCO training range in Cocoa, Fla., for the 8-hour course.

Corporal Larry Plotkin, master lead instructor, welcomed the group and gave opening remarks during the classroom portion of the course. He was followed by Corporal Jessie Holton, who spoke about the importance of mental preparedness and the tactics of firearms self-defense.

"There has been a huge uptick of personal firearms purchases over the past several years by people who want to protect their families and their homes, but many gun owners don't know how to operate their weapons," said Holton. "Most gun encounters occur within five feet or less – you will probably be touching your adversary. So when it comes to surviving a real threat, and if you really want to protect yourself, you need to know what your capabilities are, what the capabilities of your handgun are, and if you're physically and psychologically prepared to defend yourself. It's critical to staying alive."



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After Holton's presentation, the group received an in-depth briefing from Jason Arthur, assistant state attorney for Florida's 18th Judicial Circuit.

Arthur discussed specific state laws that pertain to gun ownership, impacts of the Second Amendment, definitions of deadly force, and Florida's Stand Your Ground law. He addressed the Castle Doctrine, a lesser known legal theory that gives a homeowner the right to protect his or her home using deadly force, and he also fielded a battery of questions from the inquisitive audience.



The group broke for a quick lunch, then split up into two groups: one group went to the MILO Simulator, and the other group headed to the live fire range.

"The simulator is a law enforcement-specific learning tool, but we give the scenarios to the SDTTS classes so they can experience the interactivity of the program," said Plotkin. "It's much more than a kid's video game; it's a realistic, versatile training product that exercises a shooter's tactical judgment under duress. It also gives civilians the chance to see just how fast a situation can go bad for a cop."

Once on the range, shooters were placed in three different positions: lock out, compressed ready and hip shooting, and fired multiple rounds from each position.

"Lock out is when the shooter draws their weapon and pushes it straight out towards the target," said Plotkin. "It's employed when there is some distance between a perpetrator and the shooter. Compressed ready is when a perp is too close for a shooter to execute the lock-out position. You simply tuck your arms into your body and fire multiple rounds into the target. We have shooters fire three feet from the target and force them to pivot while firing at three separate targets. Hip shooting is taught in the event the perp has tackled you or if you're unable to execute the other two positions. We train shooters to place their gun on their hip sideways to prevent the slide from hitting their body which could cause a deadly malfunction."

He added, "We want to train gun owners to realize they don't necessarily have to be looking straight at a target to execute an effective shot. When you're comfortable with various positions at close range, your chances of survival are greatly improved."

The groups switched places from simulator to range and vice versa, giving everyone the opportunity to experience all aspects of the course.

After each person fired off 100 rounds and ran through the simulator, they gathered for closing comments and to receive their certificates for a concealed carry permit application. Based on the chatter that could be overheard in the classroom, the course was a resounding success.

Corporal Brian Adams, one of the course instructors, was quite impressed with the AFTAC class. "This group was very engaged and it was obvious they came here to learn," said Adams. "They picked things up very quickly, even those who seemed a bit hesitant at the start. The whole purpose of the class is to build confidence and make the shooter feel comfortable under pressure. They were among the best classes we've ever had take the course. That speaks volumes about their capabilities."

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The sheriff himself was unable to make it to AFTAC's class due to emerging events, but he did take the time to relay his thoughts about the importance of the training.

"Self Defense Through Tactical Shooting and Decision Making is an amazing course that teaches our citizens how to respond to a violent attack or active shooter scenario," said Sheriff Wayne Ivey. "While the best law enforcement agencies in the country have response times in minutes, a violent criminal can take our lives in seconds if we are not truly prepared to be the first line of defense for ourselves, our families and those around us when evil comes knocking on the door."



Angela Schuler, wife of Chief Master Sgt. Wes Schuler, AFTAC's superintendent of operations, seemed to thoroughly enjoy the training. "This was an incredibly informative course," she said. "The speakers were great and they distilled the information down to make it very understandable, including all the legal jargon. I would highly recommend it to anyone, whether they're new to shooting or an experienced marksman."

"When I heard about this course, I thought it would be a great way for me to meet the requirements for my concealed weapons permit," said Capt. Reggie Luper, a member of Gorski's team. "That was my primary motivation. But after going through the entire training, I can't even begin to describe how much I learned about self-defense and how to use my gun in a close-quarters self-defense situation. It was a superb learning experience!"

Gorski echoed the sentiments of his fellow AFTACers.

"I walked away with an even greater respect of what the men and women of law enforcement face on a daily basis, and appreciate the dedication it takes to put their lives on the line each and every day," said Gorski. "I value my Air Force CATM training for deployment scenarios, and now I equally value the SDTTS training as well. This was an extraordinary experience and I can't thank Sheriff Ivey and his deputies enough for offering this invaluable course."