

STREET SMARTS LIVING IN "CONDITION YELLOW"

You're alert, you're totally aware of what's happening around you—you're a "point man in enemy territory!"

By Marcus Wynne

"You got to have the sense," Smitty said. "You got to be switched on...all your senses working and you paying attention to what they're saying to you. That's how you smell trouble before you run into it."

Smitty was a battle-seasoned recon sergeant who had served as a LRRP with the 173d Airborne and the 1st Cavalry in Viet Nam. I was a young slick-sleeve paratrooper under his tutelage at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was talking about the point-man's sense—the ability to be out in front of a recon team and anticipate the enemy ambushes, minefields and tripwires.

That special awareness is just as critical to the lawman or the armed civilian as it is to the recon man out in Indian territory. We call it alertness, situational awareness, street smarts or, in the words of Colonel Cooper, "living in Condition Yellow." Col. Cooper's famous color code describes the various states of awareness necessary to survive a lethal encounter. What it doesn't describe is how to get into the necessary mental states.

Retired Air Force Colonel John Boyd ran into the same difficulty when he was training fighter pilots. Total situational awareness is what keeps a pilot alive in a dogfight, but how do you break down "the sense" in such a way that you can teach it to trainees? Boyd studied film footage of actual dogfights and interviewed pilots who had survived aerial combat and discovered that pilots go through a cycle of Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action—which he called "OODA loops". The critical component Boyd discovered was that the victorious American pilots, even when outgunned, won by assessing the situation faster and reacting faster. They did this by getting inside their opponent's OODA loop.

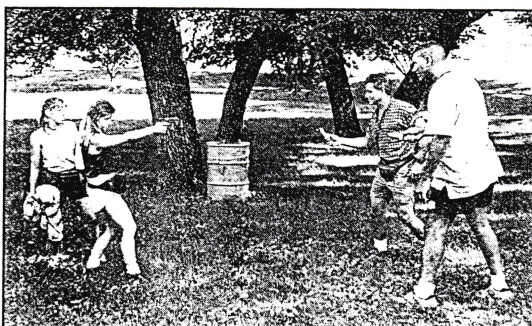
Boyd's insights and ideas were greeted by a small faction of ex-Vietnam commanders within the Army and Marine Corps, whose combat experiences validated the concept of a smaller, less well-armed force outmaneuvering the opponent. With influential supporters like Army Brigadier General Huba Wass de



The women **OBSERVE** and **ORIENT** on the men approaching them in the park.



They **DECIDE** and **ACT** on their decision to leave for a more populated area.



After **OBSERVING** and **ORIENTING** on the hostile intention displayed, the armed woman **DECIDES** and **ACTS** to protect herself and her friend. Her Karl Sokol custom Hi-Power and the willingness to use it displayed in her body language bring things to a halt.

Czege, who rewrote the Army's tactical doctrine manual, and Marine Corps Commandant General Alfred Gray, the concept of getting inside and breaking the opponent's OODA cycle was taught to hundreds of officers, who then went on to use the new strategy to devastating effect in Desert Storm.

So how does this strategy apply to defensive pistol craft?

In personal combat, whether you're a soldier, a police officer, or a legally armed civilian, assessing the situation faster and reacting faster in a lethal engagement is what will ensure your survival. Alertness is our early warning system; the earlier we spot trouble brewing, the more time we have to develop and use options. Time equals options. When we run out of time, we run out of options. Our options can range from avoiding a situation, calling for back-up, or a last-ditch panicked fumbling

STREET SMARTS

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for our weapon. We need to maximize our options, which means we need to maximize our time. Time also equals distance; the further out we spot a problem, the sooner we can present our weapon (if justified) and use the firearm to create stand-off distance and control the threat.

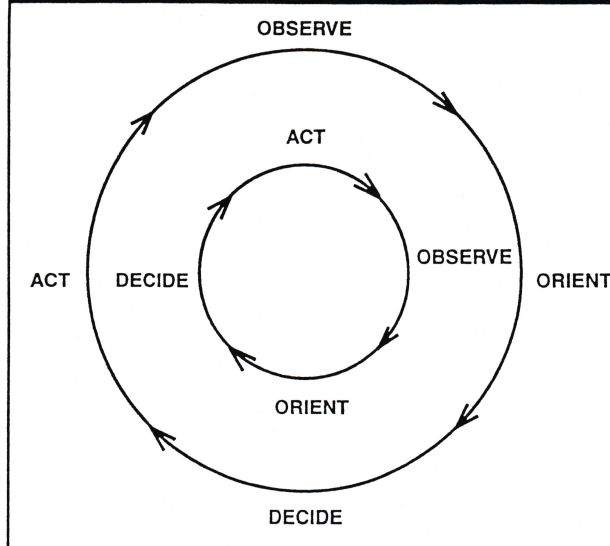
The first component of the OODA loop is OBSERVATION. I've heard this described as looking around and paying attention to what seems out of place. It's more than that. A key element of observation is something I quote at the beginning of this piece, "...all your senses working and you paying attention to what they're saying to you." That's the first and most critical component of situational awareness: paying attention to what our senses are telling us. Research in human learning, especially in neuro-linguistic programming, shows that the human organism constantly processes information on several levels. The primary processing avenues are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. I would add other-than-conscious processing, the province of intuition or hunch—what we call street sense, like when we just know something is going down, but we couldn't tell you exactly how we know.

The human being can't not communicate. We are hard-wired in our brains to communicate constantly on the non-verbal level. If we weren't, infants would starve to death because they can't communicate their needs verbally. How often do we see someone and say to ourselves, "He sure looks unhappy," or "She looks on top of the world today"? Body posture and physiology continually transmit communications that we are all hard-wired to receive and understand.

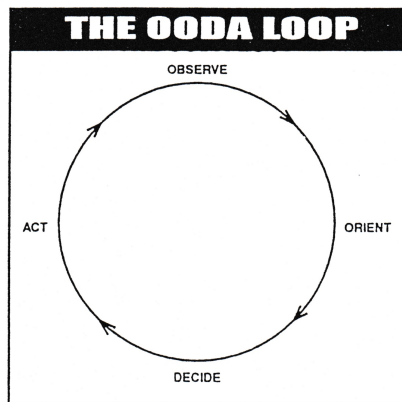
Complications arise when we go through socialization and introduce a pre-processing filter in our perceptual process. The brain filters through the overwhelming amount of information our senses feed us according to a priority created by our upbringing, cultural context and personal experiences. We learn early what is important to us and what is not and filter out what we judge to be non-essential information. The problem is that sometimes we filter out information that is essential to our survival because of that social conditioning. Mental commentary like "This isn't happening to me," or "This person doesn't really want to hurt me," or "I'm just being paranoid" in the face of real and imminent danger is a form of denial that robs us of options, time and distance.

We need to get out of our own way and re-learn trust in that intuitive processing. We need to pay attention to it. I describe this as being engaged in our environment and being an active participant in our life. This doesn't mean a

GETTIN INSIDE THE OODA LOOP



The inner circle represents the shooter with the best chance of survival; he's into action while the outer circle opponent is just beginning to observe.



paranoid and fearful stance in relation to the world; it means active engagement in what is going on around us. It means we are looking around and seeing what is there, that we are listening to the sounds and voices around us, that we are feeling the condition of the air or the surfaces around us, and that we are paying attention to the little hunches that are with us every day.

We can consciously train this ability, five minutes at a time, by asking ourselves, "What am I seeing around me right now?" and enumerating the people, trees, birds, cars that are in our visual field; by asking "What am I hearing right now?" and carefully listening to the birds, the voices of people walking by, the planes passing overhead, the sound of car doors slamming; by asking "What am I feeling right now?" and noticing the twinges in our stomach, the tightness in our shoulders, the tension in our foreheads; by asking "What do I know right now?" and paying attention to the messages we get from the sixth sense of

intuition—whether it's a little voice or a knot in the pit of our stomach.

Intelligence agencies use a variant of this exercise to train field operatives. They sit the trainee down in a busy bus station or airport terminal and tell them to record everything and everyone they see for a set period of time. The object of the exercise is not so much to passively record a possible surveillance as it is to develop the ability to process lots of information efficiently and relax the pre-conscious filter. Working like this in a stimuli intensive environment quickly

improves your ability to perceive. Boyd's work with fighter pilots bears this out: in aerial combat, a pilot must process kinesthetic, visual and auditory information and make decisions while piloting a plane at speeds of 700-1200 miles per hour. Gunfight survivors have told me they were processing information so fast that it seemed as though time slowed down for them. We can learn to do this—before we need to use it—by practicing situational awareness in five minute blocks throughout the day.

The total observation skills we develop are utilized in the second component of OODA: ORIENTATION. Orientation parallels Col. Cooper's Condition Orange, which is a state of selective awareness and focus. Specifically we have identified something within our total sphere of observation, which includes sound, sight, feeling and intuition, that requires closer attention. We turn our focus there and ORIENT on what draws our attention. It might be a car approaching the crosswalk we're in or a man lingering beside our parked car. This state of selective and closer attention leads to the next component: DECISION.

Decision involves important sub-components, specifically previous experience and training. We decide, or plan in advance, what we do according to our previous life experiences and any formal training we may have. In the context of personal combat, those decisions may range from spotting a troublesome individual and avoiding him to confronting the suspect at gun point and taking him into custody. The important aspect is that the earlier we OBSERVE and ORIENT on a problem, the more time we have to DECIDE on a course of ACTION, which

is the last component of the OODA loop.

ACTION is when we effect the plan we DECIDE on. We might decide to avoid an imminent situation or to engage a target, but in any event, we put into action our plan. The important aspect of ACTION is that once we've acted, we've changed the situation and we need to OBSERVE the new, changed situation, ORIENT on the changed situation, DECIDE what we're going to do and continue to ACT.

This is the model of human behavior and information processing that is most useful to the gunfighter. The OODA loop provides a continuous, ongoing process of awareness and evaluation that is effortless to maintain on a moment by moment basis—provided you take the time to train yourself to do so. The OODA loop is a model of three-dimensional thinking that actively engages the user in his environment. The process of consciously using the OODA loop creates the necessary situational awareness to "live in Condition Yellow."

So what about the tactical use of OODA? How else can we use this concept in gun fighting?

The decisive component identified by military strategists in the tactical application of the OODA loop is the key element of getting inside your opponent's OODA loop to assess and act faster than your opponent. If you look at the second OODA loop diagram, you'll see that the

COOPER COLOR CODE

WHITE: A state of total unawareness of your surroundings. Oblivious to what is going on around you, you are unready and unaware.

YELLOW: A state of relaxed alertness. You are tuned in and engaged in and aware of your surroundings.

ORANGE: A state of specific alertness, in which you have focused a selective awareness on a developing problem.

RED: A state of full physiological alarm—"fight or flight." Action is required and the fight is on.

NOTE: Previous versions of the Color Code included a Condition Black. According to recent API graduates, the Color Code has been simplified by dropping Condition Black, which referred to lethal force being used.

inner circle represents the combatant with the most chance of survival: the inner combatant is already into ACTION while the outer combatant is just starting at OBSERVE. If you act decisively while your opponent is still observing, your speed has maximized your options while eliminating your opponent's.

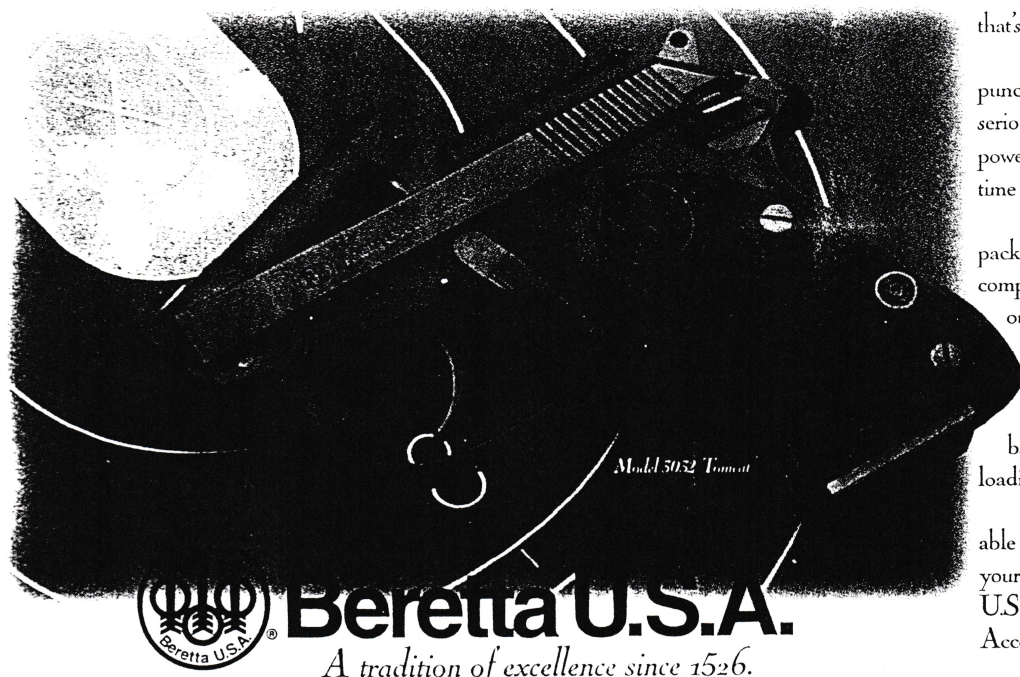
Another key concept is breaking your

opponent's OODA loop. If you can deny your opponent observation, orientation, decision or action, anywhere along in the process, you deny them the ability to fight effectively. The Desert Storm strategists demonstrated the success of this concept when they used air superiority to destroy Saddam Hussein's ability to observe the allied forces. The subsequent allied use of deception enabled them to stay one step ahead of Hussein throughout the war.

I've taught this concept to military and government security personnel, federal and local law enforcement officers, as well as private citizens and the reports I get back indicate that they find the use of an acronym like OODA an easy tool to reinforce their situational awareness. One federal agent attributed her success in managing her first armed encounter to her conscious use of the OODA loop. OBSERVE, ORIENT, DECIDE, ACT. I invite you to experiment with the process and see how it works for you—five minutes at a time.

About the author: With over 17 years relevant experience in military, government and private sectors, including service in 82nd Airborne and as a Federal Air Marshal, he has recently instructed at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.

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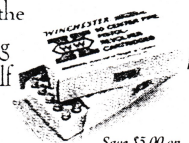


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