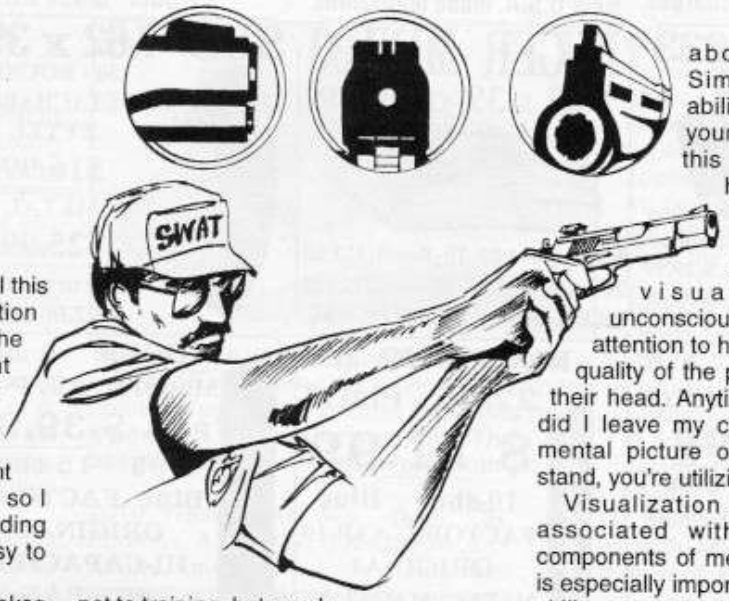
SHOOTING WITH THE MIND'S EYE

How to think "Front Sight!"

By Marcus Wynne



"Marcus, I used to think all this mind-control visualization stuff was a lot of BS," the former Operational Detachment DELTA commando said to me. "But I've used this stuff. When we went through that door, I was burned in on my front sight. And that front sight swelled up to the size of an orange, so I could see every little nick and ding around the Tritium insert. It was easy to put it on the terrorist's chest..."

That shooter and I were sipping cokes on a dusty range hidden away in the foothills of West Virginia, trading stories about our experiences with using visualization techniques in shooting. I contrasted his story with one I heard from a young police officer in a major metropolitan department after the officer had been involved in his first shooting.

"I was never so scared in my life," he admitted, the bluffing, macho facade he had erected around himself in the wake of the post-shooting investigation, the back-slapping in the locker room and the legal depositions, slipped away as he unburdened himself:

"You know, all the time I spent on the range didn't prepare me for that...I'm always working, you know, front sight, front sight, front sight...but when it came down to it all I could see was his face and the flash of his shot at me...I've done red-handle exercises, paint-ball, you know...but I guess when it came down to it I never really saw myself shooting the guy, never saw it in my mind like it really turned out to be..."

Skill Versus Luck

Both of these brave men were successful in their critical incidents. The difference between them was in their post-incident confidence level: one of them received the ultimate validation for his training methods, the other was consumed with doubt and dismay by his performance and attributed his survival not to training, but purely to luck. The key in both these stories is the element of the shooters *seeing themselves doing or not-doing the deed.*

The high-speed shooters of the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), Britain's Special Air Service (SAS), most successful gunfight survivors and the top competitive shooters *ALL* use visualization techniques to train their shooting skills—even though they might not call what they do visualization. That sounds too much like what a granola-eating, goat-skin sandal-wearing, politically correct transcendental meditator might say.

Instead, you hear terms like "seeing it in my mind's eye," "running through it in my head" or "seeing myself doing the deed." That descriptive language tells us what we need to know in order to understand how these high-order shooters are able to do what they do, both on the range and out in the real world. In my ongoing research into critical skill retention under stress, I've found (as have other researchers) that high performers—whether astronauts, fighter pilots, anti-terrorist commandos, police officers or civilian survivors of gunfights—have a number of skills and attributes in common.

One of those attributes is a well-developed set of visualization skills; high performers consciously apply visualization techniques to enhance their performance.

So what do we mean when we talk about visualization? Simply stated, it's the ability to see pictures in your head. Everyone has this ability—you're born hard-wired with the capability built into your neurology. Most people use their visualization skills unconsciously, without paying any attention to how they do it, or to the quality of the pictures they create in their head. Anytime you think, "Where did I leave my car keys?" and see a mental picture of them on the night stand, you're utilizing visualization.

Visualization and the neurology associated with it are important components of memory. Visual memory is especially important in the retention of skills associated with tasks involving hand-eye coordination—like shooting. Experiments conducted by neurologists, where various parts of the brain were electrically stimulated, as well as sessions of deep hypnosis targeting visual recall, indicate that visual memory is essentially perfect. The deletion and distortion of visual memory in conscious recall (as seen in witnesses to crimes and or/accidents) is a function of the conscious mind attempting to put order to an overwhelming amount of information. Without some kind of filter in place, we would be overwhelmed by the amount of information that our eyes are constantly taking in. Our preconscious filter activates and sorts information according to what we believe our priorities are at that moment—which isn't always what we actually need.

Visualization & Shooting Skill

In training for shooting, visualization used with a supporting range program can generate quantum leaps in performance. Here's how:

- Visualization used while actively training the skill on the range increases and amplifies the visual-kinesthetic memory associated with the skill.
- Visualization used away from the range increases the retention of the skill.
- Visualization used to prepare for a specific event reduces reaction time and event-induced stress.

SHOOTING WITH THE MIND'S EYE

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While visualization has been around as long as humans have walked upright, the systematic use of it in sports and other training is relatively recent and well documented. Olympic athletes, professional sports teams and high-end military and intelligence units have been using it since the late 1970s. An interesting examination of the systematic use of visualization to improve shooting skills is covered in the book *The Warrior's Edge*, by Alexander, Groller and Morris. The authors detail the then highly classified Jedi Project, when the US Army studied the best handgun shooters to learn how their visualization skills might be taught to new recruits.

The resulting training program improved shooting scores dramatically, with a shorter investment of training time.

Is learning to shoot better in a shorter period of time something you want to learn? It's easy, really...

First you start by looking at your own pictures. Close your eyes and recall something you know well, like your bedroom at home. Can you see everything in the room? If you have difficulty, stand up as though you were at the door, and point at the various things—the bed, the night stand, the dresser—and where they would be located from your position at the door.

Now pay attention to the small details. Do you see it like a movie, or like a series of still slides? In black and white or color? Through your eyes, or can you see yourself looking at the room? If it's a still picture, is there a frame around it? Are the colors bright or dull? (See the sidebar for visual distinctions and qualities.)

What happens when you make the colors brighter? When you make it black and white? When you bring it closer, or when you put it far away from you?

Now let's bring this back to something shooting-specific, something simple, like sight picture. Do you know what your front sight looks like? What it really looks like? Take a minute and study the front sight of your favorite hand-cannon and look at it as though you've never seen it before. Do you know where every little chip and ding is? The gentleman speaking at the beginning of this piece could draw a picture of his front sight without looking at it. My former partner Scott Ralston can describe the front-sight on each one of the seventeen 1911 .45 autos he owns—with his eyes closed. Both of these gentlemen are world-class shooters in an arena where the trophy you get is your skin in one piece. They started where all of us are right now, at the beginning, by studying the front sight of their pistol.

After you know what your front sight really looks like, take it in your hands and bring it up to eye level and lock in on that front sight. Use all of your skills to create as clear and steady a hold as you can. What does that look like? Study it carefully, then close your eyes and keep your hands and weapon in the same position. Only when you can see your front sight as clearly as when your eyes are open will you open them and notice your front sight again. Go back and forth five times, with your eyes open and then closed. Hold that vision of perfect sight alignment in your mind's eye.

Then lower your weapon. Close your eyes. Create that vision of perfect sight alignment. When you have it clearly in focus, down to every smallest detail, open your eyes and bring your weapon up into alignment. Are there differences between what you see in your mind's eye and what you see when you bring the pistol up to your eye? Make what adjustments you need to in order to make the picture in front of you perfect; notice the differences in grip, position, stance, etc. Visualize clearly. Then lower your weapon, close your eyes and go through the sequence again. Do this five times.

You'll notice that each time, your presentation and your visualization will become even more congruent. So now we'll add something a little more advanced that will accelerate your learning even more. Create your visualization. Bring your weapon up with your eyes closed. Imagine your weapon being perfectly aligned. When you feel as though you have it just right and your visualization is perfectly focused, open your eyes. Are there any differences between your visualization and what you see when you open your eyes? Make any necessary adjustments and do it again. Five times.

Do you notice the difference when you pay attention to the fine details?

You can use this particular visualization as a building block to add other components: the draw, holster skills, relative positioning for tactics, etc. Five minutes at a time. Just this simple technique adds to the efficiency of your performance and increases your accuracy. How can it add to the retention of your hard-earned shooting skills when you don't have the time to get to the range? Pretty easily...

Once you've mastered the techniques mentioned above, you can conjure up the image of your front sight (and the accompanying kinesthetics, the feelings of the gun in your hand) anytime you choose to. Maybe you're daydreaming at work, staring at the wall. Why not use that as training time? Create your visualization and refine the focus on your front sight. Can you blow the image of your front sight up to the size of an orange? Make it close up, or zoom out? Change colors? Make it blurry, then sharply in focus?

One shooter I know uses his spare time when out in public to refine his visualization. While waiting for his wife to come out of the grocery store, he'd visualize his front sight in perfect alignment on various objects in the parking lot. He'd imagine scenarios where he would have to draw his Karl Sokol custom .45 and go to work, and see those imaginary scenarios as clearly as though he were watching a movie take place right in front of him.

The young police officer I mentioned earlier sought counseling from a skilled psychiatrist experienced with post-traumatic stress disorder. He's doing great, is back on the job and has incorporated intensive visualization work into his personal training. "It works," he said to me. "I use it to rehearse everything from vehicle stops to verbal defusing to shooting. Adding the emotional content to my pictures helps me experience my visualization as though it were real...and when it comes time to do it, I feel like I have already been there—and succeeded."

These techniques are as simple as can be. All you need is decent vision, imagination and the willingness to experiment with your own brain. They've been proven in jet fighter cockpits, in spacecraft, in the back streets of Beirut and on football playing fields. Experiment and have fun with them; let the only limit be the limits you yourself place on your imagination. •

VISUAL DISTINCTIONS

Use these guidelines to help you notice the details you use in creating your visualizations.

BRIGHTNESS: Are your pictures dim or bright? Can you make them brighter?

SIZE: How big are they? Large or small? Can you change their size?

COLOR: Black and white or color? How do you change the colors?

MOVEMENT: Fast, slow or still? What happens when you speed them up? Slow them down?

DISTANCE: Are they near or far? What happens when you make them small and far away? Or big and right in front of your face?

FOCUS: Are they clear or fuzzy? Is there any difference in how you feel when you make them fuzzy, or clear?

LOCATION: Are they right in front of you? Off to one side, or up and to the right, or where?

DEPTH: Do you see them in three dimensions or are they flat? Can you make them 3-D or flatten them?