

Overall Awareness - White Paper

I wanted to talk about overall awareness, situational awareness and tactical awareness. First off, I'd like to start off with general overall awareness by mentioning and a hypothesis by military strategist Col. John Boyd. The concept is called the OODA Loop. This is an acronym for Observe, Orientate, Decide and Act.

During the Observation phase, you take into consideration the unfolding circumstances of the event, implicit guidance and control, any outside information that's occurring, and unfolding information/interaction with the environment. This is then fed forward to the Orientation portion. During this phase your cultural traditions, your genetic heritage, all new information, but mostly all the training and learning during your life is taken into consideration. In other words your instincts. This is then fed forward into the Decision-making process where you make a hypothesis or best guess, based on your Observation, fed forward into the Orientation process, where you now make a decision, which leads directly to your action.

I often use a metaphor of driving down the road heading towards a T intersection. When you're driving straight into that intersection, your observation skills are generating new information from your looking left, looking right, looking forward and looking in the rearview mirror. As you close in on the intersection you orientate to all this new information and come up with a decision, then action. Based on all this new information, you come up with a hypothesis. Say the light is yellow, decide to hit the brakes or hit the gas, an action.

During my last tour in Iraq I was constantly utilizing this method. This constant mental training allowed me to maintain a *heightened awareness* of my surroundings. I was constantly observing my surroundings, orientating to them, making decisions and then acting on them. All of my students and friends who have known me over last several years know that I use this process, OODA Loop, and believe in it as the beginning to overall awareness protocols. This is one of the first things my students hear me say, and it's not until the shooting days on the range, that we move forward to the situational awareness and tactical awareness protocols.

Next we have situational awareness, where due to a contact or moments of heightened duress, we have to maintain outside awareness because our body goes into a nor-epinephrine/fight or flight mode. Our body naturally flows into a focused/tunnel vision mode. Search and assess, or scan and assess means coming out of that focus and reassessing your peripherals. As you roll into a contact/moment of duress, your OODA Loop protocol is fed into a heightened situational awareness, where you're trying not to lose peripheral awareness. If this contact/moment of duress turns into an engagement, your focus tunnels towards engaging the target, ensuring the target is down, then like a tank turret you assess left right, up and down, and ensure your target is still down. Situational awareness turns into tactical awareness almost instantly.

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In combat or a hot zone what I've found, is that your OODA Loop process is on high alert as you enter and pass through. When the contact happens you instantly assess yourself, engage the target, ensuring that it is down, then widen your focus outward, still ensuring your target is down but scanning outward to ensure no other threats are imminent. You first engage the target, follow it as it falls, reengage it necessary, scan deep and peripherals, reassess your target, rescan your peripherals, thus tactical awareness.

Your strong side is going to be a weak side regarding peripheral awareness. Because of the slight tilt of your head during your sight picture/sight alignment, your strong side peripheral is at a disadvantage. You need to train knowing this. In other words, if I'm right-handed, my strong side is normally my right side. This means looking outward to my left is much easier than looking outward to my right. I train starting my scan and assess looking to the right, my strong side, because my open left eye has already seen the general left peripherals.

Also, during a contact there is so much going on, so many different sounds, smells, screams, gunshots, burning flesh, smoke, etc. that your left and right scan in reality turns to all over the place. You automatically prioritize these. Training allows you to strengthen your muscle memory in your mental memory when this happens. We've all heard the phrase "situation dictates," this is where your constant training helps you work faster through this process.

Once again when the contact/moment of duress becomes an engagement of a hostile target, engage and ensure your target is down, following them as they fall, both eyes open maintaining peripherals. Then go from center mass, down as they fall, up to look down range, strong/right - weak/left for other hostile targets. All the while taking input from your other senses.

We've all heard that you need to keep breathing, because it keeps you focused and this is true. But what is also true is that you should train with the methodology of a checklist, constantly moving on to the next item in that checklist to ensure you maximize your decision-making and problem-solving process. This type of training also puts fear in check. Your training gives you the ability to perform under duress which sets fear aside, because there's no time for it.

Amidst all the information you're taking in from all your senses during the contact, your brain needs to prioritize them. Which is the sound of a can falling to the ground, which is the sound of the safety clicking off? This is why you train like you fight. The difference between a good operator and a great operator is their ability to problem solve. Problem solving is all about making decisions and coming up with a plan to make it happen. The faster you can do this-successfully, the better you will become. My dad, a Purple Heart recipient and survivor of the siege of Khe Sanh, told me one thing about combat. He said "Trust your instincts, because there's no time for second guessing." I'm proposing to you that all your life lessons learned equal just that, your instincts, and the above methodology is just a way to put it into a training protocol.

Instinct, you've got to go with it.