

Jail & Prison techniques used by U.S. Correctional facilities

Jim Wagner

Imagine going into a cage with the most violent people in society, knowing that at any moment they can turn on you. It's not the UFC where winning means notoriety and losing means going back to work. Instead it's a very real arena where you may end up paying the "ultimate price" - your life. The arena is the job of Corrections.

Every day thousands of corrections officers book, house, transport and guard America's prisoners. From the local city jail to maximum-security penitentiaries it's an environment that can turn volatile in an instant. I know, because I spent two years of my life as a corrections officer before becoming a cop. I've also been hired by several prisons over the years to train their guards. It's a place where you never turn your back on anyone, where you always double check locks, and where dropping your guard can mean getting "shanked" (stabbed with an improvised weapon).

Even today I instruct a course throughout the world called Defensive Tactics for Corrections. The term "Defensive Tactics" refers to subduing combative subjects; in this case, violent prisoners. Previously the techniques and tactics of correctional facilities have remained behind closed doors - and bars. That is, up until now. In this article I'm going to reveal to you a few techniques and pointers to help you survive various crisis situations similar to those corrections officers face everyday.

Edged Weapons Defense

It's no secret to corrections officers that many prisoners are armed. If the weapons are not smuggled in somehow, then they are made while in custody. Criminals with nothing but time on their hands become very creative in making improvised weapons out of almost anything; even paint chips from the wall. It's not uncommon to do a cell "shakedown" (surprise inspection of a prisoner and the cell) and find pieces of metal or melted plastic sharpened into cutting or stabbing instruments. I have personally found several "home made" weapons under the bunks of inmates or stashed in some crevice of the cell. Thus, the possibility of getting stabbed is a very real concern to every corrections officer.

The following technique, called the Knife Avoidance Exercise, which I developed and teach to my students, is simple and effective, and should be included in your own training program as well. First, outfit an "attacker" (the trainer) with a rubber training knife. You, the "victim" (the trainee) will be empty handed wearing eye protection (rubber training knives can cause eye injuries). The attacker will then make a sudden violent attack against you slashing and stabbing for vital areas.

The moment the attack is launched, place both of your hands in front of you, guarding your centerline. Move out of the way and slap the knife away with both hands. That's right, slap or push the knife away from you each time it comes at you. If the attacker is skilled with a knife there is no way you are going to get the weapon out of their hand. Therefore, keep dodging and avoiding the weapon in this manner until you can either get to a weapon yourself or escape. Keep in mind that in a real life situation you're going to get cut. You can count on it. You can withstand multiple cuts to the hands and arms (known as defensive wounds in police talk) and still survive. The hospital can sew you up later. But, you won't survive long with wounds to the torso. In training you can prepare yourself mentally for this occurrence so you won't be paralyzed with fear if you ever sustain defensive wounds. To make your training even more realistic, dip the rubber training knife in stage blood. Seeing the "blood" will condition your mind to the gore associated with knife wounds, and thus reduces the shock factor.

Another key factor to remember when it comes to edged weapons defense is that the average knife fight last a mere five seconds, and rarely goes beyond 10 seconds. If you are unable to neutralize the attacker or get away within the first 4 - 8 seconds your ability to survive is severely diminished. Any good Filipino Kali student can prove that. Thus, you have only moments to observe, orient, decide and act (O.O.D.A).

There are many martial arts schools teaching disarm techniques against knife attacks. They're good to know, but they seldom work. I've attacked hundreds of students (corrections officers, SWAT team operators, patrol officers, Special Forces personnel) in realistic scenarios where I played the "bad guy," and only a handful of defenders have survived... by "shooting" me. Not one student has ever disarmed me (of course, this test is always conducted at the beginning of my course before they're trained in the Knife Avoidance Exercise). In addition, I have survived two real knife attacks myself (one in the Army and one on police patrol), and both times I was unable to disarm the subject even with years of martial arts training behind me at the time. With that said, here's a word of warning: you're better off using the Knife Avoidance technique first if you plan on living.

Cell Extractions

Sometimes prisoners barricade themselves in their cell and refuse to come out. Somebody has to go in and get them out. It's a very dangerous environment due to the tight confines: metal bunk beds, toilet, sink, and concrete walls. Thus, many jails and prisons have what they call Cell Extraction Teams. These are usually 3 to 6 person teams trained to enter a cell to subdue and extract resistant inmates.

If less-than-lethal methods (such as chemical agents, nets, tasers, or riot munitions) are ineffective, then a team must physically extract the prisoner from the cell by force. To do it safely requires team coordination.

When a team "forces entry" into a cell they spread out as much as the cell will allow, and rush the inmate. This forces the inmate to divide his attention between each of the team members. Remember the O.O.D.A. process? The mind slows down with multiple threats, thus giving the entry team the tactical advantage.

The first officer through the door, usually armed with a riot shield, engages the inmate first. He tries to shove the combative inmate up against the wall and pin him there, if

possible, with the shield. If the "number one man" is not armed with a shield he will engage the inmate with hand-to-hand combat techniques (punching, kicking, elbow and knee strikes, baton, or whatever the agency's policy dictates). The "number two man" will come in low, wrap his arms around the inmate's legs just above the knees, and twists him to the ground which is the signal to the number one man to grab the upper body and knock him off balance to bring him down. The "number three man" will assist where needed, and help with the pinning and cuffing. The extract will take but a few seconds if choreographed right.

Even though you, the martial artist, may never end up on a "team" in an altercation, there are lessons that can be learned from cell extractions that will also work for you in a self-defense situation.

If you find yourself confronting a combative subject in a small room you may want to pin the subject to the wall or a corner to prevent mobility. A mobile enemy is a dangerous one because he, or she, can use the environment to their advantage. You could end up tripping or being pushed over furniture, debris, or getting whacked with an object that the subject runs to and use as a weapon. By pinning the subject, you take away their access to remote weapons, and their ability to put you where they want you. In addition, pinning them may also prevent their escape (if that is your goal).

Another lesson to draw from cell extractions is in the case where you find yourself fighting multiple subjects. Remember that you can only fight one person at a time. In actual fights the bad guys don't wait their turns to lay into you. Attempt to disable the first attacker then immediately move on to the next. You must be careful not to let one subject distract you while the other goes for your legs taking you down as cell extraction teams do to inmates. If you see the second subject going for your legs or coming up behind you, you must move away immediately and engage the aggressor closest to you. Always try to keep one subject in front of the other. In other words, never get sandwiched between two attackers.

When training to fight multiple subjects, start off with just two aggressors. Outfit yourself and two students with protective equipment and mouthpieces. You will be the "victim." Then, have the two aggressors attack you. A third party should stop the fight after 10 -15 seconds to prevent injuries. Then switch roles and have one of the aggressors attack the new victim. Students must be careful not to strike the trainee too hard if the trainee's attention is diverted because he ends up sandwiched. In other words, don't cold cock someone who is not looking. Hit them just hard enough to let them know that they screwed up. It's not easy fighting off two people, and it's never quite as easy as it looks in martial arts movies. Practice makes perfect.

Keep Your Back to the Wall

One thing you soon learn working in the jails is to never turn your back on an inmate. The moment you turn away, or you let someone get behind you, you're vulnerable. You immediately lose the tactical advantage, and you could end up getting blind-sided. Now, let's apply this knowledge to you.

Whenever you eat in a restaurant, sit in a bar, or wait at the airport for example, position yourself with your back to the wall if possible. Place yourself in a position where you can see everything. This applies to any public place where violence could occur.

If a crisis situation arises you'll want to have adequate reaction time. You want to observe the warning signs early on, and not when it's too late. Scan the area for potential problems so as to be pro-active, and not just reactive. Proactive means initiating a response in anticipation of an action. It means getting involved or escaping. In the words of the Orange County Sheriff's Corrections Officer Academy where I trained at in 1989, "Position yourself to observe all dangerous possibilities."

Another example of not turning your back is when you are walking down a public street. Stay in the center of the sidewalk. Do not walk too close to parked vehicles, or too close to buildings where someone can jump out and attack you. If you're walking near a wall or fence stay close to it since that is the one direction an attack will not come from.

Avoiding the fight

Preventing or avoiding a conflict is always better than fighting. At the "jail academy" recruits are taught a demeanor of "command presence." In other words, appearing confident, authoritative, and "in control" A good command presence can prevent most conflicts. On the other hand, if you are soft spoken, not making eye contact, and do not appear to be confident, then the crook will exploit those weaknesses; both in the jail and on the streets.

The only way to develop command presence, if it is not a God given gift, is to include it in your training. Set up fighting scenarios where you first warn an aggressor to back off. For example set up one where someone plays the role of an aggressive pan handler and you are up front with him, "Look, get out of my way or I'm going to call the cops!" With enough practice your attitude will reflect your training.

Disturbances

With criminals cooped up together day in and day out, fights and riots are often the results. When such conflicts arise many corrections officers feel that it is their duty to immediately jump right in the middle of it and try to stop it. However, rushing in can be dangerous. That's why there are four rules corrections officers are required to remember in these situations:

1. What is the situation?
2. Let other officers know that you're checking it out.
3. Call for back up.
4. Don't unlock cell doors until safe to do so.

If we modify these rules for the crisis situations that you may face, such as your neighbors fighting in front of your home or you see a strong-arm robbery occurring, the rules would read:

1. What is the situation? (observe before acting)
2. Call the police. Give them a complete account.
3. Be a good witness, and not a casualty yourself.
4. If you are compelled to get involved make sure the odds are stacked in your favor.

The next time you hear about an infamous prisoner being transported, sent to court, or going to death row, think about the men and women who risk their lives daily dealing with this element, and their silent contribution to the martial arts.

Copyright Jim Wagner www.jimwagnerrealitybased.com