



# THE LINE OF FIRE

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED  
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TACTICAL ARMS TRAINING WITH THE CADET COMBAT SHOOTING TEAM

## Dust clouds drift across the arid wasteland

of the Airburst range just west of Pueblo Colorado. In the distance, Cold War era tank carcasses lay heaped amid the make-shift city built of old railroad car containers, giant generator hulls and burned out vehicles. Every metal structure as far as the eye can see is riddled with bullet holes and the dry earth is scattered with empty shell casings underfoot. An unseasonably hot sun burns down on the January training day. All around there is quiet, save the light breeze which shifts in from the west.

Coach Kelly Hohnholz gives a command and the Air Force Academy Combat Shooting Team raise their rifles in unison. The cadets are lined up six-wide, with one shooter in front and one spotter behind—their eyes trained on the targets down range. Each wears full tactical combat gear—a vest jammed with spare ammunition, a side arm clinging to his leg, hearing and vision protection in place and, most important, a sharpened awareness of his weapon and his surroundings. With another command the team begins slowly walking towards the targets, their steps perfectly matched to keep the line together.

“Threat!” barks the coach.

Rifles are raised and sighted and the air is filled with the thunder of gunfire as each shooter unleashes a three-shot volley from his AR-15. The line continues to move forward. Without missing a step, one

cadet pulls his magazine free of the rifle, slaps a new one into place, chambers the first round and checks the dust cover.

“Threat!”

Three more rounds are unleashed as a total of 18 shots split the air. The cardboard targets shudder with gunfire and dust clouds erupt from the desert down range where the bullets impact the ground. Shell casings flitter across the line and the rumble of the second volley slowly echoes over the wasteland. The command to stand down is given. Each cadet pans his head back and forth, searching for the final all clear. Rifles are lowered, safeties locked in place. The team stands still. No one speaks. No one moves. The coach makes his way towards the targets for the dreaded accuracy evaluation. In the distance, the dust slowly floats away, disappearing with the last echoes of gunfire. ▷



# COMBAT SHOOTING

After the firing line comes to a halt, each cadet scans his surroundings for further threats before securing his weapon.

## CALL TO ACTION

Jump back three weeks to the café in Fairchild Hall. Cadets busy themselves with their daily routines and the Hall of Exemplars is bustling with activity. CIC Kenneth Costello and civilian coach Kelly Hohnholz take their seats for a meeting with *Checkpoints* magazine. They are here to discuss the importance of the new cadet Combat Shooting Team, what it means for the Academy and for the future of Air Force officers who receive their commission from USAFA.

Costello is the Cadet-in-Charge of the Combat Shooting Team, and provides a brief history of how this new club came into being. He illustrates that the team was founded by cadets who recognized a need for a combat oriented shooting program at the Academy. Costello was a freshman then, and recounts the club's primitive origins. "The Academy had a stockpile of weapons from the inter-collegiate pistol team that had been shut down some years back for lack of interest. Therefore, we had the weapons and the Air Force began allocating ammo for us."

Casually organized at first, the club began searching for a figure head with extensive knowledge in the tactical shooting arena to provide guidance and mentorship. Fortunately, the club's path was soon aligned with Kelly Hohnholz, a seasoned tactical arms practitioner who teaches fire-arms safety courses in Denver, Colorado. "Before Coach Kelly came along," Costello explains, "we

were pretty much just picking up these weapons to hone our basic marksmanship skills. We were really struggling for membership and participation."

Kelly has since become the volunteer civilian coach of the Combat Shooting Team. A lifetime shooter, firearm enthusiast and safety professional, Coach Kelly recalls his initial introduction to the Academy shooting club. "At the time, my wife and I were holding open range days, which we called 'making payments.' I got a call from the CIC of the Academy's Combat Shooting Team, asking if he and the club could attend. We didn't have room to accommodate their 14 shooters at the time, so I agreed to come down to the Academy and do a range day for them."

When Kelly arrived at the Academy, he was surprised to find that the team only had five rifles for 14 shooters. "They had no holsters," he recounts, "no slings, no basic gear at all. So I decided it was my calling to help them." Kelly went to work contacting all of his affiliates in the gun industry, making a case for the cadet team. "My contacts came through in spades," Kelly remembers. "Remington and Bushmaster donated rifles. Beretta has donated M9 pistols to the program. There was a real out pouring of support to help these kids with the basic equipment that is similar to what they will be issued on active duty." ▽



### HEARING/VISION PROTECTION

Revision Sawfly glasses and Howard Leight Impact Sport electronic hearing protection.

### OVERARMOR

SpecOps Brand Overarmor Vest and armor: used to carry most equipment such as magazines, medical supplies, and water. Armor replicates what will be used in combat.

### SECONDARY WEAPON

Glock 34 or Beretta M9: 9X19mm. 15+ round magazines. Part of layered offense, used in case the primary weapon goes down. Effective range: 50 yards

### RIFLE MAGAZINES

Magpul PMAG AR-15 Magazines: Standard load out is six magazines, 180 rounds.

### PISTOL MAGAZINES

Standard load out is three magazines, 45 rounds

### PRIMARY WEAPON

Bushmaster XM15E2 type carbine: 5.56 NATO. 30 round magazines. Primary weapon in layered offense. Effective range: 550 yards.

**C1C KENNETH COSTELLO**



The firing line prepares for a pistol volley.

## “We’re not out there to turn gunpowder into noise. We’re out there to train.”

“Coach Kelly has played a huge part in developing a curriculum for the team,” Costello adds, “getting us equipped with new weapons. He’s very well connected with a multitude of companies, including Remington.” Just recently, the USAFA Endowment played a pivotal role in accepting a gift of 20 M-9 pistols from Beretta on behalf of the Combat Shooting Team. The group also uses the AR-15 rifle, which is essentially the equivalent of the Air Force’s standard issue M4 rifle only without the fully automatic firing capabilities. With the new plethora of weapons in place, the team went to work on how to safely and effectively use them in simulated combat situations.

“For the most part,” Costello describes, “a typical practice is designed to cover the basics. We learn how to shoot targets, how to reload and how to handle malfunctions.” One of the program’s main objectives is to begin familiarizing cadets with the weapons they will be issued while in the Air Force. Coach Kelly discusses his strategic plan regarding young officers freshly minted from the Academy who are preparing to go on active duty. “I’m not a police officer,” he clarifies. “I don’t kick in doors for a living, but I felt a calling to turn my knowledge over to the Combat Shooting Team, to the people who are preparing to go into harm’s way.” Coach Kelly emphasizes the importance of making the cadet training

environment as realistic as possible. He has created a curriculum that pits cadets against the three most probable combat scenarios they will face on active duty.

“The first,” Kelly begins, “involves a downed pilot. Officers need to be able to pick up field weapons—be they U.S. or foreign manufacture—and use them effectively. The second scenario involves the Joint Expeditionary Tasking, or JET program. This is where Air Force personnel are being used for convoys, logistics and fuel delivery where they are performing roles that would traditionally be handled by the Army or Marines. So, our training teaches them how to respond if they get ambushed in a vehicle. The third most likely scenario involves taking cover in a building or house during deployment. We teach cadets the basics of how to safely and effectively clear each room to take cover or shelter.”

The team has built a foundation on the teachings of Master Sergeant Paul Howe, former Army special operations and instructor for Combat Shooting and Tactics. MSGT Howe has published literature on shooting, and explains the basics on what a gun fighter should know in a combat situation.

Costello declares that the team starts off every combat shooting practice and squadron training session by reciting the four pinnacle rules of weapons safety. The cadet recites from memory, “Rule number one: treat every weapon as though it is loaded. Two: Never muzzle anything you are not willing to destroy. Three: finger off the trigger until you are ready to fire. Four: know your target, what’s around it, and the status of your weapon.”



Each shooter is paired with a spotter to keep the firing line together

## Shooting Team Roster

C1C Kenneth Costello  
C1C Peter Shufeldt  
C1C Joshua Auerbach  
C2C Joseph Springfield  
C2C Christopher Moede  
C2C Parker Jamieson  
C2C Derek Schillaci  
C3C Aaron Kerkhoff  
C3C Michael Jones  
C3C Zackary Watkins  
C3C Sebastian Constable  
C4C Oliver Sfeir  
C4C Alexander Severson  
C4C Jason David  
C4C Jared Hafich  
C4C Glen Hanson

OIC: Major Meghan Ripple  
AOIC: Major Joseph Granistosky  
NCOICs: TSgt Jon Hyder,  
TSgt Andre Bell  
TSgt Adrian Oriade

Coach: Mr. Kelly Hohnholz

# COMBAT SHOOTING

Working in conjunction with other shooters in a three dimensional environment with live ammunition is infinitely more complicated than resting in a prone position at the Academy's rifle range. "Outside of being shot at," Costello says. "weather is the number two stress inducer for service members. We've trained in sub-zero temperatures, when it literally hurts to move." No one ever said war was easy, which is why these cadets take their training so seriously. Considering the harsh reality that many young graduates will one day deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, the Combat Shooting Team is offering training of immeasurable value. The organization is 100 percent voluntary. Coach Kelly, the cadets, the OIC and the NCOIC(s) devote their time simply because they believe in the program. This brings up the inevitable question: when will tactical arms training become a part of the Academy's mandatory curriculum?

Back on the Airburst range, the firing line prepares for the transition drill. Just as before, the line advances on the targets, rifles raised. The cadets get off one shot with their AR-15s before the simulated rifle malfunction takes place. The primary weapons are quickly stowed and in the same movement pistols are unholstered, sighted and fired. The rounds crack through the air as shell casings dance in long shimmering arcs in the mid-day sun. The rumble of gunfire dissipates, safeties are locked, weapons holstered and the group once again goes into the assessment phase.

"This year's been really good to us," Costello reflects. "We've made a lot of progress. We implemented a squadron training pro-

gram last semester and the Cadet Wing Training Office—under the Commandant's office—picked it up. They've given us the go-ahead to start a training program that gives cadets some basic weapons familiarization. The program has been received very well by the Cadet Wing." A look of satisfaction washes over the cadet's face. "We're not out there to turn gunpowder into noise. We're out there to train."

Coach Kelly could not agree more. With a decided increase in Joint Expeditionary Tasking, it is clear that cadets will benefit from any weapons training they can get. As Air Force personnel continue to be cross-integrated with Army and Marine operations on the ground, the need for tactical arms training is upon us. "You can't always choose your battle field," Kelly says. "We try very hard to be adaptable, and there's always an opportunity to learn. We try to teach these cadets to flow like water around potential obstacles."

Much like water, the cadets are fluid as they reload their weapons and prepare for another volley. "Eyes and ears!" calls out the CIC. "Eyes and ears!" the cadets chorus in unison. Hearing and eye protection are secured. The Combat Shooting Team takes up their positions. Each cadet clears his mind to focus on the task at hand. Safeties are flicked off and the range goes hot; the firing line proceeds towards their targets and training continues, ever vigilant. ▣