LASERS FOR LOW LIGHT COMBAT

Where does the laser fit in the tactical operator's toolbox? By Clyde Caceres Photos by Ichiro Nagata

An off-duty officer in Ohio is driving home at night in his unmarked car, wearing his usual civilian clothes. Another driver comes up from behind flashing his lights and driving aggressively. Road rage! The officer calls dispatch who advises that troopers are en route. The officer pulls off to the shoulder of the road, hoping to break off from the enraged driver. Ominously, the other car follows him to the shoulder. The driver gets out of his car and begins to walk aggressively toward the officer. In the partial darkness, the officer sees the aggressor's hand slip into his jacket pocket. The off-duty officer steps out of his car and...



And what? The officer in this case has several critical choices to make - right now. Is this person a threat? If so, is it imminent? What is in his hand? If lethal force is justified, can the suspect be seen clearly enough in the dim light to make an accurate shot? This scenario shows several of the challenges that low-light presents: threat assessment, target identification and shot placement. With 80 percent of armed encounters occurring in reduced light, according to Dept. Of Justice statistics, the prepared individual must be armed with not only a gun, but also with the knowledge and tools required to survive in low-light. Human beings make virtually all of their decisions based on what they see. In fact, 85 percent of the sensory input we rely on to make decisions comes from visual stimuli. Limited visual input means limited ability to make sound

decisions. Whether you're a police officer searching for a subject, a legally armed citizen, an operator doing entry work, a soldier searching caves, or a homeowner defending your loved ones, low-light presents special challenges.

The obvious tool for dealing with the dark is white light. It is useful for navigation, target identification and engagement. White light can be handheld, weapon-mounted or ambient (i.e., sunlight or room lights). Although white light is critical, it's only half the story. Another low-light tool - the laser sight - completes the story.

Rest Of The Story

Meanwhile, back at the road side, our off-duty officer is facing an individual who displayed hostility with his vehicle and is now walking aggressively toward him. The officer gets out of his car, identifies himself, draws his Smith & Wesson .38 Special revolver equipped with Lasergrips and "lights up" the bad guy with the laser. The officer holds the red dot on his chest and while moving to cover, verbally engaging the aggressor, telling him to stop and show his hands. From behind his car, while covering him, the officer clearly sees the man pull a cell phone out of his pocket. No shoot! Relying on all the right training, the officer also had another valuable tool at his disposal, the Lasergrips on his handgun. The Lasergrips allowed him to do several things that probably kept the aggressor alive. Under poor lighting conditions, the bright red dot allowed the officer to accurately cover the subject while moving to cover. The laser also ensured an accurate shot if lethal force became necessary. The laser signaled the severity of the situation to the aggressor in no uncertain terms. And perhaps most importantly, Lasergrips also allowed the officer to observe the subject's hands in real-time.

With traditional sights, everything below the sight plane is obscured by the pistol. You often can't see what a threat is doing with his hands, or what is on his hip while you're confirming aim. You're either focused on the front sight or focused on the threat - it's one or the other, never both at the same time. Sighting by an index of a laser dot on a subject's chest means your eyes can scan the real-time activities of the threat without the limitation of having to continually adjust your focal plane.

Nothing solves all problems. A laser is a tool, an option, an alternative sighting system that can allow you to get faster, more accurate hits. A laser allows you to shoot and move with confidence. A laser can help get more of your body behind cover while still being able to aim accurately. A laser may even help prevent you from having to shoot in the first place. Lasergrips are a mandatory complement to white light when operating in a low-light environment. If a threat is imminent, and lighting conditions are treacherous, a laser allows you to see clearly where you aim your pistol. And when the world is dark, and Freddy Kruger is looming, that red dot piercing the halo of white light may be your most important link to survival.

Practical Uses Of A Laser Sight

• Shooting From Cover: It's as simple as this. When traditional sights are all you have, your eyes line up behind the front and rear sight, you "pie, peak or sneak" around a corner, and unless you've got eyes in different locations than

mine, your "dome" pokes around cover before your eyes can see danger.

• Shooting From Behind A Shield: Again, no rocket science needed. Entry scenario: You're stumbling through unknown hazards, with two subgun muzzles flanking your ears and five guys pushing you from the back. The 40 lb. shield you're holding is the only protection you and your team have. You're looking through a narrow, obscured port while stumbling over a skate board, hooking an unknown corner and trying to bring your weapon to bear. Your choices? Hold your arm extended out in front of you - on the danger side of the shield - and look at a sight picture that is 90 degrees different from what you're used to seeing, the so-called "gangsta grip." Alternatively, you can press your weapon arm in tight against your body, index your weapon hand knuckles against the shield edge, cant the pistol slightly, leave only the muzzle protruding on the danger side of the shield, and project your sighting index (any side up is the correct side of the dot) and let your eyes look real-time, at where you're going.

• Unorthodox Positions: You practice and practice. Feet firmly planted, shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, chest and arms oriented in your perfect Isosceles, Weaver, fill-in-the-blank stance. You get your perfect sight picture, fire at your target, move left, right, forward, do your obligatory reloads, tap-rack-whatever. You're ready for the streets. Shooting from traditional positions is fine until you're clobbered across the neck from behind with a two-by-four. You're on the ground, your head is ringing, your vision is blurry and it takes all the motivation you have just to lay hands on your pistol. Survival option one: point in general direction, spray and pray. Survival option two: place laser dot onto scumbag's body and start pulling trigger.

How To Choose A Laser Sight

While humans will always be impaired in the dark - we don't have owl eyes - the right combination of white and laser light can help us prevail in a low-light combative environment.

If our criteria for a weapon-mounted laser was simply a red laser beam emanating from somewhere on your gun, anything would do. Heck, you could even just duct tape a pointer onto your gun. Applying this same thinking, any gun should do for fighting, so long as a bullet comes out the front. Whoops! Big mistakes are brewing on both counts. Here are some more advanced criteria in laser selection.

Instant and Intuitive Operation: Certain laser systems are grip-activated and work as a valuable sighting system when you operate the gun in your normal manner. There is no time under stress to give your trigger finger and brain too many options. Imagine drawing and trying to flip a switch with your trigger finger and then moving that same finger to the trigger.

Ability To Apply Principles Of Light Management: The best weapon-mounted lights operate by momentary pressure switches. This allows the user to on or off the light by simply applying or releasing pressure. You would seldom consider switching a white light on, leaving it on and entering a building. That's a great way to get dead. White light is flicked on momentarily to move, assess and search, and then quickly turned off. Your laser must operate in the same manner. Make sure you can manage your laser light with one hand, ambidextrously and without breaking your firing grip. Reaching for switches and levers is fine for the range, but will get you killed in the real world.

Does Not Replace Internal Gun Parts: Your gun is your ultimate survival tool. If an external lasers breaks, you may not have a red dot, but you can quickly transition to your iron sights. That's something we can all live with that. But if a broken laser means your gun stops working or seizes up, this could be fatal. Avoid the lasers that are installed inside the gun's mechanism.

Durability, Reliability And Accuracy: Lasers are electronic devices that live longest when installed in a stable manner. This also ensures repeatable accuracy. The best lasers can be adjusted for point-of-aim. Make sure you can adjust your laser to light up the actual area of bullet impact. This is critical for shots that required pinpoint accuracy like HRT work.

Holster Compatibility: It's nice if you don't have to buy a new holster just because you upgraded to a laserenhanced pistol. Pick a laser that fits most of your common duty or carry holsters.

Battery Availability And Life: Make sure you can find batteries for your laser at the Kwiky-Mart. Having to track down oddball, expensive batteries from the laser manufacturer will get old quick. Remember the momentary switch? Let go of gun, laser goes off. Switches or levers can be left "on" in the holster and that can mean dead batteries. Battery life is another important consideration. You do not want to be caught in a critical situation with dead batteries. The lifespan of batteries varies from one to five hours depending on the brand of laser.

Solid Versus Blinking Beam: Your choice. They both pick up as quickly in low-light; they both are hard to see in bright light. There is really no such thing as a "daylight" laser for sale to the general public because the FDA limits power output.

Clyde Caceres is a professional law enforcement trainer and an expert on the use of lasers in combative situations. He is the law enforcement sales manager for Crimson Trace, the manufacturer of LasergripsTM.