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Are Single-Action Semiautos Street Safe?

A subconscious analysis

By David Kenik

When faced with a threat, you may experience tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, loss of fine motor skills and time distortion.



With renewed interest in firearms with single-action triggers by both shooters and manufacturers alike, it's good to review staying safe under stress. It's easy to learn to keep your finger off the trigger at the range, but the subconscious effects due to the stress of a lethal-force encounter can counteract years of safety training.

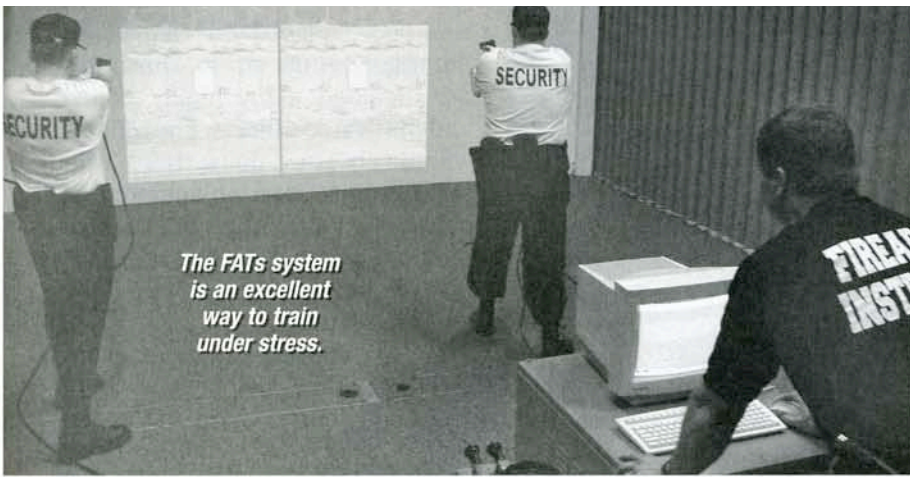
The single-action trigger design offers a light, short trigger pull. It is the most accurate and easiest-to-shoot trigger system because the

less motion that is required to actuate the trigger, the less the movement of the trigger finger will negatively affect the aim of the gun. A light, short pull is the single-action trigger's greatest asset, but it can also be its greatest detriment.

I own several 1911-type handguns with single-action triggers. This is one of my favorite gun designs, and I carried one for many years. I love their light, short triggers, and they feel great in my hand. However, to carry them safely, additional training under extremely

high-stress situations is warranted due to the body's subconscious reactions to high levels of stress, such as those created by a lethal encounter.

It has been argued by many well-known pistoleros that single-action triggers are perfectly safe if the operator keeps his finger off the trigger. While that is true, it is not the simple answer that it seems. While the conscious mind may understand the Manual of Arms and safety rules, the stress of a lethal encounter will cause many



The FATs system is an excellent way to train under stress.

physiological changes in your body and brain, which may have potentially negative effects on your ability to use your firearm safely.

All the practice in the world on a basic shooting range will not completely prepare you for the stress effects of an actual real-life lethal encounter. Under severe levels of stress, your body may react with a startle response, and Body Alarm Reaction (BAR) will take over. BAR symptoms include tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, loss of minute

motion control of appendages such as fingers, and time distortion.

Tunnel vision causes your eyes/brain to concentrate on the threat. In a life-or-death struggle, you may see only your attacker, only the hands of your attacker or possibly only the weapon. You may never even see additional attackers, bystanders or the backstop of your potential shot.

Auditory exclusion will drastically limit your hearing. You may hear just muffled sounds, hear just the

voice of your attacker, or you may not hear anything at all. Many people report never even hearing the sound of their own gunfire.

Blood restrictions will limit your body's fine motor control and will also reduce the communication that lets your brain know that your body parts are moving or even that they have come in contact with an object, such as a trigger. A racing heartbeat can make your body and hands shake.

Your sense of time can be greatly exaggerated. You may feel that you are moving in slow motion. Ten seconds may seem like minutes.

Your initial startle response alone may be enough to cause a restriction of your muscles and cause you firearm to accidentally discharge. Humans are born with a startle response as part of our survival instincts. While everyone experiences different levels of this response, some effects can be expected. Have you ever jumped when you came across someone whom you did not expect while

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Street Safe

rounding a corner? Have you ever jumped after hearing someone's voice when you thought you were alone? These are examples of startle responses.

Here's an interesting demonstration to see the effect of clenching your hand muscle in a similar fashion to what a startle may produce: Hold your shooting hand out straight with the palm vertical, curl your bottom three fingers, and extend your trigger finger as if you were gripping a gun. Clench your fist a few times. Does your trigger finger move when you clench the rest of your fingers? What might happen if you were startled while holding a gun with your finger on, or near, the trigger?

While I learned of these issues years ago, it did not really sink in until I had an accidental discharge at an IPSC match. During a particularly stressful fast reload my finger pressed the trigger without me being aware of it until the round fired. ADs are commonly blamed on poor gun-handling skills and a lack of training to keep the finger off the trigger. Well, I practiced keeping my finger off the trigger for many years. The difference at the match was that the higher level of stress that I was experiencing for the first time affected my abilities and awareness.

A few weeks after my AD, I did a

Hold your hand out as if it were holding a gun. Watch what your trigger finger does when the other fingers contract.



training session on a FATS system, (Fire Arm Training Simulation), which uses real handguns converted to shoot lasers at a movie screen displaying simulated tactical scenarios. With remembrance of my AD fresh in my mind, I specifically checked my finger during and after stressful encounters. I found my finger subconsciously on the trigger three times during the one-hour session. This proved to me that even 20 years of shooting a 1911 and several seasons of action shooting competitions did not prepare me for the effects that higher levels of stress cause.

While running officers through FATS training, Lt. Dave Spaulding of the Montgomery County, Ohio, Sheriff's Office concluded that under high levels of stress, the trigger finger often subconsciously travels to the trigger to "confirm its position." Spaulding observed that 632 out of 674 officers tested periodically placed their fingers in the triggerguard during FATS training. This is astounding: Ninety-four percent of the trained police offi-

cers tested placed their finger on the trigger under stress. This number included many highly skilled and motivated officers. The officers who he observed doing these "trigger searches" had no memory of doing so. I find that the lack of memory of touching the trigger is one of the most intriguing of the observations.

Spaulding's research confirms that high levels of stress affect the shooter's subconscious actions. While I and those officers trained to keep our fingers off the trigger, the effects of stress caused the unconscious movement of the trigger finger, thus creating a potentially dangerous situation.

During subsequent FATS training sessions, my stress levels were reduced, and I was able to pay more attention to my finger placements. With each session I was better able to control the effects of stress and be more mindful of the tasks at hand.

The conclusion is that to safely carry a single-action trigger for defense, it is important to train under the most stressful, realistic scenarios as possible. Training under stress gives your brain and body an opportunity to get used to the chemical changes caused by stress and helps reinforce shooting skills and safety protocols.

Use of a double-action trigger will make the trigger more noticeable; however, use of a double-action trigger is not the total solution. You still need to train to keep your finger off the trigger under high stress until you are ready to destroy what your gun is pointing at. ■

David Kenik is executive director of the Police Officers Safety Association, an armed citizen and author of Armed Response—A Comprehensive Guide to Using Firearms for Self-Defense, available at www.armedresponsebook.com.