



Engagement of Multiple Targets: Prioritization, Awareness, and Decision Making

**By Brian S. Williams – Founder / Director of Training Services at
Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC
www.greywolfconsulting.us**

Introduction

Training for real world hostile confrontations and situations must always consider the potential threat involving multiple assailants. Therefore, training for personal defense or security must include the engagement of multiple targets. The challenge however is not simply shifting ones attention from one assailant to another, but rather it involves a series of principles including awareness, threat identification, prioritization, communication, and decision making under extreme stress.

Unfortunately however, one of the most often mistaken considerations within multiple target training is belief that the closest always represent the most immediate threat. While in many cases this may be the case, it is not a constant and operating under this assumption can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Multiple Targets Alter the Scenario

With a single assailant, the attention is focused and concentrated on one set of circumstances which while they may and likely will evolve, will permit a higher degree of focus on the target. With multiple assailants however, several additional variables are added and must be considered to make an accurate assessment of the situation.

Theses variables will include the following:

1. Is there actually a threat?
2. How many potential assailants are there
3. What are they doing, what does there body language say?
4. Are any of them attempting to disengage / leave or retreat?
5. Is any specific one demonstrating a more threatening behavior, how far away are they?
6. Are there bystanders in the area?
7. How is the situation evolving, is it escalating or deescalating?

All of these questions need to be addressed to the best of your ability within a mater of seconds under extreme stress and it is for this reason why multiple target scenarios are fundamentally exercises in decision-making and not simply marksmanship.

The Closest is Not Always the Most Immediate Threat or Imminent Threat

As stated above within the introduction of this article, a common misconception is that the closest potential threat should automatically receive priority. That assumption can be catastrophic.

Perhaps another way of looking at this is to imagine a situation in which one assailant is physically closer to you, however they are not demonstrating any aggressive behaviors or actions, has no weapon and is not moving at all. However another individual 8' behind them has a knife, is acting aggressively,

threatening and yelling and moving side to side. Which assailant would present the greatest level of danger and therefore the most immediate threat? The answer is the individual with the knife, not only because he has a weapon, but more so due to his actions and behaviors. Remember, distance alone will not always determine the level of active threat.

Identification and Prioritization of the Most Immediate Threat Is Dynamic in Nature and Rarely if Ever Static

Prioritizing the threat you are facing is rarely if ever a one time decision. Because the situation will evolve rapidly you must be prepared to change your assessment immediately as well. An individual who initially appeared to be the most immediate concern may cease presenting a threat, while another may begin acting within a threatening or aggressive manner.

It is for this reason that prioritization should always be considered as dynamic rather than predetermined or static in nature.

Tunnel Vision Should be Fought Whenever Possible

Within any hostile / violent confrontation, the effects of stress can and often will cause an individual to become “Hyper Focused” on one perceived threat while ignoring other potential threats. This phenomenon is known as “Tunnel Vision” and it is a natural response to intense stress and is related to the “Fight or Flight” response.

An example of Tunnel Vision would be that you are challenged by a group of individuals the one in the front of the group is speaking aggressively and is very animated with their hands. You immediately focus virtually all of your attention on this individual and fail to notice one of the others coming up to you aggressively from the side.

While in truth it is extremely difficult if not impossible to avoid all tunnel vision, with proper training, it is possible to train the mind to increase situational awareness skills which can help to minimize this issue.

Distance vs. Time

Within any violent confrontation there will exist multiple variables. Among these are perhaps the two most important considerations. The first represents “Time” followed immediately by the second, which is “Distance”.

During an active aggressive violent attack, time can and should ALWAYS be considered your greatest enemy, even greater than the assailant you are facing, this is because it is time which will greatly influence your ability to respond to a developing situation or the actions of your attacker. This however does not mean that because someone is posing a perceived potential threat that you should immediately treat them as an automatic indicator of threat priority, as stated earlier within this article there exists other variables which must be considered as well, including the following:

1. The general and apparent behavior of the perceived threat.
2. The capability and intent of the perceived threat
3. Movements and any access to weapons
4. The overall evolution of the situation

It is within the consideration of these variable where the second most important consideration comes in. Because within a violent confrontation you will NEVER have adequate time to make a full assessment safely, the creation of distance between you and the threat cannot be overstated. This is because the more distance between you and the threat, can and very often will change the overall situation. One way that distance can be obtained is to increase situational awareness and learning to see potential threats before you get too close in the first place.

In Conclusion

Ultimately the engagement of multiple targets is about managing the complexity of several targets at one time and that one of the most important considerations is that proximity does not automatically determine priority, as the closest individual may not represent the most immediate or imminent threat.

Therefore, the goal is not simply to react to the nearest individual or follow a predetermined sequence of actions, but rather to identify and understand what is happening, recognize legitimate threats, avoid harming those who are not threats.

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Our training philosophy is built around developing well-rounded individuals who understand that personal safety and professional performance require more than simply equipment alone. Awareness, critical thinking, communication, and disciplined decision making skills remain the foundation of effective preparation.

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- ˆ How stress impacts critical decision-making and performance
- ˆ The high value of consistent professional training and continued education
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About the Author

Brian S. Williams is a professional firearms instructor, tactical trainer, and executive security consultant with greater than 35 years of experience in firearms instruction, use-of-force training, and protective operations. As the founder of several firearms training and security organizations, he has developed and delivered firearms, tactical, and instructor certification programs for civilians, law enforcement officers, military personnel, and licensed security professionals throughout the United States.

Over the course of his career, Mr. Williams has trained and certified more than 10,500 Connecticut pistol permit applicants, instructed more than 2,000 civilians and hundreds of law enforcement and security professionals in advanced firearms and tactical applications, and provided remedial firearms training to military and correctional personnel. He served as a Marine Police Officer and Watch Commander with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and was appointed to the Connecticut State Police Firearms Advisory Council, where he contributed to firearms training and policy discussions.

Mr. Williams holds numerous professional certifications, including NRA Training Counselor, NRA Law Enforcement Firearms Instructor, General Dynamics Simunitions FX™ Instructor, The Heckler &

Koch International Training Division and Sig Sauer Academy Instructor certifications, and USCCA Concealed Carry and Home Defense Instructor. He is the author of *Welcome to the Real World: A Dangerous Place to Be Caught Unprepared* and has been recognized as an expert in firearms by the Connecticut Superior Courts. His work continues to emphasize responsible firearms ownership, sound judgment, lawful use of force, and practical, reality-based training.