

Gladiator School

Very recently, due to my line of work, I had the opportunity to speak with a parolee who had just been released from serving 15 years of hard time in some of the toughest maximum-security federal penitentiaries in Canada. In the beginning, we both tested the waters with one another and were more adversarial, much like the mongoose and the Cobra, but as trust and rapport were established, I was able to get some very important insight into how violence inside some of the most violent prisons in Canada is taught, learned and used. This person, who I will call Bob, estimated that he had been involved in approximately 130-150 violent confrontations while inside. Bob has experienced all levels of violence while in our prison system, both armed and unarmed, and has seen death several times. IMO, based upon Bob's experience with violence, he is a subject matter expert on the topic of real world violence, and as such, has a lot of valuable insight to offer to those of us who are willing to listen; listen and learn I did. I hope you the reader will also glean some information from what it is I am about to share with you.

On The Topic Of Weapons:

On this topic, Bob stated that weapons give one the advantage and as such, anything and everything could, and was, used as a real or improvised weapon. If an inmate could grab something to defend himself with, then one would do so without hesitation. There is no dishonor in this tactic.

The weapon of choice, surprise, surprise, home made edged or pointed weapons (shivs) made from anything and everything including paper and hardened plastic or impact weapons (piping).

When I asked Bob how he would use the shiv, he replied; "using the element of surprise". More often than not, a stabbing inside the prison was never an advertised event. Bob stated that if the intended "mark" heard that he was being targeted, then the target would make every effort to hit his identified attacker first. According to Bob, this was why "surprise" was a primary tactic used in prison; it gave the attacker the advantage of first strike.

I next asked Bob, if he was going to hit someone with a Shiv, what would be his primary target. I expected to hear; throat, kidney, groin, instead Bob stated; " under the armpit is the target of choice inside." This tactic was quite bewildering to me until I asked Bob why. Bob stated that a shiv attack to the throat, kidney, or groin areas were not guaranteed to immediately debilitate/stop an adversary (thus giving the target the ability to fight back), whereas a horizontal strike directly into the armpit would cause an immediate puncture and collapse of a lung which, based upon his personal experience and observations, always caused the victim to buckle (the first thing that came to mind here was the last fight scene from Gladiator the movie when Russell Crowe was

stabbed in the side of his rib cage prior to entering the coliseum. Infact when I painted this scene to Bob, he laughed stating “ I saw that movie, in the real world that wound would have immediately collapsed Crowe”) . From this position, further multiple attacks with the knife to the body could easily take place if needed.

Another interesting piece of information that I found bewildering was that most knife attacks in prisons did not end in death, which Bob stated was “deliberate”. Yes, some attacks were planned assassinations, but most were designed to cause maximum damage, via multiple hits, without causing death to send a message to the intended target. Having said this, Bob further stated that tactics of first strike did not differentiate between the two, what differed was how the fight was finished; assassination vs. message.

On the topic of Knife defence, Bob stated that if an inmate heard he was being targeted, and could not go and hit the attacker first, then several tactics were used:

- Magazines, especially National Geographic, would be bound (usually via shoe laces) to the front, sides, and under the arm pits of the body, at which time a heavy sweater or coat was placed overtop. This was “prison made” body amour which worked very well in protecting one from both puncture and slash attacks
- Hands on self-defence against a shiv attack were simple, direct, and offensive in nature. Bob stated that the most important thing learned and taught was to control the blade/shiv first and then just “pound” the guy to hell.

I had heard of the first tactic (magazine body armor) before, but found Bob’s second tactic (hands on skills) very inspiring due to the fact that this was what I teach as well. I asked Bob why controlling the shiv was so important to him, to which he stated, “ I want to prevent multiple hits to my body because that is what is going to likely kill me.” When I asked Bob why he just did not strike the shiv arm, and then proceed to slam and jam the guy into oblivion (a tactic taught by some RBSD instructors), he laughed and stated, “ have you ever seen what adrenaline and the focused intent to live can do to a guy, they become super human, they feel no pain, you can hit the guy all you want but if you don’t control that shiv, you are going to get hit multiple times, and it’s the multiple hits that will get you killed. This is even more of a reality if the guy is high on speed, coke, or just plain mental” IMO, one of the true golden nuggets of wisdom offered by Bob. Bob further stated that in a knife fight it was extremely important to keep forward momentum and to engage with rage taking the fight to the attacker.

On the Topic Of Empty Hand Self Defence:

Again, Bob stated that the use of weapons was the preferred method of self-defence, but if a weapon was not around, he would attack three primary targets :

- EYES: Bob stated that if someone was blinded, it made it hard to fight effectively. Bob proceeded to show me how he would jam his fingertips into a person's eyes; very similar to the finger jab taught by myself, Senshido, and some Military Combatives.
- THROAT: Bob stated that this was his favorite target due to the fact that when hit, it almost always caused a gag reflex. Bob demonstrated the two ways he learned inside to attack the throat:
 1. Web hand strike up and under line of sight
 2. Open hand chop
- GROIN: Of the three this was Bob'd least favorite, due to effectiveness, but if the target presented itself, he would take it. Bob stated that he would primarily target this area with his shin or tip of boot/shoe. Bob stated that when this one worked, most victims would bend over thus allowing one to easily control the head and body. In fact, we both laughed because it was this technique that allowed me to take immediate control of him.

Other techniques utilized if the physical fight went to grapple/ground were bites, gouges, mouth hooking, and ear rips. On the topic of ear rips, Bob had seen this little beauty work on more than one occasion when rolling around on the ground with someone who he called a "wrestler." As Bob stated; "Grab an ear and yank down as hard as you can. People immediately begin to panic not because of pain, but because of the large amount of blood that begins to flow about their face."

The use of bludgeons (piping) was also very common inside prison. Again attacks here did not travel any specific lines of attack. When a body target presented itself, it was hit from anywhere and everywhere. Primary target in most cases was the head and neck. As Bob stated, "knock the guy out, and the rest is easy" No truer words have been spoken in my opinion.

Bob emphasized that if he had to go hand to hand, it was only to allow him time to transition to a real or improvised weapon, if able, as quickly as possible. Another important golden nugget, and one that is preached by some of the more "credible" RBSD instructors.

Bob also shared with me that many of the traditional martial arts are offered inside our prison system; karate, TKD, Judo, Tai Chi. Bob stated that many who took these arts did so for self discipline, fitness, focus, and stress reduction. When I asked him if he felt these arts helped in any way when it came to real world self-defence, he laughed and stated, "they look pretty and teach people how to dance." Interesting comment. Bob further went onto say that even those who had black belts resorted to good old fashion dirty fighting when defending themselves on the tier or in the yard. Another interesting

observation and comment. “Nothing fancy, just simply brutal is the name of the game inside the Pen.”

One last thing that Bob shared with me in this topic area was that multiple opponents (swarming) were not a real issue in the Canadian prison system. This is not to say that this does not happen, it does, but amongst the prison population this is seen to be a cowardly act. If you are going to go physical one should do so man to man. Many times, those that swarm, become free targets for the rest of the population. Exception to this rule, riots where informers, rapists, and child molesters are targeted by groups

On Mindset For Survival:

Bob stated that if targeted for violence, you either become the “predator or the prey.”, You either “eat or be eaten”, You either “win or loose”, and at times you either “live or die”. Focused aggression, with the intent to live, and to cause as much damage as possible, as quickly as possible, utilizing the element of surprise is the key to survival. Threat of jail, more time, isolation, is impotent to those already doing time. Your goal is survival by any means necessary. There are no rules, and there is no honor amongst thieves as Bob so eloquently stated. You do what you have to do to live and survive. If you get in a beef that goes physical, put them down fast, and put them down hard, so that they don’t get back up right away.

MINDSET, is where Bob placed the heaviest emphasis on physical survival. As Bob stated, “ the most feared and NEVER targeted are those that are seen to be the craziest and will do anything, and I mean anything, to survive”

Final Comments:

I couldn’t help but compare what I was hearing from Bob to the roman gladiators of the past; prisoners taught to fight out of the need for survival and in some cases entertainment. Thus the reason for the title of this posting, “Gladiator School”.

Never in a million years did I ever think that our interaction together would have lead to Bob sharing the above noted information. Two adversaries, with a common link, self-protection and survival. Curiosities lead to exploration, and exploration lead to knowledge. As I have always said, knowledge and the understanding and application of that knowledge is power.

When it comes to “Real World” violence, Bob has been there and done that. He shared with me a world that many cannot even begin to understand or comprehend, but yet it is an “in your face” reality that many self-defence/RBSD instructors do not want to comprehend or understand due to ignorance or willful blindness. Now the question is:

“IS YOUR TRAINING BEST PREPARING YOU TO FACE THIS MODERN GLADIATOR GIVEN THE ABOVE NOTED INFORMATION !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Just for clarification on attacks with the shiv to the armpit:, there were two main tactics that ‘Bob’ stated were taught and utilized:

Due to the fact that most shankings took place utilizing the element of surprise, they would approach the mark from the rear or side, and then with the hand not holding the shiv, they grabbed their target by the wrist, quickly lifted it and then proceeded to impale under the armpit.

- If it was a face to face encounter where the element of surprise was not used, primary tactic would be to quickly shoot for the mark’s leg and lift it with forward drive, this would usually cause the victim to grab onto the attacker with both hands for balance, thus opening up the armpit for attack. (this was similar in description to Pentecost, but different in the target attacked)

If the above two tactics failed, they would just penetrate to grapple range and start pumping any target of opportunity.

Having seen my fair share of prison shivs, most are designed to impale/thrust rather than slash. This “might” also explain why getting into the chest cavity is so easily done. I too was a big believer that the ribs offered some protection against bladed attacks until I went to a few autopsies and watch the pathologist do their thing. There is no doubt that the ribs do offer some protection from a “slashing” cut with a knife, but against a committed weighted strike with impaling type of weapon , penetration is easily acquired in most cases.

On the issue of the number of fights that “Bob” stated that he was involved in, there was no doubt in my interview with him that “ego” did play a small role. I had some concerns over his numbers too, but after checking with some friends who work within the correctional system here in Canada, they were not surprised by Bob’s numbers. In the end, only “Bob” knows the real numbers, but given who he is and what he has done, I don’t think there is a lot of deviation.

The purpose of the posting was to provided readers with a perspective on violence from another “experts” point of view. “Bob” is a skilled predator who survived life on the inside, and was willing to share some of his thoughts, be they slightly tainted or exaggerated, on the issue of violence and self-protection from his point of view. What I got from the interview was:

Bob, and other predators like him, are “asymmetrical” thinkers and fighters who utilize the elements of, simplicity, surprise, speed, and violence of action to their advantage.

Those who teach or participate in the RBSD field should take note and acid test what they do against the tactics and skills mentioned by BOB.

Strength and Honor

Darren Laur