

Hell on Wheels - Olive Security Training Center's Personal Security Driving Course

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S.W.A.T. November 2006

"Do you smell that? Nothing like it-tire smoke and brake fluid!"

Our instructor's passion for high-speed technical driving was clear as the four of us slingshot out of a sharp curve and blasted down the straightaway at 110 miles per hour in our Ford Crown Vic Police Interceptor sedan.

"Where is my G suit?" I thought as my internal organs were subjected to nearly four times the weight of gravity as we initially slammed and eventually finessed our way through chicanes and turns. Also troubling me was the strong prospect of being the first to experience reverse peristalsis or, as the Aussies say, "spewing forth," from a major physical effort connected to one of their "sickner" endurance runs.

I was no "newbie," having years ago been to two counter-abduction and terrorism driving academies, but these skills are perishable and must be refreshed periodically. Frankly, at my ripe old age, I had either lost some nerve or gained some sense, and there was a period of adjustment where I had to regain confidence in my ability to have the vehicle go where I wanted it to go at speeds well beyond legal limits and at the physical limits of its adhesion to the track. Conversely, our instructor, on leave from Special Forces, and the other two young hard chargers with me relished attacking the asphalt at the edge of the Newtonian envelope. So, putting up as good a front as possible I outwardly encouraged them to put the pedal to the metal.

And so it was, for three very fast and professional days at Olive Security Training Center's (Formerly TEES) pilot Personal Security Driving Course (PSD). A British firm, OSTC is a highly respected international company and also has offices in Washington, D.C.

TIER ONE STAFF

Al Minnick is probably the most experienced and respected security-driving instructor in the business and oversees everything dealing with tactical mobility. Minimal time is spent in the classroom, so his explanations for each facet of progressively difficult training were precise, concise and kept as simple as possible. I think Al and his crew could teach chimpanzees to drive, and rumor has it that he may have worked for a circus at one time, so we presented him and his staff with few instructional challenges. The other full time instructor is Wil McKenzie, a former law enforcement officer, soldier and military driving instructor at the outstanding Military Police School at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri.

The instructors' mantra was simply, Look where you want the car to go-look deep-look at a positive goal. Do not look where the car is going, but where it should go." In other words if, while in a skid you look in the direction of the skid, that's exactly where the car

will go. "While this is not a racing class," Al emphasized, "speed is an essential escape maneuver."

The first orders of business, however, were language training and learning how to interpret the relationship between the driver's input and the vehicle's response to those inputs, which involve all of the human senses. This translates into understanding vehicle weight transfer and the role "heavy tires" play. The basics also included driving posture and steering wheel management. No shuffle steering here - always anticipate and turn into a good steering-wheel hand position by presetting the hands. For left-hand turns, place the left hand at the 12 o'clock position on the wheel and crank in enough steering to get the job done. For directional changes to the right, reverse the drill.

DAY ONE

The first day was spent negotiating curves at high speed, and we concentrated on "in slow and out fast," or moving from the outside to the inside and to the outside again - selecting the proper apex. Choosing a later apex by staying outside longer lets you see more of the curve and lets you exit faster. Major braking should be done in a straight line when approaching the curve's entrance, or else the car may do funny things. Although the Crown Vics had ABS, the system was turned off and we also operated without stability control. Tire pressure is critical, and they were kept hard at 40 psi so we would slide, rather than dig in and plow through turns. Low tire pressure can also "trip" a vehicle and cause it to roll over. In addition to familiarizing each student with the course at high speed, we wove through pylons, engaged in toes actuated threshold braking and fast lane change (serpentine) maneuvers. Here again, if you looked at the obstacle-instead of long and deep-you stood a very good chance of clipping it.

In the afternoon, we got wet and, as temperatures rose, I anticipated that it would be a pleasant respite. Wrong! The skid pad was probably the most frustrating aspect of the training. The student steers, but the instructor triggers the skid by operating the accelerator with his left foot from the passenger seat. Floundering out of the wet tarmac after several trips to the deep graveled shoulder, we raced around the track in the opposite direction and yes, things looked different. Instead of using the whole road, we were now restricted to one lane and had to cope with simulated oncoming traffic - a realistic impediment when you are trying to put distance between you and a rolling ambush.

DAY TWO

The cool morning of day two started out by satisfying our group of risk takers' inherent "need for speed" with a quick review of tech driving on the track. Everything was coming together nicely when our instructors presented us with an unanticipated problem. "Your driver is dead and you can't stop, because you are still taking incoming - solve your problem, mate." I'd heard of back-seat driving, but never "right-seat driving" (unless of course you are in the U.K.). Without a scintilla of reverence, I pushed the "body" aside, kicked his feet off the pedals with my size 12 left foot, hunted momentarily for the accelerator and mashed it to the firewall. The white Ford squatted and squirted, but the thrill of potentially life-saving acceleration was soon replaced by the anxious realization that I needed to get on the brakes - now - or leave the road. Anxious, because while my

left foot was always along for the ride, I had never used it to slow or stop a clutchless vehicle before. Like trigger control with your support hand, I was concerned about applying too much pressure and locking up the brakes.

The car dove forward as I applied the binders to the discs. No sweat, the car was still stable as I entered and negotiated the sweeping, but ever tightening, bend with tires protesting like a squealing pig. As I closed in on the exit, I let her unwind, floored it and got out of there. Braking on turns transfers weight to one corner of the vehicle, and the lightened rear wheel may lock up. This may require brake modulation as you drag that wheel around the curve before stopping. Sounds involved, but it was quite simple to execute.

Hound and hare was exciting. One car pursues and the other chases. You try to shake him with your newly acquired skills. In both cases you have to drive your line and not get sucked into his incorrect positioning. We were on and off the road, executing 90-degree turns, running gravel roads and trying to overtake each other through the skid pad. I lost it on the gravel and went round and round in a cloud of blinding dust.

Although we are catching up to the foreign competition, American cars are designed to look good, but not truly drive. High-speed backing has come into its own in Iraq, and it's an essential survival skill. However, vehicles become volatile machines in reverse and, like caster wheels, car wheels want to turn around in these circumstances. With minimal practice, students were flooring it on the straights, carving neat turns and weaving around cars and pylons in the roadway. Complete laps in reverse required high levels of concentration to avoid obstacles or eat lots of impact-absorbing materials. All this backwardness was capped off by driving in reverse from the front passenger seat.

The next logical progression was into "J" (bootleg) and "Y" (three-point) turns. Although taught, the instructors opined that the "J" turn might not be realistic under high-stress conditions. Bootleg hand-brake turns are rarely covered anymore, because of vehicle design and mechanical limitations. Throwing a car into a hard "J" can be both beautiful and ugly to watch. When it comes together and goes right, the Ford looked like a ballerina performing a pirouette-something a threatened VIP will truly appreciate. Done improperly, it mimics a drunk staggering and lurching along a sidewalk, and you are out of a job-or worse.

The average two-ton sedan at 70 miles per hour can deliver 675,000 foot pounds of kinetic energy at its bumper, making it a formidable weapon. Tactical ramming, like forced entry, is a tactic of last resort, but may be your only option when your escape routes are blocked by other vehicles.

For our version of jalopy derby, we used "Hoopdies" (junkers) and cleared our axis of advance by ramming the trailing and leading anatomy of cars set up as roadblocks while moving forward, in reverse, from the right seat and against two-car obstacles. Right-seat ramming is awkward because you get visual distortion and don't always strike the opposing vehicle in the right place. We hit one engine block target a little too fast, which

can damage your vehicle to the point of inoperability and I could feel the organs leap forward in my chest. It doesn't take gobs of speed to blast through, but when you are "amped up," the tendency is to build up too much velocity. The important thing is to look downrange and not at the car. If you look at the car, most people will brake before contact. As a testimony to GM, the old Cadillac that we "attacked" in ran for 45 minutes without its radiator and looked like a half-opened jack-knife when we sent her off for final burial. If possible, avoid the ram altogether and reverse out into a "Y" turn. Although airbags were operable, none had deployed-yet.

DAY THREE

The last day of instruction involved everybody's favorite, especially when the good guys do it to the bad guys on TV-pitting (Precision Immobilization Techniques) your adversary. Never zigzag to avoid contact, or the enemy will pit you (technique used to force another car off the road). You can pit anywhere on the road and at almost any speed, depending on road conditions. However, pitting is very easy to avoid with relatively simple counter-pitting maneuvers. Again, the hound and hare drill took place, and we took turns pitting and avoiding pitting with each team. If you are pitted, your only countermeasure is to lock the brakes and stop.

LIVE-FIRE COUNTER AMBUSH

Up until now, things had been relatively benign, but that changed when they broke out the ammo and the carbines. Live-fire safety briefs were held and we kitted up with body armor, eye and ear protection. Our new mounts had all windows removed, so that we could fire from front and side apertures. Cruising speed was 30 mph until linear and "L" shaped ambushes were triggered by an explosive device, and then the driver would attempt to rocket "off the X" while his two teammates laid down suppressive fire. The emphasis here was the driving, not the marksmanship, and the driver did a good job if the riflemen got only a few shots off before contact was broken. Judging by the paucity of hits on the targets, we made more noise than anything else.

MOTHER OF ALL GAUNTLETS

OSTC saved the best for last, however, and the instructors finally got their revenge for suffering through three days of our mostly amateurish, but earnest, performances. Prior to the combined skills scenarios, our fire was outgoing-now we would be experiencing incoming while we drove for our lives. Back in the Hoopdies again, our three-man teams were dispatched to conduct a route reconnaissance in contested territory.

Cruising down an innocent-looking byway, a car turned into our path from a side road and accelerated directly toward us. Before we could ascertain its intent, .68-caliber paintballs began zipping through our windowless mount, and yells of "I'm hit" soon followed. Protected by our paintball goggles and masks, the driver hit reverse, got us up to speed, executed a sweet "J" turn, and we were into the wind. Hot on our bumper, the "terrorists" continued to strafe us, bump us and attempt to position themselves to rake our interior with pink paintballs.

We finally broke contact and found ourselves alone on a long straightaway of OSTC's street without joy. However, we hadn't had much of a respite when Doc, our medic, announced rather matter of factly, "Roadblock twelve o'clock." Downrange, two cars stood nose to nose across our route to prevent our escape. The bad guys had backed off, but were now coming hard. I looked out the rear window and could see the gunner grinning behind his high-capacity piece. Without further deliberation, we lanced through the block and "Pow, pow," - the air bags deployed and we were showered with a wave of almost crystallized safety-glass from one of the blocking sedans. Both driver and front seat passenger were now "air bag" qualified, but shrugged off this dubious honor and charged ahead. We ate the pursuing car's nose with our rear bumper by unexpectedly applying our brakes, and I thought I saw a wisp of smoke rise from its engine compartment

"Hey, hey, gravel road to the left, take it, take it" I screamed, and we shot off the hard top, hit loose stone and started to fishtail almost 90 degrees left and right. And then our worst nightmare became a reality--our car died. Repeated attempts could not get it started and then I heard the sound of gravel crunching behind us in the dissipating dust. "Car coming, let's bail and see if we can grab another ride," was our driver's snap decision. We were under fire again, so like scalded rats we all de-bussed, sprinted to a parked car 15 yards to our front and dove in. Fortunately, the good fairy had left it running for us, and we kicked up a fusillade of granite as we peeled out and regained the highway. Weaving in and out of slower vehicles, we sped off again. As we approached our "Green Zone," our antagonists vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

The car was a virtual sieve and so were our bodies. All of us had taken multiple hits, and rising welts proved it. In addition, driver and front passenger exhibited airbag bruises and burns, but we were in much better condition than our vehicle. We were safe and now it was the other teams' turn to run the Mother of All Gauntlets.

CONCLUSION

This course is a must for anyone going to the "Big Sandbox" in any security capacity, since personal mobility by vehicle is the most common form of transport. Those engaged in VIP protection in any country will benefit from the realistic scenarios, no matter what level of driving skills they possess. OSTC offers six different vehicle courses ranging from two to five days and will customize training to fit a customer's requirements. In the near future, specialized courses will include four-wheel-drive SUV and off-road driving. When all phases of construction of the facility are completed, OSTC will provide one-stop shopping for a full range of military, security and counter-terrorist training.

SOURCE

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