

Principles Of Low-Light Combat

Techniques are only the means to implement principles.
Understanding the fundamental concepts of fighting in the dark is the core.

By Ken J. Good

Photos by Ichiro Nagata

Most advanced shooters can execute at least one handgun flashlight technique, usually the Harries or the Rogers/SureFire, sometimes the Chapman, maybe even the Ayoob. But if you ask those same shooters if they can state one lighting principle, articulate it clearly and correctly apply it, you might find a few blank faces looking back at you.

The reason is simple—most people have not been trained in the basic principles of lighting for a tactical environment. They understand the principles of shooting—concepts like sight alignment, trigger control and follow-through—but they have not been exposed to the same groundwork of understanding for lighting.

A principle can be defined as a fundamental truth, law, doctrine or motivational force, upon which all techniques are based. A technique is

a method, procedure or manner of using basic skills to achieve the goal of a principle.

Addressing techniques only in any area of study falls far short of the mark. You must evaluate your principles at the core level. In order to reduce internal conflict and friction, you should ask yourself the following questions:

Do the principles I have adopted work at all ranges of combat? Have they been tested? Are they repeat-

able and useful?

Consider the practice of martial arts. Many modern and classical systems have codified the body of knowledge contained in their art by creating a list of techniques. In many cases these systems also have many forms of "kata" or what I would call "dance." These are useful for passing on many elements that define the art itself.

But there is a danger in being able to articulate and perform the techniques and katas without understanding the principles that underlie them. Otherwise, you have fooled yourself—and nobody else—that somehow you now know when, where and in what circumstance this or that technique should be employed.

Technique-based and kata-only perspectives end up restraining you from further development, if left unchecked. You can find yourself in the situation where technique is all you see. Your horizon is self-limited.

It turns out that understanding the principle of a matter is far more useful—and higher on the importance scale. If you do not understand the fundamental principles of lighting in a combative situation, you will be only guessing as to when, where or for how long to use any given technique.

On the other hand, if you only know one technique, you will also not be able to leverage the principles on your own behalf. Imagine only being allowed to have one type of punch to throw—say, a right hook—and you were put in the ring with Mike Tyson. You'd wish you had a jab, cross and uppercut too!

You need to understand both techniques and principles to maximize your effectiveness as a boxer. By the same token, you need to understand fundamental techniques and principles of low-light combat.

After years of real-world fighting in a force-on-force training environment, certain principles of low-light combat have emerged. These are the basic truths of fighting at night in a projectile-based combat arena. 

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Principle One: "Read" The Light

The prime directive for successful negotiation of unknown terrain so that you can exploit all available strategies and tactics is to read the lighting conditions in the environment that you are situated.

The more you study and consider the thought processes of something called Boyd's Cycle—observe, orient, decide, act, otherwise known as the OODA Cycle— and then attempt to apply them, the more you will realize that observation is the starting gate that must be exited cleanly as confrontations materialize.

Before you or your team decide to use stealth, employ slow or fast movements, emit white light or infrared, stay completely dark, deploy this or that weapon, you must understand what actual lighting condition you are in.

Learning to differentiate the nuances of these conditions separates the professional from the amateur. Actively seeking to exploit one condition over another should take precedence over other tasking.

All lighting conditions can be placed in the following basic categories. There are infinite gradients and variations, but these are the reference points:

Bright High Noon: well lit area, high level of detail, depth perception excellent, target identification is excellent.

Dawn And Dusk: enough light to distinguish shapes, texture and color of objects with noticeable shadow areas, target identification is impaired.

Low Full Moon: minimal ambient light, weak artificial sources such as distant street light, emission of light from another room, shapes only, distance judgment and



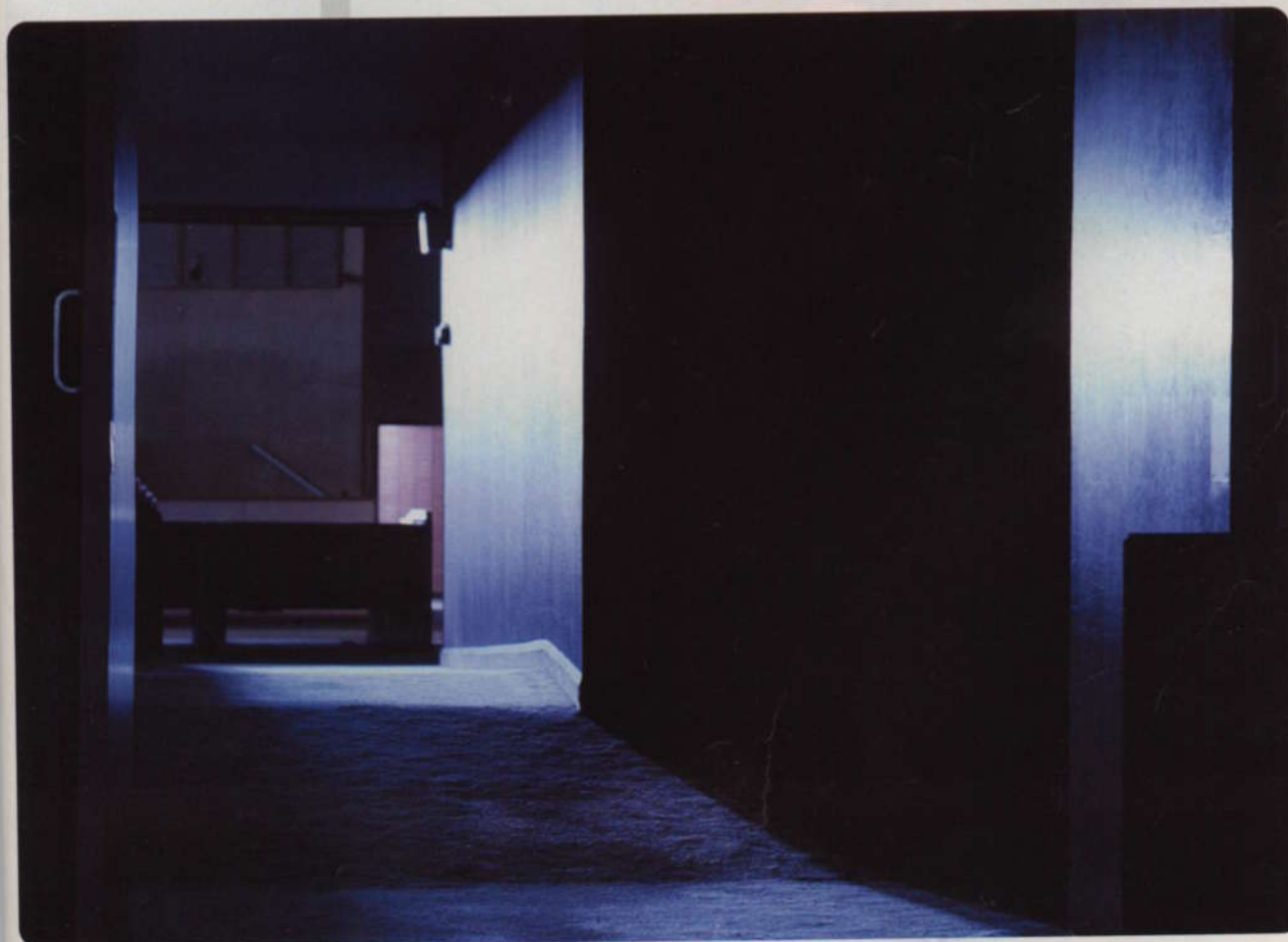
target identification is severely impaired.

No Ambient Light: rarely encountered, but typically exists in underground structures, sealed warehouses and other man-made environments; target identification is non-existent without illumination.

Regardless of the lighting condition you find yourself in, attempt to get to a better one than your opponent. Create or alter it if you have to. Backlight him, **SF** not yourself.

"Not by strength, but by guile."

motto of British Special Boat Service (SBS)



Principle Two: Operate From The Lowest Level of Light

As water seeks its own level, move and operate from the lowest level of light whenever practical. After you "read the light" and have made an assessment of the varied conditions, generally you should place yourself or your team into the lowest level of light. Operate or further assess from that point in space.

Assume that "All dark holes have guns." This saying migrated to the SureFire Institute from years of operating below deck of a darkened ship in a rigorous force-on-force program designed to address terrorist threats facing the U.S. Navy when I was working as a trainer after I left the SEALs.

One of my fellow instructors, Dave Maynard, coined this phrase as a way to succinctly describe what your mind should be thinking as you evaluate a darkened, three-

dimensional space. This pithy saying was often a reminder of the pain experienced for neglecting or passing by dark areas during low-light force-on-force drills.

These dark holes exist during daylight hours. Before you move into the lowest level of light, you need to flush out any potential threats that may have already taken up residence. It is completely natural and intuitive for predators to operate from the "cover of darkness," so move and act accordingly.

On the other hand, once you occupy the darkest space, potential threats now have to come and take it back from you. This means one of two things— either they wander unwittingly from a backlit condition into your space or they reluctantly use some type of illumination tool to evaluate the space. Either way, this gives you the indicators that

you need to take your next action.

The study of battle through history clearly shows that forces which are similarly armed win or lose based on their commander's understanding of the terrain, lighting conditions and weather. It is the correct leveraging of these additional tools that spells the difference between victory or defeat.

Your terrain may not be a classic battlefield, but the light levels in the same room can be different enough to have a significant impact on any given engagement. Open doors, energized televisions, lights and vehicle traffic can all paint a lighting picture. 

"Let there be light."

Book of Genesis





Principle Three: "See" From The Opposite Direction

For a minute, imagine yourself as a Marine sniper. One of your most dangerous adversaries is your counterpart, an enemy sniper. Why is this so? First, this threat has weaponry that can perform to the same or higher level than yours. But more importantly, this enemy views the world as you do. His training may be similar or even better. His commitment is high.

He knows you are looking for an excellent final firing position as he too is interpreting the terrain from that perspective. He knows what would be optimal, marginal and unacceptable. He is attempting to think and act like you are.

He is waiting for a mistake to appear so he can exploit the opportunity. In many ways he is acting like a criminal profiler, totally immersing himself into your thoughts, strategies, techniques, and game plan.

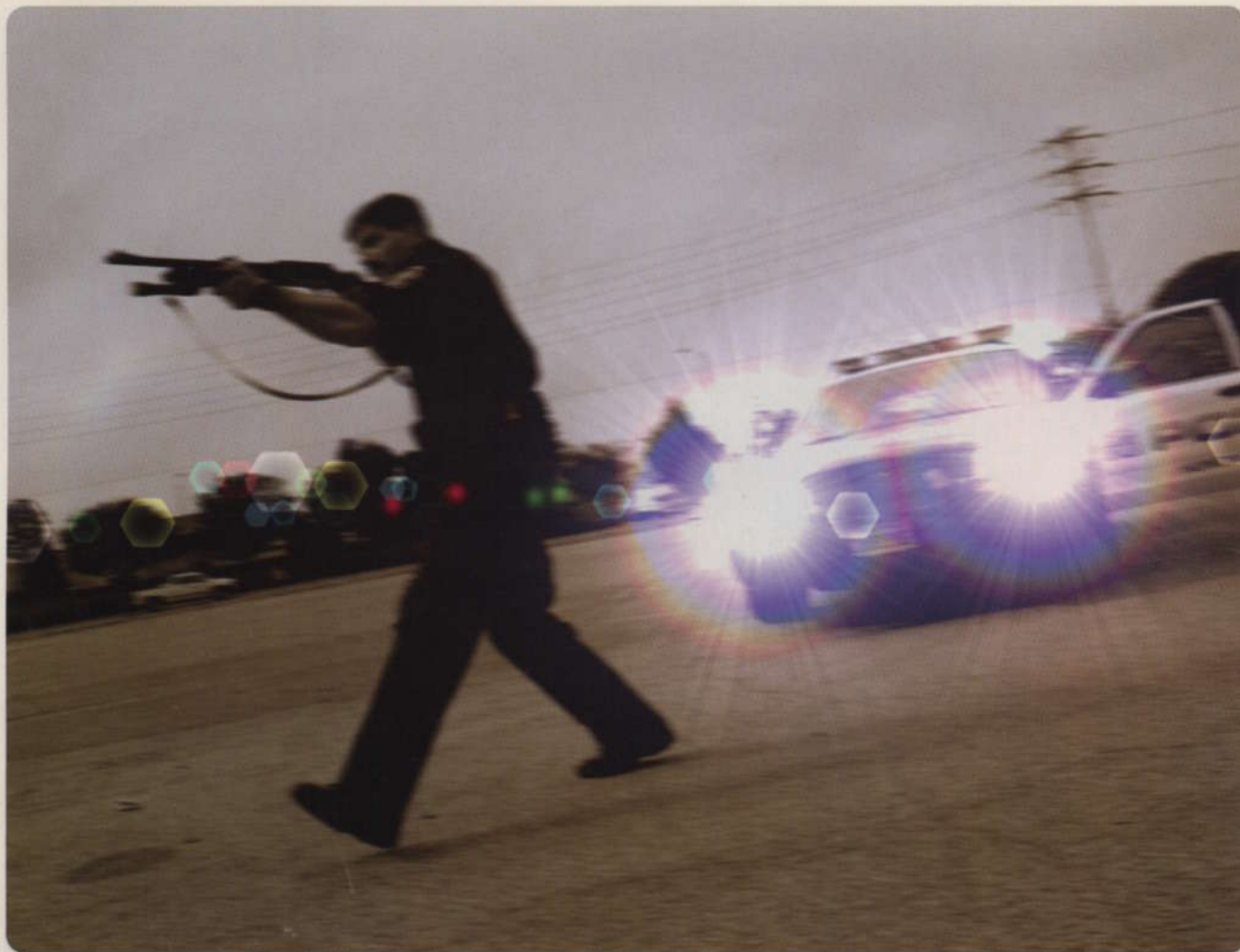
The sniper game can be slow and methodical, a

drawn out chess game with high stakes— your life or his. While performing law enforcement duties in a low-light environment or responding to a threat as a home owner, you often do not have this luxury of time.

Yet, you still must learn to "see" yourself as a threat, like a counter-sniper would. You need to know what you look like from the threat's point of view.

You need to know when you can be clearly seen, silhouetted, partially obscured, or completely invisible. You need to know when to move quickly or not move at all.

This "vision" will determine route selection, timing and communication methods. The ability to see yourself as a potential opponent sees you will allow you to make intelligent and confident decisions that will lead to decisive actions culminating in the neutralization of the threat. 



"Death waits in the dark."

motto of U.S. Army Task Force 160 "Night Stalkers"

Principle Four: Light and Move

Generally speaking, the two principles of "Light and Move" and "Power With Light" are two sides of the same coin. You definitely want to put this coin in your pocket!

How much light should I use? How long should I keep it on for any given situation? These questions in and of themselves encapsulate the art and science of proper application of light. The answers are crucial to success and often incite controversy among trainers.

It turns out that there is no black and white answer. It is the proverbial shade of gray. Every operator needs to apply the first three principles— read the light, operate from the lowest level of light, see from the opposite perspective— then intuitively decide what should be done in terms of active emission of light from the illumination tool.

"Light and move" can be best described as trying to create the view of a firefly in motion. The outside observer never really knows where or when the next flash will appear. The true number of "fireflies" is unknown. This tends to keep threats disoriented and makes it difficult for them to accurately evaluate the situation and develop a solid, easy-to-implement firing solution.

Light, then move. Don't stand still. If you engage your illumination tool, be prepared to beat feet to another location. This is one of the most valuable life-saving principles. 





Principle Five: Power With Light

By "power with light," I refer to creating a wall of light to dazzle or blind your opponent. This means changing the threat's perspective from viewing the world clearly and without interruption to seeing nothing but brilliant white light with no clear comprehension of force deployment.

When supporting this principle, you are creating a temporary wall of light. When you have large numbers of combatants in confined spaces, a team of men will be more effective if they "power with light" punctuated or broken up with the strobing effect of "light and move."

Remember, all dark holes have guns. When you see a dark hole, ferret out any potential threats by eliminating the dark hole and the concealment it offers by "powering with light."

When you have not isolated your threats, you should probably tend toward the "light and move" side of the coin. Once you have locked down a threat's location and other potential threat areas are identified and accounted for, then you should move towards the "power with light" principle. It is a balancing act only you can orchestrate. 

"Let your plans be dark and as impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt."

Sun Tzu, The Art of War



Principle Six: Align Three Things

Align three things— eyes, weapon, and light— when searching for threats. Endeavor to align your weapon with your vision and then ensure that the “hot spot” of your illumination tool is where you want it to be. It is time to hunt— not to cower, recoil or shy away.

An unofficial estimate of first-time participants in force-on-force training reveals that alignment of the shooter’s eye, light and gun is only occurring approximately 10 percent of the time, a number much lower that you might initially expect.

Victory goes to the one who dominates by minimizing his own gaps and exploits his opponent’s openings.

Regardless of the flashlight technique you choose to use, endeavor to maintain the alignment of your eyes, weapon (sights) and your light at all times. You should not be staring at your sights while searching but they should be “in battery,” hinged just below the final sight

plane, ready to be reattached to your vision if you determine that you need to engage with you weapon.

Smaller movements are more efficient. Years of force-on-force training have shown that this is not as easy as it sounds when an individual is placed under the duress of simulated combat. More often than not, one or more of these critical “weapon system” components are completely out of alignment during movement or during the actual engagement.

Videotape analysis of our force-on-force training scenarios reveals weapons dangling and pointing in non-specific and often unsafe directions. Heads peek around corners minus weapons or lights. Flashlights and weapons appear, but no vision to make an assessment of what is really happening. These are all failures to execute the principle of “align three things.”

It turns out there are more ways to move wrong than right. In any

type of conflict, the superior combatant has trained himself to eliminate gaps in time and space whenever and wherever possible. When the opponent leaves a gap, the advanced combatant will immediately close and finish.

This holds most true in close-quarter, reduced-illumination projectile-based fights. Electrons travel at the speed of light and bullets, for all practical purposes, arrive almost instantaneously. Therefore, you cannot leave large windows of opportunity for our adversaries by wandering around in the environment without all of our tools immediately poised and positioned to move.

As the famous Border Patrol agent, the late Bill Jordan, said, “There is no second place in a gunfight.” A proficient low-light operator keeps his eyes, weapon and light aligned most of the time, unless specifically directing the light or weapon in alternate directions for a specific purpose. 

“There is only one tactical principle which is not subject to change. It is to use the means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wound, death and destruction on the enemy in the minimum amount of time.”

General George S. Patton, Jr.

Principle Seven: Carry More Than One Light

Do you carry a spare tire in your car? A spare magazine on your belt? An extra life vest on your boat? You should also carry a back-up light in a tactical environment.

The definition of extreme skiing is, "If you fall, you die!" In a low-light conflict, if your only illumination tool malfunctions, gets damaged, dropped or lost, your life may be over. Yes, it's that serious.

Redundancy is built into fighter jets, the Space Shuttle and a myriad of other devices. All but the most insane rock climbers use more than one piece of protection to arrest their potential fall during ascent up radically pitched rock faces.

Flashlights, regardless of the manufacturer, can fail. Bulbs can burn out, batteries can go flat. Flashlights can get hit with projectiles. They can be dropped in the middle of a search and become irretrievable or damaged. Your personal survival and safety is certainly worth more than the price of an  extra SureFire.



"Alas! How easily things go wrong!"

George MacDonald (1824–1905)

