

# MECHANICAL SAFETY On or Off?

by Max Joseph

Photos by James Kreter M.D.

The ideas discussed in the following article are certain to raise objections and get some people's blood boiling. This subject is rarely mentioned and not given nearly enough attention. The ideas presented here are sure to cause many debates. That is a good thing. Men generally are resistant to change and very proud of their existing weapons techniques, whatever their level may be. Additionally, they also do not like to change their weapon's SOP. Whether your duty weapon is an M-16A2, MP5, 12-gauge shotgun or venerable 1911, the following information pertains to you.

Department liability is a concern of all administrators, yet the operators are often rightfully miffed when the administrators meddle in the tactics or techniques of the officers or enforce unrealistic limitations on the way their SWAT team members train or execute ops. While I absolutely agree that the men in the field have the call on the manner in which they accomplish the mission, the fact remains that the fundamental issue of the required position of an officer's mechanical safety on their weapons is an item of common sense. All hands need to ensure that the condition of weapons carry allows the officer instant access to his weapon, and they must never put in place redundant safety standards that would endanger the safety of the officers. At the same time, they must ensure the highest standard of weapons safety and professional handling at all



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The shotgun has one of the most user-friendly safeties for a right-hander.

Left-handers can easily acquire their shotgun safety by canting the weapon slightly and reaching under the trigger guard to ride/disengage.

Would a man behind you with his revolver in this condition give you peace of mind? An MP5 or shotgun is in this exact same condition when off safe.



times for the safety of their patrol and SWAT personnel and the public.

Be advised that I am definitely not one of the safer, kinder, gentler of the weapons generation. If anything, I am the exact hard-core opposite. My teaching and philosophy over the last 16 years focuses on extreme stress during training, extreme realism as much as the operators and environment allow for and no tolerance whatsoever for unsafe weapons handling or for whiners. This attitude is not always popular with those who strive for the mediocre.

Here is the scoop: Common sense dictates that all single-action weapons need to have a primary safety employed during movements and

ingress. Regardless of what the traditional understanding of single-action is, it can be simply defined as: *Single-action* means hammer restrained by sear only, always cocked. Do we need safeties on revolvers? Of course not. The reason is that it takes two conscious physical actions to make that weapon fire. The first one is distinct pressure exerted to cause the hammer to begin its cocking cycle. Second is the final pressure of causing the hammer to slip the sear and fly home. The concept is so basic that it needs no further discussion. It does not take a Delta Force operator to figure it out. Now, that said, I am sure that we are all in agreement that our shotguns and SMGs and rifles are all single-action.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Navy trigger groups with H&K weapons can be manipulated in the same fashion as a left-hander utilizes an M-16 safety.

When riding the safety on the strong side, keep the thumb on the safety while firing/covering. There is no time for anything else.

As the weapon comes up to bear on a threat, the safety is released "automatically."



Why should it be on safe? Team-member and noncombatant safety is always a primary concern of a lethal-force operation. While moving or traveling with our weapons, we all know that all the normal mishaps such as falling and being forced into hand-to-hand defensive tactics mean that the trigger may come into contact with a piece of your gear and/or the body extremities of both yourself and/or any suspects or hostages.

When is it not on safe? There are those that say, "My finger is always straight, so it's never on safe." Envision being in a stack getting ready to make dynamic entry, hearing a click and glancing to your rear; you see the man behind you with a revolver cocked, bringing up your six. He looks at you and says, "Don't worry, I have my finger straight." Would you feel comfortable? I didn't think so. Some say, "When we jump out of the van and begin our dynamic ingress." Others say, "Once the door is breached and we begin physical entry into the stronghold." And then there is, "Well, during training, we keep our safeties on for safety reasons, but during operations, we need them off so that we can react quickly." Sometimes it's okay, sometimes it's not? In training, on operations? Is there a difference? How

can you justify that?

During searching and securing of suspects, what is the condition of your long gun? Some will say this classifies as a "stowed weapon," so of course it's on safe. Really? What does that mean? When exactly does it become a stowed weapon? Do all the other team members know exactly when the safety is reengaged and it becomes a stowed weapon?

While 95% of all S.W.A.T. readers have their finger straight when their sights are not on target, how many of them also have their thumb/finger on the safety catch until the sights come up on target? When our weapons are in the ready position, either while in a static position awaiting entry or while moving through a stronghold, the thumb/finger should be on the safety at all times to afford instant disengagement of it as the sights come up on target. As with anything, training in muscle-memory skills is of paramount importance. I am clearly not advocating application of the safety catch on double-action autoloaders for anything other than a mechanical decocker. I personally feel that a Beretta or Smith autoloader should be carried with safety off. A mechanical safety is not needed on these weapons any more than it is on a revolver. It is single-

action weapons that are the focus here.

Lack of training breeds the mindset that, "I'll forget to take it off." During gross-motor-skill manipulation, "I will miss it." Who would admit to such a thing? This is the same as saying that you would forget to deploy your reserve chute on a jump. A man that would admit to that would be immediately removed from the jump manifest. Someone who is already admitting to a mental defeat in regards to remembering to sweep his safety as his weapon comes up to bear on a threat has some issues. What makes us think that this individual even has his finger straight and his muzzle pointed in a safe direction as his pucker factor begins to increase on an operation?

The traditional MP5 safety is agreeably the most right-hand unfriendly mechanical safety system there is. However, right-handers, with only a ten-minute period of instruction, can easily master this safety. The Navy trigger group is much more user-friendly. It allows a right-handed shooter to keep his thumb on the starboard (right) side of the weapon to disengage the safety in the same manner that a left-hander manipulates an M-16 safety. When using this method, it is important for the shooter to keep his thumb in the same position when firing. There is no time or need to attempt to wrap his thumb around the pistol grip.

The vast majority of small arms mechanically favor a right-handed person. While I was advised in the military that 80% of the population was right-handed, I find that nowadays, it is more like one in ten are total left-handers. I am myself a "southpaw," and while I admit to many faults, proper weapons handling and failure to consistently shoot fast and accurate under stress have never been ones that have been pointed out to me.

Admittedly, the shotgun and M-16 weapons require a little bit more effort on the part of the southpaw. I have never seen this as a difficulty that can not be overcome. With John Browning's 1911 or Hi Power, this problem has been corrected in modern times by the



With 1911-style weapons, the thumb should always ride the safety high so that as the safety is swept off, the finger goes into the trigger.

addition of ambidextrous safeties.

The cowboy-mentality bible dictates that, "I don't need to adhere to basic safety standards because I can handle it—you don't realize how high-speed I am." It is also the reason that men fall off boats and drown because they were too high-speed for the need to wear their buoyancy compensatory in rough seas!

Mark my words, in five years, this concept will be SOP with the majority

of quality teams. It already has been for several years with the most progressive tactical operators. How many negligent discharges have you seen? I have witnessed my share of NDs over the years, most prominent with the pump shotgun and other single-action weapons. I definitely agree that the main suspect is the finger in the trigger.

Remember the old "keep your finger straight?" This idea met with much resistance at first and is still questioned by some of the least informed. This finger-straight concept seems so basic now, new recruits find it hard to believe that it was not always the norm. Rest assured though, it was extremely radical when first introduced (by Colonel Cooper, if I am not mistaken).

I remember hunting as a kid with a double-barrel 12 with cocked overland hammers, with my finger lightly in the trigger, because that was all I knew.

I also remember my early days in the

Marine Corps, running about with my finger in the trigger and/or the safety off, because we did as we were told, and that is all we were told. This simplistic idea had not been founded yet. I know that many of you reading this who have spent any substantial number of years in the military and/or on a department can also attest to this fact.

## Conclusion

The danger of a hostage or noncombatant releasing the sear as they are running and grabbing for their rescuer in a panic is a very real possibility—one that can not be ignored. Take it for what it's worth; but professionals train to master their weapons, not to make excuses. If you are the team leader, and you don't already have this concept in place as your SOP, try utilizing it on your next training day. Disciplined training is the key.

Remember: Sights on, safety off!  
Sights off, safety on! ☉