

The Knife Fighting Tactics of the US Marine Corps: Grips, Stances and Targets

by Robert Safreed



It's midnight in the jungle, and a United States Marine Corps infantryman crouches in the grass. His M16 assault rifle, emptied of bullets, lies somewhere in the thick underbrush, near the bodies of the soldier's slain enemies. He is alone, and he is far from home, behind enemy lines. Yet he is unafraid. He still has his knife, and in close combat, that is all he needs.

According to Jim Advincula, a longtime U.S. Marine Corps knife and close-combat instructor, basic knife-fighting techniques are far more effective in close-combat situations than fancy or advanced techniques. For the average grunt, simple is deadly.

Advincula's Oceanside, California martial arts school is located near a military base, and the issihin-ryu karate and escrima instructor is frequently called upon to teach UPS. servicemen the finer points (excuse the pun) of knife fighting. Following are some of the major principles Advincula covers with his trainees.

Grip

The first thing Advincula shows his knife-fighting students is how to grip the weapon. The terrain and environment are rarely ideal for close combat. Rain, mud or snow will make the handle of a knife slippery and difficult to manage, and wearing gloves only makes it more difficult to wield the weapon efficiently.

Technique #1

Therefore, it is necessary to select a simple, strong grip which can be used in any situation. Close-combat instructors generally teach four methods of grip- ping a knife:

- Reverse grip. Some instructors advocate the use of the "reverse" grip, with the knife held along the wrist. However, Advincula claims this method limits your techniques and only allows for slashing maneuvers, which are usually ineffective in a close-combat situation because the blade doesn't penetrate the target or generate much power.
- Fencer's grip. Most instructors teach the "fencer's" grip, in which the knife handle is gripped firmly between the thumb and forefinger, with the other fingers wrapped loosely around the handle. While this grip may be suitable for small knives like a stiletto, it isn't suitable for blades with large grips. If your hand is hit during combat while employing the fencer's grip, you can lose your grasp on the weapon.
- Ice-pick grip. The "ice-pick" grip enables deep penetration against soft body armor, heavy clothing, or other protective outfits.. To achieve this grip, simply hold the knife handle in a fist, with the blade pointing down. There are drawbacks to this grip, however. When raising the knife for a downward strike, you not only telegraph your intentions and expose your chest area, but you also make it easy for your opponent to see the weapon. Moreover, the ice-pick grip does not provide parrying or thrusting capability, and it is easier for the opponent to block a knife strike delivered in this manner.

■ Hammer grip. The hammer grip is preferred over all others. A knife held in this fashion is less likely to be knocked from your grasp, and can also be used in conjunction with a punch or to deliver butt-end knife strikes. A hammer grip is achieved by grasping the knife at the handle and forming a tight fist. Keep the wrist flexible, as if using a hammer or hatchet. This enables you to lock the wrist tightly when needed.

The hammer grip provides great penetration and power, allowing the blade to easily cut through heavy clothing. There is also less likelihood of injury to the user's thumb, unlike with the fencer's grip. The hammer grip can be used for chopping, slashing, and especially thrusting techniques.

Stance

After achieving an effective grip, the knife fighter must assume an appropriate combat stance. Advincula teaches Marines to fight from a basic "triangle" stance. Also known as the "fencer's" stance, the triangle posture allows the knife fighter to move in any direction at a moment's notice. This stance also allows the practitioner maximum reach because his knife is held in the hand nearest to the enemy.



Covering

Advincula teaches students to "hide" behind their knife; in other words, keep the weapon between them and the opponent. By keeping the knife pointed toward the enemy, you can attack and/or block or parry any thrusts by the opponent. You can also pull the weapon close to your body, leaving your free hand to protect against an opponent's grabbing technique.

Jim Advincula (left) demonstrates the "triangle" stance, with his knife to the front and shield hand covering his chest. This is the preferred knife-fighting stance. Standing with the free hand forward (center) rather than the knife hand, or using a reverse grip (right) is not recommended.

Shield Hand

The knife fighter's free hand should be held close to the heart or solar plexus to protect vital areas such as the heart and throat. Should the enemy's blade get through your defenses, your free hand will hopefully absorb the blade rather than one of your vital organs. This technique is taken from Filipino escrima, in which the hand is used as a shield and is sacrificed, if necessary. According to Advincula, the escrimador's credo is: "You can cut my hand, but I will take your life!"

The knife fighter's "shield hand" can also be used to parry, punch, fake a blow, throw objects, distract the opponent, or assist balance in rough terrain. Marines are even taught to grab the opponent's blade, if necessary. It should be noted that your hand can't be cut unless the enemy is able to draw his blade. By grabbing and attacking the opponent, you can prevent him from drawing the weapon and cutting your hand.

Targets

Attacking the right targets is a key to effective knife fighting. The objective is to neutralize the enemy as quickly as possible, but this does not mean always attempting to strike vital points.

Since the enemy will generally be defending his vital points, you should seek the most available target, be it the solar plexus, back, neck, stomach, etc. Drawing first blood is a tremendous psychological advantage. The more you strike your opponent- regardless of where you hit him- the more he will bleed and weaken.

Technique #2

Advincula also teaches students to aim for the opponent's weapon-wielding hand. By disabling the hand that holds his weapon, you neutralize the threat to your safety and gain the advantage. If the enemy has two weapons- say a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other- zero in on the one that presents the most immediate danger to your well-being.

The official motto of the U.S. Marine Corps is semper fidelis, a Latin phrase meaning "always faithful." By practicing the basic principles of close-combat knife fighting—proper grip, balanced stance, accessible targets—you too can be assured that your knife will always be "faithful," be it in the jungle, or on the streets.



Caption p.59 bottom There are four basic methods of gripping a knife: the reverse grip (1), the fencer's grip (2), the ice pick grip (3) and the hammer grip (4). The hammer grip is the preferred method because you are less likely to lose your grasp of the weapon and you can use the knife in combination with a punch. Caption p59top Caption p.60 In the "shield hand" technique, the knife fighter places (1) his free hand close to his heart or solar plexus to protect vital areas from his opponent's Knife strikes. Or, he can use the free hand to parry (2) an opponent's strike, and then counterattack.