

# Thunder Ranch Urban Rifle 1 Course Review

I have just arrived home after a long trip back from Texas, having spent the last week in Clint Smith's Urban Rifle 1 course at Thunder Ranch, or as I like to call it, "The Ultimate Combat Reality Check For The Normal Citizen." I am still nursing numerous bruises, sore muscles, and physical fatigue and trying to adjust back in to the real world outside of Thunder Ranch. This is not an easy task. My goal in writing this review is to try to put down as much information about the experience as possible before the memories fade.

Make no mistake, this is not a course, it is an EXPERIENCE in all areas, physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional. My attendance has been a life-altering one in that my entire outlook on actual combat and life has changed over the last week. Let me hit a couple of the major changes:

1. I do not ever, ever, ever, ever, EVER want to be in a gunfight with anyone for any reason. Period.
2. I no longer have any desire to be a police officer, join a SWAT unit or be in the military.
3. I have nothing but the utmost respect and appreciation for those who are engaged in any operations associated with item #2.

The most amazing thing about Clint Smith is not his ability to shoot and instruct, but rather his philosophy on life, firearms, and the use of force. I firmly believe that the number one driving force behind everything he does is his honest and fervent desire for YOU to survive a deadly encounter of any kind. He really does not care about your cool laser or scope, whether you can shoot a .5-inch group at 100 yards or how much you spent on your John Wayne setup. The only question he cares about is, "if YOU are placed in a gunfight, will YOU still be ALIVE when it is over. THAT IS ALL.

He is very straightforward and honest in all regards. He pulls no punches and makes it very clear that even if you do everything right, there is still a very good chance you will die in an actual fight. To quote him, "It's not ugly, it's just the way it is. "Bad people do bad things to good people and they die." For instance, a SWAT team entering a house is walking into an ambush, pure and simple. If the adversary is properly setup on a hallway etc, they OWN the house and anyone who enters it will die. If an officer does a traffic stop and the driver has a handgun in his lap, he can swing up and shoot the officer before

the officers' hand even makes it to the butt of his holstered gun. Why? Because premeditated ACTION is always faster than reaction.

Nevertheless, Clint does everything he can to stack the deck in your favor. The best thing you can do to help is simply do what he says and then go home and practice it over and over, in between praying daily that you will never have to use what he has taught you.

## **Facilities:**

Simply excellent. Everything is very clean and well kept. Everything works. Everything is in an excellent state of repair and the simulators are as close to real life as you can get without having someone actually shoot at you.

**Ranges include the Terminator (house clearing room by room simulator),**



There are 2 simulators in the above building, so when you go through you actually run (2) different scenarios on each trip to the Terminator. It is basically a movable maze that is different every time you go through. Make no mistake about it, it is VERY hard. I would never want to have to do it for real, with adversaries actually shooting back.

**The Tower  
(room clearing simulator on multiple floors)**





**Thunderville (a urban assault scenario simulator),**



**The White range (wobblers),**



**And the orange range (chargers)**

## **Day by Day Action:**

All activities for the day start on the White range. This range has 25 targets mounted on moving stands. Why moving targets?

If someone was going to shoot you in 3 seconds, would you rather be moving or remain stationary? Why then do we spend all our time shooting at fixed, non-moving targets while remaining stationary ourselves? “We will do in combat what we do in practice,” so we better get our butts off the bench at the range and start MOVING.

Therefore, from day 1 on we were either moving and shooting, moving to cover and shooting, shooting at targets that were moving, or doing all of the above at the same time. We came to dread the white range because of hour after hour of doing drill after drill; malfunction drills, shooting from cover drills, injury drills, transition drills, movement

drills, tac reloads and empty reload drills...it seemed never ending, and you were always working, you had very few breaks and they were always SHORT!

You shoot at representations of PEOPLE. If you don't like that then you aren't really looking for a FIGHTING course, you are looking for a competitive shooting course and that is one thing this is not. As Clint says, "We don't shoot gelatin here, I have never been attacked by gelatin... We don't shoot little targets, bowling pins etc, we shoot the threat and our threat is the guy with a weapon who wants to kill us." According to Clint there are only 2 reasons you NEED to have a rifle:

#1. To stop someone for doing something you don't want them to.

#2. To get something to eat.

"Everything else from clays to "target" practice is just BS"... a façade trying to cover up reasons #1 and #2" This course will teach you how to deal with item #1.

On several occasions we grounded our rifles and were told to move to another rifle to ensure that we could operate other types of weapons platforms, including being able to clear their malfunctions.

Monday morning was the introductory lecture from Clint that covered many aspects of the rifle and its use, as well as how to determine when to use deadly force and what to do if you have been forced to. He covered firing positions, tactics, slings etc and the only safety rules you really need to know about any firearm:

1. All guns are always loaded. Period.
2. Do not point the muzzle at anything you are not willing to destroy.
3. Do not put your finger on the trigger until your sights are on target and you are willing to shoot.
4. Be sure of your target and the backstop.

Other interesting and important information was given:

Never shoot OVER cover, that's what the enemy expects, always shoot AROUND cover. Gunfights are not based on time, they are based on ammo.

M&M-Maximize the distance between you and the threat, minimize your exposure.

Monday afternoon was out on the white range, sighting in rifles from 15-100 yard and the beginning of the endless drills. Tuesday was drills from morning to night, with a nice cold rain shower for most of the afternoon. The instructors reminded us a hundred times, "We know you are cold, tired and sore. You know what? NO ONE CARES. GET MOVING" Wednesday morning was back on the white range for more drills. By this time everyone was "cheating" on holding their rifles up because all upper body strength was completely gone and the aches and pains were in full swing. Wednesday afternoon we were finally taken to the terminator, a realistic simulator used to teach one how to

clear a building of “bad guys” and get the good guys out. Wed afternoon was all “dry runs” to learn how to do it. It is VERY hard and the pressure and stress are very REAL.



Imagine being faced with the hallway below. No matter what door you choose you will be turning your back on a room you have not cleared yet. Extremely dangerous work.



The room above has positions for (2) targets to be placed. You never know which one will be a good guy, hostage or bad guy. Usually by the time you hit your 3<sup>rd</sup> room you are so freaked out you just shoot without thinking. This is how yours truly shot a police officer being held hostage the first time I ran the Terminator. The targets fall if you score direct hits. Sometimes they are weighted to only allow headshots to take them down.

Thursday was drills in the morning and full terminator runs in the afternoon, plus a live fire assault on Thunderville, the full size street mockup. Thunderville was physically exhausting and Clint pushes the pace right up to the limit.



Several students have actually puked while doing it as they succumb to the adrenalin and sensory overload. It is basically a heavy-duty obstacle course on 2 levels with interspersed engagement stations where you shoot the bad guys across the street.



Thunderville is a live-fire **RUNNING** gunfight that kicks your butt to a new level of endurance, and shows any weaknesses in your physical condition or your gear. Thursday you run it once in the daylight and once after dark, I don't think any of us could have run it even one more time that day, we were so completely wiped out.



Clint and his wife provided a fantastic Texas barbecue that night in between the 2 runs. The food was Excellent!

In between doing the live fire house clearing of the terminator and the live fire assault on thunderville you pay a visit to the orange range where you and your partner are faced with 2 “charging” adversaries that test your communication skills with you and your partner and more importantly, show how very fast an adversary can cover ground to kill you. It is also designed to weed out the natural human tendency to stand your ground when a threat approaches you. The safe thing to do is retreat **WHILE FIRING** and keep retreating until you get a good distance between you and the threat.

Distance=Time and Time=Life in the gun fighting equation.

Friday brings more drills and another trip through Thunderville. You will also pay one more visit to the orange range with the chargers running even faster than the day before. You also get a trip through The Tower



You start off by running to the ladders and climbing to the top on the **OUTSIDE** of the Tower. Then you have 50 seconds to clear the tower from Top to Bottom and find the “bad guy” who is getting ready to blow it up. Again, stress, pressure and physical work are the trademarks of the Tower. BTW, when you exit the tower you **IMMEDIATELY** run over to Thunderville and engage. I believe their goal is to get you tired and mentally overwhelmed before you even start your Thunderville run.

## **Equipment:**

Thunder Ranch will test you and your equipment to the max. You will soon find out what really works and what does not. Out of the 23 students there, 18 had AR's or variants. There were 2 with AK-47's 1 with H&K 93 and 1 with a H&K 91. I observed several failures in the AR's during the week. Nothing ugly, that's just the way it was. I did not observe any of the H&K's or AK's having any failures. (Please don't be mad about this, I am just reporting what I saw.) I had some difficulty in getting my 5.45 X 39 ammo down to the school in time for the first day of class, so I borrowed a TR employees AK-47 in 7.62. It worked flawlessly from start to finish. Thanks Pete! Tuesday morning a fellow student offered me the use of his brand new Rob Arms M96 in .223 to see how it would do. I was really excited because my trouble finding 5.45 locally had me thinking I should buy a AR style rifle and I was really interested in the M96. It lasted about 100 rounds before breaking. We found out later the trigger had actually broken in half up in the receiver. Prior to the breakdown it had a couple failures to feed and was very HEAVY! I don't have any desire for one now. ☺

I switched back to Pete's borrowed AK-47 and used it until my 5.45 arrived Tuesday at noon. BTW the Fed-Ex guy came all the way out to TR on his own lunch hour to get me my ammo because he knew I was in great need of it for the class. This is just one example of the incredible southern hospitality I enjoyed from all those I met on my trip while in Texas. The people there went out of their way to be helpful and friendly and would do nearly anything for you. Whether it was Heidi and Diane in the TR office or the fine folks I sat next to on the plane ride down, all were so amazingly happy and upbeat, while doing everything they could to help out a complete stranger. I was totally impressed.

We were instructed in 5 malfunctions specific to the AR platform and their solutions. There was one malfunction that could only be cleared by slamming the butt into the ground with enough force to shatter a collapsible stock. That's right, if you perform the clearance drill properly, you WILL shatter your stock. Clearing an AR involves numerous steps, and the instructors were constantly harping on keeping the dust covers closed. An instructor stated that they recently changed the "ground" on the ranges from sand to rock because the AR's were constantly choking on the sand. My most difficult clearance drill was to remove the mag and run the charging handle a couple of times. No slam intended, just what I observed. The AR guys were constantly having to pull on their mags to see if they were seated, finger sweep the chamber to see if the round actually went in the barrel, download their mags 2-3 rounds to ensure they would insert and feed properly, slam there rifles on the ground to knock out extra rounds, etc. Several of the most frequent jams were very time consuming to clear. The common one of having a round actually get stuck ABOVE the bolt was really nasty. They had a clever way to clear it that I will have to pass on to my AR buddy, as he has had it on several occasions and we have worked at length to get it cleared. On numerous occasions I saw AR mags fall out of the weapons on the line after the student had fired the first shot. It became almost comical, except when one considers that most of them were police officers and

when it happens to them for real they could easily be killed. During the rain storm on Monday the instructors also warned all the AR owners to make sure they kept their muzzles down. They stated that just 1 drop of water down the barrel could cause high pressure to form in the chamber resulting in a violent explosion in the rifle. Those with H&Ks and AK's were told to feel free to submerge their rifles if they felt like it and pull triggers without hesitation.

I had come to the class thinking I was going to buy an AR type rifle when I got home (because of the ammo/mag availability issue for the AK's.) A week in the "zone" left me convinced that I would never again feel comfortable trusting my life to the AR platform, or the "disposable" magazines that it uses. **THIS IS JUST MY PERSONEL OPINION, AND SINCE IT IS MY LIFE I AM ENTITLED TO IT!** If you don't agree, that is fine.

Scopes, red dots etc are OK to bring, but chances are that like me you will discard them before the week is out. The first day we endured a 3-hour heavy rainstorm that fogged scopes, soaked the optics, and made it difficult to look through the glass etc. Furthermore, while going through the thunderville course it would be easy to knock the optics off. However, I did notice that in the drills going from standing to prone and shooting 2 shots to center of mass, my Kobra dot scope made a noticeable speed improvement over my iron sights. When I ran Thunderville with the Kobra, the speed improvement was again very apparent. Tube-type red dots are at some disadvantage in the interior drills and shooting from cover because of how they limit the field of view and required you to lower the rifle to see what was going on. Scopes not to even bother bringing? Anything that will not allow both eyes open shooting, anything that is big, and anything that is heavy. The main reason that I went back to iron at the end of the week was because I did not want the extra 14 ounces of weight from the scope on the rifle to have to hold up in the air for hour after hour. I also noticed I was more accurate with iron than the dot. I attribute this to having to take the time to line everything up with iron, rather than snap shooting with the dot bouncing all around.

Knee and elbow pads are a necessity.

Bring rain gear, the E.C.W.C.S Gore Tex was the thing to have. I was without it, and suffered the wet and chilling consequences.

Bring lots of mags that you can load up the every night to have ready for the next mornings class. It is a pain in the butt to load mags while on the range. I had (12) along and they would get me through the whole morning without a reload. Lunch was when we would then reload for the entire afternoon. It was really nice not to have to worry about reloading mags while on the firing line. BTW, You really roll through the ammo in this course! I used 1,500 rounds of rifle and 150 rounds of pistol ammo in the 1 week course. Bring more than you think you will need.

I personally learned the shortcomings of the cross-body tactical sling when trying to slide down the pole in Thunderville under great duress and loaded down. The rifle muzzle caught on the edge of the hole and went horizontal, thereby suspending me in my sling 8 ft in the air before gravity took over and I dropped to the concrete below. Then I had to fight my way back up the pole to retrieve the suspended rifle. Not fun. The webbing of the cross body sling makes it difficult to reach mags on the front of your load bearing vests as well. Finally, it is always in the way when you are doing tactical and empty mag changes. I switched back to the traditional sling on Thursday and never looked back. Clint said on several occasions, "I did not say I did not know how to USE a tactical sling, I just said I don't."

I was pleased with my choice of the AK-74 for this particular course. By the end of the first day it was apparent that WEIGHT was the major consideration when choosing a rifle for urban rifle, followed closely by reliability. I believe my rifle was the lightest in attendance, with the only possible exception being a Corbon 15 ( a plastic AR clone in .223), but it started jamming after less than 30 rounds so the owner quit using it. (He said that he had brought other rifles because he felt very strongly it would never last the week of torture, so he was not too disappointed:) In any case, we held the rifles up at the ready position for hours. Literally. Try holding your rifle up in freestanding mode for just 5 minutes. You will quickly find yourself with severe muscle cramps and forearm weakness. It is tough! By the end of the second day it was impossible for us to keep the rifles on our shoulders for longer than a couple minutes at a time. We simply could not do it, because our arm muscles were totally shot. Combined with the black polymer mags and the 5.45 cartridge, the AK-74 made a very lightweight, robust and maneuverable platform with which to attack every area of the course all week long.

A rifle with a short overall length is very important. Nothing with a barrel longer than 16 inches should be considered. Clearing rooms, manipulation etc is much more difficult with a longer rifle. I had purchased the longer "US" stocks for my AK-74. I switched back to the original short version right away to get the weight closer to my body and to make it easier to manipulate in the close quarters.

My FMCO load-bearing vest arrived the day before I left home to attend TR. It got its trial by fire and performed beyond my expectations. It is the most comfortable vest I have ever used, and I have tried all the Black Hawk tac vests in current production. I had it loaded down every day with (2) 72oz camelbacks in an custom made insulated patrol pack, 12 loaded mags, food, compass, knife, leatherman, medical supplies, batteries etc. and it was still more flexible and comfortable than my BH setup was with 1/2 the weight. Plus, with no Velcro it was quiet yet fast, and the position of the front mag pouches provided excellent access regardless of your body position. Talk about tough, I beat the crap out of the vest in that week with zero failures. It goes on and off fast and seems to have no weight limit. It is a complete system. They will custom build your vest for any rifle platform. They are not cheap, but you do get what you pay for. I highly recommend them. <http://fmco.hypermart.net>

Bring a light and pistol if you have them. The surefire line of tac lights is preferred, and make sure you have a red filter for it. The glock pistol is preferred for the same reasons as the AK's, lightweight, simple to operate and impervious to abuse, the elements and the rough environment. Bring your holsters and all you tac gear and WEAR them if you ever intend to use them in a real fight. You might as well know now whether they are going to work like you expect them to. I wanted to know that I could fight in all my gear, so I left it on every day and worked through the difficulties, learning what things needed to be changed. Believe me several things NEEDED to be changed in layout, mag closures etc!☺ I am sure some folks wondered about me with all the stuff I had on, but hey, it cost me a lot of personal time and money to get there and take the course, so I wanted to learn about my gear function, fit, and operation under full stress and fatigue.

I would also recommend a camelbak type hydration system. Water breaks are not frequent, and the glasses they provide only hold about 12 oz of water. Several days I drank both of my 72 camelbaks dry and was still thirsty, and I took the course in November. I can't imagine how much water one would consume in the summer courses.

The single most important thing you can do before taking the class is GET IN SHAPE! Lift weights and concentrate on your upper body, shoulders and forearms. Get rid of your gut. Do aerobic exercise to get your stamina up. Try holding your rifle up at your shoulder for 5 minutes without a break. If you can't do it you are not ready for TR.

The week long course is VERY physically demanding! Be ready for it and you will enjoy it a lot more! Otherwise, bring a lot of aspirin and Ben Gay and get ready to HURT!



A note on food: There is a great little gas stop just up the road from Thunder Ranch as you head back to I-10 called Garven's Store. My partner and I discovered it when we ran low on gas heading home one night. They have EXCELLENT BBQ sandwiches piled high with lots of beef, piping hot and fresh for \$3 each. They also have hot sausage, chips, pop etc. I would highly recommend eating there over bringing your own lunch every day. You have enough to worry about besides packing a lunch, and if you fly in like I did, you have to go grocery shopping before the week starts to get provisions. Stop in and tell them "that guy in the Coppell Police truck" told you to stop by! ☺



At first it seems like Clint is just a guy full of lots of one-liners. As the week goes on you begin to realize he keeps saying them because he wants them drilled into your subconscious, again, in order that they might someday save your life. If you start to meditate on them a little while, you start to see the very real wisdom behind the initial “cleverness”:

**“The fight is never what you THINK it will be. It is gonna be what it’s gonna be, the only variable is what YOU are going to do.”**

**With regard to many subjects: “It’s nothing ugly, it’s just the way it is.”**

**“You can only shoot what you can see.”**

**“If you get shot, it’s because they saw you. They saw you because you let them.”**

**"Open up the ground between you and the threat. At arm’s distance, your opponent doesn’t have to be good, he just has to be lucky."**

**"Shoot what’s available, as long as it’s available, until something else becomes available."**

**"Don’t shoot fast, shoot good."**

**“Move fast, shoot slow.”**

**“Only hits count.”**

**“If the enemy is in range, so are you.”**

**“An empty gun is not bad, load the thing and move on!”**

I could go on but you get the point.

I just can't say enough positive things about this experience. It is very hard, very tough, and very demanding and that is just the kind of training you need if you plan on surviving an actual firefight. I could write pages on all that I learned and brought back, but you should really just go take the course. It was worth every dime and all the time and effort it took to make there. If you go with an open mind and a willingness to learn it will change your life. We had one student there who was an active member of the Army 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces. He said that this was the best training he had ever had, “hands down-no contest.” I think that says it all. I feel privileged to have been able to attend.

A special thanks to Clint and all the Staff at Thunder Ranch for providing me the experience of a lifetime!