

The Principles of CQB

By Jason Wuestenberg

Between my military and law enforcement experience, I have seen the training of CQB (Close Quarters Battle) evolve. I first learned CQB while I was in the Army between 1990 and 1994. I talk to guys now who have returned from Iraq and realize that the military has changed their CQB tactics a little since I was in. I have seen various CQB tactics since I have been in law enforcement as well. Every tactic I have been taught, or have seen, I have given a fair shot during force-on-force training. The problem I see, as a tactical trainer for my department, is that officers focus too much on the specific tactics and don't truly understand the principles behind them.

I was the same way at one time. I wanted to learn all the CQB tactics that were known. That way I could be ready for any situation or floor plan. I'm still not sure where the turning point was, but suddenly I started to shift my focus on the principles to CQB, and not so much on memorizing specific tactics. I realized that learning specific tactics is like learning dance steps. You don't have to think about it. And, I can see how that would be appealing to many trainers and tactical teams. The problem is if you encounter an environment that you are unfamiliar with, then a pause or hesitation occurs because you're trying to figure out how to make a specific tactic work. If officers are taught the principles, and drilled in a manner that forces them to think on the move, then you have a more fluid operator. But, this is harder than teaching dance steps.



Looking back on previous years, some of the tactics I have learned have supported the principles, and some of them didn't. Some of the very basic tactics that I have learned and used out on the street, like "crisscross" and "buttonhook" for room entries, I have now realized can be very dangerous against an armed and dedicated suspect who is willing to get into a gunfight.

Understanding the principles has simplified CQB for me. I don't worry so much about what specific tactic I am about to use, because as long as I keep the principles in mind, the environment will dictate my tactics or actions. And, the tactics can be modified or "tweaked" to fit the situation.

Understanding the principles has also helped me to predict what my partner is going to do, or should do (providing they know the principles), which allows me to start my decision-making process early. Most people have heard of the OODA cycle, or loop, which was developed by the famous fighter pilot, John Boyd. OODA stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. This process is constantly cycling, or looping. We use it every day in various things. I will use the analogy of driving a car. Imagine driving your car on a freeway. The actions of the vehicles in front of you help you to

decide what you are going to do next. If you OBSERVE a vehicle about to switch lanes in front of you, you ORIENT yourself to the situation and environment (how far away is the vehicle, how fast is it going, what other vehicles are around, etc.), you DECIDE what you are going to do (slow down, change lanes to avoid, etc.), and then you ACT. And then, you start the cycle over again. The bottom line is this; your decisions and actions are based on your observation and orientation of the environment and actions, or inactions, of those in front of you. The same holds true for CQB.



The principles of driving are understood more than the tactics or techniques used for driving. For example, if you make the decision to switch lanes, whether you use the turn signal or not is irrelevant. Whether you change lanes gradually or swiftly is irrelevant. The principle is that you change lanes without hitting another vehicle. How you do it is a tactic, or technique, and is based on the environment and situation in front of you. The same is true for CQB. Whether you step left or right, or whether you go fast or slow, depends on the environment and situation in front of you. When you and your teammates understand the principles, you will experience true free-flowing movement through a CQB environment, just like free flowing movement on a freeway.

Here are some basic principles that I have identified through training and experience. This is not an “all encompassing” list, and I don’t consider myself a “master” in this. So, I am probably missing some other principles that are out there.

Principles of CQB:

- **Point man is never wrong** – If you are the point man, make a decision; commit to an act and/or direction. This allows the other officers behind you to make their decisions easier.
- **Read and react** (AKA Initiative-based tactics) – The heart of CQB. You have to be able to read what is going on in front of you so that you can react to it. Your decisions are based on the action of those in front of you (officer’s and suspect’s). This is based on you knowledge in OODA.
- **Fill and flow** – This simply means that if your partner in front of you screws up, “zigged” when he should have “zagged”, or did something you were not expecting, then you need to fill in accordingly to make the situation work. You can be vocal about it later when the situation is over, if needed. Remember the first principle, “Point man is never wrong.”

- **The battle of angles** – It's not about who's closer to a threat area to cover it. It's all about who has the best angle on it. What angles can you and your teammates be engaged from? Those are angles you need to cover or clear.
- **Your head is always on a swivel** – Those people who say you should never look away from your "area of responsibility" don't realize that they are telling officer to have "tunnel vision", which most officers agree is a bad thing. I have heard people say "You have to trust your partner." This is not a "trust" issue. You shouldn't watch your partner do his or her job, but you should be quickly looking around on a regular basis to orientate yourself to what is going on and help break tunnel vision. You can't make good decision if you don't know what's going on ALL AROUND you. Imagine driving your car and trying to plan your next vehicular movement without looking at the rear view mirror, side view mirror, or out the side windows for the traffic around you. That's ridiculous!
- **Find an area to cover or someone to support** – Stay busy and find work. Find a threat area to cover. If all the threat areas are covered, then find someone to support. Even if you're a beginner at CQB, following this principle will help you become an effective part of the team.
- **Bodies, Doors, & Hides** – This should be your priority of search upon entry into any CQB environment. Look for bodies first (prioritize them...next principle). If there are no bodies, then look for doors and cover them. If there are no doors, then look for hides and clear them. It doesn't get any simpler than that!
- **"Immediate" Threats vs. "Potential" Threats** – Prioritize the people you encounter. I have been trained on the "immediate threat" concept taught by many agencies and organizations. This concept states that all persons encountered are immediate threats, and the first person you see is the person you move to and deal with. This becomes problematic when you have more people than officers in a room. I don't care about the person who has the "dear in the headlight" look when I confront them (potential threat). I'm looking for someone with a weapon (immediate threat). Upon room entry, seek out the person(s) with a weapon first, then deal with the others.
- **Cornering** (or the ability to negotiate a corner effectively) – The speed at which you conduct an angular search (AKA "slicing the pie") is based on your ability to interpret what you see and be able to react to it. Some people can do it faster than others. Angular searches should be done as FAR from the corner as the environment or situation will allow, within reason. This maximizes your distance to help increase your angle and allows you to have a good shooting platform.

- **Clear as much as possible from the outside, prior to entry** – “Pie” a doorway before you enter if you are doing a limited entry (only your head and weapon breaks the threshold of doorways). If a dynamic entry has to be done, then do a dynamic pie or “hitch step” (a quick “one-step pie”) prior to entry. This allows you to clear a portion of the room from the outside prior to entry, and allows you to abort the entry if you don’t like what you see. Upon passing through the doorway, you can concentrate on the portion of the room that you could not see from the outside. This is much easier and safer than making a “blind entry” and taking on the whole room at once. A blind entry is when you quickly pass through the doorway first, without negotiating any portion of the room from the outside. I consider blind entries to be tactical suicide.
- **If making a dynamic room entry** – It should be conducted in a manner that makes it hard for a suspect to shoot the first officer, and allows the second officer to form triangulation quickly (next principle). The layout of the room dictates what direction the officers will move upon entry. Choose the path of least resistance. Moving towards the deep corner upon entry, as it is described with the Crisscross and Buttonhook technique, **WILL NOT** work against a dedicated armed suspect who is waiting for you in the room! We have proven this time and time again in force-on-force training.
- **Use triangulation** – A flexible version of “contact & cover” or “L” position. Two officers separate themselves to create a triangle with a suspect. This divides the suspect’s attention and prevents the suspect from engaging both officers simultaneously. This also opens up opportunities in a hostage situation. Officers should not be shoulder to shoulder or back-to-back with each other unless there are multiple angles to cover from a single location. This presents a single, larger target to the suspect and can interfere with either officer’s ability to move quickly, if needed.
- **Communication, communication, communication!** – If you and your teammates are not communicating clearly and decisively, then your team’s ability to flow smoothly will be hindered because no one knows who’s going to do what. The result is pause and hesitation. Unless you are operating in stealth mode, the suspect probably knows you’re there. So, you might as well communicate and project authority. Generally speaking, if you’re thinking it, you probably should be saying it. Choose your words wisely. Do not vocalize when you’re taking your next action (i.e. – a count down).
- **Have a thorough understanding of OODA** – This isn’t really a principle. It’s more of a recommendation. Colonel John Boyd (USAF) developed the OODA cycle and is considered by many as the modern day Sun Tzu. Ken Good (Strategos International) wrote a great article about OODA titled “Got a Second? Boyd’s OODA Cycle in the Close Quarter Battle Environment”. Paul Howe (U.S. Army Delta) wrote a chapter about OODA in his book titled “Leadership and Training for the Fight”. Read them both!

I'm sure there are other principles that can be mentioned and applied. These are the basic principles I use, and they work well for me and other officers I know. Remember this; "principles" are the guiding foundation for what you are trying to accomplish. "Tactics" are the various ways to apply the principle. We have all heard the saying, "There are ten ways to skin a cat." Well, there are probably ten different ways to negotiate any structure, some more advantageous than others. Stick to the principles, and let the structure and situation dictate the tactics.

Be flexible and stay safe!