

SELF DEFENSE for **FLIGHT CREWS**

In the days, months and years following 9/11, airline flight crews received little or no direction from their airline or their unions on how to survive a terrorist attack on our aircraft. Regrettably, when airliners were being taken and crashed into buildings, pilots at my airline weren't given a reason why we were all being directed to immediately land at the nearest suitable airport. I later asked management why our flight crews weren't told that people were breaking into our cockpits so that we could take precautions. Management's response was "we didn't want the pilots to panic." Aside from the unintended insult to people who were mostly military and hired for their ability to function calmly in emergencies, this decision put us in a more compromised and dangerous situation than telling us what was happening would have. Knowledge allows us to deal with the problem. A lack of knowledge allows the problem to deal with us.

The pilots of United Flight #93 were in the process of pulling up a message from dispatch warning them that cockpit incursions were occurring and airliners flown into buildings just as the terrorists broke into their cockpit and killed them. The terrorists had planned to attack all 4 airliners simultaneously within a 15-minute window to avoid immediate detection. Their signal to begin was the 10,000-foot bell. Flight #93's 15-minute gate delay resulted in dispatch finally sending them a warning that cockpit incursions were occurring...25 minutes after the Twin Towers and the Pentagon had been hit. Timing, preparedness, and knowledge is everything.

The fact that the passengers and cabin crew were also being warned by friends and family that they were not going to survive what they thought was just a hijacking changed their mindsets, changed their actions, and saved the lives of many people in Washington DC's Capitol Building. If the pilots had received their warning a few minutes earlier it may have changed the results of that day and saved their lives as well. Knowledge is not something to be suppressed and feared, it's something to be used to avoid the fear that comes with being unprepared.

Flight crew self-defense preparation and situational awareness helps us to create a safer environment in the air and on the ground, at work and at home. We spend half our lives traveling in unfamiliar cities, hotels, airports and other venues that put us more at risk than the average person. Our flight crews were left without direction and feeling vulnerable after 9/11. Having had decades of experience in the martial arts, I felt I should start including basic effective self-defense in my 10-minute Captain's Briefings. "I can't make you a Martial Artist in 10 minutes," I told my flight attendants, "but I *can* show you how to think, move and see things like a martial artist. As a First-Degree Black Belt and Instructor I can also give you some basic tools and targets that don't require a great deal of accuracy, but neutralize the threat very

effectively.” I didn’t know if my inclusion of self-defense would be appreciated or mark me as a weird captain, but it was worth the risk if one person benefitted.

I was pleasantly surprised at the enthusiasm and gratitude these short briefings were met with. Several months later a group of flight attendants asked me if they could petition the company to teach this in their training. I advised them that it was likely a lost cause and would be shot down by the company’s legal department. What I was teaching them was survival street fighting specifically designed for flight crews struggling to survive in close quarters. It was designed to result in damage. If necessary, it could result in lethal damage to stop the attacker and save lives. There was a certain amount of trust involved in the student using what they were taught appropriately. Legal Departments and Corporations don’t function on trust unless they have no choice. The difference between Management, Legal Departments, and Flight Crews is that Flight Crews, unlike Legal Departments, can’t function without communicating with, working with, and trusting each other.

I still teach Flight Crews, corporate employees, individuals, and private groups the ACA (Avoid/ Control/Attack = Neutralize) method of mental and physical self-defense. ACA is the result of 35 years of Martial Arts training and teaching, interaction with law enforcement as a Police Aerial Patrol Pilot, and Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) Training at FLETC (the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy). What I first told my crew still applies, “I can’t teach you how to be a martial artist in one article, but I can teach you how to think, react and move like one and give you a few tools and targets that can save your life.

The Mental Aspects of Self Defense

The OODA Loop: 1. = Observe 2. = Orient 3. = Decide 3. = Act

The OODA Loop is a term that most Law Enforcement and Military combat veterans are familiar with and use to their advantage. The trap in the OODA loop is the **Decide** step when confronted with a threat. It paralyzes us into inaction. We never reach the **Act** portion of the formula, but just keep circling the loop in **Decide**. It can, however, be transferred to your attacker making them feel less the predator and put them in the mindset of the prey.

A mind caught in the **Decide** portion of the OODA Loop is a blank slate of doubt waiting for someone to write on it. Either you write something on it and break the cycle by doing something, even if it’s wrong, or someone else will. That someone else will most likely be your attacker. Taking **Action** breaks the trap of **Deciding** and puts your attacker in the “**Decide**” cycle instead, especially if your reaction wasn’t what they expected from you. Now he’s the one wondering how to respond because you’re not following the part he’d written for you in his mind. A deer in the headlights is an excellent example of being trapped in the **Decide** portion of the OODA Loop.

I've mentioned that your attacker will most likely be the one that writes on your blank slate if you don't. It's a true statement, but not always the case.

One of my "Surviving Active Shooter Situations" students asked me a good question: "I know we're supposed to Run if we can, Hide if we can, and then Fight if we have no other option, but if I attack the shooter how do I know if anyone else will help me?" I explained that most people wait for others to take action and then follow whatever is making the most noise and is aggressive.... especially if you bring them into the sphere of action with a short loud command like "Get him!" "Take him down" or "Help Me NOW!" It not only snaps them out of "Decide" and gives them direction, but yelling a directive empowers you, puts you in a Predator mindset and leaves your attacker feeling more like the prey wondering what's going on. Prey have a lot more to think about and are always one step behind the predator because they're always reactive. Predators are proactive. If you want to light a fire and survive, be the spark. The rest will take care of itself. Besides, if you can't run and you can't hide, your decision is already made for you. Fight or die.

STRESSED OUT MIND GAMES:

The tricks our minds play on us when we're in stressful situations would be admirably creative if they weren't so deadly. **Denial**, **substitution**, and **justification** of a more acceptable scenario in place of reality, **Retreat** into being *uninvolved* in a situation that's unavoidable, **Paralysis** in "Decide" and **Tunnel vision**.

With knowledge, these things are not only avoidable, but transferrable to your attacker. Keep in mind that a real fight usually lasts 30 seconds, and that's a long time. I'll use the 9/11 attack scenario I gave to my Cabin Crew as an example of how this works and how to break yourself and others free of these mental traps.

Denial and Substitution:

From the passenger's standpoint, they just went from thinking about other things and enjoying a book, meal, or movie to seeing someone struggling with a flight attendant and attempting to cut his/her throat. Their first reaction is horror and confusion. "This *can't* be what it looks like!"

Immediately their minds start the desperately creative process of trying to fabricate a more acceptable, less horrific reason for what they're seeing. "Maybe she slipped and he's helping her up." "He spilled red wine on her and he's trying to clean it off." "This must be a movie being filmed and I missed the notice." All of this and the fact that no other passengers are reacting around them keeps them trapped in denial and paralyzed in the OODA Loop. Meanwhile, you're not taking advantage of all the resources you have available to you and 4 people can take over an airliner with 40 plus people on it who can, but don't, fight back.

The blank slates are waiting for direction. The obvious isn't enough.

Winning the War of Minds:

Your first step to winning the War of Minds is already completed. You're taking action to prepare yourself and acknowledging that this hopefully won't, but can, happen to you. As my Special Forces Instructor told us in FFDO Training, *"Play a movie in your minds where you win and never stop fighting, no matter what."*

Tunnel Vision:

In moments of extreme stress people tend to focus more and more on a few elements of the emergency to the exclusion of the big picture. They lose their situational awareness. It's Okay to do that for a moment, but don't stay so focused on getting the steak outside to the barbecue that you run into the closed sliding glass door. Pilots sometimes find their focus so stuck on a few instruments in an emergency that they don't see the bigger problem looming on the Horizon. This happened on Eastern Airlines Flight #401. They were all so intent on solving a potential landing gear problem that they let the autopilot fly them into the ground. Stay situationally aware.

Activate your Troops:

You're fighting for your life and trying to adhere to your script, but your back up is still seated in a Zombie like Trance waiting for their blank slates to be written on. You are a familiar uniformed crew member and to be trusted by Implied Authority. The Ki'ai' is a potent Martial Arts technique in its own right, meant to stun and temporarily blank out the opponent and empower you. In addition, this powerful short yell also keeps you breathing. Most people hold their breath in a fight and wear themselves out unnecessarily. *Breathe.*

Yell no less than one thing and no more than three, and keep yelling them. The mind under stress can't process more than three things. I instructed my cabin crew to first yell "Help me!" This gives the passengers (and your fellow crew members) permission and direction to get up and interact with you. It also implies that the other individual is the bad guy intent on doing harm.

The second directive I suggested my crew yell was "Kill them." The reason this drastic command is important is that it gives your back up a reality on how serious this situation is and to what lengths they are allowed to go to stop it. It also has an empowering effect on your own fighting and scatters your attacker's attention and resolve. People aren't used to touching someone else without their permission, much less with intent to restrain or do harm. They have to be

given permission by you. Otherwise they may think getting up and tapping your attacker on the shoulder with the polite request that they, "Please stop doing that," is what you want.

Another advantage to yelling is that the pilots can hear you and are immediately made aware of the situation in back. These things happen very quickly and unexpectedly. You won't have time to get to the phone and tell us what's going on before it's over. You can and will WIN THIS.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS:

Whether you're in the air or on the ground, at work or on your days off there are 5 levels of situational awareness you operate at. By choice or by default we're always in one of these five levels and switch back and forth between them depending on our circumstances.

As you rise to higher belt levels in the Martial Arts, you realize that the physical techniques and skill sets are just tools to be used by the even more relevant aspect of our mindset. The mindset of a good fighter rests in recognizing and practicing these things.

1. Recognizing that threats do exist.
2. Ignorance or denial of this is dangerous
3. Apathy, denial, and complacency are deadly.
4. Learn to "Trust your Gut."
5. Discipline yourself to practice Situational Awareness.

5 Levels of Awareness

1. TUNED OUT = Crossing a busy street against a red-light texting on your cell phone.
2. RELAXED AWARENESS = Waiting to cross the busy street until the light changes. Your cell phone is in your pocket.
3. FOCUSED AWARENESS = The light changes to green. You look for cars and cross the street.
4. HIGH ALERT = The light changes, you look for cars, someone runs the red light and you step back up onto the curb to avoid getting hit.
5. COMATOSE = You're texting on your cell phone while crossing the street against the red light. Oncoming cars are honking, slamming on the brakes, and careening around you. You look up and freeze like a deer in the headlights.

The best place to be in daily life is in a state of relaxed awareness. If you practice it, it will become an automatic normal state of being. The best way to win a fight is to avoid it in the first place by always being situationally aware.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS DAILY EXERCISES:

*When you enter a room, start making a mental note of how many windows are in the room and where they are. How many doors are there? Where are they located? Which ones are entry and exits versus closets or storage rooms for potentially hiding? How many people are in the room? Are they men or women, adults or children? Close your eyes a few minutes later and see if you get it right. You can add more details once you get good at this.

*Seat yourselves at tables in restaurants and other venues that give you a clear view of entrances and exits as well as access to a good escape route should it be needed. It's a habit many law enforcement officers employ without even thinking about it.

* Be aware of some of the warning signs that you're about to be attacked. These include:

1. **Invading your personal space**, especially when there are only a few people around.
2. **Asking you for the time, change, to use your cell phone etc.** This tactic is often used in kidnappings.
3. **Someone walking towards and focusing on you personally**, especially a stranger and especially if they have their hands behind their back.
4. **Coordinated Motion.** You stop, they stop. You cross the street, they cross the street. You can use reflective surfaces such as windows to monitor this.
5. **Glances.** Someone constantly looking around to see if anyone's watching.
6. **Someone in front of you constantly shifting their weight.**
7. **Herd.** Criminal(s) trying to lure or maneuver you to an isolated place. Think cars, too. Bumping, crowding etc.
8. **Never flash money or expensive jewelry.**

*Areas and Situations to be in Level Two or Three Awareness:

Parking lots and parking structures. This includes your airports, shopping malls, event parking lots etc. If you can, try to park under a light and close to the areas most people will be coming and going from. Remote unlit areas are always more attractive to would-be assailants. If you come out and find a van (particularly one without windows or someone in

it) parked next to you, enter from the opposite car door and then lock yours, or go back to a safe place and get someone to walk with you, or wait. Sliding the doors open when you pause next to your car door and dragging you into the van is a common tactic for abductions. When you're driving, another ploy to get you out of your car is to either ram it from behind or stop abruptly in front of you, causing you to run into them. NEVER allow yourself to be dragged into a vehicle. Your chances of surviving once they have you in their car are drastically reduced.

Going to and from your Hotel room. Always be aware of people punching in one floor on the elevator but getting off on yours. Be mindful of violations of your personal space. Be prepared for someone to open their door just as you walk by and try to drag you in. If you think someone is following you, pass your room and go back to the front desk if possible. Never try to open your door and go inside if they're in close proximity. Besides, you don't want them to know which room you're in if they're setting your inner warning bells off. Try to walk with another flight crew member or friend if possible.

Self Defense TOOLS and TARGETS:

TARGETS:

The Attacker's Eyes

You rarely see actors having a fight in the movies going for gouging the eyes. That's because it usually means a real fight is ended before it begins and it's just not macho enough to seem fair. In the real world, if you gouge with the intent of doing real damage or taking the eyes out, it doesn't matter how powerful, big, or strong the bad guy is—they forget about attacking you and concentrate on getting away from the pain and threat to their eyes. It's one of nature's subliminal prime programming directives for survival. The reason predators prefer what seems to be a weak, unaware or ill target is that it requires less risk to themselves in taking it down. A blind or crippled lion doesn't survive long without becoming prey itself. The same animal instinct and reaction to extreme pain is present and overrides our conscious commands.

The Attacker's Fingers

Like eye gouges, releasing someone's hold on you by seizing a finger and breaking it or bending it back will work in human animals too. It works quicker and far better than grabbing their arms or hands and trying to match strength for strength. There will always be someone bigger, stronger or more well trained than you. The police tactic that applies to

this is “Control the hand, control the man.” I can expand on the techniques you can use for this as well as breaking holds, joints, and disarming attackers if you’re seated and strapped in with the attacker behind you. That itself, requires a short but illustrated article.

The Attacker’s Groin

We’re all familiar with why this works. Kicks, grabs and punches, including if they’re behind you and have you in a bear hug, still work. Specifically spur kicks with your heel and grab and twist.

The Attacker’s Finger, Knee, and Elbow Joints

It only takes 5 to 7 pounds of force to break a knee joint. Much less to break an elbow or finger. Kicking a knee out from the front or side is a break. Kicking or pushing the bend in the knee from the back collapses the opponent. With a break, you take out their base and they can’t pursue you. Your goal is to attack and neutralize the threat. *Break points* force the joints the opposite direction of the way they’re made to bend. *Collapse points*, like those found where the hips connect to the thigh, the elbow, knees, fingers, and shoulders make the joint bend when pushed or kicked and collapse the arm, legs or torso of your opponent.

The Attacker’s Throat

Attacking someone’s throat is probably one of the most lethal targets you can aim for, which explains why so many attackers go for yours. We have two carotid arteries which supply all blood flow to the brain. One is located on each side of our neck. Putting pressure on these with hands or a headlock can cause a loss of consciousness in 6-10 seconds. Sixty seconds or more of choking results in death. If it’s just a 10 second full on choke and then you release, they should regain consciousness in 5 or 6 seconds. That’s why you should never practice chokes without the supervision of a professional.

Along with the two major sources of blood to our brains, the throat also contains our only airway, the trachea, and our spinal column. If you put your finger on that beautiful delicate indentation in your throat called the “neck dimple” or laryngeal prominence, and push (gently down and in) you’ll see why a fist, elbow, shuto (knife hand block), or even a finger here is so effective. A heavy hit to this area will crush the trachea, break the hyoid bone and result in the windpipe swelling shut and very probably death in approximately 5 minutes. Again, NEVER hit anyone in the throat unless you intend to severely injure them. A thumb or fingers in the neck dimple, however, should dissuade them from hurting you.

The Attacker’s Ears

Cupped, or even flat palms aggressively slapping the sides of your attacker's head over the ears stuns them. A percussive strike like this causes severe pain and has the potential to burst their eardrums.

The Attacker's Nose

Fortunately, or unfortunately, what you've heard about hitting someone's nose and driving a bone into their brain isn't true. The nose is mostly made up of cartilage. That said, it's still a very effective target because of the delicate nerves there and the immediate pain and stun factor when it's hit.

The Attacker's Head

"The Head" may sound like too broad of a target. The reason I'm including it in this very brief list of potential body targets is because controlling your attacker's head is another popular tool used by Law Enforcement to control their own attackers. Wherever your head turns, the body follows. The hooked bones that literally connect your skull to your vertebrae are a relatively fragile structure called the occipital bone and the atlas, or the atlanto-occipital joint. Mother Nature has good reason to mandate that "wherever the head turns, the body must follow." If an attacker has you against a wall or even on the ground, an upward elbow or heel palm to the chin will knock him back. If you're standing or up against a wall, this is particularly effective in keeping him on his heels. Always keep going into the attacker and keep striking or pushing up wards under the chin to keep them off balance or drop them. Grabbing the head or the hair close to the scalp and twisting the head to the side and down can turn or throw them.

Exercise extreme caution twisting or pulling the head of anyone you don't want to severely injure or kill. This move, when done correctly (or incorrectly) is also designed to break the neck.

There are many more targets I haven't yet mentioned for the sake of brevity, but these are a few of the best.

A good rule of thumb in a real-life situation is "Always keep hitting the closest target with your closest tool." This creates many more targets in one strike, a smoother natural flow, speed and efficiency of movement. It's also important to keep your balance. That means feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent (locking them makes it easy to push you off balance). Stay loose and relaxed. It allows you to breathe, move and absorb impacts better. Keep your posture upright head over shoulders and don't weave around unless you're

dodging punches. The body goes where the head goes. If you throw your head around outside of your alignment center you'll throw yourself off balance.

TOOLS

As in TARGETS, there are many more tools you have at your disposal than the few I'm going to list for you to begin with. I've chosen these particular tools because they're powerful, a natural go-to, and they don't require a great deal of accuracy. Even an advanced martial artist or marksman loses 60% of their fine motor skills in a stressful situation. Tools are just something you use to strike the target with. A good rule of thumb is: *"Never hit anything harder than your tool with your tool."*

Feet

Your feet can be used to kick, stomp, or push targets on your attacker. Kicks are good tools for keeping attackers with knives at a distance and away from you. Make your kicks low and fast to avoid being cut or having your leg grabbed and pulled out from under you. Kick the knees and take out their base. If you're going to do a front snap kick, keep your toes turned up and strike with the ball of your foot. If you've ever had a jammed or broken toe you know why.

Elbows

Elbows are one of my favorite tools. You can strike in any direction with elbows. They're strong solid bones with a lot of muscle power behind them. Most fights happen in close proximity where fists don't have room. The hand is a delicate structure with 27 small fragile bones, nerves, and joints in it—better used for grappling, eye pokes, and more detailed strikes. There are upward elbow strikes, side elbows, back elbows, and downward elbows designed to use gravity to take your opponent down.

Knees

Everything I've said about elbows applies to knees except for the omnidirectional advantage of elbows. The closest tool to the closest target is great for close proximity groin shots. If you've doubled your attacker over, a knee to the head combined with an elbow should neutralize the threat.

Hands

Great for grappling, grabbing fingers, ears, hair, and jabbing eyes as well as percussive strikes to the ears. Heel palms are good tools to keep your attacker retreating on their

heels. Fists will be a natural first go-to tool in a real fight. Just don't forget your other options.

Forearms

This overlooked tool is good for clotheslining your attacker's throat, strikes and generally pushing them back.

Head Butts

Again, never hit anything harder than your head...with your head. A rear head butt to your attacker's face (particularly the nose area) is a great way to defend yourself from a being grabbed and held from behind. Front head butts are best used striking your attacker's nose with your forehead. You'll get your own bell rung if you hit something harder.

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN DEALING WITH GUNS AND KNIVES

GUNS

ACA Avoid/Control/Act (Neutralize the threat)

I would rather have the barrel of a gun against my head or body because it's much easier to avoid it, control it and use it against my attacker when I know where it is and can reach it. A simple sideways pivot can get you out of the line of fire if done quickly and correctly, while simultaneously blocking and controlling the weapon. The barrel of the gun is the only threat. When you control that, you control the situation. Never let the muzzle of the gun sweep across you or anything else you don't want a bullet in... including the hand you're grabbing it with. Try to keep it pointed at your attacker.

But that's something that needs to be thoroughly explored and understood in another article.

KNIVES

In a knife fight you WILL get cut. it's a close contact attack. Make sure your cuts aren't in lethal areas as you're defending yourself. Avoid exposing the inside of your wrists, arms, and legs to the knife. That's where major veins and arteries are. Of course, there's also your neck to consider. Tucking your chin tightly into your chest and your forearms (wrists towards your face) provides some protection to your throat against both knives and chokes.

If you can keep the attacker away from you using kicks, a tool like a stick or broom, or wrap cloth like a coat around the forearm you're blocking with, that's preferable to close contact. Hitting the attacker's wrist or hand sharply with a stick can also make him release it. Again, these techniques require a more in-depth article at a later time.



In closing, I hope that I've given you one or two things that will work for you. A few self-defense moves practiced many times are far more effective than many martial arts moves practiced a few times. The mindset is even more important than tools and targets. You've already come a long way towards living a happier, more aware, and safer life. Please pass on anything that you feel is of value to your friends, family, and co-workers. Caution them to use what they learn responsibly and carefully. As with all things, the good or bad consequences of power depend on how each of us chooses to use it. Use it wisely to preserve and protect yourself and others. Happy trails and Safe Skies.

Captain Valerie Walker, DAL Ret.