

POLITICS & THE LAW

CONCEALED CARRY

MAGAZINE

VOICE FOR RESPONSIBLY ARMED AMERICANS

JULY 2024
VOLUME 21 ISSUE 5
\$9.99

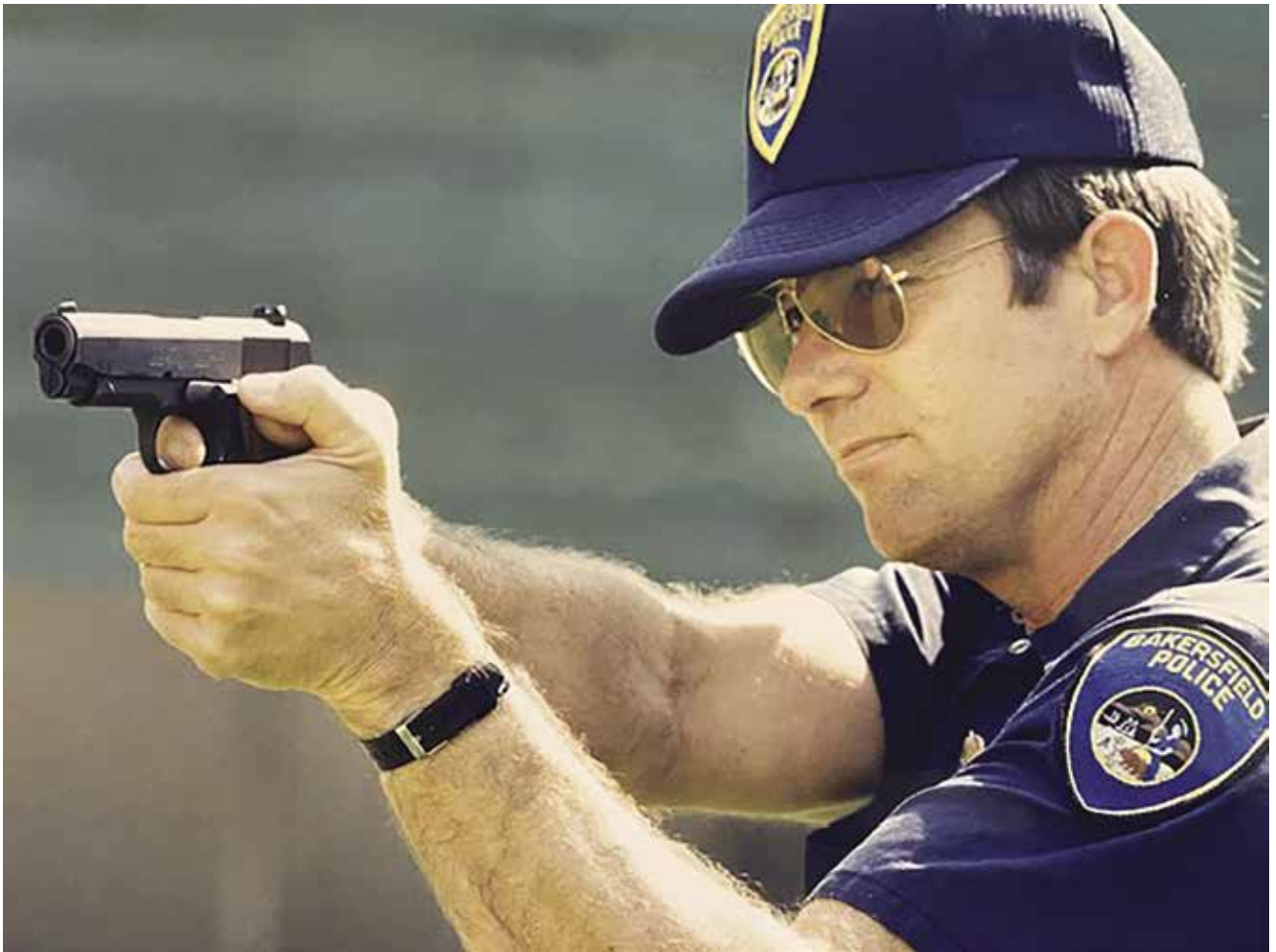


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THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

MIKE WAIDELICH'S LEGACY IN COMBAT SHOOTING

■ *Bob Jewell*

Back in the early 1980s, Bakersfield Police Department (BPD) officers were in a number of gunfights that didn't go well. During one particularly bad stretch, officers had been in eight on-duty shootings and didn't hit a single suspect.

In an effort to turn around this dismal performance, the chief selected an officer named Mike Waidelich to take over training for the department. Waidelich agreed, but only if the chief would fully support his training program, which the chief did.

Shortly after this conversation, Waidelich was assigned as the rangemaster at the BPD Training Academy and, within a year, BPD officers achieved an 85 percent hit rate in gunfights and earned a well-deserved reputation as real

gunfighters in the Central California and Los Angeles areas.

The training program and shooting qualifications that Waidelich developed required BPD officers, including the chief, to qualify on the range twice per month. If they failed the qualification, they were removed from street duty and could be fired. Let's take a closer look at the qualification and the man who made it happen.

STUDENT AND TEACHER

For more than half of his life, Mike Waidelich was involved in careers that demanded shooting skills. Regardless of the profession or hobby he pursued, he always aimed to achieve excellence.

From 1964 to 1967, Waidelich served as a Green Beret in the U.S. Army. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the decision to send U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic. Waidelich's experiences in the Caribbean country no doubt gave him insight into the value of connecting firearms training to real-world experiences.

When Waidelich joined the BPD in 1967, its officers were carrying revolvers. During his three decades on the force, he saw the department transition from .38 revolvers to Smith & Wesson Model 59 semi-autos to Colt 1911s to Glock 22s. His favorite handgun was the Colt 1911 carried in a Milt Sparks leather holster, but he later became a fan of the Glock platform for its simplicity and reliability. When he retired in 1996, his everyday duty gun was a Glock 23.

After Waidelich's retirement, the department switched over to 9mm Glocks. This caused him some concern because he believed that the only acceptable self-defense ammo started with a "4." After investigating the improved performance of 9mm ammunition, he retracted his concerns. Both his acceptance of the Glock handgun and the use of modern 9mm self-defense ammunition showed another element of his pursuit of excellence: a willingness to adopt better equipment as it became available.

In October 1976, Waidelich attended his first class at the American Pistol Institute (now known as Gunsite Academy) near Paulden, Arizona. It was the 250 Class,

referred to as "The Gunsite Experience," taught by Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper. Waidelich was staying in the campground area when Cooper stopped by to meet some of the attendees. Cooper and Waidelich immediately hit it off. The next day, during the classroom portion of the course, Cooper announced that Waidelich would be the rangemaster for the class, much to Waidelich's surprise. Cooper rarely placed this level of trust in a first-time student.

Waidelich was a big proponent of Cooper's modern pistol technique, and he returned to the American Pistol Institute as an official instructor during his summer breaks. Cooper asked Waidelich to move to Arizona and become a full-time instructor, but Waidelich chose not to relocate his young family from the Bakersfield area.

Those who knew Waidelich during his time at the American Pistol Institute described him as a quiet thinker and an outstanding instructor. Often during lunchtime, Waidelich ate his lunch alone at a picnic table, reading a book and drinking a beer.

In Paulden, Waidelich interacted with some notable students and instructors, including Ken Hackathorn (a fellow Green Beret) and Dennis Tueller, of the Salt Lake City Police Department. Both of these men respected Waidelich and described him as a humble man of honor.

"His capacities as a teacher of small arms weaponcraft are unsurpassed,"

REALISM ON THE RANGE

Mike Waidelich understood the importance of real-world skills in the context of law enforcement, and such skills are no less important for concealed carriers.



Cooper wrote about Waidelich. "He not only can practice with the best in the world, but he can teach what he practices in a clear and comprehensible manner. In addition to teaching the modern technique, Mike has been instrumental in its evolution and has contributed several important elements to the doctrine as now approved by me, and practiced worldwide. Any student of small arms technique may consider himself fortunate if he is privileged to be instructed by Mike Waidelich."¹

I don't believe there's a higher endorsement of firearms excellence than that.

HIS HANDGUN QUALIFICATION

Waidelich brought ideas from Gun-site — as well as from Soldier of Fortune 3-gun and Southwest Pistol League competition matches — back to his new assignment as the rangemaster at the BPD. During his 17 years (1975–1980 and 1984–1996) as BPD's rangemaster, he dramatically improved the tactical and firearms training officers were receiving at the academy. One of his significant improvements was a 10-round handgun qualification.

Initially, officers were required to shoot this qualification monthly, but as the department grew, it dropped to quarterly. Waidelich's target and course of fire became a much-discussed qualification in California law enforcement circles. Though I couldn't determine where Waidelich got the idea for the target and course of fire, I noted that it was similar to the course of fire and target used in the Gunsite 250 Class. I do know that the qualification was based on the shooting skills Waidelich believed an officer needed to prevail in a gunfight. He developed other drills and scenarios that emphasized the tactical skills an officer would need as well.

He didn't view firearms training as a box to check. Instead, he viewed it as a necessity to prevail in gunfights and worked backward to establish the training regimen. No doubt his experience as a Green Beret also influenced this approach to training.

Officers were required to shoot Waidelich's handgun qualification from their holsters. There were four stages (with Waidelich's rationale for each

CURRENT BAKERSFIELD POLICE DEPARTMENT QUALIFICATION

■ There are four stages to the qualification:

- **Stage 1:** Two rounds at 10 feet in 2 seconds
- **Stage 2:** Two rounds at 20 feet in 3 seconds
- **Stage 3:** Two rounds, combat reload and two rounds at 30 feet in 7 seconds
- **Stage 4:** Two rounds at 60 feet in 4 seconds

Officers must score 80 or better to pass.

The scoring is as follows:

- **A-Zone:** 10 points
- **C-Zone:** 9 points
- **D-Zone:** 6 points

There are no longer any penalties for time over the limit as in Waidelich's original qualification because the BPD now uses a turning target system. Since most of us don't have access to a turning target apparatus, if you choose to shoot the qualification on the IPSC/USPSA target, I suggest using Waidelich's original qualification times and the one-point deduction for each 0.25 seconds over the stage's time limit.

— **Bob Jewell**



stage in quotes):

- **Stage 1:** Two rounds at 10 feet in 1.5 seconds ("No one should be closer than that.")
- **Stage 2:** Two rounds at 20 feet in 2 seconds ("The length of a car.")
- **Stage 3:** Two rounds, reload, two rounds at 30 feet in 6 seconds ("From the curb to the front door.")
- **Stage 4:** Two rounds at 60 feet in 3.5 seconds ("From the opposite curb to the front door.")

Waidelich had a unique but purposeful method of scoring the target that placed an emphasis on speed but not at the expense of accuracy. His scoring system also included points deducted for exceeding the time limit of each stage. In addition to points gained, one point was deducted per each 0.25 seconds over the stage's time limit. So, if you fired Stage 1 in two seconds, you would lose two points. If you fired it in 2.3 seconds, you would lose four points.

With regard to the reload stage, up until 2006, it was run as a speed reload mainly because Waidelich didn't want officers manipulating rounds in their magazines in order to run the qualification. I learned that this year, the reload stage was run from slide lock

since that would likely be the condition of an officer's firearm when he or she needed to perform a magazine change in a gunfight.

BPD officers had two chances to pass the qualification with an 80 out of 100 score. If, after two attempts, an officer hadn't passed, he or she was sent to a side range to dry practice before being given a third attempt.

In an email to combat shooting instructor Andy Stanford in 2021, Waidelich said that if the officer failed again, he or she was required to come back, but only once on department time. If the officer failed again, he or she had to come back on his or her own time. If the officer couldn't qualify during the course of the training period, he or she was assigned to remedial training. No officer was allowed on the street until he or she had passed the qualification. If an officer wasn't routinely passing the qualification, he or she could be fired. As Waidelich concluded in his email to Stanford, "The training had teeth."²

I had to dig a bit to get hold of the exact dimensions of the Waidelich target. I had read that the target was comprised of a 7-inch circle surrounded by a 9-by-13-inch oval. Those were

the dimensions I used when I first shot Waidelich's qualification and later in a class I taught for advanced shooters. After several conversations with people who actually have some of the targets, I learned that the oval is 10 by 16 inches and that the 7-inch circle is not exactly in the middle of the oval. I'm honored to have been sent one of the actual targets by Waidelich's friend and former BPD rangemaster, Jim Ramos.

This is a qualification that, as you shoot it and reflect on it, allows you to get a better handle on the concepts of speed and accuracy. The first time I shot it (using the smaller 9-by-13-inch oval) in June 2022, I scored an 88 (89 points minus one point for 0.25 seconds over the time on Stage 1). Having never shot it before, I was definitely focused on the times, but after thinking more about the course of fire, I came back a few months later and shot a 96. This time, I focused more on accuracy (scoring 10s) than on the times. If you think about it, you have a cumulative five seconds over the time limits across all four stages to shoot all 10s for 100 points and still pass the qualification.

In the same email to Stanford, Waidelich said that, in one instance, a sergeant consistently hit the 10-ring without making the time, while others met the time requirement but had erratic target hits. Balancing speed and accuracy according to their individual abilities proved to be an intriguing challenge. Waidelich believed that it instilled a proper mindset for real combat situations.³

Waidelich created a "DVC 100 Club" plaque to acknowledge officers who had shot perfect 100s on the qualification. It included the Aristotle quote, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

"DVC" is the acronym for "diligentia, vis, celeritas" — or "accuracy, power, speed" — and can also be found on the logo for the United States Practical Shooting Association (USPSA). DVC was popularized by Cooper as shorthand for the goals of defensive shooting. In writing this article, I was honored to have spoken with four of the officers

whose names are on Waidelich's DVC 100 Club plaque.

Nothing better validates the excellence of this qualification than the fact that it is still being used by the BPD today, some three decades after Waidelich developed it. The current rangemaster at BPD told me that a few minor modifications have been made to the course of fire, and they're using the more readily available IPSC/USPSA target. When Waidelich originally designed the target, he laid it out by hand.



A LIFE OF SERVICE

Mike Waidelich's military experiences informed his attitudes as a firearms trainer.

Eventually, a local company in Bakersfield, California, printed Waidelich's design on a cardboard target, but as the department grew and the demand for targets increased, the cost of custom-printed targets became prohibitive. Today, BPD officers are required to pass the qualification four times per year.

Paul Trent was one of the BPD officers who benefited from Waidelich's knowledge and training. In 1976, Trent met Waidelich as a new BPD officer going through the 12-week academy. Within just a few days of graduating from the academy, Trent was on his first full shift with his field training officer when he got involved in a gunfight. Trent and

Waidelich developed a close friendship, and Trent is fortunate enough to have the last 1911 Waidelich carried and the last Glock 23 he carried. Trent described Waidelich as a man of high integrity, especially in regard to how he trained.

'HONOR IS MY LIFE, TWO IN ONE'

A final testament to Waidelich's character and his contributions to the pursuit of excellence is the number of his friends who reached out to me while I was doing research on his life. My thanks to his friends and family, especially to Brenda Waidelich, his wife of 32 years. She said her late husband's pursuit of excellence didn't apply just to training police officers but also to perfecting his cooking skills. One morning after he cooked them breakfast, he passed away from a heart attack at 78.

At the Bakersfield National Cemetery, where Waidelich is interred, a marble veteran headstone honors him, with a variation of a Shakespeare quote he lived by inscribed on it: "Honor is my life, two in one."

Waidelich's integrity and dedication to firearms excellence in both the law enforcement and private-citizen training worlds should never be forgotten. The best way we can honor Waidelich would be to draw out his original 10-round qualification target (or use a current IPSC/USPSA target) and try shooting his qualification. At the very least, there's no risk of being fired if you don't pass.

ENDNOTES

(1) Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper letter of recommendation, Paulden, Arizona, April 13, 1993. (2) Andy Stanford, "R.I.P. Mike Waidelich: Requiem for an Unsung Hero," *Active Response Training*, July 21, 2021, ActiveResponseTraining.net/requiem-for-an-unsung-hero. (3) Stanford, "R.I.P. Mike Waidelich: Requiem for an Unsung Hero."

