

Training Solutions in Low Light Environments

By: Mike Seeklander

Last night, I spent three hours shooting in the dark. The goal: to shoot test my new JP-15LE rifle, test my low-light mounting solution (a SureFire X300 mounted at twelve o'clock on the top rail) and get some trigger time in complete darkness. After conducting this session to say I learned some valuable lessons would be an understatement. I am not new to low-light shooting, and I teach the low-light block with a handgun regularly. I also spend about one night per month shooting with my rifle in low-light conditions, but this particular training session came after a longer break than I like. I believe strongly that regular training is the only way to stay sharp. As an instructor, I am continually evaluating techniques and always attempting to expand my own skills and abilities. I train every week year-round with all three systems I use regularly: the shotgun, rifle, and handgun.

For this particular session, I shot my JP-15LE, JP's law enforcement/military model in their high-performance rifle line. The JP-15LE is designed as to be the premium rifle at a lower price point, meaning JP quality at an affordable price. (One unique thing about JP is that they offer a program where an officer will be sent a loaner gun if he uses his JP in the line of duty and it is confiscated as evidence!) The gun I have is a 16-inch version with pretty much all the stock parts JP puts on the rifle. In addition, I added my SureFire X300 to the top rail, as well as some backup sights, a sling system, and a BAD lever all made by Magpul.



The JP-15LE, a sub-MOA rifle built for the rigors of law enforcement use. A lightweight, extremely accurate rifle capable of shooting as well as most precision rifles.

Before starting the session, I mounted my light at the twelve o'clock position on



the top rail, though I knew that that position on a rifle can be problematic due to smoke issues at longer ranges.

You might ask why I mounted the light at twelve o'clock in the first place. There are a couple reasons actually. First, I don't like to have gear mounted to my rifle at six o'clock because it forces my hand to be farther back (toward the magazine well) on the gun causing me to lose real estate in that area. I like to have my support hand as far out as possible when shooting a rifle for increased muzzle control. Second, I had yet to mount a rail to the bottom of the hand guard on this particular rifle, so thought I would test the twelve o'clock position with the Surefire light and simply operate it using my thumb just like I would if the light were on my pistol. This allowed me to skip attaching a pressure activation switch to the light, and it works well when shooting bilaterally (off either shoulder). Why not mount my light at three o'clock or nine o'clock positions, or somewhere else on the side? Because the light simply washes back brilliantly when shining on a wall or the edge of a door when working corners, sending light splashing back into the eyes. The three and nine o'clock positions also force the operator to expose the light, gun and himself more so than with a twelve or six o'clock position.

The training session began at about 8:00 p.m., and I spent about three hours testing close-, medium-, and long-range shooting techniques and also worked on using cover by setting up some barricades. Training with this simulated cover was a big part of correct training as well as testing techniques in the contextual situation they would be used thus allowing correct lessons to be learned. I did not exceed 100 yards, as using a light to illuminate and engage past 100 yards would be out of context for me. (and most others)

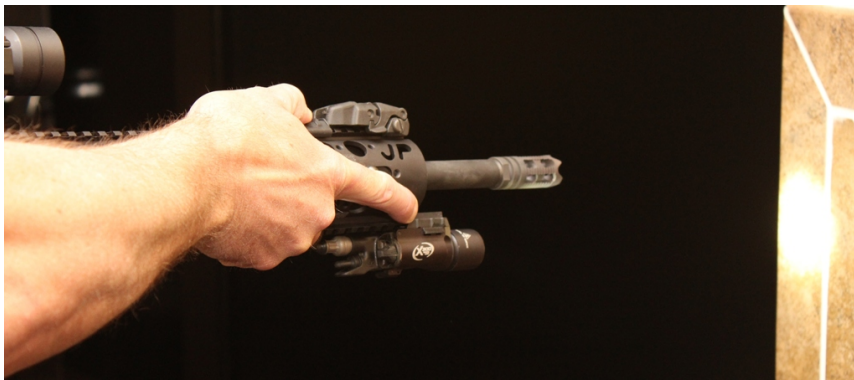
The lessons learned are as follows:

Training is the Way. One key to an effective training program (as listed in my book *Your Competition Handgun Training Program*) is that ***training sessions must be done at regular intervals.*** My failure to train in low light with my rifle absolutely affected my performance, and I felt out of place during the session. I could feel this right away in the activation of the light as well as in my manipulation of the rifle

system in total darkness. I try to practice what I preach because the longer than normal break I'd taken definitely affected my outcome here. Easy fix—I will be logging more low-light sessions in the future.

Watch the splashback! This session consisted of using some barricades that simulated wall corners or the edge of a piece of cover. Although I spent a portion of the night training in the open just working on illuminating, shooting and scanning the threat area, adding a barricade demonstrated the incredible importance of ensuring that the light did not splash back in my face blinding me during the process.

Another observation in relation to that concept is that the shadow caused by the edge of the barricade can easily shadow and hide a potential threat downrange. The light must be used in a manner that illuminates what needs to be seen, without exposing too much of the rifle and operator, all while paying attention to the potential for splashback. Staying a proper distance from cover is a big part of this lighting equation.



This is what happens when you mount the light and do not allow the beam to miss the wall---serious splash back of the light right in to your eyes!

Have a backup plan. When I teach low light with a handgun, I always tell students to carry a backup light in life-or-death situations. Most rifle shooters have a weapon-mounted light that is a great piece of gear, but what if it fails? A handheld light is a viable option when your weapon-mounted light goes down, but using such a light is a unique skill that must be learned and trained; don't expect to master it during the fight! During the training session, I bumped the switch on the rear portion of my light causing the light to turn off. When the light failed (due to operator error) I resorted to using my handheld light, which is a skill that is tricky with a rifle because you lose the ability to grip the hand guard the same way as normal.

Test and Modify Your Gear. This one was the biggest of the lessons learned. While I knew that the twelve o'clock mounting position of the light was not the best option, I had convinced myself that at the ranges I would likely operate my rifle, the smoke obscuring my vision would not be an issue. I was wrong! Even at closer ranges of ten yards, the smoke became an issue with multiple rounds fired, and with the light mounted at twelve o'clock; the smoke issue was huge, especially when using an optic (an Aimpoint C3 in this case). Without testing the light in live fire, I would not

have realized how much the smoke would obscure my vision. At more than fifty yards, the smoke completely covered the targets and kept me from shooting for a second or so until it cleared enough for me to see the next target.

In addition, I had a new piece of gear on the rifle that I had not used before, a BAD lever—a unique device made by Magpul that allows the operator to lock or release the bolt with the trigger finger of the shooting hand. While the BAD lever worked great, the user did not! I found myself forgetting to use it and not using it properly.

The point: train regularly with the gear you have on your gun. If it doesn't work (as in the case of the twelve o'clock mounting position of my light), then modify it.

This is where I recommend mounting the light, as opposed to twelve, three, or nine o'clock.



In closing, I'll repeat what I said about training regularly. While I do train in low light regularly, I had skipped a couple months. This made me much less comfortable when performing, and having new gear just complicated things. I have to dedicate myself to training regularly in this environment if I want to be able to perform well in it. Also, remember that training is not effective if not designed well and done within the context of the situation where the skill might be needed. Now get your rifle out and train!

Resources:

- Shooting-Performance: www.shooting-performance.com
- JP Rifles, as well as high performance parts for the M-4/16 platform: www.jp Rifles.com
- Magpul products: www.magpul.com
- Aimpoint Optics: www.aimpoint.com/us
- Surefire Flashlights: www.surefire.com