

LET THERE BE LIGHT!

How the Flashlight Evolved Into the Best Self-Defense Weapon You Can Carry

by Robert W. Young • photos by Robert Reiff

Back in the 1970s, when someone mentioned using a flashlight for self-defense, your first thought would have been to grab a Maglite, preferably one that held three or four D cells. The batteries gave it mass, and the aluminum body made it durable. In the eyes of most people, it was the perfect weapon—the bigger, the better.

Then things started to shrink. And light technology started to improve. Companies began making pocket-size models that pumped out a more intense beam than anyone could imagine—it was like having a car headlight in the palm of your hand. Thus was born the tactical light.

Neither the Maglite nor the tactical flashlight was humanity's first attempt at light warfare, though. "All throughout history, light was used as a weapon," says James Williams, an expert in the classical samurai arts and a 15-year advocate of using light to fight. "Miyamoto Musashi talks in his book, *Go Rin No Sho*, about fighting with

the sun over your right shoulder to help mask your movement with the sword—for instance, if you're doing a *kesa giri* cut or a *kiriage* from the right side.

"And in Medieval England, gentlemen would often carry a lantern with a concave silver mirror. If they were assaulted on the street, they would turn the lantern so the light went into the eyes of their opponent. Then they would take out their knife or small sword and work from behind the light.

"This is nothing new. But what we have now is the ability to carry photons in our hand in an extremely powerful package. Our military is using light more than ever, especially white light inside buildings. Police officers are doing the same."

Does John Q. Public have a clue of the potential of the fighting flashlight? "In general, no," Williams says. If he has his way, however, they'll be catching on fast. >>





MODIFIED FBI:

James Williams shines his tactical flashlight at the armed attacker (1). While the man is temporarily blinded, Williams steps to the side, making sure he leaves the light stationary (2). If the assailant swings, chances are he'll aim for the light, which marks the last known location of his victim. Meanwhile, Williams executes a groin kick from his new position (3).

How to Think

Most people know very little about self-defense, he says, and that makes them perfect candidates for carrying a tactical light. Even if you trek to the *dojo* every day, a light still offers plenty of benefits. It all has to do with tools.

As human beings evolved, we didn't survive because of our brawn; we survived because of our intellect, he says. "Our best weapons are our large brains, which give us the ability to make and use tools. For personal defense, it's best to use a tool whenever possible."

Why is the flashlight his preferred survival tool? "Light allows you to perceive threats, to know whether you should go into certain places," he says. "It's simple: Before you get out of your car at night, you shine your

light into any nearby dark spaces that might contain a threat. Before you walk up to a door at night to enter a building, you shine your light around the trees and bushes to see if anyone's hiding there.

"The only way you should walk by a dark area is if it's been cleared, and the only way to clear it is with eyes-on. That means you have to have light. Walking by and getting surprised is not an option. Remember that personal safety is not about engagement; engagement is for people who's job it is to engage, and even in the military, there's only a very small number of guys whose job it is to search out and engage the enemy."

Once you've used light to perceive the threat, it enables you to identify its source. Whenever Williams teaches law enforcement, he likes to pres-

ent his students with a scenario:

"I ask them, 'If you wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning to the sound of breaking glass, what do you do?'"

"They usually say, 'Grab a gun.'"

"I say, 'OK, what's the problem?'"

"They say, 'We don't know yet.'"

"I tell them: 'My sons have been known to eat at 2 o'clock in the morning, and on occasion, they've knocked a glass onto the tile floor. Would you bet your kids' lives on your ability to tell the difference between a breaking glass and a breaking window at 2 in the morning? I wouldn't.'"

Light will tell you what the problem is, he says, and the problem will tell you what the solution is. "If you're in a parking lot, the light might tell you there's a guy hiding behind a parked car, in which case the solution is to get back in your car and call the cops.



WEAPON OF CHOICE

When it comes to a flashlight, the needs of a martial artist can be very different from the needs of an average person. Whether they know it or not, NovaTac designed the Storm with the needs of every *Black Belt* reader in mind. Here's why.

- **Concealability** Because it takes a single CR123 battery, it's small enough (3.3 inches long) to be hidden in your palm. That gives you the element of surprise.
- **Intensity** On the highest setting, it pours out 120 lumens for 30 minutes. That's enough to temporarily blind an assailant even in daylight. Click again for the strobe effect, which will really disorient the thug.
- **Versatility** The output can be stepped down to 30 lumens for utility use (four-hour burn time) or even to 0.3 lumens for longer than you'll probably ever need—up to 10 days straight.
- **Durability** The Storm is made of aluminum, not plastic. If you need to grind it into the back of the hand of an aggressor who won't let go, it'll hold up.
- **Convenience** It comes with a carrying case that can be attached to your belt. Or you can clip it to the inside of your pocket next to your tactical folding knife.
- **Affordability** The NovaTac Storm sells for \$99. For more information, visit novatac.com.

If you're in your house, the light will tell you if it's your son or your drunken neighbor—or a guy with a gun or a knife, which would call for a very different response."

How to Buy

In the early days of tactical lights, the top-of-the-line models featured an incandescent bulb that produced a beam of perhaps 60 lumens. Compared to what we have now, that's like carrying one of those Victorian lanterns.

"Incandescent lights put out the whole spectrum of light, including the wavelengths we can't see, like infrared," Williams says. "That wasted a lot of battery power and produced a lot of heat."

A state-of-the-art flashlight uses an LED to pump out 120 lumens, and

all the juice goes to creating light in the visible spectrum. A typical model, such as the NovaTac Storm he carries, uses a single battery and lasts up to four times as long on the same power setting, and it doesn't generate excess heat.

Newer lights use microprocessors that enable you to adjust the output to the situation. Think full power for self-defense, half power for utility purposes—like looking for the wallet you dropped in the yard—and low power for reading a book on a plane.

To a certain extent, carrying a single-battery LED light sacrifices power and burn time compared to a larger, multi-battery LED model, but you make up for that in convenience. The smaller one is lighter, which means it's more likely to be on you when you need it. "Having a bigger light doesn't

do you any good if you leave it home," Williams says. "I always carry a NovaTac light. Anytime I'm in a situation in which something could develop, I put it in my hand. It makes me more aware."

How to Shine

The best way to use a tactical light is as a barrier to prevent a person from closing with you, Williams says. "He can be yelling and cussing, and if you keep the light in his eyes, he'll usually disengage."

What if said person is under the influence? "Most of the time, it will keep him from coming in, but if it doesn't, at least he won't be able to see you," he says. "Then you'll be using your martial arts skills against a person who can't see you—stepping to the side and kicking him in the



AN ENLIGHTENING ENCOUNTER

Many years ago, I was walking with my wife in San Francisco. I had a jacket on; my left hand was in one pocket holding a flashlight, and my right was in the other holding a higher level of force. A guy appeared out of the darkness and moved toward us, and I came up with the light and shined it in his eyes. He reeled backward, crashing into a trash can. He was very night-adapted, so when the beam hit his eyes, it was like looking into the sun. In that moment, I got a quick read: under the influence of alcohol and perhaps other substances, unarmed, not appearing to have the intent to attack. He was just drunk.

My wife asked, "What was that?"

I said, "Nothing, sweetheart," and we kept walking. Look at the positive aspects of that. Just by using the light, I was able to solve a problem that could have resulted in violence. I couldn't run away because my wife was there. If I had hurt him, the headline in the newspaper would have been "Martial Arts Instructor Trashes Drunk!" As it was, I didn't even have to touch him. It was the most efficient solution.

—James Williams

groin or striking him with a ballpoint pen, your car keys or a rolled-up magazine."

To deal with more dangerous assailants, the law-enforcement community developed the modified-FBI shooting position: The officer confronts the bad guy while holding his light as far away from his body as possible. That way, if the perp opens fire, he'll be aiming at the light, not at the cop who's two and a half feet away, firing back. Practitioners of the way of the light use the same tactic, Williams says.

To demonstrate, he shines his beam into the eyes of his oncoming opponent, who's holding a stick. He temporarily blinds him, then steps aside while holding the light stationary. The man keeps charging, but Williams is no longer where the man is swinging. That's when Williams snaps out a quick groin kick from an unexpected angle. "You could also throw, push or strike him from the side, which is such an effective way to counterattack that's taught in all martial arts," he says.

You may not immediately halt the

assault, "but at least you'll be controlling the flow of information into his brain," Williams says, "and he won't be able to see anything you do in response."

Few fighting methods or tools can offer you a greater advantage. ✘

About the author:

Robert W. Young is the executive editor of *Black Belt*. For more information about James Williams, visit systemofstrategy.com.

LATERAL MOVEMENT:

The assailant confronts James Williams (1). Williams immediately raises his flashlight, which was concealed in his hand, and illuminates the aggressor's face (2). He sidesteps (3) and chambers his right hand, which is holding a makeshift weapon—in this case, a rolled-up magazine (4). With the opponent still unable to see, Williams sends the strike into his face (5).

