

A New Reality

Taking Jim Wagner's RBPP instructor course in LA

When *Blitz's* fitness writer Matt Jones touched down in Los Angeles' Orange County early this year, it wasn't to soak up some sun and party with a lot of rich folk as happens on the TV show, *The OC*. He was there to spend some time training in 'the dungeon', brawling with multiple attackers, getting shot with high-powered air-rifles and sprayed in the face with pepper-spray ... all in the name of becoming an instructor in Jim Wagner's world-renowned Reality-Based Personal Protection system (RBPP). Here, Matt tells it like it was.

After 35 hours of flight time and stopovers, I touched down at LA's international airport, LAX. I was pretty darn tired as I hadn't slept for about 30 hours (long story), but I was really looking forward to starting my training in nine hours time. Some may think it's overly enthusiastic to fly across the globe for training, but from what I already knew of Jim Wagner's Reality-Based Personal Protection (RBPP) system it was going to be well worth it.

Many Australian martial artists may know Jim Wagner from his long-running column in America's Black Belt magazine, though most probably won't be familiar with his RBPP system. Jim has trained in many different martial arts and previously taught Jeet Kune Do under Guro Dan Inosanto in California. He was always interested in training as functionally as possible and shortly after leaving the US Army he became a prison guard, which gave him a great insight into the realities of self-defence. Jim continued his training and went on to become a cop, SWAT team member, SWAT Instructor, Special Agent for the US Federal Government and a bodyguard to the rich and famous.

During this time he kept refining his teaching methods and for over two decades he has regularly been hired as a training consultant by many of the world's leading military and law-enforcement units such as Germany's GSG9, Israel's Mishtara, Brazil's GATE and the US Marshals Special Operations Group, just to name a few. He is also one of the only Westerners to have been called in as a close-quarter fighting consultant at Israel's Baghdad 8 (the military training wing of the famous Wingate Institute).

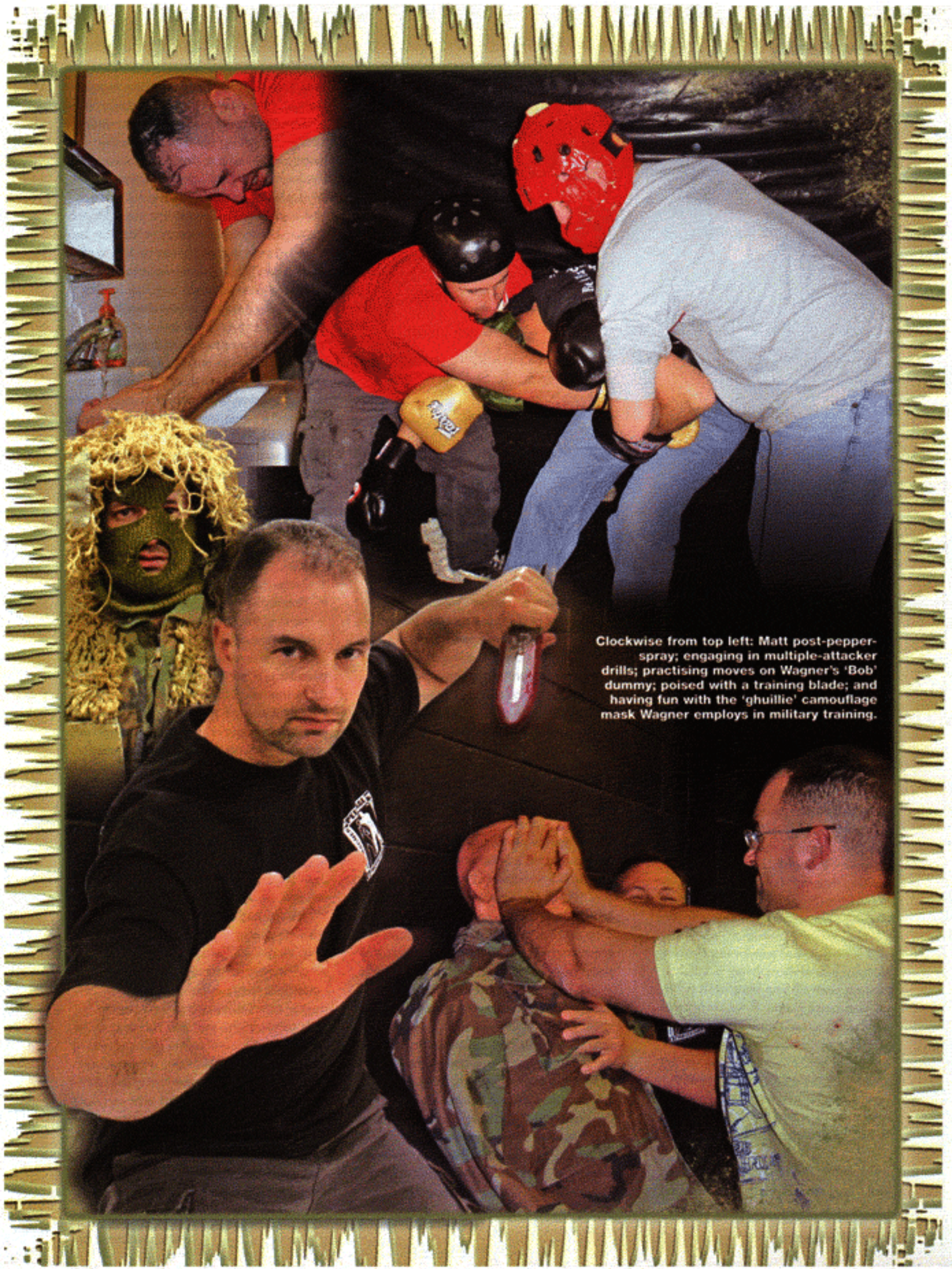
After retiring from his position as a Federal Agent, Jim decided it was time to start helping civilians improve their self-defence skills. He began designing courses specially for civilians,

drawing on his vast range of professional training experience to help make the training as effective and safe as possible. And so, Reality-Based Personal Protection (RBPP) was born.

So what is RBPP — is it Western, Eastern, Israeli or what? Well, the truth is that it's simply a combination of whatever methods Jim and his worldwide network of RBPP instructors have found to work well under pressure. The system constantly evolves and because most RBPP instructors have a background in at least one other system, Jim gets to see all sorts of things attempted during the instructor courses. If something works well, then Jim and a few others try it out. If it then works well for the vast majority of people, it becomes part of the system (conversely, if it only works well for the athletically gifted or super strong, then it doesn't become part of the RBPP system). Even the tactics of criminals and thugs are analysed and worked into the system so that participants can learn to recognise and deal with 'dirty tactics'.

The Training

Upon first entering Jim's training facility, I immediately noticed that it looked very different from any martial arts or self-defence school I'd been in. Everything was matt-black: the concrete floor, the concrete walls, the ceiling, light switches, door handles — even the electrical wiring and air-conditioning unit was painted black. The windows were all blacked out and there was not a mirror, poster, or certificate in sight. Clearly the priority here was having a very practical training environment rather than a nice vibe. Jim promptly explained to me that he views the training environment as both a stage and a tool; by having the entire place painted black, it's easy to create any lighting conditions for any scenario. It's also easy to paint over any marks left from



Clockwise from top left: Matt post-pepper-spray; engaging in multiple-attacker drills; practising moves on Wagner's 'Bob' dummy; poised with a training blade; and having fun with the 'ghuillie' camouflage mask Wagner employs in military training.

Matt and Joe
doused in
stage-blood



G'day guys,

I just thought I'd give you a quick hello to fill you in on how training is going over here. Training with Jim Wagner has been excellent. I still have two days to go ... This week I've been - stabbed hard in the chest with a metal training blade that I was tricked into believing was a real knife prior to the attack. This didn't hurt but simply scared the crap out of me - I thought I already had a healthy respect for knives but that episode really opened up my eyes. (My training partner didn't realise it was a metal training blade either and said his mind was going nuts, thinking Jim had just stabbed me - LOL.) Getting shot all the time with a BB gun has been pretty funny. It leaves little welts so we can't lie about whether or not our gun-disarms and defences worked; same goes for our scenario training. I've got a couple more days left so we'll see what else happens! I can say, though, that it truly has exceeded my expectations.

Have a great day guys,
Matt

paintball guns and stage-blood. The cold, stark nature of the place certainly worked to take me out of my comfort zone and bring me one more step toward preparing for real-world conflict. Jim mentioned that he liked the concrete walls because they don't break when objects and people slam into them, and at that point I realised I was not in Kansas - or *The OC* - any more.

For my RBPP instructor course, I trained both privately and semi-privately with Jim. My training partner and fellow instructor candidate was a guy named Joe who had just returned from a nine-month deployment in Iraq. Considering his martial arts experience and his size (six-feet-four-inches tall and weighing over 100kg), I knew Joe was going to be a great training partner and, as luck would have it, he also turned out to be a great bloke. Jim also brought in one of his local instructors to assist us in our multiple-opponent scenarios.

A great quirk, unique to RBPP, was that throughout the entire week of training, we had "clean debris" strewn across the floor. The clean debris included the likes of egg cartons, cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, plenty of papers and other such items in an attempt to create a more realistic training environment. The presence of obstacles and debris during all our training helped tremendously with putting our footwork and movement methods to the test. The reasons behind the RBPP philosophies on stance and movement quickly became apparent when doing full-

speed scenarios among the debris. A poorly balanced movement or lack of attention to my surroundings could result in a rapid meeting with the concrete floor, with my attacker bearing down on me. Cardboard boxes were stacked to represent concrete columns or windows and penalties resulted for those who inadvertently bumped into them. I found the environmental challenges of RBPP to be a leap forward in giving a real-life feel to my training and I highly recommend that anyone interested in self-defence begin decorating their training area with a little clean debris.

Low-light training was also part of the RBPP course and the use of stage-blood added a bit of extra realism, both tactile and visual, in the scenarios. Throughout our training we always wore street clothes, such as jeans and a t-shirt. We always wore shoes too, except during a brief stint training on some thin jigsaw mats, as the friction of shoes on mats can pose overly high risks to knee joints.

The courses I undertook and in which I gained certification were:

- Defensive Tactics
- Ground Survival
- Knife Survival
- Crime Survival
- Terrorism Survival

Most of the titles seem quite logical for a self-defence system, but I know some of you may have already rolled your eyes at the course titled "Terrorism Survival". I must admit that when I first read the title, I too thought it was a bit extreme, but I was soon swayed, as much of the Terrorism Survival course contained material of great value, even to us civilians.

Throughout the various courses, we dealt with multiple attackers, stabbings, robberies, being held at gunpoint, protecting a third party and the essentials for surviving if the fight goes to the ground. Jim's general method of teaching was to first put us in the scenario to see how we would survive with our current knowledge and abilities. He would then talk with us about how we handled things, what we did well, what we could have done better or what we messed up entirely. He would then teach us the RBPP method for dealing with that particular event (and its likely ramifications) and then he would show us by putting himself on the spot and having us play the attacker/s. Finally we would go through drilling the scenario using the RBPP methods we had just learned, until we could demonstrate a thorough understanding of the methods and an ability to make those methods work under pressure.

A favourite drill of mine saw one person having to fight their way out of a corner while an attacker came at them at full speed



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with a training knife. Anyone who sustains what would've been fatal injuries during the drill then has to perform penalties as punishment for getting 'killed'. Jim strikes a good balance between safety and intensity during such training via his use of safety equipment. Firstly, the hard-shell skater-style helmets protected our heads as we jostled and slammed each other into the concrete walls and floor. Jim explained that this was very important, as a prison guard in Canada had died from trauma he sustained from being slammed into a wall during cell-extraction exercises. Secondly, Jim insisted that we always wear eye-goggles during knife training to protect our 'baby blues' from being cut or stabbed with the training weapons. Thirdly, because we were going full speed and were using rigid training knives, it was important to wear a mouth-guard because any of the rigid training blades could easily knock out teeth.

Safety and the level of contact is something many people are concerned about when attending reality-based courses, but throughout the course I was extremely impressed with the levels of both safety and realism. Of course, there were some painful moments during the course — not least of which was when I volunteered to have law-enforcement-grade pepper-spray squirted directly into my open eyes. However, while that was extremely painful (Jim commented that mine was the longest list of profanities he's ever heard), it's not a normal part of the course (I volunteered) and Jim has a strict policy of avoiding long-term injuries.

Jim did say that our instructor course was more intense than usual and that he gauges the intensity depending on what he sees in the students. If students are very timid, he will reduce the intensity for them; if they are going at it a bit harder and having a good time, then he'll ramp things up, but will always have a limit as to how hard things should be. There's no point in knocking each other's heads off, as a concussion, or worse, can result in someone missing the rest of the course. Attendees are always told at the beginning that they can always opt out of any drills at any time should they not feel comfortable, but of course there is a minimum standard required to become certified as an instructor.

During the Crime Survival course we worked on the less palatable self-defence situations such as home-invasions, attacks with firearms, robberies and multiple-attacker situations. Once again, Jim threw us into the particular scenario, debriefed us, then taught us the RBPP way of doing things. He managed to film some of our multiple-attacker scenarios, which involved one person trying to make their way out of the

building while two others tried to stop them. The victim and attackers were allowed to use any methods they wanted to succeed in this scenario, while being mindful not to seriously injure each other. Punches, kicks, knees, elbows, submission-holds and takedowns were all fair game. Even eye-gouges were allowed, so long as they were executed in a controlled manner so as to avoid injury. As well as the helmets, mouth-guards and groin-protectors, we wore 16-ounce boxing gloves, which was great as the padded thumb allowed us to employ thumb-gouges with just enough pressure to make each other acknowledge the gouge without damaging our eyes.

Watching the video footage of our multiple-attacker scenarios, it would surprise most people to see how few clean strikes anyone managed to fire off, let alone land on target. As each of us weighed 95kg or more, just the sheer inertia of a combined 200kg coming at me with strikes and takedowns was enough to make things a struggle. The concrete floor made takedowns quite brutal and as such there was great incentive to stay on our feet (not to mention the obvious woes of going to the ground with multiple attackers).

We all found the best idea was, obviously, to outflank the attackers and try to have one attacker always obstructed by the other. To stun and run was optimal, but this was rarely achieved in such a confined space. When we did end up in clinching range (which always happened in the blink of an eye), I opted for a neck-tie or snap-down move (where you clasp your hands behind your opponent's head and yank it down to about your chest or waist-level, or take him right down), on the guy closest to me. I'd then use him as a barrier against the other attacker while I worked on getting out the door. The neck-tie was quite good because if I kept the attacker's head down low, it was very hard for him to launch any offensive moves. His takedown options were also limited because you could just ram his head to the floor (a great grappler may succeed in the takedown, but I doubt many great grapplers go around attacking people).

Suffice to say, I can't recommend this drill strongly enough. Try it, and film it if you can; it really is an eye-opener and your skills will improve significantly if you do it on a regular basis.

Overall, making my way to the United States to become a Reality-Based Personal Protection Instructor was one of the best decisions I ever made. It was great fun and it greatly improved my knowledge from both a student's and instructor's perspective. I can't wait to do it all again, when Jim comes Down Under to run RBPP instructor courses next summer. **BLITZ**