

# COMBAT HAND GUNS INTERVIEW

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**THE HARVARD OF SCHOOL FOR BODYGUARDS:  
An Interview with Bob Duggan of Executive Security  
International, LTD. by Marcus Wynne  
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## AN INTRODUCTION

**Bob Duggan is the founder and President of Executive Security International (ESI) in Aspen, Colorado. As the oldest and arguably most prestigious school in the field of VIP protection and executive security, ESI has been the subject of a 60 Minutes special and numerous articles in a variety of publications. Duggan's background includes an international reputation as a highly proficient and highly ranked martial artist in the esoteric Korean system called hwa rang do; a tour as an active revolutionary in a number of left-wing movements south of the border; a guest instructorship at the military intelligence school at Fort Huachuca, Arizona; and bodyguard assignments with the rich and famous of Aspen. An intelligent, cultured and creative man who attempts to live his life according to the high ideals of the warrior class, Duggan has for seventeen years steered ESI through the turbulent waters of the protection world. This interview was conducted in December 1996.**

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**CH:Mr. Duggan, how did you get into the protection business?**

**Duggan: ESI evolved out of the Aspen Academy of Martial Arts, which I and several other martial artists founded in 1973. We invited famous teachers from all around the country and the world and ran a summer camp overlooking the Rocky Mountains at 9,000 feet. It was one of the early experiments in this format of unifying arts and cultures. It had a great influence on my martial arts career. I administered the camp for most of the ten years that it was in business.**

**In Aspen, I would frequently run into celebrities or wealthy people who felt they needed security, so from time to time, I was called to provide security. That kept evolving, and eventually I began doing a significant amount of personal protection. I was Jane Fonda's personal bodyguard for a year or so. Because I spoke Spanish, I also had a number of Mexican clients who had homes both in Aspen and in**

**Mexico. One of those clients suggested that I create a school. And it just seemed to feel right. That was really what I felt I wanted to do, rather than run a store front martial arts school, which is what most martial artists end up doing. I always felt that there were other professional callings for martial artists who had a vision of the 21st Century Samurai, or in my case, Hwarang. That was the seminal idea in 1980....that ESI would become the 21st Century Warrior Bodyguard.**

**CH: How did you go about developing a curriculum for protection specialists?**

**Let me preface this by saying I knew while I was doing these various protection contracts that I was inadequate for the job. I was picked because I was a martial artist. That's often what clients who need protection do: they go out and find a martial artist, or a police officer, or a bodybuilder, because that's their image of what a body guard is -- someone tough who stands in "harms way". But catching bullets or punches is not really doing protection.**

**I was quite aware of that. I didn't have sufficient training or background for what this profession required, and so I began to think about what it would take to build a training academy that covered the entire spectrum of protection work. I simply decided that what I would do was recruit people who had a significant reputation in their field as experts or specialists, and I would pick the ones who had the finest reputations I could locate.**

**As it turned out, that isn't always the best choice, but that's where we started. The upside of picking big names in the business is that they are recognizable, and it lends credibility to the institution. The downside is that not everyone is singing from the same hymnal. There are different ideologies that people bring to the protection world. It took us at least a decade to evolve a philosophy, a perspective that was ESI's, rather than any individual instructor's.**

**CH: Could you expand on that?**

**Of course! What background a person comes from often defines their ideology on protection. Shooters and shooting instructors, for instance, bring their point of view to the protection business much like a martial artists and that is the solution is always to be ready, cocked and locked and ready to shoot. People in that mindset unload it as a philosophical point of view to students at the school. You can say exactly the same thing about martial artists or any other professional whose life force comes from this profession. That's their individual perspective. It very often becomes narrow, because it's based on, and rooted in, their personal experiences and what they do for a living.**

**A real good example of that philosophy being applied was the assault against the President of Turkey back in 87. There was a terrorist who fired at the Turkish President, missing the first shot, then hitting him in the hand with the second. The Turkish President had six bodyguards up on the stage. They were in a gymnasium with probably 2,000 people, filling the floor and the bleachers. And every bodyguard opened up at the assassin. I've got a videotape of this, and every time I show it at the class, I ask my students to count the bullets. Six bodyguards with fully loaded nine millimeters. They emptied every single gun, and never did hit the**

**bad guy. Not once. Finally somebody went over and kicked the bejesus out of him, and that was it for the assault. But of course they had to wait until all the guns were empty before they could do that.**

**Another point in refining our ideology was the John Hinckley assault on President Reagan. Hinckley had a small Saturday night special. He fired five or six shots, every bullet in his weapon, in 1.8 seconds. Hit somebody with every single bullet, including the President. The Secret Service agent, who was the first to reach him, did so in 2 seconds. You can't ask a higher level of performance from anybody. I mean, 2 seconds is faster than most people can draw their weapon from the holster and hit a target at 8 meters. And that 2 seconds is right on the leading edge of average ability. And then to do this in a crowd, where Hinckley is standing amongst a bunch of reporters, and not kill three or four of them... Well, you're asking the impossible.**

**If shooting is your solution, there isn't any way to win that contest. If the assailant is the first to launch the attack, I don't care how fast you are, I don't care what your martial arts skills are, I don't care what other physical skills or response you might have, you're not going to respond quick enough to prevent that assault. It's going to happen.**

**CH: So where did that thinking take you?**

**Well, my job was to have the gestalt view, and get a broader perspective, and that took some time. I knew there must be other answers. Shortly after the Hinckley shooting, Time Magazine ran a photograph that was taken of Hinckley in the crowd, moments before the assault. He was standing in the third row of the reporters. The photograph was taken by another reporter who stood out in front of them and cracked some joke, and everybody laughed at it, with the exception of Hinckley. And on his face is the expression of anxiety and anger, what we call a complex emotional expression.**

**As a result of that I began to develop interest in the precursors to violent assault, both in terms of facial expression and body gesture. I asked myself, What are the things you can identify before that first shot? If that first shot comes, you're going to lose, and you have very little opportunity to reverse the outcome. Your only hope of avoiding it is what you do in advance of your client arriving upon the scene where trouble might occur, which we call in the business doing the advance. I also wanted to know what kinds of skills could be developed that identify the precursors to a violent attack. It became an obsession early in the construction of the training program.**

**I discovered a book called Unmasking the Face, by Dr. Paul Eckmann, which is a study of six or seven primary emotions and their connection to facial expression. Well, you know, the problem is that psychology is primarily interested in the fascinating subject of the human personality and why it does certain things. But I'm interested in behavior, because that's the only thing that I can respond to. And the question is, can you train people to be observers of that discreet human behavior, as it's related to violence. Eckmann's work on this subject was about the only thing in the field of psychology that I found relevant at all. I had been**

interested, even before ESI had started, in behavioral cues. And I had studied a lot of different sources, books that had been written about poker players and their behavioral cues, and just all sorts of stuff.

In the last five years, we've shifted our focus to the signals, or tells as we call them, that precede the incident by hours, days, months or years. What are the tell signs that an assault is going to occur? We've begun an enormous emphasis on counter surveillance. Because an assault, unless it is purely spontaneous and coincidental, like walking into a 7-11 during a robbery, is a planned assault. Planning requires surveillance, and surveillance requires a considerable investment in time and personnel. Whether it's politically organized or it's a disorganized psychotic, they all require surveillance. Can you identify that?

So, we now emphasize that aspect of protection. We run scenarios where students are under surveillance for more than a week. And at the end of it, we expect them to have a full dossier on the persons who have them under surveillance.

**CH:** Speaking of scenarios, your organization was one of the early civilian pioneers in doing reality simulations. The Secret Service didn't start their Attack-On-Principal scenario training until after the attempt on Reagan. What led you to incorporate that training approach?

**Duggan:** The concept of realistic simulation really began to have credibility in the late 80s. A lot of law enforcement agencies started to go in that direction because of officers involved in shootings putting their casings in their pockets and that sort of thing. These incidents told them the training was being presented in the wrong way. Under stress, people revert to that little reptilian core, and whatever is in their memory. It's not like you can do highly creative thought processes while the guy's shooting at you.

Over the years, I've done a lot of law enforcement training in defensive tactics. I had an opportunity to observe what they were doing. There was this belief in the law enforcement community, which said you cannot teach a student any subject for more than two hours at a time, because he gets saturated and bored, and then he won't retain it. So if you do a 35-hour shooting program in a sixteen-week law enforcement academy, you spread it out over sixteen weeks. That means you go to the range 3 or 4 hours this week, and then next week you do it again, and so on. We didn't have that luxury at ESI. We started with ten days, went to 14, and then 15.

What we discovered came from looking at success stories from the military language schools, which were based on total immersion, high intensity, and close supervision. Those three principles produced absolutely astounding outcomes, in extraordinarily short periods of time. Americans, who don't take to foreign languages either naturally or well, learned very difficult languages like Chinese based on those three concepts: immersion, supervision, and high intensity. So I took those principles and added to it realistic simulations in a stress environment. Those five principles became the pillars upon which we developed our fifteen-day program. That's the origin of it.

**CH: What is the difference between those students that do well and those that don't?**

**Duggan: Well, not considering who's smarter than the other, I think that it really has to do with the image of this business -- putting your body in harm's way. I can't tell you how many times I've picked up a magazine and a protection story has some guy hanging over the hood of a car, firing away at the bad guy. I mean, it's photogenic, it is a manly thing to do, it's great marketing, but it has utterly nothing to do with the business. I mean, absolutely nothing.**

**So, you have students who don't get it. They think "When the bad guy shows himself, I will stand in harm's way." Well, that lasts about 1/100th of a second, and the bad guy proceeds to move on to his mission. In almost every incident that you can document, when the bad guy comes in shooting, they win, because they are very bright. Even the ones who are not so bright have the advantages of surprise in initiating the assault first. The politically oriented terrorist organizations have planners with masters degrees and Ph.D.'s, and they study their targets. When they hit a target, they intend to win. And they practically never fail. About the only incident where the good guys won such an encounter was the attack on the Egyptian President, Mubarek's when he went to Sudan.**

**Those who come to our school and do poorly are frequently those who think in terms of response to the assault. They always lose that one. And it's hard for them to get it. We hammer constantly on this subject. We have done a great deal to persuade our students that it's not the Red Brigade or the Islamic Jihad that they have to worry about. The likelihood of one of our graduates running into either of those organizations is pretty slim. They've got a greater chance of getting run over by a Mack truck.**

**What you really have to worry about are the John Hinckleys, the Mark Chapmans, the stalkers, who for whatever demented reason seek out a connection with a celebrity. This culture, for reasons far beyond my capacity to analyze, produces an enormous number of people who develop fixations on the celebrity type. And celebrity means everything from a minor star on a soap opera to an athlete on a major football team to an ice skater to Dolly Parton. They all qualify, because the media brings them into people's bedrooms or their living rooms, and those who have this kind of dementia develop a fixation on them. They are in the thousands. Now, 99 percent of them are harmless. But the 1 percenters are a considerable problem.**

**This is the kind of threat you can deal with. Typically these people tip their hand. They give advance warning of their intention to do harm, or if not to do harm, they give you a reading on the depth of their obsession, and you can usually decode that in terms of its relevance for potential violence. They almost always signal their intent to make contact. They will generally say so, either to you directly or to an intermediary. So if you're going to have someone come at you, that's the one you want, someone who'll provide early warning.**

**CH: So, you've added the proactive advance work and behavioral prediction to the shooting, driving, hand-to-hand reactive skill sets of protection.**

**Duggan:** Yes! I think we started from a very small segment of the pie. Our views were broken up into essentially a half a dozen different ideas, as to what a protection specialist was. And it just took a long time to realize that each of these particular skills have their role, and are important skills, but to focus on any of them to the exclusion of the others is just negligence. Then you're just an accident or an assault waiting to happen.

**CH:** I'd speculate that much of the belief about the importance of the reactive skills comes from the portrayal of the protection business in magazines and on TV. People don't see the advance work and the profiling.

**Duggan:** That's exactly correct. We've come so far in this direction that just this year we added an additional 700 hour program on intelligence operations. That was sparked because of training we've done in Mexico, where kidnapping is a cottage industry. One of the larger ones recently had a payoff of \$30 million. In certain parts of Mexico, like Cuernavaca, kidnappings occur every single day. Most of them are fairly low-level, small demands of \$10,000, \$15,000, whatever is in your bank account. They empty it and move on to your neighbor.

We were approached by some clients down there about doing a protection program, and I finally told them, look, we do a good job at what we're doing. We offer a 600 hour program in executive protection, and nobody even comes close to that outside the Secret Service and State Department. But the level of violence and assault against the wealthy in Mexico is at such a level that you've got to take some significant countermeasures. The only hope is to develop an information collection analysis and a proactive policy. Because unless you see what's coming at you, there's no way you can stop these things from happening. Because they'll just shoot your bodyguards. You have to be armed with an enormous amount of information about the potential origins of threat to you, and you have to be really skilled at getting that information.

**CH:** How is the business of selling high-level protection training?

**Duggan:** Well, it's not an easy business to succeed in. There is always the issue of how you recruit your students and how you keep them engaged. We get a fair number of Walter Mittys who come to us with that popular image of the protection specialist. When they are hit with college-level textbooks in countermeasures and electronics, physical security, and bomb search and identification, they don't make it through. It's one of the ways that we sift out the non-serious, because if they're not going to complete 450 hours of academic studies, then they'll never get to Aspen. The ones who make it to the resident training are dedicated, serious students. For one, they've invested a lot of money, and two, they have completed intensive academic courses in the home-study on their own. They can call us up and ask us questions and so on, but it's not like going into a classroom. You have to do this completely on your own. The ones who make it are the ones who really want to do this. It's a real qualifier.

**CH:** Would you say there's a characteristic set of attributes that are common among your successful students, the ones that do well in the course and actually end up working in the protection field?

**Duggan:** Tenacity, perseverance, attention to detail. Extraordinarily sharp observation skills. Determined enough that this is something that they will do. That they'll put aside any diversion in order to get through it. Or they won't get through it. I mean, we have a 30 or 40 percent dropout rate, where they just never make it to resident training.

**CH:** What do your students that are out there working tell you about how well the skills you taught them transferred to the real world?

**Duggan:** Well, the first thing you have to appreciate is that this is not an easy business to break into. It's just very hard. The ones who do make it share the same qualities, that is, they are tenacious, persistent, they are prepared to work their way through the various loops in the system in order to build a reputation, build a resume, and a clientele that will sustain them. Our graduates tell us that their training is indispensable in achieving those goals.

The other feedback we get is that we're well thought of in the right circles. We have a lot of students who come to us with contacts in the Secret Service or FBI and those who have those kind of contacts almost always report that we're thought of as a first-rate organization. So we must be doing something right.

**CH:** What kind of feedback do you get from protection clients about your students?

**Duggan:** I was just out in Massachusetts where we've got three of our graduates who are working for a major corporation as security drivers. The union was challenging the jobs of several of these guys on seniority. They were downsizing and they wanted to bump our graduates. The company management went to considerable expense to fly me out there and testify in their behalf, because they didn't want to give their guys up. They made it a requirement for the job that the drivers be an ESI graduate. It wasn't enough to be a trained chauffeur or that he had gone to a one-week driving school or some other bodyguard training school. They had to have gone through ESI. We are the only public institution outside of the Secret Service that provides 600 hours of training in the field, and they just felt that's what it required.

The employers who have our graduates and are willing to share their assessment with us, those assessments have been fairly high. And of course you always have some people, it wouldn't matter what they did, it would be the wrong thing. Those people are going to reflect on the school as much as the good ones, maybe more, I would think. It's just the nature of the game. There's not much you can do about that.

**CH:** There's always going to be that 10 to 15 percent, no matter how stringent the selection, assessment and training, who are going to be on the lower end of the bell curve. One factor with ESI is your longevity. So many other schools come and go. You've been around since 1980 -- 17 years. It's a great run in this business.

**Duggan:** It is indeed. I'd like to be around another 17.

**CH: Mr. Duggan, thank you for your time. Best to you.**

**Duggan: Thank you. It was nice talking with you and the readers of Combat Handguns.**