



Empowering Independent Filmmakers and Creatives

Filming with Firearms

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An interview with one of the top safety specialists in the business



Firearms Safety Specialist Dave Brown

<http://filmcourage.com/content/filming-firearms>

Dave Brown is one of the most experienced firearms safety specialists in the film business. He has been responsible for protecting the safety of cast and crew on hundreds of film, television and theater productions and has trained some of the top names in Hollywood.

David Branin and Karen Worden, of *LA Talk Radio's Film Courage* had an opportunity to talk to him about his career and what tips he might have for actors and filmmakers.

Q - First of all, let's open with the question that *always* comes to mind whenever we think of firearms on film sets. Brandon Lee. What happened?



A - Well, like most serious incidents, it was not one big mistake but rather a chain of contributing factors. It actually began two weeks before that tragic night on the set of "The Crow." The production needed some dummy cartridges for a close-up shot of loading a revolver. Not knowing better, they purchased real cartridges from a local gun store, pried off the bullets, dumped out the gunpowder and stuck the bullets back into the cases. Now, any firearms expert would be able to tell you that this is highly dangerous because, of course, the primers were still live, but unfortunately they were running out of both time and money at this point and had already sent their only firearms expert home early to save a few dollars.

While filming the close-ups, the actor they brought in for the scene was supposed to be supervised but the props assistant in charge of the firearm was busy doing other props work and left the actor on their own. Some witnesses reported they then saw the background performer pull the trigger while the "dummy" cartridges were still loaded in the chambers.

What people may not know is that if the primer is still live, when you pull the trigger there is no sound but the spark from the primer can expel a bullet an inch or two forward even with no gunpowder in the case. At the end of the day, the props assistant emptied out the cartridges and put the gun away. He knew nothing about cleaning the gun, let alone checking the barrel for obstructions.

Two weeks later, this same revolver loaded with blanks was used to fire at Brandon Lee. Again, the props assistant handling the gun had no clue how to check it for safety and simply loaded it with blanks. There was no firearms expert on set to instruct the actor how to "cheat" the angle to the side so that it doesn't get pointed directly at the actor when fired.

Now, a blank has as much as twice the amount of gunpowder as a real cartridge and when that bullet was still lodged in the barrel from two weeks previous, the blank propelled the bullet out the barrel with the same explosive force as a real cartridge. The bullet struck Brandon Lee in the chest and he collapsed, never regaining consciousness. He died on the operating room table 13 hours later.

Q - So basically people made a bunch of ‘small’ mistakes. They tried to save a few dollars, they didn’t use proper supervision in what they felt was a minor scene, they didn’t properly brief cast and crew on how to handle a gun, they didn’t use experts to check and load the prop gun with blanks ... and someone *died* because of it?

A - The world lost a very talented young actor. Ultimately, Brandon Lee’s mother sued the production for negligence and settled out of court for an undisclosed amount of money but I can guess it ran into the millions of dollars.

Q - How often are you asked this question?

A - Every single day I am on set. I never tire of it, and Brandon Lee will never be forgotten for as long as I am still alive and able to do what I do.

Q - So firearms are dangerous?

A - Firearms are no more dangerous than any other prop or effect on a motion picture set. When handled properly by experts who know what they are doing and who give them their undivided attention, they can be used safely. When I start the day with an actor, I finish the day with that actor. I never switch people part way through a day, and actors need to know that if they have a concern about their safety or even a question on how to hold the gun to make it look authentic, they can look around and I am always two steps away.

Q - You’ve often said that you don’t cost producers money; you save them money. Is this what you mean?

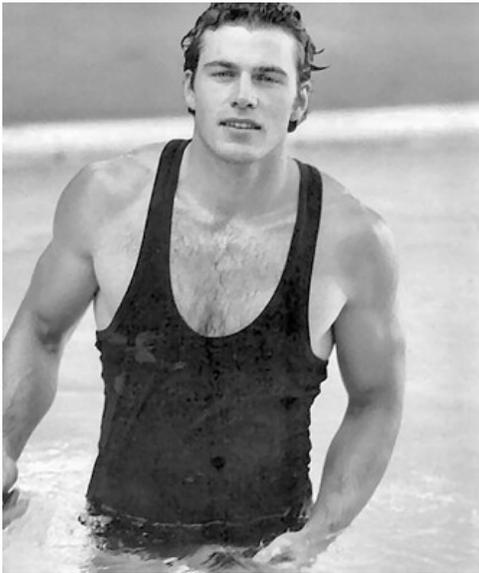
A - Exactly! Actors are paid to act, not to be constantly thinking about their safety. I am on set to keep everyone safe but the reality is that I save money by ensuring cast and crew can concentrate on the jobs they were hired for, and not worry about something going wrong. My favorite line was in overhearing two crewmembers taking off their safety glasses and removing their earplugs while walking away from set at the end of a big shootout scene. One says to the other, “Yeah, I don’t know why we need all this safety stuff for anyway. Nothing ever goes wrong around here!”

I thought to myself that is *exactly* what we are trying to achieve. At the end of the day, everyone goes home, no one gets hurt and nobody claps for us when we pull off a tricky shooting scene. Safety just becomes a normal way of doing things.

Q - Blanks are obviously dangerous at short ranges, and incident such as the one involving Jon-Erik Hexum illustrate they can even be fatal. How far away do people need to be to stay safe?

A - First of all, there is no such thing as a ‘safe’ distance. There are only ‘safer’ distances. Any time a blank is fired toward another person, there are hazards. At farther ranges, we need to take steps to protect people’s eyes. At very close ranges, the explosive force of a blank can cause serious injuries ... or, as you say, fatalities.

The distance we need to keep actors away from the blank depend on many variables such as the power of the blank and the nature of the firearm. This is why we test everything in advance before it is used on set. We can take steps to protect the crew using safety shields, protective



equipment and earplugs, but we can't usually do that with actors. This is the reason why actors are almost never seen in the same frame at the same time as the actual gunshot; there is just no reason to do that.

I actually use a bit of a formula – I call it Brown's Law – to quickly calculate the hazard of a scene involving a blank. The hazard is directly related to the power of the blank and inversely related to the square of the distance. This simply means if you double the power of a blank, you double the hazard for the actor, but if you cut the distance from the gun to the actor in half, you *quadruple* the hazard to the actor. This is why, for actors, **distance is your friend**.

Q - I read that you once did a close-up scene yourself with the gun only inches away from your chest. Why was it safe to be that close then?

A - (Laughs.) Yes, how many other people can say they were once shot in the chest by Sir Ben Kingsley! The reality is that if the actor is only inches away, we don't see their face on camera and we can use face and body shields to protect them. All we saw in that scene was the shoulder of Dennis Farina, and I chose to do the scene myself for the benefit of Sir Ben. He and I had worked closely together the whole movie and we knew and trusted each other, so it was just natural for me to do something to help his character. I stood in front of him, threw a drink in his face and he fired two blanks straight at my chest. It went off without a hitch and we got it perfect in one take.

Q - So why even use firearms with blanks? Why not just do everything in the computer in post?

A – I prefer doing as much in the camera as possible. It looks better and it helps the actors stay in character. Actors absolutely *hate* using fake guns; they have nothing to react to and good directors know this. They will even go so far as to ask me to fire off-screen gunshots even when the gun is not seen just to help the actors react properly. Blanks will be fired for many years to come, and substituting computer-generated images should only be done for safety reasons when it is not possible to get the scene any other way.

The other reason we avoid this where possible is that there are always good intentions during production but once the film wraps, time and money issues begin to creep in and it seems the CGI gunshots eventually get dropped in post-production. The reality is that you need a competent safety specialist on set anyway, so why not just fire the blanks. As we have already discussed, they can be fired safely if you know what you are doing.

Q - You are unique in the film business in that you not only work with actors to make their actions look real, you actually work with the real folks.

A – When not on a film set somewhere, I am traveling the country teaching the real professionals how to handle real firearms. I have a solid background in everything from training skills to human physiology and sports psychology, and this helps me train the real police and military folks about how humans will react in life-threatening situations. I always attack training

from a scientific perspective and I have high standards in training. I set the bar high for my students because I know the best will rise to the occasion, and one of my favorite sayings is that ‘practice doesn’t make perfect; *perfect* practice makes perfect.’

This is as true about acting as it is about real-life shooting skills.

Q - You now teach three-day workshops specifically geared toward actors that attract participants from across the country.

A – I was asked to do this several years ago and it has now turned into a yearly event. I work with a very small group of actors over the course of a Friday evening to a Sunday afternoon. We start off some of the basic safety skills everyone should know when handling firearms and then we progress through terminology, set safety, the nature of blanks and how to load and unload a typical handgun. By the end of the first day, actors are essentially empowered and in better control of their own destiny. The entire second day is spent on a shooting range with a variety of firearms and the third day is back in the classroom to analyze scenes and see how various filmmakers did it safely. We also talk a lot about authenticity and why it is important that real police officers, for example, have their equipment on very specific places on their belt.

Q – It’s all about the details.

A – Details are very important. When gear is on the wrong place or someone’s finger is inside the trigger guard when they are not shooting, it takes me – and millions of other knowledgeable people – out of the picture. I was once called “the most anal guy in Hollywood” by an actor. He meant it affectionately, by the way.

Q - Actors in your workshops get to shoot movie firearms loaded with blanks, but they also get to shoot real handguns with live ammunition on a shooting range. Why is this important to the actor?

A – Every actor I have worked who took the opportunity for live-fire training with me before we went to camera has ended up safer, more confident and more authentic. There is a huge difference between firing blanks and firing the real thing, and actors really appreciate knowing this and being able to compare them back-to-back. There are some things such as recoil that you don’t get when firing blanks and if actors have never fired the real thing, they will try to recreate that recoil for the camera. Unless you are Clint Eastwood, you are probably not going to pull it off. Once they fire the real firearm, they know the recoil is so sharp and brief that the camera wouldn’t pick it up anyway, so the most authentic way is to simply hold it steady and pull the trigger.

We also do live-fire practice with real handguns in a very controlled environment because this is an experience few actors get to try. For some, it’s a chance to learn valuable new skills. For others, it is a way to overcome fears and accomplish something that can be physically and mentally challenging for many people.

Q - You’ve often said that actors should know as much about your job as you do. After reading about your career, we doubt that is possible, but why do you think actors should at least know some basics of firearms safety before they start handling them?

A - We need to keep people safe on a film set, but it is just as important that they *know* they are safe. Actors will not always be working on big-budget movies where they bring in the proper experts. Actors need to take control over their own destiny and they need to know when to start asking questions about their own health and safety. It is when actors blindly accept what they are told without asking those questions that they can get hurt.

I think every actor should know something about basic firearms safety and handling, if nothing more than just the confidence it gives you in a scene involving guns. I said earlier that serious incidents are often caused by a chain of contributing factors, and in almost every case, one could have broken that chain if someone – anyone – had simply asked the right question.

Q - You once had an actor walk off set and lock herself in her trailer because they wanted her to handle a replica firearm and you weren't around that day. What happened?

A - They were shooting a scene where the actor was playing a highly-trained FBI agent. She is alone in her house and hears a noise downstairs. Logically, she would go for her gun first before she investigates but they didn't plan on having a real gun for her that day and I wasn't around when she started asking questions about how to hold it and how to search her house in a way that looked authentic. Most actors hate replicas because they don't feel the same, so she walked off set until they tracked me down to come to the set and help her make the scene look real. At the end of the day, she was happy, the director was happy and the scene looked great. It's what I do.

Q - When you are not working on big-budget action movies, people can usually find you working with new and young filmmakers on a low-budget film set somewhere. Why do you take the time to work almost for free helping others?

A - I like to help out new or young filmmakers in my area because I know that they cannot get those scenes otherwise. It is my way of giving something back to the industry that I love so much. It also helps illustrate how one *can* do these scenes safely, legally *and* cheaply ... if you find and bring in the right people. Lack of money is *never* an excuse for getting people hurt!

Q - What about writers? What would you like to tell young screenwriters about putting firearms in their scripts?

A - Don't let the props become the story. Tell a good story first, and worry about the props later. A firearm is used to help carry the story forward but shouldn't *be* the story. Some newer screenwriters spend so much time researching the perfect gun that they forget that all those details will be changed anyway once the film finally goes into production.

I usually work closely with the director, the props master and the art director in getting the exact look of each firearm and trying to match it logically to the character. That's why I love working with directors who know you and trust you to do your job. At the end of the day, the guns can become almost their own character in the movie. It's all about details. Screenwriters don't need to sweat those details too much because by the time it gets to us, we're the ones who sweat the little things. Just tell a good story.

Q - What is the most important thing a low-budget filmmaker needs to know about filming with firearms?

A - Bring in experts who know their job and know how to keep people safe. If you are firing blanks, it is critical to use an experienced safety specialist and not just some relative or friend who happens to own firearms. Film firearms have very unique characteristics and it takes a lot of training and experience to figure out all the ways one can get the scene the way the director wants it without putting anyone at risk.

Even if you are not firing any blanks, you must dedicate one crew person to supervise all the firearms and never let them out of their sight. Do a complete cast and crew safety briefing the first time they are used on set and give everyone the opportunity to fully inspect them. Ensure you have properly notified local law enforcement agencies and let them know exactly where you are, what you will be doing and what dates and times you will be there. You can always shoot guerilla-style; just not with something that even *looks* like a firearm!

Either do it right or don't do it at all. Every filmmaker has a legal and moral obligation to protect the safety of everyone on their set, whether they are paid to be there or not. It doesn't matter if it is a cast and crew of hundreds or you and two buddies making a short in your backyard.

Q - You have worked with a lot of very well known actors over the years. Who was your favorite?

A - One of the greatest pleasures of my job is that I get to stand behind a motion picture camera for hours on end and watch the people with the real talent at work. I've been fortunate to have worked with some of the top names in Hollywood and have had an amazing opportunity to see them do what they are good at and what they love to do. They have all been wonderful.

Someone once said that if you find a job you like, you'll never work a day in your life. For the last 20 years, I don't think I've had to work a day in my life.

Q - Well said. Thank you Dave Brown.

A - Thank you David and Karen. It was my pleasure!

Dave Brown on [IMDB](#).