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KINDER CARNAGE

By Talib Visram

The only thing that'll stop a bad guy with a gun is a good boy with a gun.

Brianna held the box of casings for all the children to share as they locked and loaded.

The drive alongside the Ohio River from Cincinnati to Flemingsburg, Kentucky is pleasant but unnoteworthy, with the sole attraction en route being General Ulysses S. Grant's birthplace.

The serene rolling hills grew windier as I came to my destination in Flemingsburg: 52 acres of land known as Camp Sousley, named after one of the flag raisers at Iwo Jima, a battleground in the South Pacific where soldiers notched a victory for the American way of life, at the cost of just under 7,000 Americans dead.

The camp's entrance is marked by a tank.

"It's actually an anti-tank vehicle," said Jay Whitehead, the commander of the facility. More precisely, the M56 Scorpion is a seven-ton, self-propelled anti-tank vehicle, armed with a 90-millimeter M54 gun. It was used in the Vietnam War.

"The hippies had spray-painted it," Commander Jay said. But he had salvaged and restored it to its unsullied state. I parked my compact rental a little distance from it so as not to invite any size comparisons.

Sousley's more playful nickname is "Military Adventure Camp." Children from around the world report to Commander Jay for a summer experience that mimics military training. They sleep in barrack-like dorms and eat rations of sloppy joes, french fries and cookie cake in a mess hall. They endure jumping jacks and push-ups, perform breach-and-clear exercises and lug rubber dinghies across the on-site lake.

"We try to emulate what the military does," Commander Jay said. "We give them a flavor."

In the summer, children from as far as Dubai, France and Vietnam find their way to the tiny Kentucky town. "We had a kid from China, he'd never seen a rifle before," Commander Jay said. "He picked it up and he was one of our best shooters. It was amazing."

They engage in gas mask training, water raids, drone reconnaissance and strikes, and "hostile environment asset protection." But Commander Jay said the crux of the camp is teaching self-discipline, love for country and respect for adults.

In the colder months, the camp operates in a lite capacity, hosting children from nearby counties. I was there on a Drill Weekend in October, when ten local children, aged 12 to 16, had come to learn the ways of the warrior.

Commander Jay took me on a tour of the camp in his Jeep. He showed me the “drill hall,” an expansive building whose interior resembled a church’s. Its closets were packed with dozens of teen-sized khaki uniforms and clunky brown boots.

It was, in fact, a museum dedicated to Franklin Sousley, who was only 19 when he was shot in the back by a Japanese sniper, 7,000 miles from home.

As we drove around the grounds, passing the breach-and-clear houses that cadets would learn to force into with explosive charges or battering rams, Commander Jay explained that weapons formed a significant part of Camp Sousley’s military curriculum.

You need to be 18 years old to own a gun in Kentucky and 21 to have a concealed carry permit. Luckily, Fleming County is dry, so you wouldn’t be under the hazy influence of a beer as you legally shoot your rifle.

Commander Jay said firearm safety is imperative, and for good reason. In the same state in 2013, a toddler shot and killed his two-year-old sister with his Crickett rifle, a gun specially designed for children. Young marksboys and girls who are gifted these guns also get a “My First Rifle” dog tag and a Beanie Baby-like toy of the mascot, Davey Crickett. He looks like Jiminy Cricket, but carries a rifle rather than an umbrella. “And always let your rifle be your guide.”

Still, as the National Sports Shooting Foundation reminded in a research study, risk of gun-related injury isn’t to be blown out of proportion. Hunting, it claimed, is statistically safer than bowling, cheerleading and golf.

When we got back to the mess hall, a man addressed simply as “Doc” was giving the cadets a military history lecture. Speaking in a gruff voice that matched his uneven stubble, he covered a wearisome range of events from General Grant to Hiroshima.

The instilling of respect that Commander Jay had mentioned was evident. When Doc asked who the current president was, to a chorus of “Donald Trump,” Doc sharply corrected them. “The Honorable Donald Trump.”

Cadets’ yawns subsided and ears perked as Doc moved onto arms history. Cadets excitedly chimed in as he asked the differences between a revolver and a pistol, and a magazine and a clip. (The clip is outdated these days, Doc taught. It’s nothing more than a glorified paper clip.)

Doc launched into an animated speech about firearms: how the M1 Garand is considered the finest weapon in the world, even if the Eastern Europeans may claim it’s the AK-47. General Patton himself said the M1 Garand won the War. (The Garand actually used clips, which generated a “ping” sound as it was fired.)

After the theory, the cadets – all of whom had shot guns before, except for the only girl cadet – moved onto practical training: how to shoot .22 rifles. The Smith & Wesson M&P 15-22s, to be exact, are essentially beginner versions of AR-15s, though Commander Jay said they were “a little more than a BB gun.”

The downside is they're not as effective as AR-15s. An online message board points out that "a .22 rifle may kill someone, but they may not die for 10 minutes to an hour, and there is a lot they can do to kill you in that time."

But with smaller bullets, virtually no kickback and a much lower price tag, they're perfect starter guns for fledgling marksmen – like training wheels for novice cyclists. They're widely available in colors like pink platinum and harvest-moon orange; a manufacturer called Savage Arms makes them in classic crayon-box shades.

Numerous publications have commended the .22 as the perfect beginners' rifle.

Shooting Sports Retailer said they "bring the coolness and fun of the tactical rifle to kids."

An *NRA Family* article gives glowing reviews to a line of guns by Marlin, an iconic brand whose logo features a mounted cowboy, firearm in hand. "These rifles are not just sized for kids – they're completely designed for kids," the NRA praised.

And *Junior Shooters* magazine said, "this rifle rocks!" (Other articles in the archives of this Boise-based publication include "Glocks for Girls," "Gunslinger by the Age of Ten" and "NRA Youth Ambassador." I browsed Volume 22, a holiday edition adorned with holly and snowflakes, that contained a special word search puzzle whose hidden terms included "takedown" and "rimfire.")

Some chattier than others, but all respectful, the cadets talked to me before their practical weapons training. Many said they enjoyed the firearms instruction the most. "It makes you better at defending yourself," said a beaming and bespectacled Guadalupe Garcia, with a faint lisp. "Once you get your license, you can take your gun anywhere."

Another stone-faced cadet, who gave only his nickname, Dunn – because he liked to get things done – pretended to point a rifle and made a pull-the-trigger gesture accompanied by a "pump" sound effect, intimating that you could shoot someone who's a perceived threat.

"You mean, in the military?" I asked.

"In real life," they corrected me.

"Because you never know when someone may come out to harm anyone," Guadalupe grinned.

• • •

"Evil walks among us. And God help us if we don't harden our schools to protect our kids."

–Wayne LaPierre, CEO of the National Rifle Association

Following a wave of school shootings – most notably the Valentine’s Day massacre in Parkland – media attention on gun violence has increased. Some states passed legislation to provide school safety dollars. Governor Rick Scott of Florida signed a law in March that distributed \$99 million for “school hardening” across districts.

But with minimal funding and little gun regulation from the government, it’s the security market that’s profiting. The education sector of the security industry is now worth \$2.7 billion, up from \$2.5 billion in 2015, according to research by data service, IHS Markit.

Some districts rely on competitive grants from their state governments, while other states allow districts to enact levies to raise revenue. Schools are scrambling to choose the right and most affordable security tools to protect their best and brightest.

There are metal detectors, door barricades and gunshot sensors. There are bulletproof backpacks and shatterproof window films.

There are ballistic chalkboards whose exteriors are printed with the alphabet, music staves or fairy-tale characters, so that they blend into classroom settings. Storytime need not be interrupted as the boards do their blast-resistant work.

There’s a gadget called Crotega that deploys a vinegar-like spray from classroom ceilings to disorient potential gunmen, by causing irritation to the eyes, throat, skin and lungs. The solution is only slightly acidic, with a pH lower than Coke or Pepsi.

“It’s like an invisible SWAT team in the ceiling,” said Dan Murphy, who runs Crotega’s business development.

Students should know how to use these tools. One maker of bulletproof backpacks, TuffyPacks, provides helpful diagrams on its website of how children should position their ballistic shields for ultimate protection. It offers pointers such as, “do not hide in shooter’s line of sight” and “do not plead for your life.” The preferred tactic, it says, is acting dead.

Backpack panels are made from Kevlar-like fibers and provide IIIA protection, according to the National Institute of Justice’s standards. That means they “will stop all handgun rounds, up to and including a .44 Magnum.” (They won’t, however, stop bullets from an AR-15, the murder weapon used in Parkland, San Bernadino, Orlando, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, and Newtown, where 20 first-graders were slaughtered at Sandy Hook Elementary School.)

The NRA takes a more rounded approach to security, spurning personal shields for its holistic National School Shield program. Boasting a task force including a retired Air Force colonel, a SWAT sergeant and a former director of the Secret Service, the project makes recommendations for hardening school infrastructure.

It suggests designing buildings in layers made up of perimeter fencing and ballistic glass, creating multiple restrictive barriers for hellbent shooters. It proposes positioning school buses

more tactically, reinforcing reception desk fronts with ballistic steel, and re-welding door hinges to prevent tampering.

Shields are ineffective without swords. The Department of Homeland Security's official guidance is *run-hide-fight*, and when *hiding* behind chalkboards and backpacks fails, kids need to be equipped to *fight*.

"Commit to your actions and act aggressively to stop the shooter," the DHS advises. "Ambushing the shooter together with makeshift weapons such as chairs, fire extinguishers, scissors and books can distract and disarm the shooter."

So that kids aren't at a loss about what weapons to use when their time comes, some districts have selected some handy munitions. A Pennsylvania district distributed 600 mini baseball bats to schools. Others have provided river stones and hockey pucks to toss at a shooter.

A Massachusetts district is able to provide its students with a more complete arsenal, thanks to a donation of Lockdown Buckets from home improvement store, Lowe's. Each bucket is filled with four defense items – a one-pound hammer, a wooden door wedge, duct tape and a 50-foot length of rope.

Deputy Superintendent Mike Thomas explained each element. The wedges can barricade the door. The hammer can lock in the wedges, or smash windows to create an escape route. The rope can tie tables and chairs in front of the door to keep the shooter out. And the tape is the most versatile. It can secure the rope, or seal gaps in the doorway if noxious smoke is seeping out. Or, it can blunt sharp glass edges of a smashed window.

All teachers are responsible for storing the items as they see fit, and for instructing their classes on how to respond. "Obviously, a kindergarten teacher knows how to discuss this at an age-appropriate level," Thomas said. "You need to have discussions that bad people come into buildings and sometimes do bad things."

A kindergarten class in another Massachusetts school, for instance, remembers how to behave during active shooter drills with this catchy song, set to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star":

*"Lockdown, lockdown, Lock the door,
Shut the lights off, Say no more.
Go behind the desk and hide,
Wait until it's safe inside.
Lockdown, lockdown, it's all done,
Now it's time to have some fun!"*

Some schools have shot down the idea of crude, household tools, instead opting for the real deal.

Rhonda Hart's 14-year-old daughter, Kimberly, died in the May shooting at Santa Fe High School in Texas. The children had barricaded themselves in the art room, she said, but the

assailant shot through the door with a pump-action shotgun. The *hide* hadn't worked, so officials turned their attention to the *fight*.

In the aftermath, an anonymous donor gifted the district eight AR-15 assault rifles.

The Department of Defense has made weapons for schools even more accessible with its 1033 Program. It's a waste-eliminating project whereby the military indefinitely loans excess arms to state and local police forces. This includes supplying military-grade equipment to school police.

According to state records, ten Texas school districts received, at little-to-no cost: 64 M16 rifles, 18 M14 rifles, 25 automatic pistols, 4,500 rounds of ammunition, armored plating, tactical vests and 15 military vehicles.

Though parent opposition eventually terminated the loan, San Diego schools received an 18-ton military vehicle, "to get into any hostile situation and pull kids out." It cost the district \$5,000 in shipping costs to bring the Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected Vehicle (MRAP) – Caiman model – to Southern California.

It was fitted with steel armor designed to deflect landmines and IEDs in Iraq. Though it was in its original military tan shade when received, they'd planned to paint the vehicle white, along with a red First Aid cross. The machine guns were taken down from its turret.

The rescue tool would be spacious enough to fill an entire elementary class, in the event of evacuation during a shooting. Until that eventuality, campus police temporarily filled it with trauma kits and teddy bears.

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I'd tried my own hand at shooting a few months earlier – albeit with a non-lethal weapon.

I was at the National School Safety Conference in Orlando, where law enforcement, educators and entrepreneurs from around the country assembled, ten miles from Walt Disney World. The spacious lobby of the Omni Resort was packed with conference goers, and with exhausted parents and their restless kids in Mickey and Minnie ears.

The ballistic backpacks and chalkboards were on display. So were the door barricades and a gunshot detection box that looked like a clunky, oversized Game Boy. There were devices that dealt with the aftermath of shootings, like emergency tourniquets, with which students could help injured classmates by compressing their bullet wounds and slowing their blood loss.

Kyle Tengwall had pushed his flight back to Minnesota to meet me for a buffet breakfast at the hotel. Soft-spoken and unassuming, he expressed dismay at many of the inventors' gadgets, saying they weren't suitable for schools.

Tengwall sported a shorter, tidier beard than I'd expected for the former chief marketing officer of Duck Commander. That's the merch company of *Duck Dynasty*, the wildly popular reality show about gritty duck hunters in the Louisiana bayou, known for their unrefined facial hair and quotes like, "My idea of happiness is killing things" and "I want only three things out of a shotgun: boom, boom, boom!"

As he crunched on crispy bacon, he recounted how he'd spent much of his career on the "lethal side," running marketing for Federal Ammunition. That was before he moved to "non-lethal" problem-solving, bringing his marketing savvy to the PepperBall Protect.

It's a device that shoots "PepperBalls": small, spherical rounds that resemble paintballs but contain a pepper spray called PAVA. The 12-foot cloud of pepper powder that disperses with a shot would disable an assailant.

The aim is to incapacitate an attacker for 10 to 15 minutes while kids and teachers get to safety and law enforcement arrives on scene. Based on anecdotal evidence, Tengwall said, a gunman would flee when encountering this kind of resistance. "Typically, it's a self-termination, or a cut-and-run into the crowd," he said. "Both of which are obviously good outcomes."

School employees would be prepped on the equipment by PepperBall's "master trainers," a group of skilled police and military personnel. Before targeting the school market, PepperBall made products that SWAT teams used to successfully control riots, allow hostage extractions and end child-trafficking situations. "Our mission is to protect life without taking life," Tengwall said.

Beside him on the restaurant booth was a cardboard box filled with the components of the PepperBall Protect: plastic projectiles, compressed carbon dioxide cartridges that power the rounds up to 150 feet, and the launcher itself – which is disguised as a flashlight.

Teachers or janitorial staff can use it as a real flashlight to check school hallways if they hear unusual commotion. If the situation is sinister, the assailant would be surprised that the light is actually a gun.

He'd scoped out an inconspicuous spot for me to demo the PepperBall, so after breakfast we walked to the edge of the resort's golf course. He loaded up the flashlight.

I tried to visualize an ominous scene and wondered where you'd point to gain maximum effect from the pepper. "Aim low," Tengwall said, "and then go ahead and aim for the face if it becomes more of a lethal encounter."

It was lightweight and wieldy, and relatively easy to fire. I pointed it toward the well-manicured bushes and slid the safety forward, which activated a red laser: "an aiming capability and a deterrent for the bad guy."

The trigger is a red button that masquerades as the flashlight switch. I pushed it repeatedly, emptying the rounds into the shrubbery. It was hard to imagine the potency as the PepperBalls

gently glided off leaves, but Tengwall clarified: “It’s like a human punch. It’s not going to break your skin, but it’s going to get your attention.”

Tengwall was focused on “non-lethal” solutions because he believed teachers should be teaching, not acting as human shields for their students. It’s in educators’ DNA, he said, to want to protect children. “They’re committing suicide to protect these kids,” he said. “And, right now, we’re leaving them with nothing.”

After we’d parted ways, and talked more about the *Duck Dynasty* clan, I had just enough time to drop into a short seminar called *Arming Teachers – What’s the Alternative?*

That question was to be answered by Jennifer Schiff, a police detective from Clarkston, Georgia. If Tengwall wasn’t eager to transform teachers into human shields, Schiff proposed making them into human swords.

“Teachers are the first line of defense,” Schiff began. “Parents are expecting to see teachers put themselves in physical danger to protect their children. I certainly hope my grandson’s teacher would. But they need the training and tools to do that.”

That training includes threat detection. If a student is walking unusually stiff-legged, for example, teachers should recognize that’s because he may have a shotgun in his pants.

But most importantly, teachers should be trained on how to operate a “suppression tool” – a lethal weapon – if needed.

Most teachers are sheep. They go about their lives, she said, merely teaching. But if a wolf – a gunman – arrives, the farm needs a sheepdog. Because the most trusted sheepdogs – law enforcement and military – can’t be on the scene immediately, there’s a need for sheepdogs on site.

“These people are willing to die for their students,” she said.

Schiff asked her audience why violence should be treated any differently than, say, a peanut allergy or a bee sting. If teachers aren’t doing anything to heal or protect, she reasoned, they’re bordering on negligence.

Schiff broke it down for me after the seminar. When the police arrive on site, a gunfight is inevitable, so why not start it earlier?

“There’s going to be uninterrupted execution until then,” she said. “And we’ve taught our kids not to fight back.”

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“The American carnage stops right here and right now.”
–Donald J. Trump, presidential inaugural address

Federal law once dictated that visitors needed passports to travel through certain Indian lands. In 1811, long before he was president, Andrew Jackson was one such traveler, transporting slaves through Choctaw territory. When an agent asked for his passport, he reached for his pistols and exclaimed: “These are General Jackson’s passports!”

Jackson is still regarded as an icon of “individual sovereignty,” explained Jason Opal, a history professor at McGill University, who specializes in America’s early decades. This valued the power of the individual over the harmony of the collective; it favored personal freedom over the society’s welfare.

Central to that tenet was the idea of “virtuous violence”: that brutality was a necessary and noble recourse for protecting yourself from harm.

Virtuous violence became the foundation for vigilante groups that sprung up in the 1830s, when Jackson was in the White House. Gun-toting posses had to take the law into their own hands in disorderly areas of the South and West, where slave and Indian populations threatened safety.

Similar but distinct from vigilante groups were the official slave patrols, whose routes still delineate many county lines in the South. Patrolmen would ride horseback, guns in tow, and enact violence as needed on escaped slaves on the loose.

Guns were as pivotal to both groups as they’d been to settlers during America’s nascence. As early as 1691, county ordinances in Virginia and the Carolinas required citizens to bring guns to church meetings in case of slave uprisings.

Over the decades, the heroic, gun-slinging individual has been lionized in different forms. The vigilante eventually gave way to the rugged cowboy, the defining figure of the West. Some regard the West as the epitome of the hardy American spirit. It was in the push west that American individualism shone, in the removal of Indians, the defiance of a callous land, and the ultimate habitation of that land. A historian named Frederick Jackson Turner compared the frontier to a “military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression.” It was here that displaced Europeans, lacking identity, became Americans, encapsulating “that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism.”

As westward expansion ground to a permanent halt, perhaps Americans lost a channel of freedom and an outlet for that fighting spirit. So, they turned it inward, creating a culture of pugnacity within.

Today, the image of the husky frontiersman has evolved into the rifle-strapped special-ops soldier.

Opal said many of his students haven't even lived during a time when America wasn't at war, which imprints the message that war, not peace, is the status quo.

Because America's wars take place abroad, far from our everyday lives, only the glory of war seeps into our consciousness. "We so blithely export war, partly due to the fact that it has been 150 years since we've experienced it," said Roger Stahl, an associate professor at the University of Georgia, whose research focuses on state violence and conflict. "We have a romanticized version of what weapons do."

The U.S. spent \$818.2 billion on the military in 2017, more than the next seven countries combined. The state has to justify this expense, said Stahl, so it makes sure that a glamorized picture of the military permeates society. "We've spent so long imagining ourselves in the soldiers' boots over there that we have transformed the culture over here," he said.

We're barraged with a constant stream of ads, video games and movies that idealize the plight of the soldier. Blockbuster films like *Iron Man*, which Stahl calls a "Pentagon production," drill an romantic version of the military into the minds of Marvel-hooked multiplex audiences.

The language of war has entered our everyday lexicon. We debate banal subjects like the "war on Christmas," numbing ourselves to the brutality of real war. Civic issues are tackled with military methodology. A DEA memo boasted that the War on Drugs "has all the risks, excitement and dangers of conventional warfare."

Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, a trained "killologist," is tasked with coaching America's local police departments to behave militarily. They should use their "gift of aggression" – their sheepdog personalities – to be more eager in using force. "Cops fight violence," he said. "What do they fight it with? Superior violence. Righteous violence."

It's not just a mentality. Leftover military weaponry is actively distributed to police precincts as they prepare to defend against threats such as a caravan of asylum seekers.

It may be hard to believe that the preferred term for law enforcement was once "peace officers." The modern SWAT – Special Weapons And Tactics – functions more like military troops, often donning '90s Army fatigues. In Missouri, a Special Response Team, a division similar to SWAT, released training materials that told officers: "Because of our laws, we can't depend on the military to help us. You, the police officer, are our Delta Force."

An ACLU report titled "War Comes Home" detailed that the 1033 Program, the same law that sent mine-resistant trucks to schools, has transferred \$4.3 billion of equipment to local police departments. The motto of the government subdivision that runs the program is: "from warfighter to crimefighter."

1033 has allowed police in Arizona to acquire: 1,034 guns, 42 forced entry tools, 17 helicopters and "a .50 caliber machine gun that shoots bullets powerful enough to blast through the buildings on multiple city blocks." A department in Arkansas obtained two armed robots.

Assault weapons – those shiny, black Jacksonian passports, and the beating heart of war – are readily available in Main Street stores. And the Second Amendment inspires a belief that Americans have a divine right to use those guns.

Military culture and virtuous violence are uniting to create a response to school violence. The state is turning districts over to security industries and police forces, said Henry Giroux, a professor of cultural studies at McMaster University. “Teachers now seem to be the adjuncts of security systems,” he said.

Schools used to be sanctuaries. The establishment of the public school system was a triumph over Jacksonian individual sovereignty, Opal said, because it represented a collective, unarmed society, for the greater good of the people.

Now, schools are the frontlines of military culture, where intruders are routinely using AR-15s to wage war. In the era of Trump, whose favorite former president was Andrew Jackson, the cure for violence is more violence. The NRA’s silver bullet of fighting guns with more guns is the very essence of virtuous violence.

That inherent itch for violence – a natural urge from decades of taming a harsh American land – is now scratched on each other, under the pretense of self-defense. Stand Your Ground laws, which afforded George Zimmerman the moral right to protect himself, are in place in some form in 33 states, permitting endless armies of quick-drawing Zimmermen to shoot first and rationalize later.

Before long, Stand Your Ground may come in miniature edition. If the military response to school violence persists, experts agreed it’s not a stretch to think that children could soon be casted as a new generation of vigilantes – and be encouraged to arm themselves.

Sacha Baron Cohen underlined this reality in *Who Is America*, when he convinced various lawmakers to support a proposal called Kinder Guardians. Kids aged 4 to 12 would be armed with models like the Puppy Pistol and the Uzicorn. “In less than a month, a first-grader can become a first-grenader,” a former Illinois representative announced in the campaign promo.

“I don’t think this is a joke,” Opal said. “I think it’s a pretty dark preview.”

• • •

While the Sousley cadets took their weapons training, I talked to Sebastian Gaskins, or “Chief.” His stature and brawn could fool anyone, as could his skin-tight upper-body camo and heavy-duty black boots. But at the camp, he’s known as a “gentle giant.”

Towering over me, Chief was soft-spoken as he discussed his role. A rare holy trinity – former military, former law enforcement, NRA-certified instructor – he ran anti-bullying and self-defense sessions, but not a lot of “hardcore combatives.”

“We try and give them every way in the world to get out of a situation before getting physical,” he said. “That’s your last resort.”

He discussed the goals of an active shooter training he’d held in February. He operated with the *run, hide, fight* philosophy – but stressed that the *fight* should be avoided by any means necessary.

“You don’t want to turn them into trained killers,” Chief said. “Because they’re kids.” But sometimes, the *fight* can’t be avoided. In that case: “It’s almost a mob mentality.”

He didn’t advocate arming teachers, because there were too many red flags. Anybody could get access to a teacher’s gun. He recommended that the only armed individuals on campuses should be police officers, who are trained in threat recognition. Or, military veterans, who could be hired to serve as full-time armed staff. Commander Jay had suggested a nationalized police program, similar to Air Marshals.

Chief valued strategic thinking. He wanted kids to know how to recognize different weapons, a tactic which he’d already mastered at home. He had guns lying all around the house, and he trained his son how to identify a real gun from a toy gun.

The cadets needed to know the difference between handguns, shotguns and rifles. In the training, he’d hold a dummy weapon and instruct the kids to turn around rapidly and identify the weapon. While the drill reminded me of a game of peekaboo, the idea was that while a school shooting is taking place, students could inform police what type of weapon the killer is carrying.

This seemed different from the NRA’s logic of taking on a shooter. Wayne LaPierre, the group’s CEO, has preached, “Whenever a good guy with a gun runs towards the gunfire, the madness stops quickly.”

Chief kept a distance from this fighting mindset. “Even though I’m certified by the NRA, I don’t follow their political guidebook,” Chief said. “It’s stupid.” He wanted children to know the consequences of violence. “It’s not like playing *Call of Duty*, where you take a life and they respawn later.”

Above all, he said: “The one thing you must do is preserve life – by any means necessary.”

I followed the cadets out onto the range, where they’d put concepts into action.

They’d be aiming their .22s at a green board about 50 yards ahead. That’s approximately 45 meters. The U.S. Army uses the metric system, and veteran Michael Timms, who was leading the shooting session, was very particular about that. Even down to the back of his t-shirt, on which all-caps text read, “Stay back 100 meters or you will be shot.” The Arabic translation was helpfully provided below.

Sergeant First Class Timms, who served 23 years in the Army in various war zones, stood emotionless, with his light-red ringlets edging out of the back of his black Army hat like a curly,

modern-age mullet, while the rookies huddled in a circle to pack bullets into their magazines. Brianna, the girl cadet, held the box of casings for all to share as they locked and loaded.

Doc stood on the sidelines, watching his theory put into practice. This was not merely a casual bit of plinking; this was military history being placed, literally, in the hands of a new generation.

The cadets placed mats onto the grass and lay down on their tummies, fitted in their kid-sized camo and boots. They aimed their semi-automatic weapons and quietly concentrated on their assignment.

The focus was intense. Behind glasses, the cadets' eyes were relaxed with the coolness and serenity of snipers. Still, stoic, sedate, like lions laying in the long savannah grass before the kill. Their body positioning told a tale of professionalism. Their patience for their orders was exemplary, a model for the troops that'd arrive in the summer. These cadets would already be in advanced placement.

Semper Paratus: always ready. *Semper Fidelis*: always faithful.

Carrying his .22, and wearing his own backup handgun visibly in the belt that held up his camo pants, Timms broke the silence as he commanded his cadets to fire.

In unison, the teens released their safeties and fired at their target. The sound of shots bursting, *clap-clap-clap*, was jarring even over the muffling foam earplugs we wore. I daydreamed about the PepperBalls subtly nicking the leaves of the bush, only to be slapped awake again by the *clap-clap-clap*.

They were able to keep their steel passports held tight to their bodies as they pulled the triggers, unruffled by the minimal recoil. Some of them removed their glasses and earmuffs, physically prepared to withstand the sensory elements of the fire.

There was no "ping" like the old-school clips Doc talked about. Just the repetitive *clap-clap-clap* as the bullets struck and pierced the sturdy target ahead.

After they'd fired their rounds, they stood up soberly and detached their magazines. I walked 45 meters forward and inspected the green target in the aftermath. It looked like a school bulletin board, ridden with holes that looked only slightly bigger than push-pins punctures.

Stapled to the bulletin board were smaller targets of letter-size paper, like pieces of art-room scrap sheets, now ripped apart from the force of multiple rounds. Below the board, 100s of empty shell casings shrouded the turf.

I glanced back at the cadets. They'd been dismissed from shooting period, and were marching off to their next class. Perhaps physical training, or a breach-and-clear, or maybe just to get their dorms in order. Whatever the case, they'd work up an appetite for sloppy joes, french fries and cookie cake for dinner.