

Creating Better Marksmen out of Riflemen?

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Problem Identified

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Marines from Second Marine Division participate in their annual rifle qualification at Stone Bay ranges. It is Friday; they completed the qualification course of fire yesterday, and now just have to endure the dreaded "field fire" portion. The Range Staff has preached throughout the week that this course of fire is just as important as Thursday's qualification, and must be passed to complete yearly qualification. However, the Marines have all been through this before and do not heed the warning. They know everybody passes, they know it does not count toward promotion, and they know that the event is almost impossible to score accurately anyway. Everyone on the range is thinking of completing their check in the box and going home for the weekend. Applying principles of marksmanship is the last thing on their mind. The bottom line is evident; the Marine Corps has not taken "field firing" seriously.

Across the globe, a squad of Marines from the First Marine Division advances through the streets of Baghdad (OIF I). They have recently escaped a barrage of small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) which took out their company command vehicle. One-hundred meters ahead, four insurgents armed with AK-47s dart across the street as the Marines open up. Covering

40 meters quickly, the insurgents duck behind buildings and get away, the Marines all failed to hit their targets.

The Battalion Gunner hears of this incident and several others like it, he even witnesses Marines missing shots they are expected to make. While sharing these stories with other Gunners, he finds that instances of Marines demonstrating poor combat marksmanship are almost prevalent throughout the fleet. The bottom line is again evident that Marines are losing their combat marksmanship skills.¹

In response to the declining marksmanship of Marines, a conference was hosted by Training and Education Command's Marksmanship Programs Section (MPS) on April 12, 2005. Marine Corps Infantry Weapons Officers ("Gunners", MOS 0306) and Marine Corps Range Officers (MOS 9925) were invited to this conference as subject matter experts. Their task was to "fix" Marine marksmanship, specifically targeting the re-qualifying course or Sustainment-Level Rifle Marksmanship (SLR) course of fire. The eventual outcome resulted in getting rid of the SLR course and developing an entirely new approach and attitude toward "field" or combat firing.

The new course of fire hit the fleet October 1, 2005 and will begin a one year review period. While Marines across the

¹ These two general scenarios are fictional but are representative of the many stories reported to the Marksmanship Training Summit on April 12, 2005 by Marine Gunners during OIF and Range Officers during rifle details.

Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) will certainly notice that the rules and course have changed, it is yet to be seen whether their attitudes and overall proficiency will increase.

Ultimately, the problems identified and changes implemented in the new course of fire will be an upgrade and improve Marine marksmanship. However, it will fail to significantly improve the combat shooting skills of MAGTAF Marines because Fleet commanders will not embrace the new plan and it will not break the individual Marines check in the box mentality.

Problems With SLR

The new course of fire was created by MPS, Gunners, and Range Officers by first identifying the physical and ideological problems with its predecessor. The first of the three main physical problems with the SLR was that the Gunners and Range Officers thought it was essentially too easy. To verify this they did not have to go any further than to point out the scoring system. From a total of 65 possible points, only 25 were needed to earn a "Marksman" badge and become qualified for the year. This equates to earning only 38% of the total points. In the Entry-Level Rifle Marksmanship (ELR) course (fired by recruits at boot camp and Second Lieutenants at The Basic School) qualification requires 190 out of 250 points (or 76%). Further, the SLR allows Marines to qualify "Expert" from the

first stage of fire at the 200-yard-line after firing only half of their rounds. The drop in institutional expectations has therefore created a drop in individual ability.

Second, the physical firing positions were also a problem. The initial guidance of sitting, kneeling, standing, and prone positions somewhere became skewed. A "Range Nazi" mentality developed resulting in range coaches and officials forcing Marines to shoot from un-natural positions. The standing position is probably the best example of this. A Marine shooting was often instructed to; lean forward but stand erect, bend slightly at the knees but not too much, keep feet parallel to the firing line but twist the upper body toward the firing side. The "aggressive stance," as it was called, made Marines more concerned about maintaining their balance than hitting their target. Comfort and relaxation which are cornerstones of Marksmanship 101 was disregarded.

The last physical problem with the SLR course results from the restraint of time. Like any skill, marksmanship abilities continue to increase with practice. However, the resources of available training time and ammunition are limited. With two and half days of "grass week" or range preparation time and a full week of classes and firing at the range, unit commanders are generally not willing to lose Marines for any more time even if their marksmanship suffers. The four day qualification

schedule also left just one day for combat or field fire classes and exercises.

The ideological problems with the SLR course result from both the style of shooting and the scoring of the field firing exercises. The course was scored by what is considered "gallery" style shooting. This focuses is on the hit or miss of irregularly shaped targets rather than accuracy in relation to the center of the target. In contrast, the ELR uses a classic marksman target with a circular center (worth the most points) and progressively larger concentric circles (worth fewer points the further away from center). Gallery style shooting made Marines more concerned about if the target was hit then challenging them to hit the center. It has also allowed Marines to accept close shots as good enough instead of "dialing in" their shots to the targets center.

The problem with scoring the field firing exercise was that the scores were not recorded. This portion of the qualification is intended to develop combat oriented shooting skills and is arguably the most important part of qualification. Without scoring the field fire, Marines did not challenge themselves and performance was measured by completion rather then execution. If institutionally the Marine Corps does not put enough importance on this event to have it count toward the qualification score, Marines will not take it seriously either.

New Course of Fire

With the problems of the SLR course identified the consensus was that modifications were definitely needed, but a complete overhaul was not necessary. As was pointed out previously, it was not the actual course of fire that needed improvement, but characteristics of it such as the scoring, time allotted, and focus. Because of this, the yard lines, positions, and rounds fired essentially remain the same with several administrative changes. For example, the qualifying course, (now referred to as "Table 1,") adopted the ELR scoring system and targets, and lasts three days instead of four. The "range nazi" mentality has theoretically vanished and Marines are taught basic positions and allowed the flexibility to find comfortable body positions. The change of focus is mostly viewed in "Table 2," (which was previously referred to as "Phase 3" or "field fire"). In Table 2, Marines must demonstrate proficiency in basic combat shooting skills, and will now have two days to do it. Table 2 focuses on immediate engagement, limited exposure, multiple targets, and moving targets. While this portion is still pass/fail, the scoring and accountability will be improved allowing the shooter to see hits and the scorer to give more accurate feedback.

Further administrative changes allow for new gear that is currently used by MAGTF operating forces. For example, Marines

can fire the range with their table of organization (T/O) rifle, whatever it may be. This will allow Marines to shoot with their M16-A2, M16-A4, or M-4. Marines will also receive instruction on techniques for using optics and lasers which are increasingly available to and used by Marines in combat. Finally, it allows for the use of the Marine Corps approved three-point sling. This sling has become increasingly popular with deploying troops, and is quickly being adopted as the standard issue. Until a single sling style is adopted, any Marine Corps approved sling may be used.

With Tables 1 and 2, the new course looks much like the ELR, with a slightly different schedule and rule book. Where the course is supposed to make its real impact on Marines, and is considered the "teeth" of the improved course is Tables 3 and 4. Both tables consist of classroom instruction and live-fire exercises. Table 3 builds upon basic combat shooting skills developed in Table 2 and develops "intermediate" combat shooting skills using; optics, night lasers, a night fire exercise, and firing with a field protective mask. Table 4, will build upon the intermediate shooting skills and develop advanced combat shooting to include; day and night confined space drills, lateral and horizontal movement, pivot drills, and weak side shooting.

Problems Still Not Addressed

While the addition of Tables 3 and 4 truly appears to provide the added edge over the previous SLR course and proves that Marine marksmanship is headed in the right direction, several issues have been overlooked. First, neither table is graded nor do they count toward annual qualification and promotion. This was one of the problems identified with the old field fire, and it seems as though the lesson has not been learned. Again, Marines will not take marksmanship seriously if their performance does not count toward something. Second, Tables 3 and 4 will not be run by the rifle ranges, but by individual battalions. If the Marine Corps does not require, enforce, grade, and track individual performance in these tables, a battalion commander will not allow for several more days on the range and away from unit training or daily operations. If even executed, these tables will quickly return to the "check in the box" mentality. And third, Table 4 is only intended to be fired by Marines with infantry occupational specialties. If any lesson was learned during Operation Iraqi freedom, it was that every Marine needs to be prepared to be a rifleman. In an environment where there is no "rear area," Marines who operated fuel farms, were in convoys, provided humanitarian relief, etc., all found themselves engaged with the enemy. If all Marines are riflemen, the marksmanship goals of

the Marine Corps must be the same across the occupational specialty spectrum. For most of the Marine Corps, including the infantry, any advanced combat marksmanship training will need to be supported and executed by individual units. The Marksmanship program will serve only as a guide to acceptable combat marksmanship training.

Essentially, the success of this program is going to rest where it always has, on the shoulders of unit commanders. Range time and quality instructors are spread thin and the scheduling and support required to manage Table 3 will require significant efforts. If commanders need to devote more time to individual marksmanship, they will. If they feel it is more necessary to train in the ever expanding Individual Training Standards list, marksmanship will be put on the backburner until time permits, which it never does.

Conclusion

Overall, the new SLR is a good plan. Tables 1 and 2 show a re-focus of effort which emphasize both pure marksmanship and basic combat shooting. When, or if, Table 2 is included in a Marine's overall score, Marines will feel challenged and will take this course seriously. However, Marines across the MAGTF are not likely to become better combat shooters, which was the primary goal of re-evaluating the SLR. Table 3 will not be

fired annually by every Marine. For battalions, there is simply not enough value in dedicating the time and resources necessary into a program which is ultimately not enforced or counted.

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