

A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO BASIC RIFLE MARKSMANSHIP

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A Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, is a light Infantry company under the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division stationed at Fort Carson, Colo. Following a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan in 2014, the company was sent to Fort Knox, Ky., as a part of a U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) task to support the execution of the 2015 Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Cadet Summer Training (CST). One of the tasks assigned to our company during CST was to support the cadet rifle training ranges. As a result of these tasks, our company had the opportunity to invest deeply in basic rifle marksmanship (BRM). Members of our company attended the 75th Ranger Regiment's Ranger Marksmanship Instructor Course (RMIC) and the Asymmetric Warfare Group's CST Basic Rifle Marksmanship Instructor's Course. These training opportunities and the experience of training thousands of cadets on rifle marksmanship afforded our company the opportunity to gain numerous techniques to apply to our own BRM progression and to share with our sister units. The most significant conclusions that our unit pulled from our marksmanship experience were:

- The need for Soldiers to achieve a foundational knowledge base in marksmanship;
- The importance of Soldiers at the lowest level developing functional weapons safety habits; and
- The importance of mastering how and why to apply the fundamentals of marksmanship.

When we began the Asymmetric Warfare Group's marksmanship instructor course prior to executing CST, Senior Instructor Chris Crider emphasized first and foremost the importance of giving Soldiers a strong knowledge base and stressed the significant role that this plays in their marksmanship progression. In order to set the conditions for Soldiers to be successful in marksmanship, it is imperative that they have a solid understanding of the marksmanship fundamentals. It is not enough to simply tell Soldiers where to hold their sights as they engage targets at distance or to make adjustments for Soldiers' sights as they zero their weapons. These habits are effective in zeroing and qualifying Soldiers but cripple them when it comes to allowing them to develop a true understanding of marksmanship. To instill a lasting understanding of marksmanship, trainees should first be taught the science behind marksmanship such as minute of angle, trajectory, ballistics, functions of fire, and



A Soldier fires from the kneeling position during advanced marksmanship training at Fort Carson.

weapons maintenance. Once they have this knowledge base, Soldiers will be able to take the initiative in their marksmanship. (For example, Soldiers can make necessary holds as they engage targets at distance and make the appropriate adjustments to their sights when zeroing their weapons without having to wait for the directions or assistance of their leadership.)

Soldiers can still group and zero their weapons and qualify well if leaders do not spend the time to educate them through preliminary marksmanship instruction (PMI). However, by neglecting their education, we greatly limit Soldiers' potential for marksmanship progression. The use of the standard M4/M16 25-meter zero target (with numbers on the X and Y axis that tell Soldiers how many clicks to move their sights to zero their weapon) is a perfect example of how we as an Army have fallen back on the easier marksmanship solution instead of investing in the knowledge of our Soldiers. These practices detract from the overall capabilities of our units. Allowing a piece of paper to tell us how to make sight adjustments to our weapons instead of having an understanding of the minute of angle adjustments needed to properly zero our weapons accomplishes the immediate task of zeroing but inhibits our potential for marksmanship progression. By using these simplified techniques, we will not have the understanding needed to zero out to further distances for a more accurate zero. When we teach Soldiers the science behind marksmanship, they will understand not only the procedures necessary to operate their weapons but the reason behind those procedures. The use of the M4/M16 zero target is only an example of how simplified marksmanship techniques can inhibit a Soldier's marksmanship progression. Moving away from these expedited and simplified marksmanship practices and developing a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of marksmanship will allow Soldiers to effectively operate their weapons in any environment or circumstance.

During CST 2015, the first day of marksmanship training did not take place at the range but in the classroom. Marksmanship instructors dedicated a full day of PMI to educate the cadets and set the conditions for success prior to them firing their first round. Their instruction included ballistics, minute of angle, trajectory, and a strong emphasis on the fundamentals of marksmanship. Even at the range, there was still an emphasis on PMI. If cadets were unable to apply the fundamentals of marksmanship as they grouped and zeroed their weapons, they were taken by a dedicated PMI instructor to identify and fix any deficiencies in their understanding and application of the fundamentals of marksmanship.

As FORSCOM units, we can replicate the knowledge-based BRM progression that our CRT committee used to train the cadets. Using Chapter 4 of FM 3-22.9, *Rifle Marksmanship M16/M4 Series Weapons*, we should be conducting PMI and teaching our Soldiers about BRM days before we go to the range. Although all Soldiers should have been given this instruction during their initial entry training, it will provide a good refresher and fill any gaps in their knowledge of marksmanship. At a minimum, our PMI instruction should include weapons safety, disassembly, assembly, maintenance, functions of fire, minute of angle, ballistics and trajectory, and an overview of the type of shooting to be executed. Soldiers' knowledge can then be tested and improved upon through numerous dry fire drills that instill marksmanship habits and set the conditions for success when they are on the range. Having a common understanding of information such as the minute of angle for each weapon and optic that are to be used, effective firing positions, and the proper holds for each distance to be fired will be critical in setting our units up for success in marksmanship. This also saves time and resources while significantly increasing the marksmanship capabilities inside of our formations.

Although a strong knowledge base is essential in the success of marksmanship, no marksmanship program will be successful if they do not actively practice weapons safety habits. Both the Asymmetric Warfare Group's team and the RMIC team emphasized the importance of safety above all else while training marksmanship. The attitude of "the safer we are, the more we can do" that Crider stressed through his course is one we should strive to emulate in the planning and execution of our training. By the chain of command identifying risks and then avoiding them through blanket safety policies that take away individual Soldier responsibility, we limit the capabilities and the outcomes of our training and reinforce bad habits for Soldiers. Instead, we should mitigate those risks to the best of our abilities by instilling habitual, simple, and effective safety practices at the individual Soldier level.

Imperative to the practice of safe marksmanship is the internalization of the fundamentals of safety. The atmosphere of responsibility that was emphasized by the RMIC instructors allowed Soldiers to internalize the principles of weapons safety. The most effective way that we as leaders can train our Soldiers to practice habitual weapons safety is by making them comfortable with their weapons through instruction, dry-fire drills, and the example of their leaders. When Soldiers have demonstrated that they have mastered the basic principles of weapons safety,

the redundant control mechanisms can then be minimized to allow them the responsibility to practice safety. Once the basic controls have been mitigated to the bottom-line necessities, we should then hold them to the highest standard of weapons safety to ensure that they continue to practice these fundamentals before progressing to more complex shooting such as advanced rifle marksmanship, close quarters marksmanship, and live-fire exercises, with risks that are both more frequent and more severe.

The typical “safety” practices that the Army habitually uses — such as firing our last round and immediately passing our weapon off to a safety for clearance or finishing a firing iteration and placing our weapon on a sandbag pointed down range where we cannot accidentally discharge a round — ingrains bad habits of poor weapons safety in our Soldiers. As Crider explained, when we place these blanket safety policies over our Soldiers, “we train them to think that weapons are dangerous, instead of training them to think of weapons as their tools — their personal life lines.” During our CST instructor course, when the AWG instructors observed us becoming more confident and responsible with our weapons and able to practice the four safety rules, they slowly lessened the blanket safety restrictions that were placed on us, allowing us to feel more comfortable and confident in the use of our weapons. For example, our instructors told us to move up and down range to check targets with our weapons slung at the low ready, allowing us to carry our weapons in a safe manner. This practice not only made the range safer as we did not have unattended weapons pointed at us, it also instilled the habitual practice of carrying our weapons properly and safely at all times. During the training, if any of the Soldiers were unsafe with their weapons, such as pointing their weapons in unsafe directions while picking up brass, the instructors and the Soldiers to their left and right were quick to correct the deficiency. The four safety rules that were instilled in us through our AWG training and that were instilled in the cadets through CST are as follows:

1. Treat all weapons as if they are loaded at all times.
2. Only point your weapon at something you are willing to destroy.
3. Finger off the trigger and weapon on SAFE until a sight picture is acquired.
4. Positively identify your target, what is beyond it, and what is left and right of it.

By continually allowing us to take ownership of the range and more importantly our own weapons safety through use of the four safety rules, our coaches allowed us to become comfortable with our weapons, creating an end state of good safety habits.

Similar to what we experienced during our training, the cadets at CST became much safer and more efficient with their weapons as they became more comfortable. Not only will fostering an environment of personal responsibility and ownership help our Soldiers on the range, it will improve them holistically as it instills in them core values such as responsibility, accountability, and discipline. We must realize that the Soldiers we should be trusting to carry a loaded weapon on a flat range today are the same Soldiers that we will trust to carry loaded weapons on deployment in the near future. Therefore, we must instill in them a habitual practice of the four safety rules.

In our marksmanship progression, once we have come to a common understanding of safety, we should begin with the five fundamentals of marksmanship:

1. Stable body position
2. Breathing
3. Sight alignment and sight picture
4. Trigger squeeze
5. Follow through

While conducting our training prior to CST, Crider and his team continuously stressed the significance of understanding the fundamentals of marksmanship and slowly progressing to more advanced shooting only as each Soldier is ready. Before Soldiers fire a round, they should have a firm understanding of the five fundamentals of marksmanship. Through instruction, demonstration, and dry fire drills, Soldiers should be given an opportunity to conduct PMI and practice and master these fundamentals before even going to the range. Once at the range, Soldiers will then put into practice the principles that they have already drilled. With one Soldier firing on the line and a peer coach behind them coaching and critiquing, they are able to identify deficiencies that couldn't be identified in PMI due to a lack of recoil and the anticipation of the round firing.

Throughout the sequence of a slow progression in fire, a coach and shooter pair, with the help of experienced leaders, should be able to use their understanding of the five fundamentals of marksmanship to identify the deficiencies that they have in their shooting and greatly improve their marksmanship capabilities. Once the fundamentals of marksmanship are understood and have been mastered in basic sequences of fire, firers should then progress to more advanced marksmanship. By beginning unit marksmanship programs with this slow, knowledge-based progression, leaders are sure to see greater and longer lasting improvement in their Soldiers' marksmanship capabilities with even fewer resources.

While training cadets at the BRM range during CST 2015, our coaches effectively grouped, zeroed, and qualified an average of 300 cadets a day for 20 ranges with more than a 97 percent success rate. This was no easy task as many of the cadets had never fired a weapon before and only had three days to be prepared for a team live fire. Their success in coaching so many cadets can be credited in most part to their common understanding and coaching of the five fundamentals of marksmanship. Giving the cadets the base of knowledge on marksmanship the day prior through the PMI committee allowed our coaches to simply reinforce the fundamentals they had already been taught. Since the cadets already knew the five fundamentals, our coaches were able to systematically pinpoint each fundamental to hone the cadets' marksmanship and make them successful in grouping, zeroing, and qualifying. Our coaches' common understanding of the five fundamentals kept all them consistent in the corrections that they made to cadets, limiting confusion and regression in marksmanship. Though our coaches had differing levels of experience in marksmanship, they were all invaluable in the combined effort of coaching 6,000 cadets over the summer due to their consistent adherence to the five fundamentals of marksmanship.

In conclusion, in order to establish an effective BRM progression, a unit must invest in a strong knowledge base for their Soldiers, entrust their Soldiers with and hold them to the highest standard of weapons safety, and have a strong understanding of the fundamentals of marksmanship. By applying these aspects of marksmanship, a unit will produce not only good marksmen but marksmen who are able to adapt to adverse situations and engage targets accurately in varied circumstances. In a world with threats continually emerging, it is imperative that our Army stand ready to deploy, close with, and destroy the enemy; and paramount to this is our ability to train and remain proficient in marksmanship.

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