

The Changing Face of Rifle Qualification:

Best Practices to Succeed in a New Era



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Above, a Soldier in training with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, prepares to fire his weapon during marksmanship training at Fort Benning, GA.

Photos courtesy of authors

Individual weapon qualification has long been a staple of Army training. It serves as a method for commanders to gauge unit proficiency and training needs, allows for a certain degree of risk mitigation, and serves as a gate to allow individuals and units to progress to more advanced training. For years, the Army has used a three-position static record fire qualification to achieve these goals across the force. Though that course of fire allowed commanders to have a modicum of understanding of where their units stood in terms of the ability to hit a target from 50 to 300 meters, it did very little to enforce the skills needed to utilize the rifle in combat. Reacting to an immediate threat, reloading, using cover, and changing positions — skills needed to maximize individual Soldier lethality and survivability on the battlefield — were entirely absent from qualification. As a result, these skills were at best secondarily trained, and Soldiers qualified on their M4 carbines had to learn these key tasks in the crucible of ground combat.

On 30 July 2019, however, the qualification table fired by most Soldiers for at least the majority of their careers was replaced by a new course of fire under the auspices of the newly-minted TC 3-20.40, *Training and Qualification, Individual Weapons*. Built within the structure of the Integrated Weapons Training Strategy (IWTS), the new course of fire requires a shooter to have significantly greater weapon-handling skills, operate under the stress of a time constraint, and to take proper action without needing to be told. The standard for qualification has not changed, and marksmanship skill out to 300 meters is still tested at least as much as it was under the previous course of fire. The new course of fire will improve

individual Soldier lethality by increasing the skill level needed to reach proficiency defined as qualification.

In order to prepare Soldiers to meet the challenge presented by the new qualification standard, leaders at all levels must begin to understand both the differences between the old and new courses of fire and the differences in the training path that will be required in order for Soldiers to achieve success and units to maintain readiness. Where in years past qualification was often thought of as little more than an administrative necessity in order to begin a live-fire training progression, it will now require time and energy allocated in the form of a deliberate training progression for Soldiers and units to be successful when qualifying with their primary weapon systems.

In late spring 2019, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, became the first Infantry One Station Unit Training (OSUT) company at Fort Benning, GA, and one of the first companies across the Army, to conduct rifle qualification in accordance with the standards of TC 3-20.40. Adding barricade fire and forcing Soldiers to reload and change positions under the pressure of a time constraint, the new qualification table tested our ability to shape our training progression to provide the best training for our trainees and helped us to develop some “best practices” that facilitated an improvement from an average score of 15 out of 40 to an average score of 36 out of 40 from the time trainees fired

their first practice qualification with iron sights to their final record qualification. Our experiences and recommendations will help your unit succeed in the future.

Our Experience

Infantry OSUT breaks up the program of instruction (POI) for rifle marksmanship (RM) into 18 distinct periods. RM one through seven focus on the very basics of RM, first introducing trainees to the M4 Carbine and then progressing through a scripted series of Engagement Skills Trainer (EST) and live-fire training events utilizing back-up iron sights (BUIS). The culminating event in this first portion of RM is a qualification table shot with BUIS. Afterwards, trainees are issued M68 Close Combat Optics (CCOs) and proceed through a nearly identical set of training gates utilizing their optical sighting systems before reaching record qualification on the all-important RM 18.

RM 7, the trainees' first experience with a record fire qualification shot with open sights, is the point at which Bravo Company noticed a significant difference in the ability of trainees to achieve similar results to those achieved by previous classes shooting the "old" qualification table. Specifically, the class in question averaged a score of 15 hits on RM 7 during the cycle, while the class prior, shooting the legacy table, had averaged a score of 23. Was this class just filled with inferior marksmen across the board? Were our drill sergeants somehow missing the mark with their instruction to this class? Or was the new qualification that much more difficult than the legacy course of fire?

In watching trainees execute RM 7, one major problem became clear. Marksmanship, in its purest form, the ability to hit a target, was not lacking. The trainees were actually hitting targets at a high rate... when they actually managed to fire at the target at all. Unfortunately, they were missing the chance to fire at a significant portion of target exposures because their ability to manipulate their individual weapons had not sufficiently developed to that point. Though Soldiers still face 40 possible engagements on the new qualification table, their ability to achieve a high score is negated drastically if they are unable to reload, correct a malfunction, and/or change positions quickly enough to fire at their next target exposure. Coupling the weapon-handling requirements of the new qualification table with a group of relatively inexperienced shooters still learning the fundamentals of marksmanship created a situation that looked, at best, challenging to correct.

After identifying the problem, we realized that we had to make some immediate changes to our planned training progression in order to ensure our Soldiers were trained to standard and had the best opportunity to excel. First and foremost, we dissected the course of fire and prioritized where instruction was essential and where repetition and consistent rehearsal would be enough to improve skill level. We had to do our best to ensure that these young Soldiers, motivated as they were to improve, did not launch headlong into practicing bad habits. Drill sergeants went about re-teaching techniques for reloading, demonstrated and discussed possible ways to

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change positions, and encouraged trainees to experiment with shifting positions in order to find the ways that were most economical and comfortable for them individually. Slowly but surely we began to see improvements across the board.

While we allowed Soldiers to explore their abilities to find comfort and economy of motion in positional changes, we found that reloading presented a slightly different conundrum. Typically, a magazine change — or tactical reload — is the preferred method taught to Soldiers early in their careers. This method entails retaining the empty magazine once it is changed; it is generally performed when cover is available and can be utilized to allow safely changing of magazines in a slower, more controlled fashion. This method of changing magazines can also be used when the opportunity arises to exchange a partially used magazine with a full magazine prior to moving or doing anything that might require the maximum amount of rounds the weapon is capable of delivering. For example, a Soldier may perform a tactical reload at his or her last covered and concealed position before stacking on a door and entering a structure, or once a room is cleared prior to entering another room. Generally speaking, this method is best used when time is not at a premium and is best utilized in the latter sense mentioned above — in which the Soldier has not reached bolt lock and is preemptively changing magazines to avoid that situation.

As our trainees were losing significant amounts of time attempting to perform a tactical reload, we introduced them earlier than usual to the concept of an emergency reload. This is a reload wherein the weapon reaches bolt lock on an empty magazine, and retention of the empty magazine is, at best, secondary in priority to getting the weapon back in the fight. This reload is the preferred method when time is of the essence, cover is unavailable, and/or the ability of the individual to put rounds downrange quickly is of greater importance to his or her survivability, lethality, or the success of the mission than immediate retention of an empty magazine. Introducing our trainees to this version of a reload greatly enhanced their ability to perform on the new qualification table, as they ceased wasting valuable time attempting to stow an empty magazine while laying exposed in the prone.

After our company had spent time exploring different ways to shift positions and drilled emergency reloads to a point of relative proficiency, the trainees rehearsed the course of fire constantly. While the old qualification table required

little if any rehearsal for success, this piece made the overall difference for B Company as we approached our final record qualification. During intermittent “downtime” both during training events and in the company area, drill sergeants timed and observed trainees rehearsing dry qualification iterations from a set of standard barricades that remained with the group throughout our rifle marksmanship period. These rehearsals allowed trainees significant added time to practice the skills they had been taught and gain vastly more familiarity with the skills needed to accomplish the task at hand.

B Company leadership also identified areas within the POI where we might be able to make improvements that would increase training value for the company. Under the current POI, trainees technically still shoot an “Introduction to Barricades” course of fire during RM 14, seven periods of instruction after they shoot their first BUIS qualification table utilizing barricades. With this in mind, B Company drill sergeants and leadership planned and received approval for several minor modifications to the courses of fire for RM periods 11-16. We worked with range operations cadre to create a course of fire consisting of target exposure frequency and duration that modeled that seen on the qualification table for use when trainees had finished confirming zero on LOMAH (location of misses and hits) ranges, and we also added barricades to courses of fire that traditionally introduced trainees to single and multiple target exposures, moving targets, and conducting immediate action on their weapons while in the prone. This increased trainee familiarity with barricades significantly and allowed them even more opportunities to build proficiency leading to their record qualification.

When the dust cleared and B Company had completed RM 18 (the trainees’ record qualification), our average score had improved from the aforementioned 15 we had begrudgingly recorded at RM 7 to 35.99, with 68 percent of trainees (116 out of 170) achieving expert rating. Though our trainees still had much to learn, they had come a very long way in a

short period of time. Their dedication to the task and ultimate success led to an increased motivation that carried them beyond the completion of their rifle marksmanship period and helped them to achieve goals in subsequent portions of their training path. It also became clear to them that obstacles that seemed insurmountable just days before could be hurdled successfully with the proper application of attention and commitment.

Application to Your Formation

If you take one lesson away from reading this article, let it be this: Build subject matter expertise within your formation. Doing so not only benefits your formation in the near-term, but if done in mass, it will increase capability across the force. As an OSUT company, we were lucky to have two drill sergeants who had graduated from Fort Benning’s Marksmanship Master Trainer Course (MMTC). MMTC is not designed to build the best shooters, although graduates will shoot at a higher level when they return to your formation than they did prior to attendance. The course does, however, produce individuals with a great deal of skill in marksmanship instruction, especially as it pertains to qualification and training plan development in support of qualification goals.

If you are unable to send individuals to MMTC or cannot send enough individuals, other options exist to build subject matter experts (SMEs) within your formation at a faster rate. MMTC can come to you in mobile training team (MTT) format. The 75th Ranger Regiment and Army Marksmanship Unit also have the ability to conduct mobile training for your formation that will increase marksmanship capacity, building better shooters within your formation who will also be able to assist in raising proficiency throughout. If you are located at an installation that is also home station to a Special Forces group, teams are often available to supplement your training and bring with them Soldiers with special operations forces (SOF) shooting course experience. Finally, civilian instructors, many of whom have extensive experience from long military careers, can be contracted to provide instruction to your formation at command discretion. While not all options provide instruction directly related to rifle qualification itself, all will provide formations with an increased understanding of marksmanship and, perhaps more importantly, weapon-handling abilities that will translate to performance on the new qualification table.

The second thing units should do to ensure success is dry fire practice. There are only two aspects of shooting that cannot be trained by dry firing: terminal ballistics and recoil control. Every other aspect of the shot process can be improved by consistent, deliberate dry firing. Dry fire is absolutely free and can be done without any resourcing; the possibilities for training are limitless. Soldiers can practice everything from basic sight alignment and trigger squeeze to magazine changes, malfunction diagnosis and correction, and shooting from different positions. Dry fire made the difference for us, as trainees were able to experiment



A Soldier in training with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, changes firing positions.

with varying body positions, improve functionality of their kit or make adjustments to it, and improve reload speeds all while getting repetitions executing the fundamentals of the shot process.

In order to do this, however, commanders must develop systems within their organizations that not only allow weapons to come out of the arms room with great frequency, but force them to. Drawing weapons can be a cumbersome and difficult process — look for ways to streamline it and ensure Soldiers handle their weapons as close to daily as they possibly can. Dry fire is the most certain way to create proficiency quickly within a formation, especially when it comes to the weapon-handling requirements of the new qualification table. Because weapon handling has so much more significant a role than it has ever had in qualification, those skills must be built and committed to muscle memory perhaps even before a shot is fired.

Units should also consider kit setup as a vehicle to increasing potential for proficiency. Closed-top magazine pouches will severely hinder Soldiers' ability to perform magazine changes quickly, and magazine pouch positioning can make or break the ability to reload quickly in certain positions. For instance, in the prone position, it is much slower to reload out of a closed-top pouch placed on the chest either on a fighting load carrier (FLC) or body armor than it is from an open-top magazine pouch worn on a Soldier's belt. From a survivability standpoint, the Soldier will also expose less of himself to the enemy retrieving the magazine from his belt than he would be rolling onto his side to create the space needed to retrieve the chest-mounted magazine.

Units should resist the urge to ban personally purchased kit items, specifically magazine pouches and "battle belts." They offer individuals significantly more options to arrange their kit to fit them and allow them the opportunity to perform at their best. Leaders must acquire a certain level of knowledge, however, so that they can ensure that Soldiers are using dependable equipment that will perform in training and combat. This is not to say that the new qualification requires Soldiers to purchase their own kit, but units will see that improved kits will beget improved scores, as Soldiers will waste less time fumbling with magazines and have more time to spend executing the shot process.

Finally, units must be willing to train as they fight. No, I do not mean train in body armor, helmet, and knee pads at all times. I mean that units must cultivate the mindset of training like their lives are on the line. Build barricades and use them in your company areas, but also learn to use them as if someone is actively engaging your position. Train magazine changes and immediate action whenever possible, and do so as if the only thing that stands between you and certain death is your ability to get your weapon back into the fight and engage the enemy. Utilize a shot timer to try to shave a quarter second off reload times across your formation. Train to make the slightest improvement which might make your



A Soldier in training with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, prepares to fire his weapon.

formation — and the individuals within — that much more lethal and survivable.

Individual weapon qualification is changing, but the results you achieve as a formation do not have to atrophy as a result. The new rifle qualification table requires more of Soldiers and leaders alike, but we are more than capable to provide what it requires. Learn from our early experiences that produced excellent results. Build SMEs within your formation through any and every available training opportunity. Conduct dry-fire practice often in order to build, improve, and maintain skills. Seek out and welcome ergonomic improvements to kits that allow the possibility of realizing increased proficiency. Train every day to be a little better than you were the day before and be a split second faster on the gun than the enemy.

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