

A New Training Path:

Maximizing LFXs Rather than Culminating with Them

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“We do it that way because that is what we have always done.” Everyone has heard that statement, or excuse, repeatedly in their career. That way of thinking can be dangerous to the Infantry Soldier. After decades of watching and learning how the U.S. military fights, our adversaries adapt and innovate. The Commandant of the U.S. Army Infantry School articulated it best in a recent article: Infantry leaders must adapt their training so that their Soldiers become familiarized with the environment they will face in high-intensity large-scale combat operations.¹

Infantry training at all levels should be adaptive and innovative. How infantry units have trained in the past is not wrong or unsafe, but a different sequence of training events would develop a more combat-ready fighting force. To better prepare for future combat, infantry units should think about rearranging the training path. Infantry units should build the foundational skills during a live-fire exercise and then apply the live-fire skills during realistic lane training.

Background

While the standard infantry unit training path has been sufficient for combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, it may not be adequate for future combat against a near-peer competitor. Close combat against insurgents will be very different from close combat against a professionally trained and equipped army. Within a typical infantry unit training path, the unit individually qualifies Soldiers on their organic weapon systems, conducts lane training during situational training exercises (STXs), and progresses to live-fire exercises (LFXs) as the culminating certification exercise. The term “infantry unit” can be applied to fire team, squad, or platoon.

The typical lane training that follows the initial weapon systems qualification consists of the infantry unit conducting battle drills against a live opposing force (OPFOR) with blank ammunition expended by both sides. This force-



Soldiers in 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, conduct a squad live-fire exercise in August 2021 at Fort Drum, NY. (Photos by SPC Pierre Osias)

on-force training is essential to developing combat-ready infantry units. Training Circular (TC) 7-9, *Infantry Live-Fire Training*, directs that force-on-force training and live-fire training must be coupled and that while force-on-force trains realistic actions, live fire trains marksmanship.² Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, directs situational training exercises as prerequisites to live-fire exercises. TC 3-20.0, *Integrated Weapons Training Strategy*, describes six sequential live-fire training progression tables.³ It states that Table III of the integrated weapons training strategy consists of STX, while LFXs do not start until Tables V and VI.⁴

Both FM 7-0 and TC 3-20.0 direct infantry units to conduct lane training during STX before performing live-fire exercises. However, TC 3-20.0 also stipulates that while the tables are typically executed in sequence, “commanders have the flexibility to execute tables in a varying sequence based on their training need, accessibility to resources, and other synchronization requirements.”⁵ Subsequently, the sequence of the training path is at the commander’s discretion.

The training path following FM 7-0 has worked well in preparing small units for combat. The infantry units performed well in combat during Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s and again during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom throughout the past 21 years. However, as our adversaries evolve and learn our tactics, our training must evolve and adapt. The sequence of infantry training events, if tailored correctly, could enhance the capability of the small unit, particularly the infantry units.

The historical notion that the culminating training event for an infantry unit is its LFX requires re-evaluation. Conversely, the best way to train infantry units for combat should not simply culminate in the unit’s ability to conduct movement and maneuver under live-fire conditions. Successfully executing movement and maneuver under live-fire conditions is suitable for combat. However, live-fire training can be better maximized at the beginning of the training path rather than at the end. The proposed methodology recommends using the LFX as the foundation for the infantry unit and then applying the foundational skills and confidence during lane training. To apply an academic metaphor to the proposed infantry unit training path, the live fire earns the unit an undergraduate degree, and the lane training earns the unit a graduate degree. Then, the units which engage in combat earn their Ph.D.

Live-Fire Exercise — Foundational Combat Skills

LFXs are more foundationally beneficial to building combat skills. For Infantry Soldiers, a live-fire exercise is typically a very scripted event. A crawl, walk, and run methodology enables the training event. The crawl phase consists of leaders conducting a walkthrough of the lane and the objective. The walk phase consists of a dry iteration of the live-fire lane followed by a blank iteration of the same lane. Sometimes there are multiple dry or blank iterations required. The lane does not change; the targets remain the same, and the terrain and firing points all stay the same from the crawl to the walk and then to the run phase. The run phase is the iteration utilizing live ammunition.

There are significant benefits to these scripted LFXs. These exercises are the primary tools for training marksmanship under field conditions, fire distribution and control, weapons confidence and familiarization, and synchronization of fires and effects.⁶ Additional training includes movement and maneuver techniques, command and control skills, and enabler integration. The LFX is a pinnacle training event for the squad or platoon and should remain so. Ensuring Soldiers execute proper weapons handling techniques is essential during the dry and blank ammunition iterations to ensure safe procedures during the live portion. Ensuring Soldiers know where their teammates are moving and maneuvering is also a vital rehearsed element of the dry- and blank-fire iterations. However, the scripted aspects of the exercise should be the starting point of preparing the infantry unit for future combat, not the culminating training event.

LFXs train marksmanship for combat better than any static weapons range. As was established earlier and implied by TC 7-9, they are essentially advanced marksmanship and thus should sequentially follow marksmanship during the training path. Marksmanship during LFXs is one of the best training events for Infantry Soldiers to hone their skills. During these exercises, Infantry Soldiers engage targets with live ammunition while moving and maneuvering around the battlefield. Whether in a rural, wooded, or urban area, LFXs allow Infantry Soldiers to apply their marksmanship fundamentals while also learning their weapon system’s limitations.

Infantry units can develop poor marksmanship habits during lane training if the applied marksmanship fundamentals are not adequately trained. Writing from experience as a former infantry rifle company commander, many



Soldiers in 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, conduct a squad live-fire exercise in August 2021 at Fort Drum, NY.

Soldiers develop poor marksmanship habits when much of their weapons training takes place during STX. Firing from improper angles and impossible fighting positions can be commonplace. Firing weapons with blank ammunition in the woods without real consequences to consider degrades the quality of training. During lane training, these bad habits can form in Soldiers and units that have not learned their marksmanship fundamentals under live-fire conditions. Suppose the scripted LFXs drill the applied marksmanship fundamentals into the Soldiers. In that case, the quality of marksmanship throughout the follow-on lane training will carry over and maximize the unit's training.

Conversely, infantry units can develop poor movement techniques during LFXs because no OPFOR is shooting back at them. Without an opposing force shooting back at them, requiring the use of cover while firing is hard to simulate. However, whether an LFX is conducted before or after the lane training, it has the potential to allow these poor techniques to foster. Leaders and lane observers must watch for these poor practices and reiterate the proper techniques during the dry or blank iterations. The scripted scenarios also contribute to poor movement techniques because the units know precisely where the targets will rise.

The scripted nature of LFXs is not entirely negative; these exercises help instill safe movements, accurate marksmanship, and confidence with live ammunition — all of which are essential for an infantry unit in combat. All Infantry Soldiers must be conscious of their surroundings, especially under live-fire conditions. They must also be aware of their maneuver lanes, firing points, and weapon system's capabilities. These skills are learned and reinforced during LFXs. The skills drilled during the scripted LFX can be amplified and maximized during the follow-on lane training.

Lane Training — Applied Lethality

Lane training, commonly referred to as STX, is where infantry units master their skills. The infantry unit conducts battle drills against live OPFOR while using blank ammunition. This force-on-force training is an important training event for the infantry unit. Lane training involves a live, thinking enemy that acts as the OPFOR. Infantry units can use various training aids to supplement the blank ammunition to enhance the event. Potential training aids available to units to enhance their lane training include Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES), simulation rounds, and simulated pyrotechnics. These training aids involve additional risk mitigations and require additional paperwork or higher levels of approval. These administrative obstacles are in place for a reason and should never be used to excuse the lack of training aid utilization.

Infantry units can maximize their lane training after conducting the scripted LFXs by enforcing the lessons and skills learned during the exercise. The units will be better positioned to identify the best firing positions during movement: the firing positions where they are confident their weapon system can accurately engage the target. Leaders, particularly at the team and squad levels, understand the precautions their maneuver forces must take to prevent fratricide based on their scripted live-fire training. After the LFX, these skills can be applied to the lane training. Soldiers understand the necessity to look down the scope of their rifles to engage targets, and they may be less likely to fire their blank ammunition superficially and indiscriminately at the OPFOR.

Additionally, the infantry unit can now apply the LFX skills against a live-thinking enemy. Ensuring they engage with and destroy the enemy without committing fratricide against moving targets trying to do the same to them is what best prepares units for combat. Lane training is a vital step in combat-ready units' training path. The infantry unit that can conduct live-fire training exercises before the lane training can maximize realistic combat conditions during lane training.

Implications

Developing combat-ready infantry units will be essential to the future success of infantry battalions, brigades, and divisions in large-scale ground combat. Training infantry units in the foundational aspects of fire and maneuver should start with live-fire training, not culminate there. Building competence and confidence with live ammunition before applying movement and maneuver skills against a live enemy OPFOR is critical. Infantry leaders must continually find ways to improve their unit within the bounds of Army regulations and field manuals. Finding innovative ways to improve their unit's lethality is critical to the future force.

Resource limitations can hinder the implementation of lane training after LFXs or the appropriate utilization of training aids to enhance the lane training. These restraints and constraints are in place for a reason; however, there are exceptions to policy and risk-mitigation measures that can lift the restraints and limitations. Infantry leaders who want to exercise innovative methods to train their unit should go the extra mile to ensure they get the required exceptions and permissions.

Lastly, infantry leaders' responsibility is to train their units for combat. Whether they utilize the prescribed methodology described or not, Infantry Soldiers must be capable of closing with and destroying the enemy in combat. Using live-fire training as the foundation of training and then applying their live-fire training skills in a lane-training environment will maximize the training time to produce lethal, combat-ready Infantry Soldiers.

Notes

¹ BG Larry Burris, "Commandant's Note: Modernizing for Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Infantry* (Spring 2022): 1.

² Training Circular (TC) 7-9, *Infantry Live-Fire Training*, April 2014, 1-2.

³ TC 3-20.0, *Integrated Weapons Training Strategy* (IWTS), June 2019, 1-5.

⁴ Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, June 2021, 1-4.

⁵ TC 3-20.0, 1-5.

⁶ FM 7-0, 4-2.

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