

FORUM & FEATURES



Concerning "Safety"

CAPTAIN THOMAS P. KRATMAN

There are those people in the Army, or working for the Army, to whom this statement will ring of heresy, but "safety" isn't everything; in fact, it is often not even desirable.

"Safety" is defined for the purposes of this article as an unreasonable preoccupation with reducing or eliminating injuries and deaths to the exclusion of all other considerations. Safety, on the other hand — without the qualifying quotation marks — is defined as the things a leader does to ensure that his troops are as well protected as possible consistent with accomplishing the unit's mission.

Nowhere is the difference between the current view of safety and the overreaction of "safety" more apparent than in our all-too-infrequent exercises with live ammunition.

Consider, for example, a few of the "safe" training exercises as currently practiced in the Army.

In the typical canned live fire exercise, a squad, a platoon, or a company negotiates a set problem against a well-known objective. The operations order (OPORD) for the problem is given to the unit commander. In other words, a platoon leader gets a platoon OPORD that tells him exactly how to position his supporting weapons and maneuver his squads. Controllers at every level make sure no man gets ahead of another. Lanes, sometimes marked with engineer tape, show every sub-unit exactly where to go.

Prepared positions are very obviously laid out for each individual to maneuver toward. These positions are in parallel banks so that no one can be endangered by getting ahead of a firer.

This sort of exercise isn't war; it certainly isn't training; it isn't even much of a show. It is ballet. The troops aren't fooled by it. They can see that they're considered bumbling incompetents and that their leaders are considered worse.

PROBLEMS

The trouble with this sort of exercise is twofold. First, the exercise takes place under circumstances that would never occur in a war. Second, and far more devastating, each man is relieved of the responsibility he would have in a real war by "safety" officers and controllers. The leaders are not allowed to plan or control the problem; and the troops are not allowed to use any initiative in moving, positioning, or firing. All the great potential to be gained from such an exercise is lost in the interest of "safety."

As a result, we need not be surprised when, in the next major war (as in the last few), our leaders and men initially lack confidence in each other. Then "safety" will have cost us far more men than a more realistic attitude would ever have cost us in training.

The only thing worse than *no* train-

ing is *bad* training, and the totally canned live fire exercise is training at its worst.

Sometimes an unusually courageous commander will take a risk and allow his men to train in the employment of demolitions. Unfortunately, each step in the process will be rigidly controlled. Each man will prime the same meaningless lump of C-4, place it in the same demolition pit, ignite the fuze at the same time, move to the concrete reinforced bunkers 400 feet away, and wait for the explosion.

What are the objectives of training in demolitions? They are to train troops in the technical details of blowing things up and to give them the confidence to do so safely and effectively in war. The standard demolition training mentioned above may accomplish the first of these objectives, but it has a negative effect on the second. If anything, the men are trained to believe that explosives can be employed only if they are 400 feet away and there is a concrete reinforced bunker to hide in.

If the Army's philosophy that "the way you do it in training is the way you'll do it in war" has any validity (and I think it does), the result of this kind of training can only be bad. Bunkers will not be destroyed, obstacles will not be breached, and many men will die needlessly on the battlefield, all in the interest of "safety."

A similar level of confidence is instilled on a grenade range. Grenades

are the infantryman's hip-pocket artillery. They are to be employed at close range under almost any circumstances. But to employ them effectively, a soldier must have an appreciation of their faults and virtues as well as confidence in his own ability to use them.

So how do we train our soldiers to use hand grenades? First, we use inert dummy grenades to practice accuracy and procedures on reasonably realistic grenade assault courses. Then we throw the benefits of that training to the winds by terrorizing the troops on a live grenade range where the sole objective seems to be to get the grenade as far away as possible in the shortest possible time. No soldier can possibly gain any self-confidence with using hand grenades as a result of our standard live grenade range — just the opposite, in fact.

VICTIM

Another victim of "safety" is guard duty, which is also training of a most important type. We issue the soldiers weapons (sometimes) and ammunition (less frequently) and send them off on their own to secure a vital piece of ground. This duty could have the effect of boosting the confidence of young soldiers who have been shown so little regard on live fire, grenade, and demolition ranges. The whole tenor of guard duty prevents this, however. Even if the soldiers are trusted with weapons and ammunition, none of them is allowed even to place a magazine in his weapon, much less to chamber a round.

Ever notice how infrequently accidents happen when the danger is clear to everyone? Ever notice how often they occur when least expected? From this we can infer a general rule — it is not necessarily danger that kills but a falsely perceived level of "safety" or an artificially induced fear. The man who drops a live grenade, for example, doesn't do it from carelessness but from a terror that drives out all reason. The man shot on a live fire range will most likely be shot by an im-

properly cleared weapon while sitting on a truck waiting to go home. Conversely, the man moving forward under machinegun fire pretty well knows he can't stick his head up very far without losing it, so he usually doesn't.

It would be wrong of me to attack "safety" this way without offering some positive suggestions to help in achieving real safety and high quality, realistic training that builds teams and confidence. I offer, therefore, the following:

Use common sense. When the only possible projectiles to be launched by demolitions are grains of sand, one can get very close indeed to the explosion because sand loses its velocity rapidly. Similarly when a bangalore torpedo is detonated under concertina wire the troops should be slightly below ground level and far enough away to be protected from the concussion (which is a distance of a lot less than 91.4 meters). Any wire fragments traveling along the ground will pass over them, and any wire thrown into the air will lose its velocity before returning to earth. A claymore mine can be safely fired four or five meters away from prone troops in the open as long as it's pointed away from them with a couple of sandbags behind it. A grenade can be placed inside a well-built bunker or a trench without danger to a prone man outside it.

Use the chain of command to control. Everything done by controllers and "safety" officers to ensure "safety" in a live fire exercise can be done as well by the chain of command with the added benefit of training that chain of command. For a little added surety, the evaluators can serve as auxiliary safeties. Their influence and interference, though, should be minimized.

Give the OPORD for the next higher unit only. Let each leader plan for himself how his unit will negotiate the problem, and let him issue his own OPORD.

Allow adequate time for thorough troop leading procedures. Any leader who has ever given a standard "safety" briefing on a range should recall for himself how little effect the

briefing had on the troops. They'd heard it all before. The best safety briefing is a good operations order. The best way to ensure real safety in live fire exercises is to conduct complete troop leading procedures, including rehearsals.

As an aside, by placing notional sister units along the right and left boundaries of the range fan, the firing limits can be clearly delineated and, rather than detracting from the realistic aura of the exercise, will actually add to it. The leader should be required to back-brief the evaluator (his actual or notional boss) to ensure that safety requirements are met (in other words, that the missions of adjacent left and right units are not hampered by the careless control of fire). Such back-briefs have as important a place in war as in training.

Set up realistic conditions with a realistic enemy. The ground should be of a type that we might expect to fight on and for in battle. Tactically sound, OPFOR-style obstacles and fortifications should be present. Targets representing the OPFOR must be armed, equipped, uniformed, and camouflaged. They should pop up and down, simulate return fire to include showing a signature, and have elements of intelligence value on them. They absolutely must be killable by accurate fire. It helps if they're cheap and easily manufactured out of locally obtained materials (ammunition boxes, E-type silhouettes, nails, wire and balloons, and sandbags).

The evaluator and the man who planned the range should be one and the same. Only if the evaluator is intimately familiar with the tactical plan or the OPFOR can he be expected to assess actions as correct or incorrect. For example, if, on a live fire platoon attack, a soldier gets up and makes a seven-second rush to put a grenade or an explosive charge inside a bunker, then an evaluator who is not intimately familiar with the obstacle set-up might well assess the man as a casualty on the spot for no other reason than that he took too long in his rush. On the other hand, if the evaluator set up the range and knows that the only

OPFOR position capable of engaging the man is suppressed by machinegun fire, he may well let the man complete his mission.

Start small. It would appear that the overwhelming majority of our combat units aren't ready for this type of training yet. It may even be necessary to start off with canned exercises. There is no tragedy in that. The tragedy is in never going beyond that. The canned exercise may be necessary to prepare the men for real training, just as real training is necessary to prepare them for war.

Don't let "safety" cover up poor leadership. If you have leaders who can be neither trained nor trusted to negotiate a realistic live fire exercise,

they simply don't belong in the Army. Get rid of them. In this sense, good live fire training can be an excellent tool with which to improve the quality of infantry leadership in the Army.

Remember that accidents will still happen. Accidents are the unavoidable cost of doing business in an intrinsically dangerous profession. I doubt, however, that well-trained troops undergoing realistic training will do more damage to each other than poorly trained troops undergoing poor training.

These suggestions are not pipe dreams. There is nothing that I have suggested here that I have not employed in live fire training myself. And I have never had a man injured or

killed on any of the several dozen such ranges that I have run. You can do as well or better.

The ogre of "safety" has ruled the Army for too long, distracting our attention, devouring our resources, emasculating our officers and men. The time has long since come to depose the tyrant and re-establish ourselves as warriors and men and our Army as a fighting team. This article is offered as a modest effort in that direction.

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Training Realism and Safety

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Many people in the Army have expressed concern over the performance of the combat battalions undergoing training at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. This concern is, essentially, that these battalions do not always display the level of training and proficiency necessary for them to defeat the NTC's aggressor forces.

One explanation for these shortcomings is that the training the battalions get before going to the NTC is not realistic enough. And if it isn't realistic enough for the NTC's simulated battle, it isn't realistic enough for actual combat.

But *why* is the Army's training, in general, not realistic enough? A 1977 study conducted by SRI International (under contract for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) blames, among several other factors, stringent safety requirements. That study says, in part, that "safety re-

quirements often make realistic training impossible," but that if the paramount safety requirements are ignored in the interest of realistic training, "the commander's career is in jeopardy."

There are at least six ways in which safety requirements can adversely affect training realism. They can:

- **Inhibit weapon firing.** For example, safety restrictions on hypervelocity tank rounds either preclude or greatly restrict firing this primary antitank round at most Army installations. The same is true for the 25mm gun on the M2/M3 BFV.

- **Break the continuity of action.** Too often in the conduct of a training scenario a unit must stop at an artificial phase line that exists for safety reasons only. During these stops, bores are rodded and the unit generally "steps down" for 15 minutes or more. The continuity and the dynamics of the attack are totally destroyed,

and realism is almost nil.

- **Restrict combined arms training.** Although the combined arms team is firmly entrenched in our doctrine, only occasionally is the concept fully employed in training. It is not employed because of the potential hazards involved in mixing infantry, armor, artillery, and aviation in a single training scenario.

- **Restrict the creation of realistic battlefield conditions and effects.** The use of such things as smoke, tear gas, simulators, and demolition blocks is often severely restricted in the interest of safety. Often artillery and mortar rounds have to be fired so far from the troops that they contribute nothing to realism and training value.

- **Restrict the application of tactical doctrine.** Fire and movement, overwatch techniques, and other fundamental tactical procedures are not easily adapted to live fire training