Combat Safety

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The senior leaders of the United States Army have taken a hard stand against training accidents, and I applaud both their cause and their unified zeal. I agree that we cannot morally accept the fact that more than a battalion of soldiers die each year in training accidents.

But the Army is fast becoming more concerned with training safely than with preparing to fight safely. In concert with the new safety revival, commanders at all levels now focus their attention on training safely first and on training realistically second. Success is measured by achieving new standards in safety performance instead of achieving preparedness for combat.

Caring for soldiers and training them for combat is an inherent responsibility of the commander. His position also entrusts him with the burden of constantly weighing troop safety against mission accomplishment. The burden is no lighter in peacetime than it is in combat. In the past, commanders allowed their subordinates to strive for a reasonable balance between training safety and combat realism, but commanders at battalion level and lower no longer have that latitude. Many commanders have simply given up trying to achieve a balance, because safety seems to drive training now.

The increase in the responsibility, stature, and certainly rank of the unit safety officer exemplifies the role safety had come to play in a unit's everyday life. The safety officer pores over the increasing volumes of safety regulations and advises the commander on current training restrictions. All too often, unfortunately, it is the safety officer's interpretation of these regulations that governs training instead of the operation officer's estimate of the unit's needs.

Today's commander develops safety SOPs that outweigh his field SOPs, and are more familiar to him. He develops safety program after safety program, enumerating restriction after restriction. Each new entry is a reaction to someone else's safety failure. This passive-reactive approach to safety characterizes most of the safety programs I have seen.

The real injustice is that the soldier hears only what he can and cannot do in the name of safety. He is still not actively trained in safety and can apply very little of what he is told to the job he will have to perform in combat.

I believe we should adopt an active approach to safety that concentrates on training our soldiers to perform tasks to the same safety standards they will use in combat. I call this approach "combat safety," which is purely a mindset or a framework. The goal is the same as that of our senior leaders—to eliminate needless peacetime casualties. This approach does not differentiate the level of safety that is acceptable in combat from the level that is acceptable in training.

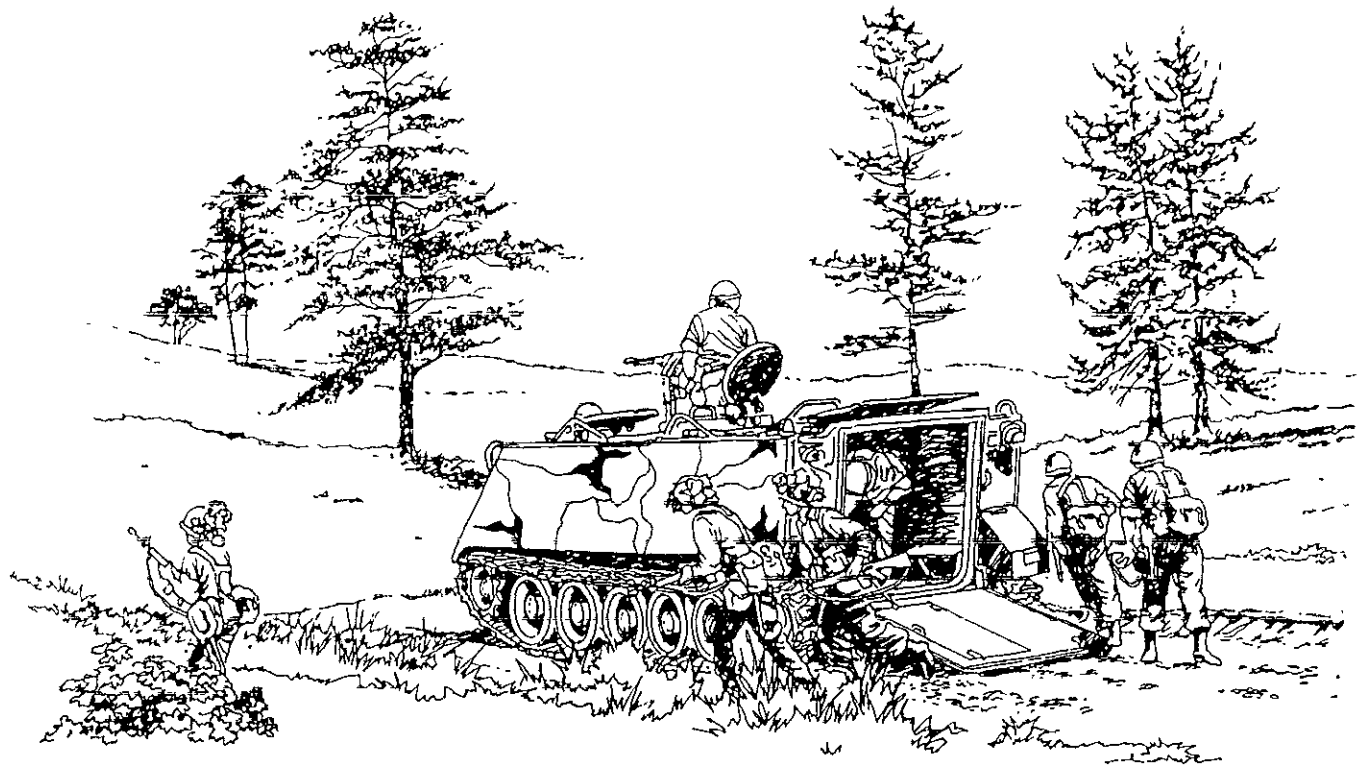
First, the combat safety approach establishes a safety standard for the soldier to meet, and it requires a commander to develop methods of performing combat tasks safely. He then demands that his unit train to standard on those tasks, emphasizing their combat safety principles. The commander must not compromise the standard whether during hip-pocket, SQT, or live fire training, because he owes it to his soldiers not to tailor a safety standard to a particular exercise or a particular visitor.

Nowhere is safety paranoia more prevalent and more counterproductive than on a live fire range. S.L.A. Marshall, in his book *Men Against Fire*, says, "There is today a superior system for bringing infantry weapons under command and control so that in the crisis of battle their response will be decisive. It is called Train Fire."

Train fire in Marshall's day was a new concept. Prior to that time, infantry gunnery limited live fire exercises to the realm of individual weapons qualification. The train fire exercise Marshall spoke of, however, was the first attempt at allowing squads to practice massing all of their organic weapons against targets.

Today, train fire involves platoon and company level gunnery exercises. These units train to combine the fires of their organic weapons as well as the nonorganic weapons of sister services, and this may be the single biggest contributor to the Army's sustained combat readiness. It is unfortunate that any benefits that might be gained from these exercises quickly take a back seat to peacetime safety restrictions.

During a recent tour in Europe, I served as the assistant S-3 of a mechanized combat engineer battalion. The battalion was preparing to fire its first mechanized infantry gunnery on the fire and maneuver ranges at Grafenwoehr. I was in charge of preparing the range scenarios for the squad and platoon qualifications. But getting the proper balance between safety and realism eluded me, so I turned to my brothers in the infantry for the answer and visited the squad and platoon level ranges of a mechanized infantry battalion. The precautions that unit took during its training on the range both surprised and appalled me: In one case, the range



safety NCO did not allow the members of a squad who had just dismounted from their carrier to insert magazines in their weapons until he was sure everyone was on line. In another case, he inspected each weapon and put a cleaning rod down each barrel before permitting any soldier to move toward a carrier. During another engagement, the soldiers conducted a dismounted attack using individual movement techniques. Once again, the safety NCO inspected each soldier's weapon and used his cleaning rod on it before permitting any movement.

The range safety officer, who was also a company commander, had imposed these stringent safety measures on the advice of his brigade's safety officer. While the measures certainly enforced safety, they did not *train* safety. Instead, they stifled all combat realism and severely degraded the unit's training; they did not train the soldiers on the proper way of mounting or dismounting from a carrier with loaded weapons.

After I saw these safety procedures in action, I became even more puzzled by the dilemma of safety versus realism and discussed it at length with my senior officers. They outlined certain principles in safety philosophy that I now coin as combat safety imperatives:

- Develop definitive levels of safety for the weapon system or the equipment.
- Weigh the possible levels of safety against the degradations they cause in performance or readiness.
- If various levels of safety are situation-dependent, define each situation.
- Incorporate the combat safety principles into battle drills for the critical tasks that must become second nature to the soldier in combat.
- Constantly train to the established safety standard. Do not accept less than an exacting performance regardless of the type of training being conducted—hip pocket, dry fire, or live fire.

These imperatives were the key to the development of a combat safety guide. Jointly with the battalion commander and the S-3, I developed a combat safety SOP for mounting and then dismounting from an M113. We first delineated what we felt were acceptable safety procedures in combat. Next, we applied these procedures specifically to the critical tasks required of a squad during contact. Then we developed some general combat safety principles for the task as a whole. Finally, with the help of our noncommissioned officers, we developed a battle drill that supported the combat safety principles for dismounting from or mounting an M113. The battle drill was used to train and retrain the squad members until correct performance became second nature to them.

The combat safety principles we outlined were the framework upon which the battle drill was based, but they did not apply solely to developing mount and dismount drills. Rather, they were general rules for handling weapons and were observed whether a soldier was on guard, in an arms room, or on a zero range.

The basic principles were these:

- Only the squad leader issues the commands that bring his unit's weapons to various states of readiness or safety.
- During carrier movement, no magazines are inserted, all bolts are forward, and weapons are on SAFE.
- At all times when inside the carrier, weapons remain on SAFE and have no rounds in the chamber.

BATTLE DRILL
MOUNTING OR DISMOUNTING FROM A SQUAD CARRIER

PHASE I. Condition: Conducting tactical movement, but not in contact.

- Squad members stand in the cargo hatch for 360-degree observation and security.
- No magazines have been inserted in any of the squad weapons.
- All bolts are forward in the weapons.
- All weapons are on SAFE.

PHASE II. Condition: Contact or observed enemy requiring the squad to dismount.

- The squad leader issues the command "Prepare to dismount," and the squad members take the following actions:
  - Soldiers drop inside the carrier.
  - Each soldier inserts a magazine into his weapon and slaps the magazine bottom to insure proper seating.
  - Soldiers face the ramp door.
  - The ramp or troop door is opened. (Preferably the ramp is used.)
- The squad leader issues the command "Dismount left/right," and the squad members take the following actions:
  - Soldiers dismount in an orderly manner through the troop door or ramp in the direction designated by the squad leader.
  - The squad leader positions himself where he can best control the squad.
  - Soldiers seek covered and concealed positions where the terrain offers good fields of fire.

PHASE III. Condition: Enemy targets are within range, and contact is imminent.

- At the squad leader's command "Engage," or upon observation of enemy targets within range, the squad takes the following actions:
  - The soldier pulls the bolt to the rear, chambering a round.
  - The soldier places the selector lever on SEMI or AUTO as predesignated by the squad leader. He directs his fires under the control of the squad leader.
  - After the weapon has been charged, the soldier places it on SAFE before moving to another firing position for any reason (to conduct a breach, better acquire a target, disperse from the last muzzle flash, or pursue the enemy).

PHASE IV. Condition: Enemy has been destroyed, or the squad receives an order requiring them to remount.

- The squad leader issues the command "Prepare to remount," and the squad takes the following actions:
  - The soldier ejects the magazine from his weapon and stores it on his person.
  - The soldier THEN pulls the bolt to the rear. He simultaneously cants the weapon and watches the round eject, thereby clearing the chamber. The bolt is NOT locked to the rear but is allowed to fly forward.
  - The soldier places the weapon on SAFE.
- The squad leader issues the command "Remount," and the squad takes the following actions:
  - The squad moves to the vehicle and remounts through the troop door or the ramp in an orderly manner with the squad leader in the best position to command and control the movement.
  - Once inside the carrier, the squad leader checks each weapon for a SAFE condition.
  - The squad members return to their positions in the cargo hatch of the carrier for the 360-degree observation.

- A round is never chambered in a weapon until contact is made with an enemy.
- When a dismounted soldier moves from his initial position after dismounting, he places his weapon on SAFE before moving. After initial contact with the enemy, the soldier may move using individual movement techniques with a round in the chamber as long as the weapon is on SAFE.
- To put a weapon on SAFE for remounting, a soldier removes the magazine and THEN clears the weapon by ejecting the chambered round. Whether the soldier has chambered a round or not, he goes through the motion of making his weapon safe, which includes clearing the chamber each time.
- Weapons are declared safe by the squad leader after the dismounted operation is completed and the squad is safely inside the carrier.

The battle drill itself is shown in the accompanying box.

The combat safety training paid off for us on the ranges. Squad leaders performed the necessary safety checks. A safety NCO rode on each squad vehicle and monitored the squad's compliance with the combat safety principles. He interfered with the squad maneuver only at the sign of an unsafe act or when he questioned the safe condition of a weapon.

The squads executed the dismount and remount drills exactly and automatically. Soldiers moved in and out of the carrier as an experienced hunter gets in and out of his pickup truck. The loading and clearing of the weapons became an almost subconscious action. In the same way, a soldier moved from position to position as he would in combat with his weapon loaded and on SAFE. This enabled him to concentrate on moving tactically to a good firing position on his own initiative rather than with the permission of a safety NCO.

Target engagement scenarios and squad movement were fluid and uninterrupted by safety time-outs. Instead, the soldiers remained combat safe during the entire engagement. (The safety NCOs did rod and inspect all squad weapons at the end of a scenario before the squad was cleared of the range, because this was a training area requirement.)

As the scenarios became more difficult, I noticed a marked improvement in the soldiers' ability to control any situation on live fire ranges. The soldiers also became more aware of their weapons and controlled them better during movement. Lastly, I was confident that the soldiers were learning skills and safety procedures they would need in combat.

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