

KEEPING YOUR GUARD UP

Soldiering is a dangerous business, no question about it. It always has been, and it always will be. The challenge is to eliminate those risks that you can control, and firearms-related accidents are close to the top of the list.

The next time you're getting the troops ready for a trip to the rifle range or a parade, or even when they're cleaning weapons, stand back and watch what happens. Odds are that you will see some unsafe acts, ranging from improper clearing of weapons, to muzzles pointed in the wrong direction, and even to soldiers dry-firing weapons at one another. We can call it horseplay, clowning around, or just carelessness, but what it amounts to is taking deadly chances with the lives of their fellow soldiers. Most of your soldiers will discourage or at least avoid those engaging in unsafe acts, but you can also bet that they will be waiting to see what you are going to do about it. Prompt, effective corrective action will let the offender know that you—and your chain of command—will not tolerate this sort of carelessness with firearms, and it will let the rest of your soldiers know that you are indeed concerned with their safety. So how do we prevent the accidental shootings that continue to kill and maim our soldiers every year?

The quick fix is to make sure ammunition is tightly controlled and issued only when absolutely necessary, but this is at best a poor solution, because it treats the symptom and not the problem. Instead, soldiers need to learn to handle weapons with proper respect, and they need to get used to handling live ammunition. Sending a member of your unit out on a roadblock or to face a potential riot with an unloaded weapon is clearly not the answer. To be sure, by doing so we eliminate any chance of an accidental discharge of a weapon, but—beyond endangering a soldier—we send another message: that we don't think the soldier can be trusted with live rounds. Do that a few times, and the soldier will begin to wonder just how much confidence he should have in his chain of command.

But there is a solution, and it has been here all along: good, solid training. Your unit or installation safety office has the materials you need to set up classes on firearms safety, and that's a good place to start. Once you've conducted the training, follow it up with chain-of-command supervision, and you will soon see the difference.

Once we solve the problem of personal safety, we're ready to address a major issue facing deployed forces, and that is the rules of engagement. In the past two years, INFANTRY articles have discussed the actions of California National Guard units deployed to the streets of Los Angeles during the riots of April 1992 and the earthquake of January 17, 1994, including the units' measures on arming orders and the rules regarding the use of deadly force. The steps taken by the Guard chain of command may not necessarily fit every case faced by deploying units, but they offer a good start point for commanders who may someday face similar contingencies.

In today's turbulent world, operations other than war will occupy more and more of our time, and most of them will involve a high degree of risk. Application of the use of deadly force can become blurred unless soldiers fully understand the rules of engagement and can apply them to the situation at hand. The best way to ensure success in the highly visible environment in which we must operate is through tough, realistic training and discipline, principles that have sustained our Army throughout its history. Well-trained, disciplined soldiers who routinely handle weapons safely and understand the rules of engagement will be able to deploy quickly, get the job done, and return home ready for the next mission.

Soldiering is indeed a dangerous business, but by eliminating firearms-related accidents we can continue to protect the force while still accomplishing the mission.

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