

Preliminary Rifle Instruction *BEFORE* the First Bullet Flies

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Shoot, move, and communicate are the three implied tasks for every drill or tactic an infantry unit performs. Every leader knows how important they are and schedules as much time practicing each of the three as possible. In the case of marksmanship, our focus tends to be on the time spent on the range; what we often miss is the opportunity to maximize the effectiveness of our range time with cheap, hands-on preliminary rifle instruction (PRI).

The payoff of prepared PRI sessions before any range or live-fire exercise is twofold. First, the Soldiers, and thus the unit, perform better and build confidence in their abilities. Second, teaching PRI is a great way for leaders at all levels to develop rapport with their Soldiers and establish their own credibility with the tools of the trade. Once a range gets underway or an exercise commences, there is little opportunity for one-on-one time with the Soldiers, and the coaching that takes place will be primarily between the Soldier and his squad leader or NCOIC. PRI lends itself to team building in a unique way.

This article discusses some techniques and considerations that will make your PRI sessions effective and efficient. The focus remains on the PRI instructor; the principles are the same for Soldiers from corporal to colonel.

Goals of the PRI Instructor

As a PRI instructor, you will be called on to assist your Soldiers in successfully qualifying with the M4 or M16A2 rifle by helping them develop, refine, or refresh their understanding of basic rifle marksmanship before they head to the range. This training guidance is intended to supplement the Army's field manuals by highlighting some commonly encountered problems in marksmanship training and presenting techniques to deal with those problems. The techniques provided are prescriptive, not directive — use them if they help, but ignore them if they don't.

Your goals should be to:

- (1) Teach proper rifle marksmanship fundamentals;
- (2) Help the Soldiers understand how to improve themselves;
- (3) Encourage and motivate the Soldiers to excel; and
- (4) Develop rapport with the Soldiers.

Your success in both motivating and understanding your Soldiers will directly affect how much you will be able to teach them, as it will determine how much they will be willing to learn from you. Bear that in mind as you approach this training and coaching on the range later, and you will find your patience rewarded with superior performance by the Soldiers you have trained.

The first goal is self-explanatory. The second goal, helping the Soldiers understand how to improve themselves, requires that you go beyond the simple teaching of “steady position, aiming, breath control, trigger squeeze” to explaining why these factors are important and training the Soldiers how to recognize signs of poor performance on their own and correct themselves. Most of the guidance provided here addresses this second goal.

Preparing For PRI Instruction

The first step is to do your homework. FM 23-9, *M16A1 and M16A2 Rifle Marksmanship*, lays out the fundamentals of teaching rifle marksmanship in Chapter 4 as well as provides a checklist for coaches. STP 21-1-SMCT, *Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks*, discusses the steps for zeroing and maintaining the M16A1, M16A2, and M4. Chapter 3 of FM 23-10, *Sniper Training*, addresses the same points of marksmanship as does FM 23-9, but in more depth. *Infantry Magazine* has run numerous articles on dealing with the logistics and scheduling from squad to battalion levels.

In addition to using these materials, consider photocopying or copying some of the diagrams or illustrations to a flip chart for use in your PRI. Showing how a bullet drops at various ranges makes a much better impression than simply waving your hands to simulate a bullet's flight.

The next step is to check yourself against someone else who has read the materials. In the eight-step training process, this is called “certifying the trainer.” It is especially important in marksmanship training because every Soldier in the Army knows how to fire a rifle, regardless of their current level of skill. Form buddy teams and critique each other's dry-fire performance as well as knowledge of the book material. Be as receptive to constructive criticism as you would like your Soldiers to be. Even the best marksman loses his edge when he only qualifies with his rifle once or twice per year.

Conducting Preliminary Rifle Instruction

After you have squared yourself away, make sure you have all of the accessories necessary for successful training: rifles, a handful of dimes or washers to balance on the shooter's rifle barrel to test steadiness, a few diagrams of critical points (like the breath control diagram in FM 23-9), and a pocketful of patience.

At the range and during PRI, time is at a premium and everyone wants to get done quickly. Some Soldiers respond well to this and demonstrate proficiency immediately. Others' skills degrade under

stress or time pressure. These Soldiers will need your patience, and you must give it to them. The purpose of PRI isn't to simulate combat or introduce stress, but to lay the fundamentals of marksmanship so that the Soldier is more likely to act correctly when under stress.

During PRI instruction, what frequently happens is the Soldiers who are more current get checked first and begin to coach the ones who require more training. This is generally not acceptable since the proficient Soldiers don't get sustained attention on more advanced points that they need and then coach less-proficient Soldiers without certification or guidance.

A more balanced technique is to keep everyone doing the same task (dime/washer drill, dry fire) until the trainer has inspected all of the Soldiers. The trainer spends a few minutes with each Soldier, gives them specific feedback ("you're holding your breath – practice firing in your natural pause"), and allows them to practice while he makes the rounds. If a Soldier has mastered a particular drill, the trainer can pair him with another Soldier to observe a specific aspect of the practicing Soldier's technique (watch him to see if he holds his breath – nothing else).

When dealing with practicing Soldiers and instructing their coaches, you must ensure that everyone stays calm and helpful. A coach that belittles or embarrasses his shooter could spend his time more productively building his own upper-body strength until his attitude realigns with that of the PRI instructor. Remember, every Soldier loses if his buddy can't shoot well.

Tips and Techniques

Breath Control

One common error occurs when the shooter rests his body flat on the ground, where the rise and fall of his chest moves his sights up and down. Have the Soldier bring his elbows in towards his body and lift his chest off of the ground.

Not everyone recognizes their natural pause. "Breathing practice" sounds silly, but often gives Soldiers a better awareness of how long they have to get a shot off before they need to resume breathing. Incorporated with the dime/washer drill, the Soldier can see his sight picture start wavering after his natural pause expires. Especially when live-firing, Soldiers will try to align their sights well past their natural pause and must be reminded to breathe.

A quick way to liven up a PRI session and re-emphasize the importance of breath control and natural pauses is to sprint 20 meters, go prone, try to align the sights and dry fire. Watch the really fast shooters, as they are almost certainly ignoring their breathing.

There are two types of natural pauses. Encourage your Soldiers to try both, but emphasize the "plateau" method for rapid fire. It's what they will need to qualify and in combat.

Steady Position

We frequently ignore firing hand position, but it can play a large role in a consistent stock weld and good trigger pull. Hold the pistol grip

high with the web of the firing hand as high on the grip as is practical. The Soldier won't initially feel comfortable with this grip, but will soon become so. The raised grip places the arm more in line with the axis of the rifle, reducing apparent recoil and aligning the trigger finger with the trigger. It also facilitates a better cheek and stock weld by pulling the rifle back more directly into the shoulder pocket.

Some Soldiers will put a death grip on their pistol grip, which interferes with a smooth trigger pull, while others hold the grip loosely and don't return to the same position after every shot. One easy way to tell if the Soldier is gripping the rifle with the appropriate tightness is to look at their hand. Light tension shows in the hand but the knuckles aren't white or tight. Another way is to ask them if their hands are getting tired.

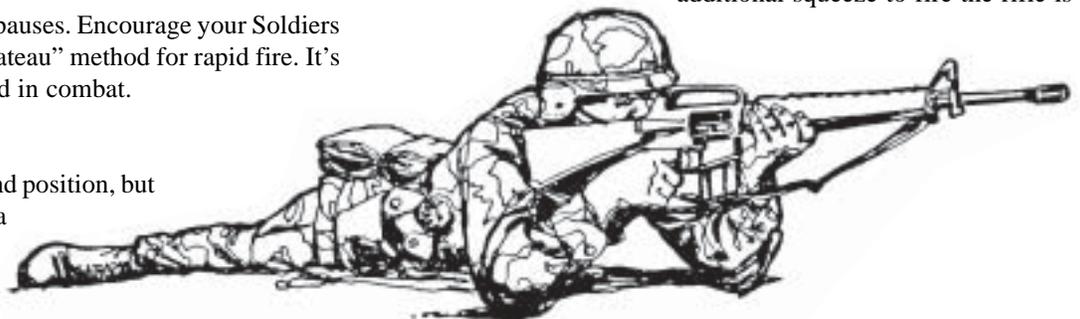
Natural point of aim can make a large difference. If you suspect a Soldier isn't aligned with his natural point of aim, have him relax his aim, close his eyes, then aim again without opening his eyes. When he opens his eyes, ask him what precisely he's pointing at. If he's a hard case with good muscle memory, let him simply hold an aim for awhile — it only causes fatigue if he's forcing his point of aim. Incidentally, once Soldiers go prone, they are often reluctant to squirm around to align to their natural point of aim. Encourage them and demonstrate moving your body, elbows, and feet to place everything in alignment so you can hold your position for extended periods.

The cheek weld is important for the same reason the shoulder/stock weld is important — both make it more likely that the next shot will be like the last shot (repeatability). Watch to see that your Soldiers are placing their rifles in the same spot, wherever it may be on their particular anatomy, every time. Consistency is the key.

The non-firing hand should be relaxed, cupping the rifle handguard, and as nearly vertical as possible (harder with an M203, however). The vertical alignment places the rifle's support on bone and not shaky muscle. For M203 gunners, the key is to have them hold farther forward on the handguard as opposed to letting their elbows creep away from their body's centerline. For all Soldiers, the elbows should be as tight into the body as possible without upsetting their natural point of aim.

Trigger Squeeze

One of the main tricks to teach is called "staging the trigger." The Soldier begins to take up slack on the trigger as soon as the rifle is pointed in the vicinity of the target. With multiple targets or pop-ups, that can be before the target even appears. Once the Soldier has taken all of the slack out of the trigger, his slight additional squeeze to fire the rifle is





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Breath control, steady position, trigger squeeze, and aiming are all important fundamentals of marksmanship. It is also important to ensure Soldiers understand why these are so crucial. They should also be able to recognize signs of poor performance and correct themselves.

both quicker and less likely to move his point of aim. An added bonus is that the slight tension on the trigger virtually ensures that the Soldier's firing grip won't be too loose.

Dry firing is the best practice for dealing with two trigger-related problems: the flinch and the yank. By having the Soldier stage the trigger, then squeeze smoothly on command, the PRI instructor can minimize the flinch reflex some Soldiers have and develop muscle memory of a smooth pull essential to accuracy. Carefully observed group practice in this area can yield dramatic benefits for Soldiers of varying skill levels. Professional shooters do far more dry fire than live fire for precisely that reason. The drill is: "Charge. Point. Stage. Aim. Fire." Complete many repetitions. Five minutes of this is time well-spent, especially if you are diligent and walk around to see who keeps yanking their trigger when you say "Fire."

Do you use the knuckle or tip of the

finger to pull the trigger? Which do you teach? That's easy — teach whichever that particular Soldier was taught in his basic training. The Army has taught both methods over the years, often simultaneously in different basic training companies. Trying to "re-educate" a Soldier from one technique to the other is a plan for disaster. Both work well, and the only thing to watch for with the knuckle pull is that the first knuckle is used. Big-handed Soldiers might be more comfortable with the knuckle pull, and vice-versa for Soldiers with smaller hands, but the difference is rarely significant. If a Soldier can't hit his target, check everything else before worrying about changing this.

Don't yell at a flincher. They'll only get worse. Calm, supportive practice is the only remedy. Remember, we want this guy to shoot well when he's covering us some day.

Aiming

For all of the attention spent on aiming, it's really the least critical of the areas. If

you ensure that the Soldiers know what their sight picture should look like, and their rifle is zeroed properly, most of your aiming issues will go away.

Pick a point. When shooting, have your Soldiers specify exactly what they are aiming at. "Center mass" is imprecise and leads to imprecise groups. "The white dot on the zeroing target" is much clearer and will lead to tighter grouping. Remember, "aim big, miss big — aim small, miss small." If you aim at center mass, you might miss the target; if you aim at the belt buckle, you'll still hit center mass. For PRI, it is particularly important to provide targets that have specific, clearly visible small points to aim at.

Soldiers who need to re-zero often, or shoot tight groups that meander around the target, don't have aiming problems. They have problems with their firing position. PRI instruction enables them to correct their loose or inconsistent firing stance before they waste time and bullets at the range.

Eye fatigue is a factor in aiming. A Soldier who can't focus to aim needs to close his eyes and relax a few moments — his eyes haven't worked this hard in quite a while and they need to be conditioned gradually like every other muscle group. Encourage Soldiers to look with both eyes until they are aiming at a specific target to reduce fatigue and improve situation awareness.

Firing is an integrated act. For every drill you do, make sure the Soldiers are aiming at a particular, specific target before they pull the trigger — **every time**. Marksmanship skills learned in isolation are of limited use when firing "for real."

By watching and consistently emphasizing the perishable fundamentals of marksmanship in an atmosphere of continuous improvement, PRI can improve both marginal and excellent shooters while ensuring the time spent locked and loaded returns the highest payoff for the individual Soldier and his unit.

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