



THE USAMU SDM COURSE — A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

MAJOR TYSON ANDREW JOHNSON

I recently attended the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit's (USAMU's) Squad Designated Marksman's (SDM) Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, and I thought folks who love the black rifle might want a range report (limited, of course, to public domain data.)

My USAMU SDM class had Active Army, National Guard, Reserve, and Navy students — and I'm told sometimes there are Air Force and Marine Corps students as well. Of the 40 students in my class, many were in the Guard.

The Course

During the first day of SDM, I learned more about **precision** shooting out past 600 yards than I had learned from every preliminary marksmanship instruction (PMI) class I attended in nineteen and a half years of service. The military instructors were all "President's Hundred," and there were also civilian coaches from the Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP). What an incredible partnership, and the beneficiary is each Soldier-Sailor-Airman-Marine who comes through this course!

We covered, among other things:

- * Natural point of aim (NPA);
- * "Settling in" to the weapon, "chipmunk cheek" etc.;
- * Proper follow through;
- * The magic of a two-stage 4.5 lb trigger;
- * The formula for correcting windage ...

(For example, if you are engaging a 400-yard target with a 10 mile an hour cross wind, the wind-induced horizontal/lateral error at the POI will be 16 inches);

- * You don't need a zero range to zero;
- * How to engage in "no man's land."

(The average rifleman engages targets from up to 300 yards, the sniper engages from 600 yards on out, but the squad designated marksman is especially trained to use the SDM rifle to engage targets from 300 to 600 yards [and beyond] to the very limit of what heavy Black Hills ammo will do);

- * How to read the mirage to estimate wind; and

- * The difference between a "squared off" stance for close quarters marksmanship and "bladed" shooting positions for long range shooting, standing, kneeling, and prone.

The key to shooting is marksmanship fundamentals, calculating wind error, and the often repeated rule, "Focus on the front sight and smooth on the trigger."

I think it's pretty simple and applies no matter what you are shooting. You estimate the wind speed. You estimate wind direction. You estimate range.

Wind speed in mph multiplied by range

in yards ... take that and divide by 10 or 100 to get inches of drift.

For example, wind speed is 5 miles per hour. Distance to target is 500 yards. Five times 500 is 2,500. Then divide by 100, which equals 2.5 minutes of angle. Since a minute of angle is for 100 yards, and since you have five 100-hundred yard spans, you multiply 2.5 times 5. This is 12.5 inches of error if the wind is perpendicular to your round's flight path, or full value. If the wind is coming in at a diagonal, or half value, cut 12.5 in half.

Since the wind can push different caliber/shape rounds differently, this is one way to think about calculating wind error, not simply THE way."

The Designated Marksman's Rifle

The rifles USAMU issues for the course are commercial off-the-shelf Armalite National Match rifles fitted with a Daniel Defense free-float rail and a Harris bipod.



Major Tyson Andrew Johnson

The U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit/Civilian Marksmanship Program Designated Marksman Rifles are manufactured by Armalite and equipped with Advanced Combat Optical Gunsights.

Each rifle is fitted with an Armalite stainless steel National Match barrel with 1-in-8 twist (the bullet makes one complete rifling spin every eight inches it travels down the bore). Each rifle is equipped with a two-stage Armalite match trigger (that breaks clean at 4.5 pounds) and a TAO1 Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight (ACOG). They also have TA31F (chevron aiming reticle) ACOGs, the same issued by the Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI) Program.

When we got to the range, the ACOG came off, the carry handle was put in its proper place, and we spent the entire day shooting with iron sights out to 500 yards. Before attending this course if you had handed me an M-16/AR-15 rifle and invited me to engage targets at 500 yards, it would have been hit and miss — *mostly miss*.

Some of the Navy guys I talked to one day said their DM rifles are M-14s. When this came up, they said anyone with a traditional sniper rifle such as an M-21, M-24, or M-14 was basically calling themselves out to be a target. The AR allows them to blend in. The Navy guys said they are working toward building SDM rifles like the Armalites.

Hey, one more thing ... not one single malfunction. NOT ONE.

Training the Trainer

Professionally, part of my job is to ensure that deploying National Guard units get first class training and to certify that training to my state's Adjutant General. Two captains I brought with me to the course are team leaders in our Pre-Mobilization Training Element (PTAE) (two other team leaders would have attended, but they were at other training elsewhere — they will attend the SDM course in September of this year).

The PTAE consists of five teams. Our unit mission is to function as training assistants for deploying National Guard units. We observe/control pre-mobilization training, and if the training was done to standard we certify that to the state's Adjutant General and the commander of their mobilization (MOB) site. If the training was not

done to standard, the units retrain and repeat it at their MOB station.

"One Army, One standard" is the rule. We want all deploying Reserve component units to make excellence their goal — to not settle for substandard training.

Focus on the front sight, smooth on the trigger...

We have to constantly struggle to maintain combat overmatch — the enemy is looking for new ways to kill us, and they aren't relaxing their marksmanship training.

If a target emerges at 400 to 600 yards, what is your average Soldier who barely qualified on a pop up 300-yard course going to do? Make failed attempts to engage and hope to get lucky?

Anything past 300 yards WILL be affected by the wind, and wind, trace, and mirage aren't taught at basic training, so you end up taking pot shots and giving away your position. A couple of missed shots and the enemy will probably know where you are enough to put mortar fire on you. Or if you don't have anyone with the confidence to engage at these ranges they may simply say, "That's too far, sir." *This is where the designated marksman comes in.*

Target identification has always been important, but with heightened scrutiny on incidents where noncombatants are accidentally hit by fire, proper target ID is critically important on today's battlefield. The designated marksman has settled into the first line countersniper role since squad-level DMs are deployed first to put precision fire on enemy targets. The squad-level Soldier with advanced rifle shooting skills helps his unit continue moving forward to control dominant terrain to engage the enemy. Put simply, the DM helps his unit shoot, move, and communicate.

Personally, I wake up planning to be a better Soldier than I was yesterday, and a better trainer — so my Soldiers can 1) Accomplish their mission, and 2) Return home safely. I am always interested in

SDM Course students and instructors move to the 300-yard line for their first engagement.

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Exceptionally talented Civilian Marksmanship Program assistant instructors increase the teacher and coach-to-student ratio.

learning more about anything to do with, shoot, move, and communicate. That's why I became a Soldier ... if you think about it, that's why most became Soldiers! My GI Joe toy came with a gun, not a typewriter. When the shooting starts, your paper-pushing staff officer skills don't matter much.

I am fortunate I am in a position to recommend that each deploying Engineer, Infantry, and Military Police unit send two Soldiers per squad to the DM course. Each squad simply MUST have long range precision fire capability. With the Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI), Soldiers are being issued TA31s — two per squad — with no training to go with them. The DM course IS that training.

The Instructors

These NCOs and Civilians are awesome. I have NEVER seen such a well-run course, and I'll be singing their praises at my home station!

Let's talk a little about the Sergeant Alvin Yorks of the program ... the NCOs who are consummate professionals. They run the program. You don't see their faces or nametapes because I wanted to respect their privacy, but that fails to give them proper credit for their key role in carrying on this program. There is a medium-sized cadre of NCOs. These sergeants are the backbone

of the Army, and the backbone of this SDM program. They have my absolute respect, and my lifelong gratitude!

The Civilian Marksmanship Program Military Rifle Instructors

The guys in the blue coats, the CMP guys — I cannot begin to describe the bank of knowledge these gray-haired guys bring to the table. My assigned coach watched every single shot. He was there to help me figure out my error, and then correct it. "Read the mirage ... Way to work the wind!!!" This guy was smiling every time I looked up, had more energy than I did when I was 20, and it was obvious he loves his job.

In addition to my CMP coach, every shooter had another Soldier serve as his coach on the firing line. Mine was a consummate professional NCO, dedicated to putting lead on target. My left hand placement screwed me up a few times. This just goes to show what a good shooting coach can do for you. I noticed that when my line coach observed an abnormality in my shot — holding breath, jerking my leg, failing to settle into the rifle, tensing up, fighting the recoil, etc. — my shot would be off. At 600 yards almost anything can make you off.

On the other hand, when a coach would say, "You looked relaxed on that one!" the

shot would be GOLDEN.

If you are interested in the CMP and what it offers, go to their Web site: <http://odcmp.com> and check it out. If you look at their programs page, you'll see just how much they are involved in promoting marksmanship in this country. The emphasis is on junior shooters, but there are events for everybody. It's a great organization and worthy of our support.

The CMP military rifle instructors augment the USAMU NCOs. These gentlemen come from a variety of backgrounds but share common experience. All are former military or civilian marksmen who over their careers as service rifle (M1, M14, and M16) shooters have demonstrated mastery of precision marksmanship skills. Most are distinguished riflemen, having ranked highly in military, state, regional, and national rifle championships. Many have ranked in "The President's Hundred" at the National Matches.

Staff Sergeant Emil Praslick of the USAMU wrote:

"The Civilian Marksmanship Program was created by Congress and the military to prepare civilians for wartime military service. The organization has always had military oversight and roots (the CMP operates under oversight of the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and Firearms Safety. The board consists of members appointed as Civilian Assistants to the Secretary of the Army).

For years, we (the USAMU) have been fighting the good fight in marksmanship. The Service Rifle Team shouldered the burden of train-the-trainers and mobile training teams (MTTs). Our small section (16-20 Soldiers) split our time between competition and training Soldiers. I worked with everybody from Army supply people at Fort Eustis to elements of SOCOM (Special Operations Command) at Bragg and elsewhere.

The SDM program grew rapidly after it was introduced — so rapidly we were running out of bodies to support it. We would send four or five AMU Soldiers TDY to train 40-60 troops. We would often have three or more teams out at the same time. A few years ago, then AMU commander, LTC Dave Liwanag, came up with the idea to supplement AMU personnel with CMP-sponsored volunteers. LTC Liwanag's idea

to use CMP people to augment AMU really saved our bacon.

We were then able to reduce the number of Soldiers needed on each trip and use CMP assistant instructors on the range. Our op-tempo was made much more efficient.

“This is the way it works: we run interested and qualified CMP people through our training both in the classroom and on the range. They then meet with us TDY (the CMP pays for their TDY). Everybody wins: we get to train more bodies, and the CMP maintains relevance in the GWOT.”

“There is currently a major review and refit on marksmanship in the Army. The success of our MTTs and the SDM program has given us a seat at the head table. We now have 3 and 4-star general officer involvement. Hopefully, things will begin to turn around.”

“I’ve got a great job. I can’t say enough about the value and motivation of the CMP instructors in the SDM program.”

Developing a Skill and Building Confidence

This program just works. We want to help the bad guys assume room temperature as soon as possible: everyone in the United States Army Marksmanship Unit wants the same thing, from the uniformed staff to the CMP guys.

The Army is in a constant state of transformation, and we have to stay ahead of the curve to maintain combat overmatch. The USAMU is a transforming force. What I wonder is why all basic trainees, or at least those who qualify sharpshooter and above, are not given additional training. I’d love to see the USAMU grow in ways to better meet the needs of the rifleman.

We had some really talented shooters in my class ... the source units didn’t just send “anyone” — they sent men *who can shoot*. So while I was trying to get first place, honor grad, I was a realist and I knew my place in the pack.

All prone shooting was with a bipod. All standing and kneeling

we had no sling at all, just you and the rifle. I wish I had a sling, but you know I learned I do OK without one.

OK, I scored 179 (out of 200 points possible) ... I can do much better (and plan to!). There were a lot of very good scores. There were two captains on my team who scored 184 and 182. I think the top score was 196.

When you look at all the scores together, there is comparatively little variance, which says quite a bit about the incredible instruction from the NCOs at the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit. Everyone can hit the silhouette — we are all trying to hit a 5-inch “X ring” at 600 yards.

This is a fun course. You need to talk to your readiness NCO and find out who your unit’s schools guru is, then get your command to get you a slot. It’s one week unless you add the Close Quarters Battle (CQB) Course, then it’s two.

Basically this is a CMP Service Rifle Clinic. It’s a good course and very fun, but if you’ve shot service rifle or anything similar the course would be better passed to another Soldier. It is fun, and you will meet great shooters. My main instructor was number one on this year’s President’s Hundred. Good stuff.

**“I am an expert and I am a professional”
— The Soldier’s Creed**

Why should officers attend this course? First of all, they didn’t send me to the course — I volunteered. But before I came I verified that there are normally 7 to 15 Soldiers who don’t show up, leaving empty firing positions. I ensured I filled one of those available slots, and that I didn’t take a slot from any Joes. Besides, when leaders don’t understand a training program, they are less likely to ensure its continued support, both with bodies and money. In general we should expect leaders to attend all shoot, move, communicate - based training.

I don’t ask my Soldiers to do anything I couldn’t do, or wouldn’t do. I say, “Follow me.” Aim where I am aiming. When I’m up, you’re up. When I’m down, you get down. When I stop shooting, you stop shooting. I choose to lead from the front, that is the essence of “Follow Me.”

For those who asked why officers are attending, my answer is that it is vital to the future of this program and marksmanship in the Army overall for officers to see and participate in the course. Things have changed in the Army, but there is still a lack of understanding and support



Captain John B. Roache

The author fires his designated marksman rifle. Note how he places the weight of his head on the buttstock, helping to maintain firing position as the rifle recoils.



Captain John B. Roache

A student eyes a target from 400 yards.

for marksmanship training in the force. Without support by senior officer leadership, these efforts won't survive. We don't go to war to push paper, we use a rifle to engage and kill the enemy. Instead of pushing paper, we need to be punching paper on the range!

Now on the 600 with optics — I want to make it very clear that we aren't trying to hit the silhouette — that would be too easy. We are trying to get a tight group at 600 yards ... does that change anything? Everyone here can hit the 600-yard target, that's not the goal ... the goal is to put them all in a tight 5-inch group. The "spotters" are 3-inch and 5-inch white/black plates, so you want one spotter to cover all five shots at the extended range, if possible.

Well this is part of why I'm so excited about this program — I think in the near future there exists the opportunity to:

- * Expand this program in terms of visibility among all branches' leadership (Navy and Air Force guys go, too);

- * Help transform our Army to maintain combat overmatch. The enemy is constantly transforming, adapting TTPs and training/technology — which means we can't stop and we can't accept mediocre training. Every Soldier should hit 40 out of 40 from 50 yards to 300 yards;

- * Transform BRM (basic rifle

marksmanship) to take advantage of the knowledge and teaching ability of the USAMU shooters.

I'd love to see the day when in basic training the best shooters are automatically sent to a follow-on SDM course to earn the designated marksman additional skill identifier, so that each squad can have a DM in A and B fire teams and two DMs per squad. As a major, I'm an ideas guy — I send the ideas and recommendations

up the chain, but this will require someone with stars on his chest to make it happen! DMs in every squad is a vital component for tomorrow's force structure!

These guys have talked me into shooting the President's Match this August, and I'm committed! I feel at this point after completing the DM course, I can do it. (I would have never thought I could do this prior to meeting these guys!) I used to think of shooting as an art. Either you were born an artist, or you weren't. A lot

of PMI trainers take this same approach, and the Army suffers as a result.

The USAMU trainers/CMP coaches taught us that shooting is more science than art — even someone who was not raised to be a shooter can be taught in a short amount of time to successfully engage long range targets (300 to 600 yards). In fact, placing accurate fire on a 600-yard target is no longer a challenge; the challenge rather is to get them all in the "X-ring," a 5-inch circle in the vital zone of a standard man-sized silhouette. Believe it or not, we all became rather bored with just hitting the target — this course allows you to move on to a higher degree of excellence and to go for the X-ring.

For those with AKO access, all course materials are online. All you need to do is the following:

Log on to AKO. Click on "Groups" box at the top. Type in USAMU in the box and click "Find. Click on "Homepage" for USAMU SDM (NOT BRM). Click on USAMU SDM classes again. Select your class and GO!

Class dates, procedures for registering, and other information on USAMU's SDM course can found online at <http://www.usaac.army.mil/amu/sdm/sdm.html>

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Captain John B. Roache

The author stands with a few USAMU instructors who are also members of the USAMU Rifle Team.