

Efficient Training for Crew Served Weapons Marines
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to
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Complexity of crew served weapons training

Few leaders in the infantry battalion truly understand the mortar system or TOW and Javelin missile systems. In addition the SMAW rocket system and the medium and heavy machine guns are simple to learn however extremely difficult to master. Infantry officers and staff non-commissioned officers generally struggle to recall the safety procedures and employment considerations for each crew served weapon, and only a select few can name all the parts and nomenclature of a TOW missile system or mortar. So how do infantry battalions develop effective training for the specialized crew served weapons military occupational specialties?

Currently limited formal training is available for the crew served weapons military occupational specialties (MOS). As a result the majority of the training crew served weapons Marines receive is informal or on-the-job training conducted within the infantry battalion. Infantry battalions commonly conduct centralized battalion training to establish a common level of proficiency in the "specialty" MOSs. However, this battalion-level training can fall short. In the 1st Marine Division, the "Division Schools" once provided a specific training package to

enhance the training of crew served weapons MOSs known as the "Big 3," but it was discontinued. The loss of the Division Schools package forces infantry battalions to develop complete and thorough intermediate level training, with little outside assistance, placing a greater burden on the battalion during compressed training cycles. The 1st Marine Division Schools should re-develop and maintain a crew served weapons training package to supplement the infantry battalion training of those critical skills.

Conducting crew served weapons training

Division schools training package

The 1st Marine Division Schools training package specifically developed to supplement battalion-level training of crew served weapons MOSs offered personnel, time, and resources above and beyond what the battalion provided to produce high quality training. The division school's package trained Marines as a team utilizing a staff of NCOs experienced in the MOS, as well as the existing leadership structure within each weapons section. Since the training was treated as a formal school, it removed Marines from the daily operations of the battalion and allowed them to be free of the daily distractions that

often occurred. The division schools' dedicated staff existed solely for the purpose of teaching. The full time staff produced materials, designed a curriculum, and focused their efforts to enhance crew served weapons training.

Most importantly, the division schools' training package allowed experienced NCOs time to pass knowledge to their Marines and develop their gun crews. The training was focused at the gun crew and squad level allowing Marines the time to train as a team in a structured environment guided by a curriculum. The time spent at division schools allowed the graduates of advanced crew served weapons leader's courses to fill the gap between entry-level training at SOI and the school-trained expert level. Additionally, the training at division schools could even be adjusted to meet the battalion's specific needs by the request of platoon commanders or the battalion gunner. If used to its potential, division schools offered a useful supplement to battalion training designed to develop intermediate level crew served weapons skills.

Infantry Battalion crew served weapons training

Even when the division schools' "big 3" package was available, some infantry battalions turned down the

training to conduct their own crew-served weapons packages. Battalion training packages have many potential downfalls and are timely to develop. Two of the more detrimental shortcomings include the scarcity of truly qualified duty experts in crew served weapons and the limited time and resources available in the infantry battalion.

For an infantry Marine to become an expert in a particular "specialty" MOS requires experience and training gained in the infantry battalion supplemented by the completion of an advanced course (ie machine gun leaders course). The advanced courses are offered on the East Coast and West Coast under the Advanced Infantry Training Company (AIT) section of the School of Infantry. However, the pre-requisites of the school and required aptitude, limit attendees and graduates to only a select few NCOs in each "specialty MOS." As a result the infantry battalion is limited in the number of officially qualified duty experts in each of the crew served weapons MOSs. This becomes a problem when training is conducted because not every company has a formally trained duty expert in each MOS. Decentralized training at the company level is likely to produce varying levels of proficiency throughout the battalion.

Centralized battalion training is possible but it requires someone to develop and supervise the training. In the infantry battalion, training for crew served weapons MOSs is generally designed by the battalion gunner and company grade infantry officers. Company grade officers and staff non-commissioned officers in the infantry know how to employ the weapons systems and how to design training for the Marines. They do not have the required skill sets to train the manipulation of the weapon at the operator level. As a result, duty experts at the NCO level are required to pass on the in-depth operator level knowledge of their crew served weapon to train gun crews. Due to the nature of the weapon systems quality training at the operator level is dependent on duty expert NCOs.

The strain of time and resources makes developing an effective crew serve weapons package for the 40-60 Marines in each specialty a difficult accomplishment. The training usually consists of a mortar package, machine gun package, assaultman package, and anti-tank package each run by a lieutenant or staff NCO and supervised by the battalion gunner. The first obstacle is that all of the infantry officers in the battalion have primary responsibilities as platoon commanders which offers them only limited time to produce a high quality training plan to develop expertise

in the crew served weapons. Officers and staff NCOs in the infantry battalion have too many responsibilities to spend time developing a school quality curriculum even for a one or two week package.

Even if platoon commanders dedicate their time to curriculum development, the Battalion's limited resources and likely distractions can degrade the quality of training. It is unlikely that personnel in the infantry battalion will produce school quality materials such as booklets or study aids for Marines to use during training. Once the execution of the training begins it is likely that the daily administrative needs of the battalion will distract Marines from the much needed training. And despite the best efforts of everyone involved a satisfactory training package can easily become a less than exceptional training event.

The dedicated staff at division schools and the access to resources were valuable assets for developing high quality intermediate level training. Division schools' training maximized the potential of the duty expert NCOs by allowing them to train with all of the Marines in their MOS and develop base line techniques and procedures as well as advance the skills of their peers or subordinates. The semi-formal nature of the school removed Marines from the

majority of the daily distractions of the Battalion allowing them to focus on training. Furthermore, the staff at division schools had the time and materials necessary to make and distribute booklets and study aids to enhance the effectiveness of the training package.

Potential Shortfalls of Division Schools

The question still remains: If division schools' "Big 3" was so good than why was it discontinued? The "big 3" was discontinued because key leadership believed that infantry battalions could produce better training on their own.¹ The three deficiencies that leaders saw with division schools were the perceived lack of quality of the instructors, lack of oversight for the curriculum, and the fact that battalions attending the training had to use their own ammunition allotment. For those reasons the division schools were discontinued in the summer of 2007¹.

Possibly the most common argument against the division schools training is the perceived lack of quality instructors. This problem exists because division schools

¹ Johnson, Gregory W. Captain USMC. Camp Pendleton CA, Director Division Schools from 2008-2009. Interview by the author, 17 Dec 2008.

does not have an official table of organization.

Consequently the school recruits instructors from infantry battalions or those who wish to re-enlist for a tour at the school. Instructors often include Marines who are: wounded, left behind from deployments for various reasons, and Marines who are awaiting their EAS. Marines in those categories are likely to be less than qualified for the instructor job but that problem can be mitigated with screening, supervision, and training. Currently the division schools have become more selective of Marines that are permitted on the instructor staff and conducts an interview process to screen potential instructors². Some Marines that are selected as instructors are able to attend formal instructor schools².

Another frequent argument against division schools is that control or oversight of the curriculum is minimal. The curriculum is developed by chief instructors (Staff NCOs) and overseen by the director (an infantry Captain or Major). Battalion gunners as well as battalion and company commanders often criticize the quality of the curriculum and the instruction at the school. The very mission of

² Johnson, Gregory W. Captain USMC. Camp Pendleton CA, Director Division Schools from 2008-2009. Interview by the author, 17 Dec 2008.

division schools is to create training that has yet to be developed by Training and Education Command (TECOM). Since TECOM approved training can take so long to develop, division schools is designed to provide flexibility and fill the gap for training needed in the division. If flexibility is desired, the school needs to have the ability to develop its own curriculum. Since the school falls under the division G-3, the division operations shop and division gunner can provide oversight to ensure the curriculum meets a standard.

The other common argument against division schools is that battalions must use their own ammunition allotment to support the training. Battalions often believe the ammunition would be better used during battalion training instead of at division schools. Although battalion training can produce quality results, live fire must be well integrated into a set training conditions and tasks. Division schools uses live fire as the cap stone to the training conducted throughout the curriculum. Crew served weapons sections and squads are able to work together and develop/refine their techniques and standard operating procedures which can then be validated by live fire. The more formalized training provided by division schools,

establishes a better base line of proficiency which maximizes the effectiveness of the live fire training.

Conclusion

The 1st Marine Division Schools offered efficient intermediate level training for Marines in the crew served weapons military occupational specialties. The intermediate level crew-served weapons training produced in the infantry battalion is acceptable if commanders are only striving to meet the standard. Using the dedicated staff and resources that 1st Marine Division Schools offers can greatly improve the combat readiness of weapons sections and infantry battalions as a whole. A redeveloped and reinstated division schools crew served weapons training package could supplement infantry battalion training and Marines' individual training in formal schools to produce exceptional proficiency in those critical skills.

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