

The Ever-Changing United States Marine Corps Rifle Qualification

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The Ever-Changing United States Marine Corps Rifle Qualification

Contemporary Issues Paper

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The qualification process at the rifle range has come under great scrutiny over the past several years, especially in light of requirements associated with the current operating environment. Many believe that the rifle range has been an ineffective training ground for Marines who will deploy to places like Iraq or Afghanistan, where every Marine, regardless of military occupational specialty (MOS), may see combat. Therefore, the rifle qualification course has been changed to adapt to the current operating environment. However, this was never the purpose of the rifle range, nor should it be. The qualification process at the rifle range should focus on teaching, reinforcing, and testing the fundamentals of marksmanship, while training Marines in combat shooting should be the responsibility of each individual unit.

Background

As of October 1st, fiscal year (FY) 2006, Marines were required to pass a new rifle qualification course. It is intended to be more realistic to combat situations Marines are faced with in today's modern conflicts. There are numerous changes to the rifle qualification.

The most significant change for Marines will be the field fire portion of the course, "table two". Unlike the old qualification process, Marines will now be required to pass

table two to qualify on the rifle range. Table two is pass or fail. If Marines pass, it has no impact on their table one score. If Marines fail table two, they will have to remediate it and to shoot to pass, but the highest they can get on table one is a 190. Table one is the traditional known-distance course of fire. For instance, if a Marine shoots a 225 on table one then goes to table two and fails, he/she will have to remediate, and then shoot again. If time permits, he/she will shoot again the same day, but the highest score possible on table one is 190. Marines who fail a second time are "unqualified," and must return to the range with another detail and complete all of table two again. However, they will not have to repeat the known-distance course of fire.

During table two, Marines will receive 80 rounds. They will shoot from the twenty-five and fifty-yard lines with a flack jacket and Kevlar. Marines must hit seventy-five percent of their rounds at twenty-five yards and fifty percent at fifty yards to qualify. The only preparation is a block of preliminary training for table two for about three hours on Thursday morning. Thursday will be reserved for practical applications, going through drills for practice, and Friday will consist of firing for qualification.

The next major difference between the old and new course of fire is the scoring system. Marines will still fire fifty

rounds, but the hits will be counted differently. The old scoring system awarded Marines one point each time they hit the black portion of the target, except during the two hundred-yard-line slow fire, in which Marines who hit the center of the target received two points. In the new course of fire, targets are marked with lines showing different areas of the target, representing different point values. Marines will get at least two points for every shot that hits the target. The location of the shot on the target will determine whether they get two, three, four or five points for the shot.

Previously, Marines received their preparatory classes Wednesday through Friday and start firing on Monday. Marines also had the option of qualifying as early as Tuesday, or they could wait until qualification day, which was Thursday. Marines who qualified on the known-distance course of fire completed the field fire course Friday. With the new system, Marines will no longer be able to qualify early, there will be no prequalification day, and Marines will qualify Wednesday vice Thursday.

Comparison

The previous known-distance course of fire was based on a sixty-five-point system. A minimum of twenty-five rounds must hit the black portion of the target for a Marine to qualify as a

marksman. Marines who failed to put twenty-five rounds on target were considered unqualified and were required to re-shoot the course of fire. The new course of fire (table one) gives Marines two hundred-fifty possible points. They must accumulate one hundred-ninety points to qualify as marksman (the lowest level).

Firing positions for the new course of fire will be the same as the old. Marines will still shoot from the two hundred, three hundred, and five hundred-yard lines. Marines will also continue to shoot a string of slow fire on all three yard lines, and a string of rapid fire on the two hundred and three hundred-yard lines. The number of rounds the Marines receive will also remain the same.

Analysis

In November of 2002, Training and Education Command (TECOM) hosted a marksmanship summit. The most notable takeaway was the complete removal of the field firing phase from the annual rifle range. The participants agreed that no one took the field fire seriously, and that it should be the responsibility of individual units to train combat marksmanship. Just two years later, TECOM hosted another summit resulting in the exact opposite conclusion. The field fire not only would remain part

of the qualification process, but would also be enhanced and actually count towards qualifying.

No skill as complicated as combat marksmanship can be learned and sustained by practicing it once a year. Therefore, Marines in non-combat MOS billets are set up for failure every time they go to the range. Range scores in turn affect their cutting scores for promotion. Is it fair for good Marines not to be promoted simply because they do not have the same opportunities as Marines in the Operating Forces? Some say unit commanders/officers in charge should conduct sustainment training similar to the field fire course. It is unrealistic to believe that those officers at Headquarters Marine Corps and other staff offices will make it a priority to get their Marines to the range for combat marksmanship sustainment training. As a matter of fact, they are less likely since their Marines will meet the proverbial combat marksmanship check in the box once a year at the rifle range. Some compare this type of sustainment training with the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. These people obviously do not understand the time, logistics, and manpower requirements to set up and run a live fire range.

Another issue is the attempt to simulate combat marksmanship by using pop-up targets, wearing war gear, and shooting from different firing positions. Will the Marine Corps incorporate other battlefield conditions for even more realism?

Will Marines have to run one hundred yards or more prior to engaging targets? Or maybe Marines will only qualify on days with a temperature of ninety degrees or higher. Better yet, have other Marines simulate the enemy and fire live rounds over the shooters' heads during qualification. Teaching different techniques of shooting based on varying threats and circumstances is great. Extremely realistic training is even better, but not when evaluating a Marine using a quantitative system such as the qualification process.

Conclusion

The new marksmanship sustainment course is a hybrid of fundamental marksmanship training and field firing, and, like all half measures, it succeeds at neither goal. The known-distance course teaches basic marksmanship fundamentals. Marksmanship fundamentals are perishable skills that must be retained and practiced consistently to be maintained. All of the elements of marksmanship must be re-taught as necessary in order for all Marines to maintain the weapons proficiency that has become the hallmark of the Marine Corps. The current system of re-qualification requirement is a valid savings of ammunition and training time when applied to known-distance course requalification (It also allows for greater attention to the shooters who need more training).

Combat marksmanship is a skill separate from basic marksmanship, and should be addressed and trained separately as necessary. Field firing should be conducted at ranges specifically designed for that purpose, and Marines conducting field firing should be trained to that end only. Not all Marines or Marine Units require similar degrees of skill or similar needs for training field firing. The degree and frequency of field firing, as well as the skill level desired from the Marines of different unit-types, should be addressed separately.

The Marine Corps should reinstitute the known-distance course as the requalification course for Basic Skills Training, and retain the current yearly requirements for requalification based on proficiency. The Marine Corps should design separate courses of field firing for use as unit training requirements. Marines have always been known across the DOD for their marksmanship abilities, as well as prowess in combat regardless of MOS. History has shown that we have adapted to every environment, not by altering the fundamentals, but by being flexible to meet every challenge.

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