

# Rethinking Combat Marksmanship Training

Train to an indispensable skill set  
by Capt Michael Levine & GySgt Neil McCoy

The Marine Corps prides itself on the marksmanship abilities of its warfighters. “Every Marine a rifleman” is a reflection of an institutional culture that honors the Marine who can accurately hit what he shoots at. Yet, while all Marines receive at least annual marksmanship training, our recent experiences suggest that there is much we can improve about how we train combat marksmanship.

While deployed as part of Marine Rotational Force–Darwin, we had the opportunity to witness seventeen Marines participate in the week-long Enhanced Combat Marksmanship Package led by the First Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR). The Marines trained with the Australian Defense Force (ADF) Mk 3 service pistol and the M4 and M27 rifles. During this time, we observed many similarities between the tactics, techniques, and procedures taught by 1 RAR and those found in *Marine Corps Order 3574.2L, Marine Combat Marksmanship Programs* (September 2014), and its references. There are, however, significant differences regarding the training methods employed and the environment created to facilitate learning. That is, while the science of the training is largely consistent, the art of the training is, quite literally, a world apart. While aboard the Mount Stuart Training Area in Townsville, Australia we observed:

*The adult learning method.* The adult learning method pioneered by the educator and author Malcolm Knowles

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***Volume of fire can seldom replace accuracy of fire.***  
—Small Wars Manual

served as the foundation for all training. Generally speaking, this model of learning accepts that:

***... our recent experiences suggest that there is much we can improve about how we train combat marksmanship.***

- Adults are internally motivated and self-directed.
- Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences.
- Adults are goal oriented.
- Adults are relevancy oriented.
- Adults are practical.

- Adult learners like to be respected.<sup>1</sup>
- Instructors and students shared a mutual respect built on a mutual desire to learn.

*Train the trainer.* Training day one began with a discussion of the adult learning method as well as the four levels of competency—unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence. Two additional hour-long lectures, led by an ADF psychologist, discussed how the brain processes information, makes decisions, and reacts to the stresses of combat. The emphasis of this training was not only on learning but also on how to learn and how to facilitate learning. From the outset, the course was designed to “train the trainer” and produce not only proficient marksmen but proficient marksmanship coaches.

We tested the effectiveness of the “train the trainer” component the following week when we conducted a “Marine led” marksmanship training package. Participants from the course led by 1 RAR served as instructors, using the knowledge they had learned the previous week. The twenty Marine students in this course experienced similar increases in proficiency to those of the Marines taught by ADF Soldiers.

*Shooting in buddy pairs.* The Marines never shot without someone observing their repetitions, thereby ensuring that there was always a 1:1 shooter to coach ratio. Consequently, the shooter received instant feedback, and the coach reinforced his knowledge base through teaching what he had learned.

*Perfect repetitions.* The goal of every drill was to conduct a perfect repetition, from preparation for combat to execution and post-engagement procedures. Shooters and coaches paid attention to every detail—combat stance, loading, dry repetition, sector scan following firing—and deviations from the standard were corrected by the coach immediately, if not already identified by the Marine himself. This meant starting slow—the instructors emphasized starting at no faster than 20 percent speed—and working quicker as proficiency increased.

*Pistol training to facilitate rifle training.* Starting with the Mk3 pistol, the Marines trained to acquire a good grip using large and small touch points, place the weapon on fire, remove the slack from the trigger while acquiring an acceptable sight picture, press the trigger, and then scan for additional threats. The mantra of the course was “Up, Touch, Roll, Safety, Slack, Sights, Press, Scan.” These “catch words” corresponded to the sequence of actions necessary to rapidly and accurately engage the target. The fundamentals built with the pistol carried over to the rifle, and training with the two weapons systems had a synergistic effect.

*Reduced human factors.* Most shooting drills were executed while stationary and under the shade of cammie netting. Coffee, tea, and cold water were available at the shooting line while drills were initially executed with as light a

gear load as possible. Following lunch, the Marines took a mandatory 20- to 30-minute nap—no talking, no phones. More burdensome combat simulators—gear, movement, developing enemy scenarios—were gradually introduced as Marines built proficiency.

*Robotic targetry.* 1 RAR works with the Australian-based Marathon Targets to provide “smart” targetry that can autonomously act, adapt, and challenge the shooters. The targets sought cover and moved in various patterns, providing a different enemy scenario for each set of shooters. The Marine Corps is no stranger to Marathon Targets; recent internal testing conducted by the Marine Corps demonstrated a 104 percent increase in combat accuracy after 24

thereby priming the shooter to move to cover. Inadequate combat behaviors resulted in an immediate correction from the shooter’s coach. During culminating buddy pair and fire team exercises, this combat mindset was tested as pop-up and “smart” targetry hid and reappeared throughout the course of fire.

*Dedicated marksmanship training cell.* Three of 1 RAR’s top Soldiers were detached from the maneuver companies and are placed in a training cell that is singularly dedicated to providing marksmanship training to the Soldiers of the battalion.

*Total rounds fired: 20,000 rounds of 5.56 and 10,000 rounds of 9mm.* This meant each Marine fired an average of 1,250 rounds of 5.56 and 625 rounds of

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## ***Piecing together these observations exposed a number of shortcomings in the present state of Marine Corps combat marksmanship training.***

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hours of training with these types of targets.<sup>2</sup> The targetry was especially effective when combined with pop up and stationary “Ivan” targets that are commonly found on Marine Corps live fire ranges.

*Training to a standard, not a time limit.* The shooters progressed at their own pace and extra time and attention was afforded to Marines falling behind. Marines struggling with a specific drill were encouraged to reduce the speed of execution or perform a series of single-shot repetitions to reinforce fundamentals. The 1:1 shooter to coach ratio ensured that slower learners were immediately made aware of the mistakes they were making (thereby avoiding “unconscious incompetence”) and maintained perfect repetitions, even if at a reduced speed.

*Combat mindset.* Proper combat behaviors permeated every action conducted on the range. Shooters were taught to first scan their sector of fire and then their immediate surroundings following each course of fire, even if firing a single round. All loading and reloading procedures were executed to a standard and initiated by a sidestep,

9mm in five days. Rounds were kept on the firing line, and Marines took ammunition as needed as they progressed through drills at their own pace. Still, the emphasis was not on the number of rounds fired but rather on the quality of each repetition.

*Better marksmanship.* *FMFRP 12-2, Infantry in Battle* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1988), says it best: “we judge by results.” After five training days, Marines’ “hit” percentage jumped from 80 percent to 89 percent on the pistol and 90 percent to 97 percent on the rifle. (See Figure 1 on next page.) Most significantly, shooters achieved a passing score on nearly four times the number of drills than they had under the same conditions on training day one.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 2 on next page.) Participants of the Marine-led week demonstrated similar improvements: jumping from 81 percent to 94 percent accuracy and passing six times the number of drills as on their initial testing.<sup>4</sup> (See Figures 3 and 4.)

Piecing together these observations exposed a number of shortcomings in the present state of Marine Corps

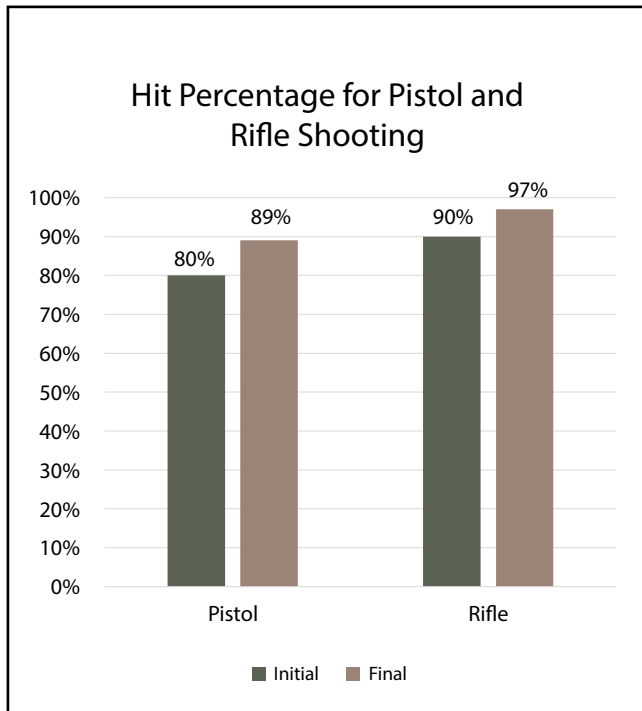


Figure 1.

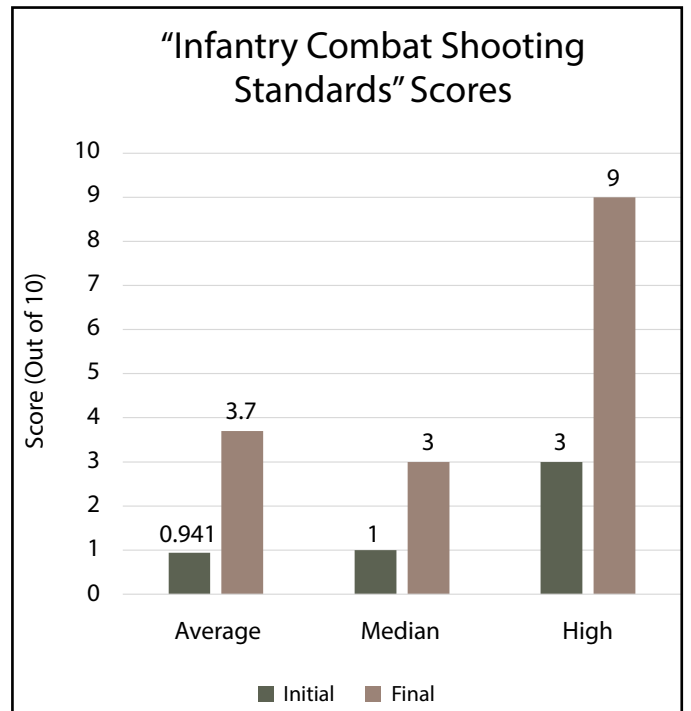


Figure 2.

combat marksmanship training. Currently, the majority of this training does not employ the adult learning method nor does it ensure perfect repetitions 100 percent of the time. It does not sufficiently focus on combat behav-

iors. No institutional wide model to lighten the burden of human factors when initially building competency exists. Lastly, as a whole, the Marine Corps' infantry community does not prioritize marksmanship appropriately.

The *Infantry Training and Readiness Manual* mandates a twelve-month sustainment interval for marksmanship training.<sup>5</sup> This is inadequate; 1 RAR Soldiers conduct marksmanship training *monthly*. Today's Marine Corps

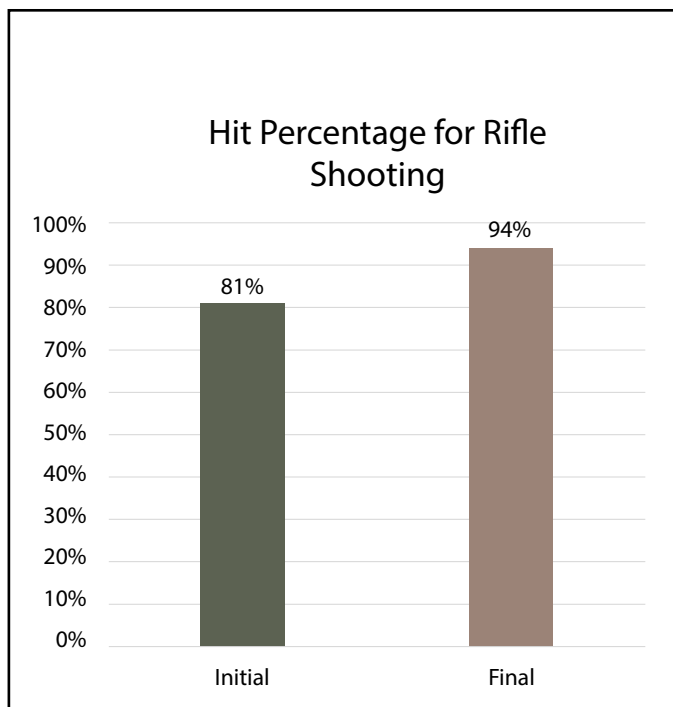


Figure 3.

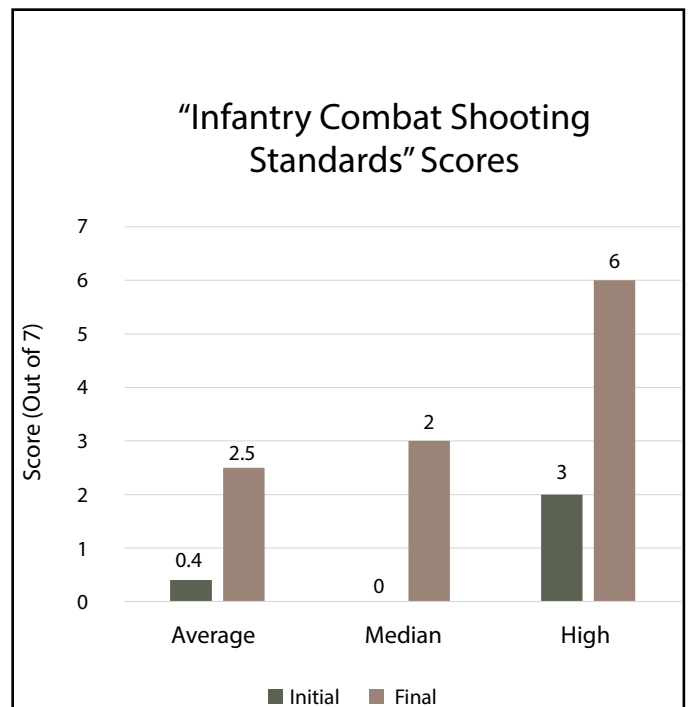


Figure 4.

infantryman is firing too few rounds, too infrequently.

While training with 1 RAR, certain techniques—high ready, canting the rifle to reload, compromised shooting positions—were new to some; however, on the whole, the fundamentals taught were remarkably similar to those the Marines had experienced up to that point in their professional development. Instead, the difference was twofold: first, the teaching methods employed, and the learning environment fostered; and second, the effective emphasis on the combat mindset. Commanders and leaders at all levels conducting unit marksmanship training should consider:

1. What is the priority? Hiking out to the range, shooting only in full combat load, rigidly adhering to the timelines prescribed by the detailed training schedule: all of these priorities largely detract from the ultimate training goal of improving individual marksmanship skills. Measures to reduce the human factors while conducting this type of training are typically cost-effective (or free) and go a long way.

2. Train *combat* marksmanship. Marksmanship cannot be conducted in isolation of its proper context: combat. Training should pay attention to both the results the shooter achieves and the combat behaviors he demonstrates. Loading, combat stance, safety, and trigger manipulation—meticulous care should be given to each of these small actions that together comprise a single engagement until it becomes second nature (unconscious competence). It cannot count as a perfect repetition unless the procedures of the shooter would directly translate to a combat environment. As proficiency increases, the relaxed environment in which shooters build brilliance at the basics should gradually give way to drills in which greater combat simulators are imposed.

3. Foster an adult learning environment. Can a gunnery sergeant and a PFC execute a week of combat marksmanship training as a buddy pair, each providing the other with professional feedback? Can the GySgt accept—or better yet, seek—critiques from the

PFC and will the PFC receive instruction from the GySgt, not on the basis of rank, but rather, on the merits of the content? This is the ultimate test of an adult learning environment. No erosion of discipline is necessary to foster a training environment like the one we witnessed at Mount Stuart. Learning occurs when there is a mutual respect between a group of professionals all seeking self-improvement.

4. Instructor to student ratio. No shooter should engage his rifle without at least one Marine actively coaching. Feedback should be immediate, ensuring perfect repetition and avoiding unconscious incompetence. A course instructor to course participant ratio of 1 to 5 is ideal but should be no less than 1 to 10, with no more than 35 to 40 total Marines on the range at one time. Rather than field this instructor cadre by creating a marksmanship training cell out of thin air, commanders should ensure that there are an appropriate number of combat marksmanship coaches within their unit to facilitate training. Similar to the 1 RAR model, there must be a continuous, internally designed and led training package headed by a handful of the unit's best NCOs and experienced lance corporals. Despite the short-term burden of sending both students and instructors to a course, this training will pay dividends for the parent unit. Attendance should be initially reserved for the highest performing Marines, to include staff non-commissioned officers and officers. Subsequent iterations of a properly conducted week-long package will produce additional coaches, thereby lightening the burden placed on the initial instructor group.

5. Maximize trigger time. Doing so requires commanders and officers-in-charge to ensure that there is an ample amount of ammunition available for the Marines. 5.56 and 9mm rounds are cheap and available, if properly forecasted. The *Infantry Training and Readiness Manual* should reflect a marksmanship sustainment interval of six months, but commanders should execute dedicated marksmanship training at least quarterly.

According to *MCDP 1-Warfighting*:

Commanders at each echelon must allot subordinates sufficient time and freedom to conduct the training necessary to achieve proficiency at their levels. They must ensure that higher-level demands do not deny subordinates adequate opportunities for autonomous training.<sup>6</sup>

Many of our experiences are not unique to some in the Marine Corps. Certain units, particularly among the reconnaissance and special operations communities and schoolhouses currently employ many of these methods. But this training need not be reserved for the select few. Our experiences with 1 RAR make plain the reality that this training can be effectively executed within the restrictions imposed by an infantry battalion's pre-deployment training program.

The changes necessary are not scientific but rather artistic. The Marine Corps understands the fundamentals of marksmanship. Now it needs to better train this indispensable skill set.

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#### Notes

1. Malcom S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, (Cambridge, NJ: Cambridge Book Company, 1980).

2. Katherine Ziesing, "Marathon Targets: Right on Target," *Australian Defence Magazine*, (March 2017), available at <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/>.

3. A passing score was awarded if shooters completed the drill within the prescribed time limit while hitting 100 percent of all shots fired.

4. Shooting during the "Marine led" week did not include the Mk3 pistol. Accordingly, Marines were tested on the seven Infantry Combat Shooting Standards that involved only the rifle. Data for pistol shooting is not presented.

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 3500.44B, Infantry Training and Readiness Manual*, (Washington, DC: August 2013).

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington D.C: June 1997).

