

The Importance of Cadet Marksmanship Programs

While I was a Cadet at the University of Montana (UM), I had the opportunity to partake in the Montana Chapter 28 Special Forces Association (28 SFA) sponsored pistol team. I was a part of the team from the fall of 2014 through the fall of 2016 when I commissioned as an Infantry Officer. I developed from an underclassmen member of the team, learning the fundamentals of pistol marksmanship, to eventually being team Captain my last three semesters at UM. The instruction, safety lessons and range operation taught by the UM pistol team Cadre were among the most transferable of all the skills I learned as a Cadet. Since I have Commissioned, I have not experienced a marksmanship program that is more encompassing than the program offered at UM. Infantry Basic Officer Leadership Course (IBOLC) does have a robust marksmanship program, however no other BOLC provides anywhere near that level of marksmanship instruction. Furthermore, IBOLC does not give instruction on range construction, leaving it to the gaining unit to teach incoming Officers. Hence, why I would highly encourage ROTC programs to sponsor marksmanship programs as a way to develop the next generation of Army Officers and better prepare them for Platoon leadership.

Safety is the most important lesson taught in any program that deals with firearms. Having an instructor, a current 28 SFA member, with an intimate understanding of firearms and firearm safety is what made UM's pistol program a quality opportunity for Cadets. The program strictly drilled the four fundamentals of range safety: 1. Muzzle awareness 2. Treating every firearm as if it were loaded 3. Target awareness including what is in front and beyond the target 4. Trigger awareness. Getting Cadets into a deliberate and regimented safety routine from weapons draw to turn in establishes a safety baseline for not only the UM Pistol Team, but also transfer directly to Army weapons safety and property management. Additionally, preventative maintenance was another valuable lesson instilled throughout the program. Keeping weapons clean and able to execute their purpose will keep the program viable for years to come. Preventative maintenance is also something that Cadets will become intimately familiar with upon commissioning. Upon arrival to their units, they will inherit equipment much older and more worn than any equipment under their custodial control at the ROTC program. Building healthy safety and maintenance habits with Army equipment as a Cadet directly translates to unit readiness in the future as an Army Officer. It also takes the pressure off the Platoon Sergeant from having to spot check his Lieutenant, ensuring they are meeting Company/Platoon safety and maintenance standards. In order to effectively supervise and refine safety procedures, an Officer must first know what to look for. The only way for an Officer to know what to look for is through exposure to programs in the past that have implemented correct safety protocol. The more ROTC programs that provide marksmanship resources, the more likely Officers are able to correctly plan, observe and refine training.

UM's pistol team is built on the Ranger Regiment's coined "crawl, walk, run" training model. This method is repetition based, adding complexity based on skill level in

each new period of instruction. Cadets in the beginning of each semester focused on the basics of marksmanship. These primarily being grip, trigger pull and follow through. Often, periods of instruction would focus on mastering those techniques through a series of dry fires and single shots at a target 5 to 10 meters away. Eventually the Cadets would progress into increasingly complex scenarios; to include multiple targets, reloads and variable distances. The semester would culminate with a professional style shooting competition where the highest scoring Cadet would receive an award for their achievement, incentivizing a semesters worth of performance and dedication the program. For Cadets to learn from a program that not only is engaging but also tangibly develops the student into a more proficient marksman is vital for the job they will perform upon commissioning and serving as Platoon leaders. Lieutenants learning to build incentivized training programs based on their experience with UM's pistol program will increase unit morale, instill purpose and develop greater proficiency across their formations.

As a planner, Lieutenants assist their commander in building a training plan on how to develop skill level one shooters into a more lethal fighting force. Although, shooting pistols on a college club is different from conducting a live fire exercise with a team sized or larger element, the fundamentals of marksmanship and training progression model remain largely the same. Giving a future Officer the tools of what right looks like prior to ever assuming Platoon leadership will give palpable results to the organization that inherits them. Especially as the Army transitions to a more fluid M4 qualification table with variable fighting positions, multiple target acquisitions and unprompted reloads to simulate a combat environment. In order for Soldiers to prepare for a more realistic marksmanship test, it is extremely important for Lieutenants to develop a progression model similar to their experience at the UM. Lastly, the exposure to this type marksmanship training has valuable second and third order effects felt outside of the Active Duty component. For example, not all Cadets will commission into the Active Duty component, some will commission into the National Guard and Reserve components. Additionally, others will perform other government jobs outside of the military that require knowledge of firearm marksmanship. In fact, the Cadet who won the 2016 pistol competition is currently a law enforcement officer for the city of Seattle. Undoubtedly, his experience with the UM pistol club will transfer to fellow law enforcement Officers and guide how they train.

In closing, my time on the pistol team was one of the most memorable college experiences and the lessons taught provided me framework for how I currently conduct range operations across all weapon systems. Having the pistol team gives inexperienced shooters the ability to learn the perishable skill of marksmanship while incorporating correct safety measures and range operation. It gives future non-combat arms Officers the knowledge to develop simple training programs for Soldiers and support units who get limited fiscal training opportunities with firearms. It gives future combat arms Officers valuable lessons on training progression and the benefits deliberate repetition. Ultimately,

these sponsorship programs will lead to Officers, NCOs, and Soldiers that are more lethal, confident and effective implementing their weapons in a combat environment.

Respectfully,

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