



Weapons Safety? (NOT)

By SFC Vance Middleton

Who's your worst enemy when it comes to handling weapons in peacetime? Look at the Army's FY 92 accident and injury statistics and you discover that it's none other than a comrade in arms.

During the past three years, 11 soldiers were killed (5 of them in Desert Shield/Storm) and 120 others were injured (28 Desert Shield/Storm) because of improper weapons handling or improper misfire procedures. More than half of the accidents involved privately owned weapons, and almost all of the

others involved personally assigned military weapons.

Failure to treat weapons as if they were loaded was a major factor in many weapons accidents. For example:

- ☐ A soldier and a group of friends were handling a .22-caliber pistol. They made sure the pistol was unloaded before placing it in the trunk of a car. The soldier left for a few minutes; when he returned, he picked up the pistol, assuming it was still unloaded. When he pulled the trigger, the pistol fired, killing him instantly.

Weapons aren't toys. Horseplay shouldn't be tolerated. NCOs and other leaders should ensure soldiers know to never point a weapon at anyone—even if it's not loaded. A case in point:

- ☐ A soldier was part of a team performing guard duty at an air defense site. During guard change, the soldier pointed out that the guard he was relieving had a magazine in his weapon and it wasn't on safe. The guard told him it was okay; no round was chambered. The guard then pointed the rifle at the relief soldier and pulled the trigger. The weapon fired, and the round struck the soldier in the throat. He died the next day.

Weapons safety covers a wide area. However, it starts when your soldiers enter the arms room and draw their weapons, no matter what the weapon and continues until they turn it in. It's our responsibility as NCOs to make sure our soldiers know what is expected of them concerning weapons and safety. This applies from cleaning to qualifying to guard duty and beyond. They need to know the standards.

The basic rule is once you draw your weapon, clear it and put it on safe. It stays on safe until you're ready to shoot someone or something.

How many times do soldiers and leaders walk around in garrison with a magazine inserted into their weapon? I ask, "for what purpose?" Probably the most common answer is it looks macho or it keeps the magazine well clean. *Not!* Train as you fight. Get your soldiers used to treating their magazines as if they're loaded.

It's amazing how many soldiers—and NCOs—don't seem to understand the damage a blank round can do. For a visual demonstration, shoot blank ammo with and without a blank adapter at balloons, paper bags, sandbags, or even watermelons. Hitting any of these items with blank ammo will drive home the point. Always use a blank adapter when firing with blanks.

During the course of live fire ranges it's common to do a practice run using blanks. Especially on fire and maneuver ranges. Leaders need to be cautious about never mixing blanks and live ammunition. Prior to issuing live rounds remove blank adapters, collect all blanks and clear weapons.

Brass and ammo check after training aren't optional. Leaders must do this, not once, but several times if necessary. Physically check your soldiers. It's your duty. Besides checking ammo pouches you must also check cargo pockets and rucksacks.

Assumptions cause accidents. For example:

- "How could a weapon in the arms room be loaded?"
- "I didn't know it was loaded."
- "I cleared it before I turned it in."
- "I only have blanks in my magazine."

These assumptions, and many more, kill or injure soldiers.

We're responsible for the welfare of our soldiers. To more effectively accomplish our NCO mission, we must enforce high standards in all areas, particularly in weapons safety and handling.

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