

Unclassified

Running Head: Risk vs. Safety

Risk vs. Safety in Training

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11/20/2007

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class 58

Abstract

One of the toughest decisions we have to face as senior NCOs' is how much risk due we take in training. Most military training has risk involved, especially when it comes to preparing Soldiers for combat. We will deal with the ethical decisions involved in deciding on what level of risk versus safety we take in training. We have to push our Soldiers in order to prepare the to fight and when. This involve the difficult decisions to elevate the risk of training in order to achieve the needed results.

Risk vs. Safety in Training

Training soldiers is the most important peacetime activity any NCO will perform. A bold statement but one I believe is completely true. With that being said we must train to a standard of excellence, pushing Soldiers past their limits and bringing out their absolute best. Here is the ethical dilemma, should we except injury and risk death to train at a levels above normal standards or should we use safety as our limiting factor even if it degrades the quality of training. I will discuss both sides and look at the benefits of each and the downfalls of both. My viewpoint will be that of an Airborne Ranger who has trained Paratroopers for 18 years and believes there is no place for mediocre Soldier's in today's Army. So I invite you to read my thoughts and decide for yourself which is more important, safety or realistic training at the highest level and how do we achieve an ethical balance.

“Fall in”, the first thing most of heard in basic training. The second and most memorable was the colorful description the drill sergeant gave regarding the fact many of us would not physically or mentally be up to the challenge. The third thing the drill sergeants told us was that some of us would be hurt or possibly be killed in training; he was detailed almost gruesome in his account. I remember thinking the drill sergeants were crazy and what had I got myself into. A pattern that repeated itself in almost every school I went to during my first ten years of military service. The drill sergeant did not lie about my fellow Soldiers being hurt during training nor did the drill sergeants lie about the fact that some would not be up to the challenge. In fact when I was in Ranger school a student died my first week from heat stroke. In marine sniper school three candidates had heat strokes and recovered after hospitalization. I have never been to a single military skill training school where at least one Soldier was not seriously hurt. I will even

go one step farther and state that in my military experience the higher the level of training the more common and more serious the injuries.

We have touched on injuries in schools, but what about training centers or live fires. When I deployed to the National Training Center (NTC) my observer controller told me that at least one Soldier dies every rotation. My rotation was no exception and we lost a National Guard soldier in a vehicle roll over. When I was an observer controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center we lost five Soldiers in assorted training accidents. As a Paratrooper I have been involved in over 200 airborne operations, I cannot even count the number of injuries and have witnessed several deaths. Live fire training is the most fundamental training exercise a Soldier participates in and brings with it the most risk of injury or death. I have established the fact that injury is inevitable in training.

Now we come to the beginning of the conflict safety verses realistic training. How many times have you heard that safety must come first? I can say that I have said and heard this thousands of times in my years in the military. I am always in conflict with this statement, for my military upbringing has placed the mission first attitude deep within my thought process. When I make a live fire safer the realism and unknown aspect seems to disappear. The mere fact of having Soldiers walk the lane before they shoot eliminates much of the decision making process when they actually conduct the exercise. Let's look at Ranger school, when I went through you received one meal a day and slept an average of 2 hours per night during patrols. Accidents occurred due to lack of sleep and long term damage was done to students from nutritional deficiencies. The school is supposed to be the ultimate leadership school training leaders how to make decisions under extreme duress. The Army relooked the school when several soldiers were killed in the Florida phase, a very necessary and needed step after such a calamity. The Army

added safeguards increasing sleep and giving students more food. Did this detract from the training or produce leaders who had not been tested to the same standard. The graduation rate has not significantly increased nor have I seen any detectable difference in the quality of today's Rangers. There seems to be a fine line when balancing safety against realistic training.

Let's look at physical training and the effect safety has had on it. We constantly hear train smarter not harder. When I arrived to the 82nd Airborne Division in 1992 we prided ourselves in the ability to walk all night and run all day. We would continually do forced marches sometimes in excess of 25 miles. I normally ran my soldiers ten or more miles at least once weekly. Today in the 82nd Airborne Division I must have a signed letter of approval from the battalion commander to run over five miles and need the brigade commander's approval to march more than eight. We slowed and shortened both runs and road marches to decrease the number of heat casualties. The thought process was if we had tighter controls we would have less heat casualties. I don't believe this approach has worked. When we conduct our Expert Infantry Badge (EIB) testing it concludes with a 12 mile road march. For the first 11 years of my military career this was considered an easy event with very few soldiers ever failing. The PT test which occurred at the beginning was considered the easiest event for the average infantryman. Since the year 2000 I have seen more and more Paratroopers fail these events than in the rest of my years combined. Even worse than the failure rate was the increased number of heat casualties. In the summer of 2000 I was on the 505th Parachute Infantry Brigade's EIB road march; we had over 50 heat casualties and a 40% failure rate. More soldiers fell out of that road march than all other annual test I was involved in. The trend of increased heat casualties and road march failures continues to this day. We had a problem with heat and conditioning from lowered training standards based

on safety requirements, in effect if we walk less or move slower we will have fewer problems. I think this backfired and the opposite result occurred.

Each training event has a balance between safe and canned. Military schools can be extreme and forget the importance of safety; the disaster in Florida Ranger camp clearly demonstrated this. Less stress and lowered physical standards incorporated in basic training lowered the initial military readiness of our Soldiers. You have to look at each event and try to incorporate safety without losing the desired training effect. You have to take risks when necessary in order to achieve the results desired.

The last area I will look at is individual units and specific groups within the military trying set up their own standards. This is the area I feel where things get the most out of hand. I grew up in the airborne tradition of “cherry parties”. The idea is to grab an unsuspecting soldier and beat him mildly and scare the daylights out of him. The purpose was to build unity in the group by each soldier suffering through an unpleasant initiation ritual. The result is usually the opposite, Soldiers feel alienated and secret groups are formed that are in direct conflict with good military order. Second and almost as dangerous is when leaders come up with their own training standards based on their personal abilities. Such as the marathon runner who feels each Soldier should be able to run 20 miles at a fast pace. Usually this leader is unbalanced and is weak in other areas and uses this ability to mask his deficiencies. The danger here is risk of injury to Soldiers without specific military gains and alienation of this Soldier, due to lacking his in one area, though he is well within military standards. Clearly setting your own standards or setting up secret initiations will result in less trained Soldiers and put them at unnecessary risk.

In conclusion we must look at three things to decide if training is safe or have we accepted a lower standard to avoid risk. First determine if the training risk is necessary to properly prepare Soldiers to fight in combat and win. Second use all the risk assessment tools the Army provides to make training as safe as possible. Third follow Army standards and refrain from setting your standards, based on personnel strength you possess. The bottom line up front is you the leader will have to make the final decision as to what safe training is and what risks are necessary. The Army wants us to be bold and push your Soldiers to excel. Training for combat is dangerous and you will always have to take risk which may result in Soldiers being injured and possibly killed. We are the leaders so think long and think hard for the decisions you make will determine the future of our Soldiers and in the end our Army.