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Sergeants drill rules of fire into trainees

FORT JACKSON, S.C. — During a simulated street fight against “the insurgents,” three basic-training privates ran inside a house and cleared it.

After quickly relegating enemy prisoners of war to the corner of one room, the soldiers worked to identify and treat the wounds of their American casualties. The fighting had ended.

Bang!

“What the ... ?”

A soldier had accidentally fired his weapon, and his drill sergeant was quick with a lecture.

“Do you know how significant that is?” the drill sergeant asked his soldiers. “Seventy-three soldiers have died because of negligent discharge. As long as you live, that will never happen again, right?”

According to the Defense Department, 73 coalition troops, including 60 Americans, have died as a result of nonhostile weapons discharges. Of those, according to the Army’s Combat Readiness Center, 22 have been ruled accidental. The other 51, which are still under investigation, may include accidents, negligent homicide or suicide cases. In addition, 89 American soldiers have been injured in accidental discharge cases, according to the center.

As far back as last October, Multi-National Force commander Gen. George Casey issued a letter saying military leaders had to be more diligent in their weapons-clearing and safety procedures.

Drill sergeants make sure tales of accidental shootings trickle down to trainees: Former professional football player Pat Tillman died in a friendly fire incident. A Scottish soldier dropped his rifle and accidentally shot a 13-year-old Iraqi boy in the spine, paralyzing him. A sergeant from New York died when another soldier’s weapon misfired into his back during a road march.

Drill sergeants strive to make sure soldiers know how to operate safely in the zone. At Fort Jack-



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Carrying rifles everywhere, all the time, is now part of basic training. Drill sergeants issue new trainees 10 rounds — blanks — and have them lock-and-load their weapons every time they leave a building.

son, that means teaching soldiers how to avoid negligent discharge, as well as to take a split second to make sure the target lined up in a soldier’s sights is really the enemy.

Privates at Fort Jackson — and all other basic training units — carry their M16s with them at all times, conduct proper clearing procedures as they enter the barracks, learn to quickly identify threats, and switch their rifles from safe to semiautomatic and back again while patrolling a simulated danger zone.

“How do you get soldiers comfortable with weapons?” asked Col. Thomas Hayden, deputy commanding officer at Fort Jackson. “You have them keep them in the bays and carry it with them everywhere they go — even PT.”

Hayden said drill sergeants issue new trainees 10 rounds — blanks — and have them lock and load their weapons every time they leave a building. As they enter any building, they remove the magazines and clear their weapons, just as they would on a forward operating base.

They also learn to keep their fingers off the triggers.

Between safety and setback

At an EST 2000/Arm close-range simulation training area, Sgt. 1st Class Michael Autry taught privates to keep their knees bent as they walked through a dangerous street, to aim their weapons by pointing at a target rather than lifting the M16 high enough to gaze through the sights, to shoot halfway through a breath rather than at the end of it, and to keep the weapon on safe until needed.

At the front of the room on a wall-sized video screen, an Iraqi soldier operated a checkpoint while the trainees practiced backing him up. First, a truck full of American soldiers rushed through

the checkpoint as the Iraqi soldier opened a barbed-wire gate. The trainees held their weapons ready to shoot a laser beam at the simulated action but refrained from pulling the trigger.

“Good job not shooting the American soldiers,” Autry said.

For a little bit, no one appeared on the screen other than the Iraqi soldier.

Bang!

“Whoa, whoa,” Autry said. “Who fired? Don’t be afraid. Who shot?”

After some hesitation, a private spoke up, and Autry talked to the group of soldiers in a low voice.

“I just talked to her,” Autry explained afterward. “This is a simulation, but the next time she gets in that situation, she will take that extra split second.”

Training soldiers to shoot when necessary is just as important.

At the Falcon Challenge range, the bang was late in coming when a group of privates entered a building to clear it of enemy fighters.

Pvt. Brianna Thomas entered the building shooting. Pfc. Tim Moore didn’t.

Thomas’ Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System — laser transmitters and receptors that allow soldiers to “shoot” and know when they’ve been hit — started beeping.

“Ah, man,” Thomas said. “You got me killed, Moore. You got me killed.”

The young soldier hadn’t taken his weapon off safe, making it difficult to cover Thomas.

Their drill sergeant told them to take a knee, and then talked to them about the importance of thinking clearly and not letting excitement carry them away.

“It was a little more hectic than I was ready for,” Moore said. “It would be kind of scary if you went in Iraq and those were real rounds. I’d much rather learn here.” □

Drill sergeants watch soldiers clear weapons before entering a dining hall during training at Fort Lee, Va. The Army’s “weapons immersion” program requires soldiers in basic training to keep their rifles around the clock. The aim is to instill good weapons handling habits.

before he went on base. I’m grateful the sentence was what it was.”

Becker’s funeral in the 80-resident South Dakota village where he grew up brought home his mother’s need for judgment.

On that day, which would have been his 20th birthday, 40 letters and 35 birthday cards went into the coffin, followed by a blanket from his nephews, a bottle of Budweiser from a buddy and a garter from his prom date. His Web site received more than 51,000 hits after he died.

“He was the best-loved kid in school,” Senska said. “Life is pretty boring without my baby boy.”

And yet, “I was not put here to judge anyone,” she said. “I have never been in a war zone.”

As she cried, she voiced the dilemma she struggles with daily.

“My kid died, and I’m going to have half as many grandkids as I thought,” she said. “But I would like Sergeant Parker’s kids to grow up with their dad. He knows

in his heart what happened.”

Outside the military, headlines appear when children find unlocked weapons, or when the vice president accidentally shoots a hunting buddy. But rarely does anyone go to jail for those incidents — because they’re accidents.

“In the civilian world, you generally don’t see them for simple negligence,” Duignan said. “But in the military, simple negligence is enough. In the civilian world, you would sue for damages, and there wouldn’t be criminal charges. But you can’t sue a soldier.”

Duignan said there are two schools of thought about the issue: The commander should be able to do what he needs to do to keep up morale and to keep order in the ranks.

She explained the other school of thought: “In cases where you’re actually prosecuting, you’re affecting young lives, and there should be guidelines.” □