

5 Common Sense Training Rules

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As near as I can count, I have read hundreds of books on military and law enforcement training. In fact, I have read and collected so many, I was recently forced (much to my dismay and to the joy of my wife) to donate 40 or 50 of those books to the local library. Personally, after this donation, I think the city should name a wing of that library after me.

I mention my extensive book collection because I sincerely believe I have had to study (and learn through experience) to be a good, or even a decent, tactical instructor. Just as I had to learn tactical skills, I also had to learn how to teach those same skills that became easy for me to do, but not so easy to explain. During this educational process, I made some really dumb mistakes. Now days, when I think about those “mistakes,” I usually cringe and end the thought process with: “I cannot believe I did that....” And “Thank you God for not letting me kill someone.”

Based on what I learned from those mistakes, I have developed my own common sense training rules. Below, I have listed the 5 most important rules I use during my SWAT schools. These specific rules pertain to issues of safety. Also, as with all of life’s lessons, there are stories and explanations that accompany each rule.

The Rules!

Rule # 1: Your team does not have to train at being miserable, that’s going to happen naturally.

About 10 years ago, I watched a tactical team crawl through nearly two hundred yards of heavy brush and mud. It had been raining, sleet and snowing for three days and training conditions were horrid.

After approximately two hours of trying to maintain my growing aggravation, I called a halt to the training. I then asked the team leader what his training goals were for this drill – a drill that *he* was not participating in. His reply was one that I often get from team leaders when I question their wisdom on a training matter. He answered, “Well, we do not get to pick when and where we deploy. I feel my team needs to be able to operate in a woodland environment.” He spoke nothing of the weather, the deteriorating condition of his critically underdressed team or the fact that his team of 12 years had never – not once – deployed in a woodland environment.

Having worked in all known types of topography *and* having deployed in the worst weather conditions imaginable, I agree with the team leader’s sentiment. He is right, we do not get to pick when and where we deploy; however, we can pick when, where and how we train. We can pick (or adjust) our training equipment to match environmental issues when needed. And we can pick (or modify) our training to fit the weather/environment, thus making the training safer and, if not enjoyable, then more tolerable.

The end result of this training was critically fouled equipment, weapons and men. This made the team non-mission capable until the equipment, weapons and men were cleaned and made serviceable. In the case of the men, serviceable means warmed, showered and fed. Also, because the team leader did not participate in this exercise, (something he was fairly well known for not doing), the drill came across more as punishment than it did as training.

Rule # 2: SWAT training (or real missions) and an adrenalin rush do not mix!

After an intense hostage rescue training scenario, one that had gone on for almost 20 hours, I listened as a well known (and well trained) team conducted a thorough post action “debrief.” The structure of this debrief was that each operator would explain what they felt went right and what they felt could be improved on.

Toward the end of the debriefing, a veteran team member stated that he felt that they (the team), “just weren’t into the mission” and that the team leadership should have done something to get them “pumped-up” to help them get “into” the training.

When people talk about being ‘pumped-up,’ I envision a bunch of spoiled, overpaid and pampered athletes jumping up and down surrounded by cheerleaders and adoring fans. What I do not envision is brave men and women dressed in fifty pounds of body armor, weapons and ammo voluntarily walking into harm’s way to save another person’s life.

Wanting to be ‘pumped-up’ tells me that the officer is more interested in an adrenalin rush, than being a solid self-motivated tactical operator. Adrenalin based life styles are found in sports, thrill seekers, or in Hollywood’s make-believe image of SWAT. Not in the professional world of Special Operations.

Rule # 3: Pushing your team to a high level of intensity while training is one thing – allowing your team to pursue a high level of reckless intensity is another.

Back in 1992, an excellent tactical operator was badly injured during rappel training. Evidently, at the end of the training day, the team decided to have a friendly competition. The contest would be a “race” to the ground to see who could reach it in the fewest bounds and the fastest time. Based on the injury report, no one was sure exactly what happened or how it happened; however, the end result for the injured officer was two crushed Calcaneus (heel bones on each foot) and several other broken or bruised limbs. So hard did he hit the ground, he cracked his ballistic Kevlar helmet. Months of surgeries and rehab followed.

In the above story, the final control factor ought to have been the team leader. The team leader should not have allowed this “friendly competition” to take place. Not when training on a skill that requires great focus and control by both the man on rappel and the belay-man. The team leader should have known that team members would *push the upper limits of control and safety* to win.

Note: Before you decide that this team leader was incompetent, let me tell you that quite the contrary is true. In fact, he was one of the best tactical sergeants I’ve ever known. Sadly, in this case, a moment’s lapse in judgment (by all concerned) nearly got a man killed.

Rule # 4: Just because you can do something in training, does not mean that you should.

In the last five years, I've taken a lot of grief over this one. Not because I violate it, but because of the way I've chosen to handle the situation. Before I say more, let me explain why I do what I do.

In Texas, weather temperatures can exceed 100 degrees starting in early Spring and last well into Fall. In fact, in 2011 the Dallas region had over 80 days of triple digits - 70 of those days in a row. Daily, the heat did not relent until close to midnight – every night! Worse still (as if it could get any worse) was that the relative humidity was at 40%, making the “Heat Index” close to 123 degrees.

CME holds training courses year round. Summer months are not excluded just because it is hot, *even when it is brutally so*. In line with the sentiment found in Rule #1; that we do not get to pick when or where we deploy, my cadre and I must be smart about how the training is conducted. Meaning: knowing that regardless of the heat, we must still train; therefore, we must deal with the heat in as safe a manner as possible. To that end, the pictures below illustrate what we have chosen to do.



Mid August Basic SWAT class held in Cedar Hill, Texas. This picture was taken on the second half of the first day. At this point, the students had already completed four hours of lectures, a physical fitness test and now, were in full tactical gear getting to ready to do entry work and then low crawls, high crawls and 3 to 5 second rushes. Temperatures were hovering around 105 degrees with a heat index of 115 degrees.



This picture was taken around 2 pm on the second day. Temperatures were already above 100 degrees. As a reward for good performance, students are ordered to dump their heavy equipment – with the understanding to keep it close for drills that require it.



Late on day two and all of day three and four, we put the students in shorts, t-shirts and ball caps. There are still drills that require full gear – but as soon as those drills are concluded, the students are ordered back into shorts.



Practical exercises begin at 6 am Friday morning. Temperatures are above 95 degrees. However, due to the safety precautions taken during the week, the students are well hydrated and acclimatized to the weather. As can clearly be seen, the officers are obviously drenched in sweat. During these practical's, the officers were able to function at a high level of tactical proficiency throughout the intense 6 hour exam.

Remember, the rule is: **Just because you can do something in training, does not mean that you should.** I explained in some detail the issue we are dealing with so that you might better understand how this rule applies. The point I am trying to make here is: Yes, I *could avoid criticism and chose* to leave the students in full tactical gear in excessive heat conditions. However, in doing so, I would *needlessly* place my students in danger.... just because I could.

Rule # 5: Aside from sprains, strains, bumps and bruises, there are no acceptable training injuries!

I've saved this rule and the story that goes with it for last. I believe it ties in well and breaks the previous four rules. In this story, injuries were avoided but only because of the quick reactions of the evaluators. Had the injuries happened, the wounds could have been catastrophic.

In late December of 2006, I was evaluating a multi-agency hostage rescue scenario at a nearby college. The college was allowing us to use a dorm that was scheduled to be demolished. It was the perfect training site! The down side was that the weather had turned severely wet over night and, with each hour that passed, temperatures grew colder. All this would come into play later, as the rain continued to pour down.

Near dark, it came time to make the assault and liberate the hostages. The direct action team moved to its primary entry point, set up for the breach, and began slamming the door. As

planned, the bad guys had placed a large wooden chair on the inside of the door to slow the entry – not stop it. Unknown to the evaluators and actors alike, the rain had soaked through the structure and leaked heavily onto the chair, thus swelling the wood in the chair. This wedged the chair up against the wall and the door. Even though the door was flimsy, there was no way breach could be made at that location.

After the third or fourth ram-strike, the team leader called no-joy on the primary and moved his team to a large plate glass window that was designated as the secondary entry point. Unfortunately, the team had left the break and rake tool(s) at the staging area. Seeing this, the team leader ordered the Breacher to throw the 50 pound ram through the window, which he immediately did!

Before I understood what was taking place, the ram shattered the glass. The actors and evaluators on the inside jumped for cover and the assault team – discarding a controlled tactical entry with cover – ran toward the window. Below is a picture of the window.



Please note the large shards of pointed – razor sharp – glass that lines the bottom of the window. What you cannot see are like shards of glass hanging from the top. Also, out of sight and unknown to the assault team is that once you step over the window seal there is a full 12 inch drop past ground level. Remember, it was very wet and nasty. The ground in front of the window was deep with mud.

It only took a heart beat for the shock to wear off. All the evaluators began yelling for the assault team to stop moving and freeze in place, which thankfully they did! I mentioned that this story ties in with (and breaks) the other four rules. Here's how:

- Rule #1 - Training at being miserable: The entry team was put in place and left there until late in the day. Even though the team leader made several trips to the command post, the team had no break. In fact, in an effort to stay warm and out of the wind and rain, the team was hunkered against a wall near the entry point. At some point in time, the team went “admin.” This means that they cared more about staying warm and dry than they did about the mission.
- Rule #2 - Training under an adrenalin rush: Because the team had been in position for long hours without relief, when it came time to make the assault, the team literally went from being sedentary and bored to full action mode within a second. This unexpected

thrust into the action mode, gave way to a sudden and uncontrolled rush of adrenalin. When this occurred, the team leadership and unit discipline immediately broke down.

- Rule #3 - Reckless intensity: Due to the unexpected adrenalin rush, the team leader began yelling (without any warning) “go-go-go. In turn, this sent the team (and even himself) into unrestrained action and a reckless level of intensity. The team moved (actually ran) to the door without anything resembling a strategic formation. The Breacher began slamming the door before the team was stacked and set. Even though the Breacher called “no breach” on the second hit – before calling abort, the team leader let the Breacher strike the door another 4 times (yelling the whole time to get the door open). Without tactically dispersing or setting up cover, the team fell back (albeit only slightly), and then clustered in front of the second entry point.
- Rule #4 - Just because you can do something: Frustrated, on an adrenalin rush and operating at a high level of reckless intensity, the team leader – rather than control and set his team in position to make a tactical window breach – ordered the breach of the window by a severe misuse of equipment.

This brings us back full circle to Rule #5 - there are no acceptable training injuries: The team leader violated this rule in this manner: Through his actions, the team leader showed a complete disregard for the safety of his team and the actors/evaluators inside the building.

Conclusion:

I actually have another 10 training rules. Those rules deal with planning and conducting training. As I stated in the third paragraph of this article, these 5 rules – these 5 Common Sense Training Rules – deal with safety issues. Or maybe better said, situations that can become safety issues, as I hope each story illustrated.

Rarely does a team deploy with all hands present. There are always team-mates down sick, on vacation or worse, injured. Having individuals non-deployable due to an illness or on vacation is an inevitable fact of life. In SWAT; however, having an officer unable to deploy due to an injury is different – especially when the injury occurred in training! Why? Because training injuries are **rarely** unavoidable. And yet, we injure our officers during training on a routine basis.

My hope in sharing these rules and stories with you is that, in some small way, I can help you make your tactical training safer!

Stay Safe!
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