

Lobbing Grenades:

Don't Get Outwitted by Inanimate Objects

By SSgt. Rodney Smith

Can you believe that a Marine would position himself or be positioned within the surface danger zone (SDZ) of a fragmentation grenade without taking cover? That's what happened to three Marines. Here are their stories.

Standing Where He Could See It All, Even the Blast

It was your typical, picturesque spring day in southern California when a unit arrived at the military operations in urban terrain (MOUT) assault course to throw grenades. The range safety officer (RSO) and officer in charge (OIC) arrived early to receive the required briefs and complete some paperwork so they could be prepared when the company arrived. They received the SOP binder for the course from the MOUT personnel and signed the paperwork necessary to start training.

The next step was a walk-through with the course MOUT instructor, a lance corporal. The instructor escorted the RSO and OIC through the grenade house showing them the room-clearing techniques and which rooms they would use. However, the OIC wanted the training to be more realistic. He suggested to the instructor that the Marines throw the grenades into the rooms from a distant, covered position, rather than at

the door opening. The instructor told the OIC and RSO that the procedure was different from what he had learned at school and what was normally done on the course. However, he didn't have a problem with the suggestion because it didn't violate SOP.

After several rehearsals, one of the fire teams got down to training. After clearing several rooms, the fire team approached the last room in the back of the building and took their positions. Aiming for the center of the room, one of the Marines lobbed the grenade into the room. The grenade exploded within several seconds, as expected, blasting shrapnel out the entrance and past the covered Marines. Shrapnel struck the instructor who was standing in an uncovered position.

Investigators concluded that the instructor exposed himself to the blast by not standing behind the protective walls. Had he taken cover, metal shards would not have cut his neck, shoulder, upper arm, hip, and thigh. The instructor monitored the previous three assaults of the same room, and they had gone without incident. Why would he get struck on the last assault? Had he become lax?

What the Range Regs Didn't Say

The RSO told the corporal driving the unit's MRC-145 (HMMWV with high-power communication equipment) to park his vehicle on the high ground behind the grenade-throwing pits to maximize radio reception. The RSO also wanted the HMMWV's radios within arm's reach for better control of the range operations.

After 45 grenades had been thrown, the corporal stumbled out of the HMMWV with his hands over his face, bleeding. The ammunition guard immediately called for a corpsman. Shrapnel had torn through the

corporal's face and lodged behind his left eye. He was evacuated to the hospital in the safety vehicle.

The grenade that injured the corporal may not have landed within the impact area. Nevertheless, the HMMWV was parked in an unsafe area. The RSO didn't know this fact, despite being responsible for the safe operations on the range. That morning, he read the regulations that were kept on the range, but they didn't prohibit vehicles from parking in the spot that the HMMWV was in.

Range-control personnel knew about the unsafe area and had changed the range regulations indicating where to park vehicles and where to keep people not involved in the training. But they never told the unit of the changes, and the range-regulation book kept on the range didn't include the recent changes.

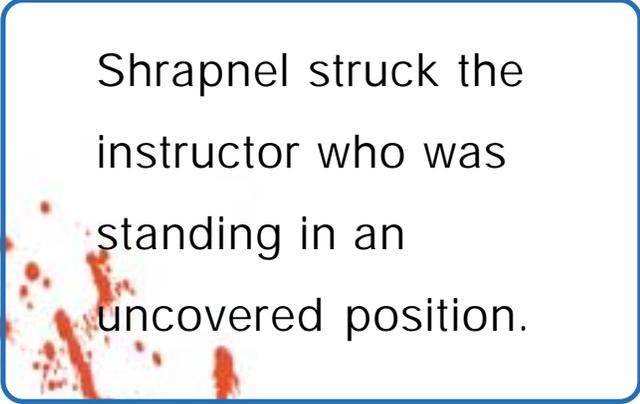
Getting the word to Marines in the trenches is always a challenge. In the fleet, our plate is overflowing with things to do. We often wait months for the perfect plan before sending the message. Meanwhile, we ignore a known, unnecessary hazard, which our Marines must still face when training. A short message containing an interim control measure (sign, barricade, procedure) can reduce or eliminate the hazard. Informing units in a timely manner can mean the difference between sending a Marine to the hospital or home to his family at the end of the day.

Captain America Makes His Own Rules

It was the first trench-and-bunker assault of the day for a three-man assault team, but it was the third for this rifle company. The training had gone as planned for the company, despite the dangers of using M67 fragmentation grenades to clear the bunkers. But this assault was different because the company commander (who was also the range OIC) decided to go with the assault team.

Adrenaline pumping, the assault team maneuvered swiftly from trench to trench, engaging each target with deadly precision. When they encountered the first bunker, they took their planned positions. The lead Marine stood at the right of the bunker entrance with his back to the wall. The Marine assigned to throw the grenade stood to his left. The captain positioned himself on the opposite side of the trench facing the two. The third member of the team remained behind, providing rear security.

The Marine with the grenade removed it from his pouch and pulled the pin. He stepped around the lead man, pitched the grenade into the bunker and quickly



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stepped back. He intended for the grenade to land at the rear of the bunker, but it fell short, just inside the opening.

The captain leaped across the trench toward the two Marines. He made it to the other side, but not before the grenade exploded. Shrapnel blasted through the bunker opening, and within seconds, the team assaulted the bunker. The captain doubled over. The shrapnel had ripped through his flak jacket into his body. After he was evacuated to a hospital, the doctors found the shrapnel had lodged between his right lung and spinal cord. He recovered, but the surgeon had to leave the metal in him.

Before the mishap, the rifle company had checked all the right boxes for a safe day of training, or so it seemed. Earlier that day, range personnel had given the captain and his RSO a walk-through, identifying the danger areas within the trenches and bunkers.

The company had thoroughly rehearsed the trench and bunker-clearing actions that day while the captain supervised. One of the company leaders had even completed a basic risk-assessment worksheet.

With all that preparation, why would the captain knowingly stand in the grenade's danger zone? The assault team might have needed extra supervision, but they didn't need the captain making a dangerous situation worse.

The next time you're leading from the front, stick with the authorized procedures for the range and what you're unit has rehearsed. Marines don't need a superhero; they need a leader. 🇺🇸

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