

Left of bang – Dry-fire practice for close combat shooting

By WO2 Mark Biviano

‘Dry firing is the surest way to master trigger control and tame recoil anticipation. Just about anyone who’s considered an expert with a gun – competitors, hunters or real-life operators – will tell you that they include plenty of dry firing as a regular part of their training.’

S. Hooper - *The Truth About Guns*

Introduction

Let’s consider an alternative way to approach marksmanship training for close combat shooting.

Marksmanship consists of movement and shooting. Movement, in this sense, involves holding, aiming and manipulating a rifle or pistol as these weapons are physically moved through space. In short, ‘movement’ is everything we do before we fire a shot. Shooting, in this sense, involves trigger manipulation, recoil control and management – meaning ‘shooting’ is everything we do after we fire a shot.

It may come as a surprise, however - if you consider marksmanship as moving and shooting - that we do a lot more moving than shooting. To get better at shooting, we have to get better at moving. In this article, we are going to get *left of bang* and explore dry-fire practice to improve the movement component of marksmanship.

Mechanical efficiency

Nothing added and nothing wasted. Mechanical efficiency is critical in achieving the speed of action demanded by close combat. Mechanical efficiency in the close fight is realised when any unnecessary movement in aligning with and presenting a rifle or pistol is eliminated. Movement and shooting are intertwined. Movement proceeds, underpins and continues after shooting has concluded. Significant improvements in mechanical efficiency can be achieved when movement improves. And for this, there is no better technique than dry-fire practice.

Mechanics

Combat shooting fundamentals can be isolated or integrated into sequences that are performed as part of a training routine. Repetition forms the basis of improving mechanics, although repetition alone is unlikely to lead to improved mechanics. Each training serial requires a point of initiation and this could be a command or a tone from a shot timer, performance markers and a definitive conclusion.

Let’s use the El Prez drill as an example of how to use dry fire to improve mechanics. This sequence involves the performance of an about turn; draw from the holster and multiple target engagements as well as a reload sequence. Each aspect of this sequence can be individually drilled for mechanical efficiency. Here is how we can break it down:

- The about turn to a presentation from the holster can be initiated by the tone of a shot timer and concluded with the visual image of the front sight post imposed on the centre of the aiming mark.
- The multiple target engagement can be initiated by a tone as the front sight post is visually tracked and coordinated with a trigger press, concluding with the final visual image of the sight post on the centre of the aiming mark.
- The reload sequence can be isolated to improve the mechanics as initiated by the magazine release and concluded by the presentation of the front sight post on the first target to be engaged in the second portion of the multiple target engagement sequence.

At all stages, the repetitions are neatly defined and the trainee requires self-discipline to remain focused on the quality of their performance. Deliberate practice is integral to effective dry-fire practice. Quality of performance is favoured over the quantity of repetitions performed or the duration of the training session.

On the dry

Dry is dry. No live ammunition is present. Your weapons, magazines and equipment have been inspected and deemed to be clear of live ammunition.

Movement is fundamental to dry-fire practice

Errors in manipulation, hold and alignment can be remediated without the requirement to shoot. This, in essence, is the value of dry-fire training. In acknowledging that shooting begins and ends with movement, it is then necessary to understand and identify whether dry-fire or live-fire is required to achieve a training outcome. As an example, errors associated with grip during the process of drawing and firing a pistol from the holster are not remediated by attempting to pass a timed and scored live-fire serial. A combatant that cannot consistently place their master hand in the optimal position while gripping the pistol to draw from the holster will experience a hold error that displaces the pistol sight. Incorrect hold and sight alignment is likely to result in a missed shot during a timed and scored serial.

This is a movement error that requires movement training to remediate. In this context live-fire is an inappropriate solution to an error related to the physical position of the master hand while gripping the pistol. Dry-fire practice is required to remediate the hold error and establish consistent movement in forming the grip from the holster. Shooting is the method by which we validate the habit of dry-fire practice. But, it is movement that is fundamental to dry-fire practice.

Habit of practice – *make it yours*

Practice can become a habit. Habits are formed by a stimulus, a routine and a reward. For dry fire, the habit of practice looks like this:

- Stimulus - Get moving with a command or a par-time set on a shot timer.
- Routine - The movement sequence to be practiced.

- Reward - Completion of the movement sequence on command or within the shot timer par.

Visual training – *the eyes have it*

Without the strike on a target to identify the result of a dry-fire sequence, the visual aspects of the training serials become crucial to self-analyse performance.

Gaze fixation, visual alignment and focal points as well as visual recognition of an acceptable sight picture are all learned skills or trained behaviours. Dry-fire practice affords the trainee an opportunity to concentrate their effort on the visual aspects of marksmanship without the reliance upon target strike and any associated pressure or anxiety that arises from striving to attain the aiming mark. The ability to identify a target and fix a visual point of reference while concurrently performing weapon manipulations is indicative of the cycle of competence.

The visual component of dry-fire practice *looks* like this:

- Post a bullseye target up on a wall or pick an easily identifiable marker.
- Focus your visual point of reference on the target or marker.
- Present the weapon to your eye-line without moving your head.
- Impose the reticule or iron sights on the target or aiming mark.
- Repeat, many times, faster and faster.

Concentration – *in the zone*

Concentration is a learned skill. The ability to visualise an aspect of a physical performance and retain that image in the mind's eye during physical performance is indicative of remaining focused. The ability to remain focused is synonymous with concentration.

Concentration requires focus on a task at the exclusion of other thoughts that may distract from a task or disrupt from the processing of sensory or environmental cues. Concentration is remaining mindful or in the present moment as a skill is performed. Dry-fire practice affords the trainee an opportunity to rehearse the generation of a mental image and the retention of that image during physical performance, without the distraction of live fire.

Go mental before you get physical.

Visualisation for dry fire *looks* like this:

- Set-up in your start position facing your target or aiming mark.
- Raise the weapon to your eye-line and establish an acceptable sight picture. Take a mental Polaroid of this visual image.
- Return the weapon to the start position.
- Shut your eyes and bring up the mental Polaroid on your virtual screen.
- Open your eyes, present the weapon on the target or aiming mark. What you see now, should match the mental Polaroid you projected up on your virtual screen.
- Repeat, many times.

Applications and timers

Dry fire practice serials can be initiated by and tracked with applications such as Dry Fire Timer (iTunes App store), Itarget Pro, Laser Lite or Mantis X and shot timers such as CED2000, Pocket pro or PACT. In each instance, the serial is bracketed by a par time and the trainee initiates the sequence at the tone and completes the mechanics before the second tone sounds. Deliberate practice and concentration on the performance markers are essential in ensuring that the quality of the repetitions remains optimal throughout the training session.

Conclusion

If you want to get better at shooting, you have to get better at moving. And the first move you should make is to get left of bang with dry-fire practice. Mechanical efficiency is movement 'light' with all of the additives removed and movement is the bastion of dry fire practice. The habit of practice is the crucial habit that we all require in order to become mechanically efficient in shooting. Movement has a visual component and concentration is a learned behaviour that can be refined with smart phone applications and shot timers. By getting left of bang, you can dial in your movement, refine your mechanics and build your concentration skills.

All you have to do next is to validate your progress with shooting.

For more resources on combat shooting go to CATC's Combat Shooting Cell Sharepoint page and join the 'combat shooting' ForceNet page:
[http://drnet/Army/CATC/CATTBr/CombinedArmsCell\(CAC\)/Pages/Combat-Shooting.aspx](http://drnet/Army/CATC/CATTBr/CombinedArmsCell(CAC)/Pages/Combat-Shooting.aspx)

Suggested images (stock images from AASAM):

Use a couple of these images below, but also add a photo or two with diversity (female and/or non-Caucasian).

https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=20200317army8526162_198.jpg&Type=Filename

https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=20200317army8526162_233.jpg&Type=Filename

https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=20200317army8526162_306.jpg&Type=Filename

https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=20200317army8526162_361.jpg&Type=Filename

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