

# Think You Know Your M249 SAW and M240G Machine Guns? *Think Again!*

By Capt. Joe Cleary

**L**eatherneck! Forget the safety, and leave the machine gun on fire. It's safer that way! What? I have to admit it sounds crazy, but I have a story for you that explains why you should leave your M249 and M240G machine guns on fire, even with rounds on the feed tray.

During a firing exercise last summer, a lance corporal was given a drum of rounds for his M249 SAW. Told to place his SAW in condition 3, he positioned the rounds on the feed tray. Next, he decided to place the gun on safe. He pulled back the cocking handle an inch until he heard and felt a click, which signaled that he could engage the safety. With his thumb, he pressed in the safety. Then he tried to ease the cocking handle and bolt to their forward position, but they stuck. Using his palm, the lance corporal shoved the handle forward, and the gun snapped, firing a round. When he had shoved the handle, the bolt had sprung forward, stripped a round, and fired it. The round tore into another Marine's arm.

After the incident, the lance corporal explained to his leaders and investigators what he had done to cause a round to unintentionally fire. Several of the leaders and investigators weren't familiar with his procedure or his version of condition 3. Perplexed, they asked him where he had learned the procedure and condition. He replied, "at school," meaning his MOS school. One SNCO offered a different explanation of condition 3, which consisted of a feed tray without rounds, the bolt locked to the rear, and the safety on. Others disagreed and said condition 3 required rounds on the feed tray, with the bolt forward and safety off. Whoa! How could there be three versions?

After lengthy research, investigators found the condition-codes (mostly condition 3 and 4) for the M249 to be inconsistent throughout the Corps. The MCWP<sup>1</sup> differed from the MBST<sup>2</sup>, and the teachings at several MOS schools differed as well. (Because the M240G is made by the same manufacturer and similar in design and function, the inconsistency also applies to

it. The M240G uses the same condition codes.)

So, what should machine gunners do? Do not follow the condition codes listed in the MBST; they are incorrect. The MBST's codes go against the design and function of the machine guns. Instead, you and your Marines should follow these condition codes:

**Condition 1:** The bolt is locked to the rear, the safety is engaged. Ammunition is on the feed tray or a magazine is inserted. The cover is closed.

**Condition 2:** Not applicable to the M249 or M240G.

**Condition 3:** The bolt is forward, the chamber is empty, and the safety is disengaged. Ammunition is on the feed tray or a magazine is inserted. The cover is closed.

**Condition 4:** The bolt is forward, the safety is disengaged and the feed tray is clear of ammunition. No magazine is inserted. The cover is closed.

The conditions listed above are taken from the MCWP (p. 2-40), with the exception of condition 3. Condition 3 listed above is a newer version agreed upon by the Corps' infantry-weapons experts. They have proposed it as a change to the MCWP.

While the MCWP's condition 3 is safe to practice, the newer version is better because it allows the gunner to transition more efficiently to condition 1—it's more technically sound.

The Schools of Infantry (SOI), The Basic School (TBS), and the Small Arms Weapons Instructor Course (SAWIC) are already teaching their students to follow the codes listed above, specifically condition 3.

**And, don't half-cock the machine gun!** This practice, as unauthorized in the MCWP (p.3-47), enables a machine gunner to bypass the weapon's design to have the safety engaged while the bolt is forward (condition 3 and 4). And, that's exactly what the lance corporal in this story did. While some Marines may think this practice makes for a safer weapon, it's deceiving and dangerous. Half-cocking may cause a jammed condition within the operating group, which may lead to a negligent discharge if rounds are present. Also, half-cocking can damage the

operating and trigger groups, which may cause a runaway gun.

Why do Marines half-cock their M249s and M240Gs? In recruit training and OCS, we teach our Marines that an M-16 should remain on safe (condition 4 through 1) until it's ready to be fired. Otherwise, the weapon isn't being handled properly. Marines have applied this logic to the M249 and M240G but are wrong in doing so. The two machine guns are designed differently from the M-16 in that they shouldn't be placed on safe when the bolt is forward (see condition 3 and 4). Thus, the machine gun's condition codes are different from those for the M-16.

SOI East and West, TBS, SAWIC, and most infantry units are teaching Marines not to half-cock their machine guns. But, they continue doing so in the operating forces as evidenced by three recent mishaps in which Marines have been shot. The problem stems from Marines (mostly senior) who haven't received recent training from SOI, TBS, or SAWIC regarding the condition codes listed above and the dangers of half-cocking.

If you have questions, ask a recent graduate of the three schools (PFC or second lieutenant), or ask a **Marine Gunner.** ☛

The author can be reached at [jcleary@safetycenter.navy.mil](mailto:jcleary@safetycenter.navy.mil).

<sup>1</sup>Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-15.1 Machine Guns and Machine Gun Gunnery dated 1 Sep. 1996

<sup>2</sup>Marine Battle Skills Training Handbook (MBST) Book 2 dated Jan. 1993.

Photograph by Sgt. B. E. Vancise