

Report: Unsafe procedures led to fatal shooting

CAMP PENDLETON ---- negligence and inadequate safety measures led to the shooting death of a Marine according to a final investigative report released by military officials.

A Marine private first class was killed during a training exercise when another Marine sergeant mistakenly loaded live rounds into his weapon instead of blanks, the report says.

Four Marines could be punished with administrative action or courts-martial in the death of the private first class who was playing the “bad guy” when he was shot four times in the torso and neck.

Investigators said they determined one magazine was loaded with blanks and another loaded with live ammunition that resulted in the fatal shooting during a mock assault mission.

Officials said that the unit commander hasn’t yet decided whether to charge the four members of the unit; each faces charges of negligent homicide or dereliction of duty.

The top operational commander at the time said the incident was “tragic beyond description.”

“The investigation reveals failures in practice and procedure that, when coupled with human error, produced the death of a fine, young Marine.” The top operational commander wrote in the investigation. “It is my responsibility to take action that will correct these deficiencies as well as hold the responsible parties accountable.”

Base officials say they are already instituting more rigorous safety procedures and reinforcing existing rules when units use blank rounds or live ammunition. They say that each range safety officer whom investigators found in this case “was over tasked with both safety and instruction duties,” will get extra help and have more authority to control the issuance and storage of ammunition.

The four Marines were removed from the platoon and returned to their Reconnaissance command, officials said.

Investigators said they found the platoon didn’t follow several safety measures, including routine checks of ammunition and separately issuing blank and live ammunition.

Reconnaissance units, which officials concede often operate less strictly because of their greater expertise than regular infantry units, will have to abide by the rules that include stringent double-checks of ammunition and weapons to prevent another ammunition mix-up.

A senior military lawyer said, “They thought that the individual himself would be responsible for the condition of the weapon.”

Although units typically have a second Marine visually inspect each magazine before it is loaded into the weapon, “they had none of that in the day in question,” the lawyer said.

The platoon had fired live rounds at a nearby range earlier in the day, but the late-day mission required blank rounds. Investigators found the sergeant grabbed different magazines, including one with heavier live ammunition, when he took his gear with him for the later training mission.

In the statement provided to Naval Criminal Investigative Service investigators, the sergeant said when he fired the rounds, "I noticed they were very loud."

The private first class hit the wall and slumped to the ground, the sergeant told investigators, "I ran over to him, dropped my magazine and noticed I had inserted a magazine of frangible (live) rounds." Additionally, the sergeant stated, "he laid his weapon on the ground, opened the private first class's vest and saw the chest wounds." He later died at the Camp Pendleton Naval Hospital.

The sergeant joined the Marine Corps six years ago. "All evidence indicated he did not know that he had shot somebody," the lawyer said.