



Junior Zachary Bruner stations himself on the cold cement floor, throwing all of his focus into his rifle and the target ahead of him. Bruner practices his shooting in the rifle range on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, while he has drill practice on the remaining days. Preparing themselves for a victory at the Area 3 competition, the rifle team and cadets such as Bruner are working rigorously hard. Photo by Paul Femia.

NJROTC rifle team shoots for stars, bullseyes and championships

By Karli Coleman

A powerful snapping sound fills the dimly lit basement that makes up the rifle range. This range has formed into a second home for many cadets that make up the rifle team. The startling noise echoes around the room, bouncing off of the cement walls. There is a constant repetition of deafening noises as cadets shoot from their air rifles one after another. This is where the rifle team practices, the pride of Chief Warrant Officer Gunner Mike Epperson.

Many important upcoming competitions were creeping around the corner for the rifle team, and the team itself had recently concluded a major competition at Area 3 in Ohio, which took place Friday, Dec. 13.

Junior Olivia Appel was found in the ROTC basement; the rooms that made up this bright, decorated basement were all too familiar to cadets, and to some it was a home away from their own house.

When the subject of rifle team arises, Appel's eyes light up, reflecting the bright lights in the room. Rifle team was a very important aspect in her life, and she was eager about the success from Area 3.

"I love rifle team," Appel said. "It's kinda like my little getaway." Many cadets love ROTC and the teams that are included such as rifle team because it teaches them a lot of life lessons and provides an outlet for problems that arise in a cadet's life.

JROTC revolves around the military core values of courage, honor and commitment. Being in JROTC and being involved in the rifle team helps cadets develop leadership skills and instills discipline and confidence into them. Cadets who are in ROTC grow as people, and one of Epperson's favorite parts about being a senior naval science instructor is watching his cadets grow and mature.

"One of my favorite parts about instructing the rifle team is watching the cadets grow and develop leadership potential," said Epperson, his eyes flashing.

Epperson was a former Chief Warrant Officer in the United States Marine Corps, and upon retirement he settled down to instruct FC's NJROTC program. Epperson instructs the unarmed drill team and teaches armed and unarmed exhibition drill, as well as instructs and handles the rifle team. The former Marine spends a lot of his time instructing cadets and training them at the rifle range, making the team better and helping cadets grow as leaders.

The rifle team sincerely shot for victory at Area 3, placing in 11th overall out of 30+ schools. The team also placed 6th best shooting school overall in the southern Indiana area. From the emotion in his voice, it was obvious to anyone that Epperson was very proud of his cadets for the success that took place at the competition.

Epperson notes that the rifle team is a very exclusive team, as are any teams that ROTC is affiliated with. Epperson said cadets cannot shoot without good grades, and they require the ability to maintain nerves. "Girls also make better shooters, due to maturity," said Epperson. "Maturity plays a key part in shooting."

Freshman Colleen Fitzgerald, a fellow cadet that was invited into the team by Epperson, said she enjoys rifle team because it's fun and gives her something to do; it gives her something to focus on and work for.

"People think that the rifle team is for boys and it's fun to show people that girls can do just as much as boys can," said Fitzgerald, adding to what Epperson said about girls typically being better shooters. "Sometimes girls even do it better. Appel got the highest score at the last rifle meet."

Rifle team is a learning experience for everybody that is involved with the team. It teaches cadets discipline, confidence, maturity, and focus. It's an intricate sport that focuses on concentration and quick critical thinking. It helps to mold cadets into better leaders and more mature citizens.

Along with teaching cadets valuable principles and offering a grip at being a leader, rifle team is also an outlet for cadets. One of the many reasons that students involve themselves in sports and extra curricular activities is because it distracts them from their problems, and helps develop them as people. As well as that, rifle team introduces cadets to new friendship opportunities.

"One of my favorite parts about being on the rifle team is getting to meet new people, and getting to show my family all of my accomplishments with the team," said Fitzgerald. Cadets like Fitzgerald and Appel are very appreciative of the rifle team and their place on the team.

This school year, the rifle team is moving towards success with renewed passion and ambition. The team is starting fresh with Epperson being the new instructor, and their goals are to shoot to new heights this year and dominate every range they shoot at.

Thus far, Epperson's first year instructing FC's NJROTC program and rifle team is coming together smoothly, according to both NS1s and NS2-4s. Epperson takes charge of the program in a peculiar way, which has taken many upperclassmen a long time to get used to. However, he is infamous for motivating cadets on the daily. Success is in the foreseeable future.

"I'm glad we're getting out there," said Appel. "The rifle team is like my little family." It is truly heartening to grow and develop as a team, and to reach success together as one.

Epperson strongly urges students to join JROTC, and he strongly advises that cadets join the rifle team. He has high regards about the team and what it has to offer cadets, and the many positive outcomes that come from being in JROTC and being involved in teams such as the rifle team make everything worth it.

NJROTC and the rifle team is able to provide scholarships, and does not effect studies. Competitions are fun, and the personal learning experiences that cadets embark on during their experience with the rifle team is something that will stay with them for the rest of their time on earth.

"Everyone can pull a trigger," said Epperson. "It's all a matter of self discipline and maturity."