

The 1st Annual Gale McMillan Memorial Sniper Team Competition

By Barrett Tillman, Photos by Nyle Leatham

The first sign says, "Welcome to Cowtown." The next sign says, "Beware of Snakes." Dude, you're in Arizona. Which translates to Gun Country.

Take 58 military and police snipers from 12 states, plunk them down in the desert for three days, and let 'em shoot it out. After the smoke had settled and the rattlers crawled away, the scores revealed a three-way tie for top gun, so another round of shooting was required. However, nobody complained – least of all the McMillan clan, purveyors of fine rifles and custom stocks.

Rock and Kelly McMillan – no strangers to patrons of *The Blue Press* – wanted to honor the founder of the firm. Thus emerged the Gale McMillan Sniper Team Competition, held at the Cowtown movie set northwest of Phoenix May 5-7, 2004. The sniper community responded enthusiastically, with 29 teams accepting the challenge. It was a sensational debut, as the McMillan event immediately leapt into prominence. William Graves, honcho of the McMillan Sniper School, oversaw the match and explained, "We're really happy with the first year. This is already the second-largest sniper competition in the country."

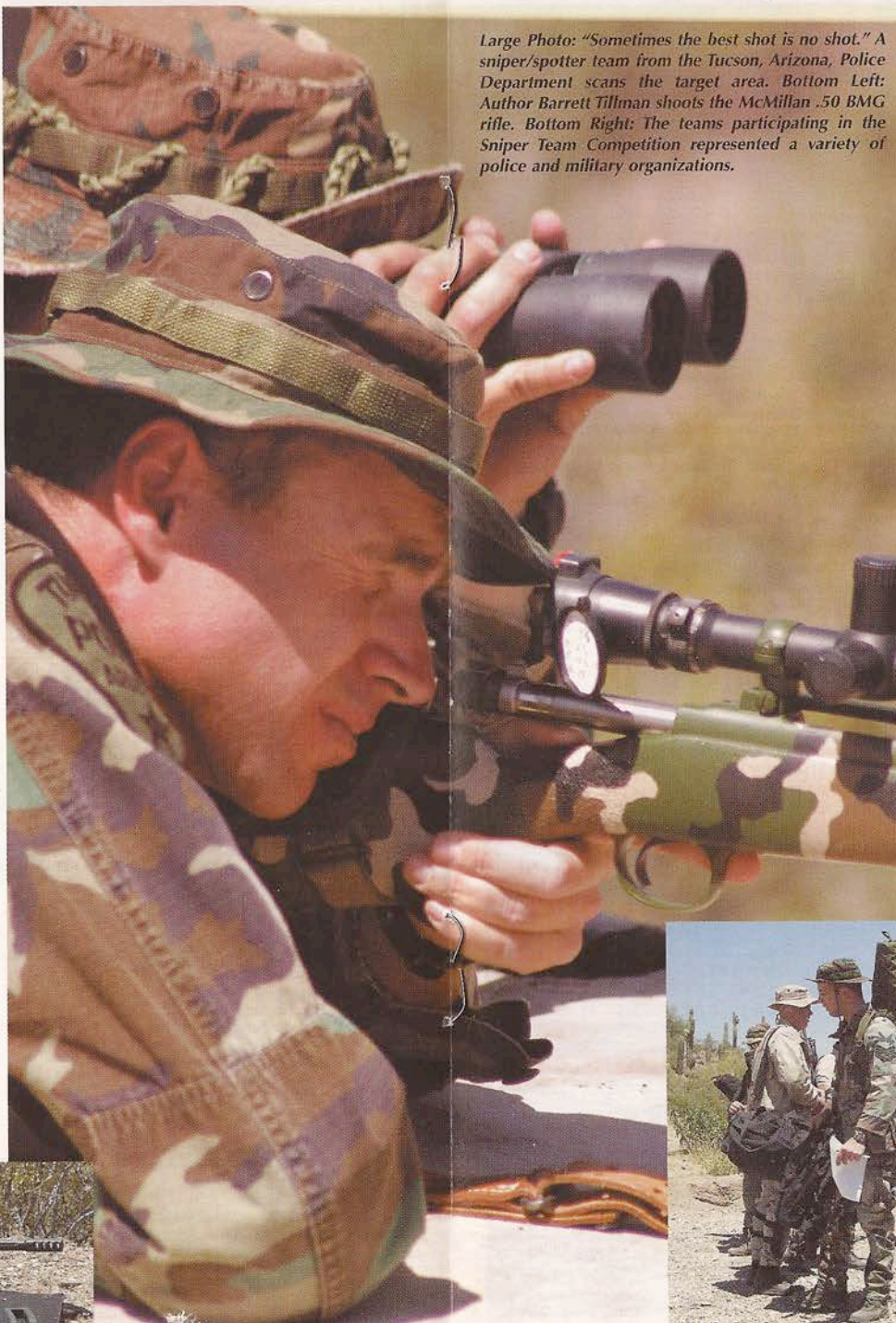
With a wealth of training experience, Graves and his staff established a match involving more than shooting. Two of the eleven stages were based solely on observation, requiring competitors to find multiple silhouette targets among the cacti and chaparral, and to remember dissimilar items, all under time limits.

The 29 teams represented a variety of police and military organizations. They came from as far afield as DC (the Pentagon police) and Fort Bragg to as close to home as Phoenix, Scottsdale and Mesa. Some had recent "real-world" experience, including the Army Special Forces snipers just back from another desert venue – Iraq. A few entrants were brand new to the sniping world and arrived short of equipment. Not to worry. McMillan provided loaners to those without enough rifles to round out the team, though some military units prefer both members to use the same primary weapon. It permits the spotter to carry an M16 for up-close engagements.

To Shoot or Not To Shoot

Shooting stages involved precision riflery at distances from 25 to 425 yards. Some events involved just one round per shooter, and the entire match barely required a box of ammo. While some competitors wanted more trigger time, others recognized the real-world applications. McMillan instructor Thad Benton said, "Sometimes the best shot is no shot. We made the scoring so there's no

Large Photo: "Sometimes the best shot is no shot." A sniper/spotter team from the Tucson, Arizona, Police Department scans the target area. Bottom Left: Author Barrett Tillman shoots the McMillan .50 BMG rifle. Bottom Right: The teams participating in the Sniper Team Competition represented a variety of police and military organizations.



penalty for passing up a shot but there are serious penalties for hitting a no-shoot."

Experience has shown that the average police sniper shot occurs at about 75 yards. However, closer encounters are fairly frequent, and the match illuminated any deficiency in across-the-street training. Several competitors admitted that they had never determined a zero inside 100 yards.

Another rare feature of the McMillan event was the ability to shoot downhill on multiple stages, at varying distances. Trying to pick off fleeting hostiles amid a crowd of no-shoots also tested snipers' speed and judgment. But team co-ordination also counted for a great deal. Putting two rounds on Hostile One and none on Hostile Two was a short trip to the bottom of the roster.

Apart from the match schedule, fringe benefits included a night shoot with sponsor-supplied equipment and a tour of both McMillan facilities. Snipers also had the opportunity to fire the company's .338 and .50 caliber rifles at distances approaching half a mile. Nearly everyone commented upon the effectiveness of the .50's muzzle brake. Said one shooter, "I'd rather fire ten .50s in that gun than five .300 Win Mags."

Wrapup

Two Louisiana reserve deputies topped the field as Terry Cross and Jim Clark captured the team title while Cross won the top-gun shootoff. Scottsdale's Tim Wattier ranked second and Marine Sgt. Ron Fuchs, Jr., finished third.

The home teams did notably well, with Scottsdale PD finishing second overall while Maricopa County and Luke AFB snipers held down third and fourth spots.

However, relative rankings were only part of the equation. Every shooter we interviewed was enthusiastic about the match format, which included an "after action report" wherein competitors offered suggestions for next year. To use an overworked phrase, the snipers were unanimous in their praise of the "networking" opportunities. One of the Canadian Army shooters was particularly enthusiastic, noting that chances to exchange information with Brand X are rare.

After three days in the heat, competitors were ready to return to their respective climes.

Meanwhile, they exchanged addresses, perused the vendor tables, and picked up goodies from Otis and other match sponsors. Though next year's dates have not been set, it's safe to say that the second Gale McMillan Sniper Competition will be another sellout. Most of the same shooters plan to be back – and undoubtedly so do the snakes. 