

MARINES INVADe ARIZONA

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The March sky was whipped into swirling eddies by the rotor blades of five helicopters. Two CH-46E Sea Knights delivered the assault force while a pair of AH-1W Super Cobras circled low over the target: thin, gray predators seeking prey. Overhead was a UH-1N Huey command and control bird, "the DC-3 of helicopters" seemingly ageless in its longevity and versatility. Higher yet was a KC-130 Hercules aerial tanker.

All four aircraft designs are ancient by military standards. Except the Cobra, which dates from 1967, they appeared in the era of hula hoops and Mouseketeer hats. (The US Army retired its AH-1s three years ago.) The Sea Knight and Huey joined the Marines in 1964 while the mighty "Herc" is even older. The original Air Force model first flew in 1956 (when Eisenhower was president) and was adopted by the Marines four years later (when Kennedy was president).

It's doubtful that any of the pilots we saw that day had been born when their aircraft entered service. On the other hand, sometimes Older is Better: *Blue Press* readers know there's absolutely nothing wrong with the M1911 pistol.

Front-Row Center

Owing to all the Right Contacts, we were invited to observe the operation in an abandoned industrial park awaiting its turn in the super fund cleanup schedule. One of two large buildings was designated the objective while participants and observers watched from the second.

The briefing was provided by a noncom in civvies but his high and tight haircut marked him as one of the breed. "Our scenario today is set in Ethiopia," he began. "The building represents a religious school that's been taken over by radical fundamentalists. Our objective is to neutralize the radicals, and return the building to the school." He added that the building had 53 rooms containing 16 targets. Two were no-shoots. We were warned that there would be live-fire exercises inside the building as well as "dynamic entry," which is a buzzword for explosive.

The operations plan involved three elements: a security force arriving by vehicle to secure the perimeter; a sniper team to open the ball by "neutralizing" two guards (Apparently the US Marine Corps doesn't kill people anymore!); and the heliborne assault force. A few WW II veterans recalled the good old days when the Marines neutralized the hell out of places like Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima.

Our briefing ended 30 minutes before the scheduled start time, but a full hour passed before the first trucks and "humvees" rolled in.

Scuttlebutt had it that West Valley traffic interfered with the ground element.

As the ground element dispersed to contain the perimeter, the sniper team opened fire on the two visible "guards" on the northeast corner. From 143 yards the first 7.62 round penetrated a dual-pane glass door, taking the mannequin below the nose and exiting behind the left ear. The next three rounds went into a radio-controlled popup silhouette. The after-action review showed a three-inch group centered on the radical's chin.

From our position beneath the snipers we glimpsed a second rifle, a scoped M16 used by a "designated marksman." Reportedly most rifle squads now possess such a capability: a sniper-qualified Marine with the extra precision possible in an optically-sighted, heavy-barrel weapon. The main difference, of course, is limited range and penetration in comparison to the M40 bolt action.

At that point the two Sea Knights motored into view, alighting on the tarmac near the door. However, the entry team scampered around the west side and several minutes later we heard a series of *Booms* as dynamic entry was made.

All the while, the Super Cobras maintained a wagon wheel orbit perhaps 500 feet overhead, always on opposite sides of the circle from one another. It was obviously part of the script, as one gunship was almost always in position to roll in should any "hostiles" appear on the roof or elsewhere nearby.



Large Photo: A CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter delivers a Marine assault force during a recent exercise in Arizona. Above: With an AH-1W Super Cobra gunship overhead, a Marine sniper team prepares to engage their target. (See inset photo at right.)



After an hour or so the assault force began extracting. The CH-46s loaded up and lifted off, blowing all manner of small and medium-sized debris upon the spectators. The snipers withdrew from their hide atop the adjacent building, and finally the ground team mounted up and exited in its trucks and hummers.

The audience was favorably impressed with the demonstration, especially since such evolutions are seldom announced, let alone open to viewing. But the Marines, active and reserve, were uniformly cheerful and friendly, looking equally squared away in their new computer-generated camouflage patterns.

SpecOps Background

Without saying so, the Marines were showing us their Maritime Special Purpose Force (MSPF) which is part of every deploying Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The MSPF is not intended to operate independently, as the MEU provides essential logistics and basing support, but the MSPF doorkickers are specially trained in a variety of missions including reconnaissance, hostage rescue, demolitions and "direct action" (more of that "neutralizing" we heard about).

Perhaps more to the point of the op we observed, most MSPFs receive dedicated instruction in urban recon and surveillance (R&S). Course topics include intelligence considerations, R&S planning, route planning and movements,

countersurveillance, and urban communications. And, since Marines like to be able to get out of trouble almost as fast as they can get in, there's also escape and evasion (E&E). By definition Marines are light troops, operating well forward and not always connected to an artillery battery at the other end of the radio. Consequently, they train to operate, fight and win independently.

Much of the Corps' urban planning and training is achieved via Project Metropolis, which dates at least from 2001. Open sources refer to on-site research and training in Arkansas and elsewhere, with Marines involved in considerable headwork and counter-terror planning. But it's not entirely theoretical: reportedly nocturnal live-fire exercises have been conducted in some downtown urban areas, using targets backed by armor plate.

Some Marine Corps special ops training is devoted to homeland security, though specifics are understandably rare. Logically, the need to engage terrorists by using small arms within the US is extremely unlikely, as a gunfight *jihad* is by definition a losing proposition (especially in Arizona, a CCW state with more world- and national-class shooters per capita than anywhere on earth). But there's a stated need for the Marine option in event of a WMD scheme being uncovered. All we can say is that the Marines had things well in hand on the morning they landed in Arizona.