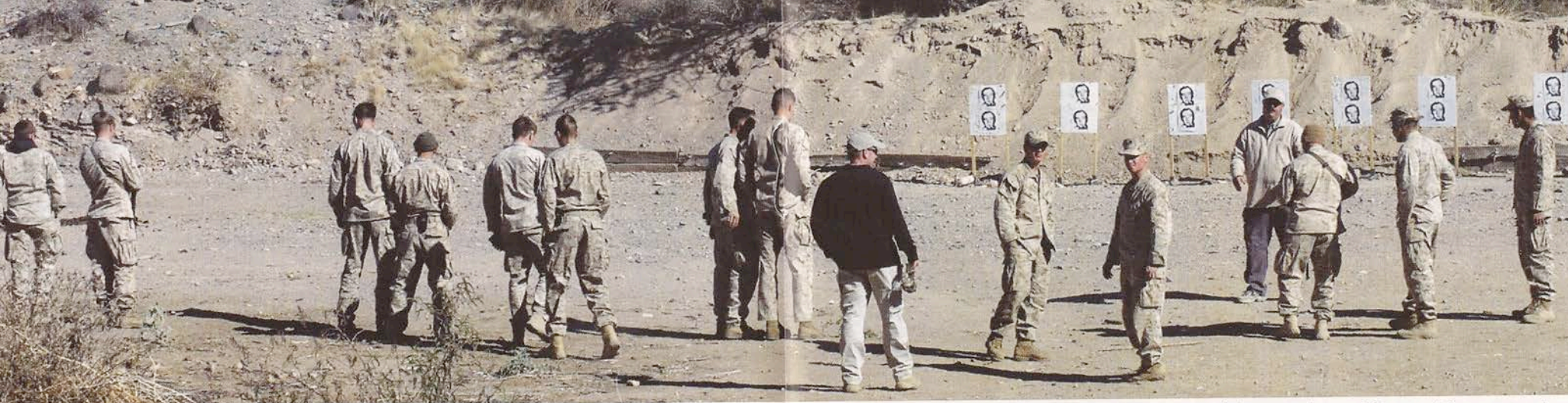


RECON, McMILLAN STYLE



By Barrett Tillman, Nyle Leatham Photos

It was January in Arizona – time to train for the upcoming gunfighting season in Iraq.

The McMillan Sniper School has no shortage of trainee gunfighters these days. Or more specifically, rifle fighters. Since 9-11 the Phoenix area firm has trained a succession of military and police organizations in addition to hosting the annual Gale McMillan Sniper Match.

William Graves, who ramrods the school, reports that five months of courses were already filled when the new year rolled around, and four other months were half to three-quarters enrolled. “We’re full up for our 10-day warfighter classes,” he said. “People keep calling us, asking when they can step into the available slots.”

The January course at the old Cowtown movie lot consisted of 14 Marines from the Second Reconnaissance Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Led by Staff Sergeant Mark Detrick, the unit included a mixture of new bubbas and old heads. Sergeant Eric Kocher, for instance, was preparing for his fifth deployment; the fourth to Iraq. He is nothing if not motivated: in Fallujah he was blown up by an RPG that destroyed his rifle and maimed his partner. The Surefire light was the only part of his M16 that survived the explosion, as Kocher sustained severe injuries that required multiple operations on his right arm and hand. Consequently, the company donated its advanced hearing aids that enabled him to remain on active duty.

The New Rifle

Recon troops are not to be confused with full-time snipers. But they need that capability, and they’re equipped accordingly. The Corps’ new sniper rifle is the M40A3 with a 25-inch

Schneider barrel and steel floorplate magazine. In place of the old 10X Unertl is a 3x12 Schmidt and Bender with settings from 100 to 1,000 yards, as the Marines don’t use meters anymore. However, the mil dot reticle is mated to 1/10 mil windage and elevation knobs (1 miliradian = 3.4 inches at 100 yards).

“It really takes getting used to,” said one Marine. “We sort of grew up with minute-of-angle adjustments but somebody decided that spotting scopes and rifle scopes should have the same values. But we’re still using spotting scopes that were made in the 1940s, so it doesn’t really help us.”

The M40A3 was adopted in 2004, and it’s extremely accurate: Recon Marines were frequently hitting IPSC silhouettes at over 900 yards. Though “the front office” did consult snipers about the new rifle, somehow the match shooters got a say, and the A3

weighs a honking 19 pounds. That’s one hellacious load to carry, especially in places like Afghanistan where it’s uphill in both directions. The result is a weapon that’s much better suited to benchrest matches than infantry combat.

Instructor Rick Furr, who also manages the Fire-base Phoenix school, provided technical expertise. Using a Remington 700, he demonstrated how to remove a barreled action from the McMillan glass-bedded stock to cure a finicky safety or disassemble a bolt. Ordinarily only battalion and depot-level armorers are authorized to do such work, but



Graves and Furr believe that shooters need to know how to repair their weapons in the field.

Furr also showed the Marines how to use simple devices to improve performance. Snipers usually are issued match-grade ammo, but careful selection can

result in as much as a 10 percent improvement in accuracy. Furr advocates weighing each lot of ammo and setting aside heavy or light rounds for practice. Other checks are a concentricity gauge and a meplat uniformer to deburr bullet tips. He warns, “You can do everything exactly right and still miss at long range. But if you cull your combat ammo during your down time, it can pay off when you crosshair somebody who needs to go away.”

At the end of the course, the recon Marines had more information than they had been able to accumulate before. High on the list was valid scope settings for more than 30 distances, from seven yards to 1,000. Other benefits include use of the shooting sling (seldom taught in military schools), unconventional positions such as the Hawkins low prone, and live-fire stalks. Because of range safety concerns, military snipers conduct most of their training stalks with blanks. At Cowtown that’s not a limitation.

The In-Country View

After multiple tours, the Marines know what to expect when they return to Iraq. For instance, the resistance fighters prefer to spend the winter conducting secretive operations but often they come out in the summer. “They think they have an advantage because they’re used to 120-degree heat,” explains Sgt. Detrick. “They know that we’re all loaded down with armor and other gear, so they’re more willing to fight in the hot months.”

Despite the conditions, many Marines remain eager for repeat tours in Iraq. Their reasons are varied, ranging from patriotism to pro-

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