

A Sniper's Confession: The Importance of Competitive Shooting to Sniping

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Well before I became a sniper and sniper instructor – nearly 20 years ago -- there has been a rivalry, approaching an adversarial relationship, between the sniper community and High Power, NRA-type shooters in the military. I saw it when I was a Marine stationed at the USMC Marksmanship Training Unit (MTU) in Quantico, Virginia in the 80's and also at the National Guard Bureau MTU in Little Rock, Arkansas in the late 90's. Often the rivalry was limited to good-humored ribbing; still a good portion of it was serious and said with malicious intent. Often, the banter turned into fisticuffs, with the resulting bad blood between the two communities. This is unfortunate, to say the least.

How many times have you heard these phrases uttered, "I don't care what those paper punchers do, this is sniping and it's an entirely different game!" Who needs to learn how to use a sling? That's for those yellow glass shooters!" Or from team shooter "Hey sniper! When are you going to learn how to shoot?" and "I'm telling you it's easier to take a National Match Shooter and teach him infantry skills than it is to take a grunt and try to teach him how to shoot!" I have heard these and a lot more, and being familiar with both sides of the rivalry I have come to some conclusions. What I will do here is attempt to show, through my own experiences and historical examples, the importance of competitive shooting events to snipers and how the two shooting disciplines' interrelate.

There used to be a sign in the classroom of the 3rd Marine Division Scout-Sniper School in Okinawa. It has been awhile, but I remember that it stated that a sniper was a hybrid of a poacher and a competitive shooter. At the time in 1980, the sign really didn't register; it was simply a phrase intended to motivate the students. I was a high expert M16 shooter and that, plus this sniper training I was about to undergo, was going to make me a steely-eyed killer. I graduated, kept training, shot the M16 annually, went on to graduate from the Quantico instructor course, and figured that I was one bad Marine who didn't need any training in other rifle disciplines. I never really paid much attention to the USMC Competition in Arms program, which holds Division level competitions and culminates in the Marine Corps matches and results in the selection of that year's "All Marine Corps" teams. I saw the funny looking leg medals and kinda wondered what those distinguished shooters badges were about.

Once I got stationed at the USMC MTU I cohabited with the Marine Corps shooting teams. I made a few friends on the teams and started getting curious about this "competitive shooting" thing. I started talking to the team shooters and some of the more senior ones even taught me some tricks. Unfortunately, during the eight years I was stationed at the MTU, I only shot one rifle match, the 1000-yard stage of the Virginia State Championships. I wanted to see what the deal was. It was a good experience, and it wetted my appetite for later down the road.

In 1989, I was promoted to Warrant Officer and made a Range Officer. USMC Range Officers supervise marksmanship training and are responsible for the training and management of small shooting teams throughout the Corps. Many of the top enlisted rifle and pistol shooters are put into this military occupational specialty. I was selected due to my training background and was expected to get up to speed on the competitive aspects of the USMC marksmanship program. So at my first duty station I was appointed to be team captain of the shooting team

at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, CA. Mare Island is the original location of the West Coast Boot Camp and had a tradition of fine shooting teams back to the early 1900's. I was lucky to work with a Staff Sergeant who was an experienced competitive shooter and despite my best efforts to mess things up we put together a team, trained and went to shoot the 1st Marine Division matches in Camp Pendleton.

How did I – one bad sniper – do? You could say that in his first attempt at NRA style Service Rifle shooting this old sniper didn't do so well. In fact, I ended up about halfway down out of about 200 shooters. To understand why I did so poorly, you have to understand what I, a "tactical" shooter, thought about marksmanship and competition:

1. I thought I knew what precision marksmanship was about.
2. I thought I knew how to read wind.
3. I thought I knew what precision shooting under pressure was like.

I was wrong. On all three counts.

While I had a good idea of what was going on, I was only at about a sophomoric level, learned yet stupid. Most of the mistakes I made that first year were mental errors, not physical. I knew shooting positions, I knew wind formulas, and I knew how to press a trigger. The problem was in the application of these aspects, which had kept me at a mediocre level of competitive shooting. Let me explain.

Precision Marksmanship. When training snipers, many times instructors espouse the idea of precision being that as long as the students keep the bullet in the chest they are doing well. In competitive shooting, matches are won and lost in the X-ring. This elusive little sucker can ruin your day if you don't think center instead of a hit in the middle somewhere. What competitive shooting does is develop the mindset during training that if your weapons system is capable of holding .5 minute of angle (MOA), then you should be getting .5 MOA out of it when firing from the shoulder. I found as well that competitive shooting shows you the difference between a good position and a correct position. Not only that but it also shows you that through proper trigger control, position and mental management a shooter can regularly hit a man-sized target from the standing unsupported position at 200 yards and prone at the 600 yardline with iron sights and no support other than a correct position and a little leather strap.

Reading wind. As a sniper you learn how to read wind for your partner. You glue your eye into the scope and casually take a guess at the mirage, grass blowing, whatever. As the shot fires you watch the trace and impact and make required corrections. In competitive shooting you are your own wind caller. You must get the wind right or that little X-ring will elude you enough to put you right out of the competition. On rapid-fire strings you have to be fast, sure and accurate. You have to learn to watch flags, mirage, grass and any other indicators you can find. And when you make a mistake, it's your butt, your embarrassment, and your miss at 3 or 9 o'clock. The ultimate test of this, in my mind, is the 1000 yard match (relax you benchresters). It's in these matches where you are on the line with your peers playing a mental game. Here the X-ring is 10 inches and only the best will nail the sucker on a regular basis while reading their own wind.

Pressure. There are few stressors as evil as competition. When shooting a qualification course you may feel a little stress, when you are shooting for high shooter in a school you may feel even more. But show up to a firing line full of strangers, some of who look like they really know what they are doing. They have high speed looking guns and bright shiny reloads and their shooting jackets have patches from hell all over them. Each shot is spotted and scored and as your points accumulate the stress can start. Each firing line it gets worse and worse, unless you learn to handle it. That is when you will have to learn to deal with stress.

My experiences with High Power shooting impressed upon me the importance of NRA-style competition for a tactical shooter. That does not mean that I believe a High Power shooter in the tactical arena, when compared with the tactical shooter in the High Power arena, will outperform the tactical shooter. Quite the contrary. The proficient tactical shooter should be able to make that X-ring-accurate shot with monotonous regularity, but against live, moving targets whose comrades will shoot back upon successful interdiction. And this does not include the terribly strenuous infiltration and exfiltration necessary for a successful sniper engagement. In short, competitive shooting does not encompass the "poaching" skills referred to on the sign in Okinawa. What I mean is that the proficient sniper can, and should, learn from the High Power shooter, if he is to be a better sniper. This is important, for there is no second place in the sniper's arena. Only death.

Since I left the USMC I began shooting in the Canadian Forces Small Arms Championships in Ottawa, Canada. These matches are open to civilians through the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association (www.dkra.ca) which is the Canadian equivalent of the NRA. CFSAC is an excellent example of how bulls-eye competition can be crossbred with combat style skills. Competitors in service rifle/pistol, sniper rifle and light machinegun categories are required to apply precision marksmanship skills in combat oriented courses of fire at extended ranges while under conditions of physical and mental stress. My favorite is the 300m "Agony Snaps". In this match you are assigned a sector of fire in which a "Hun head" sniper target is presented randomly for engagement. The hard part of this is that you don't know when or where the target will appear only that you will have ten, 3-second exposures in around 10 minutes, plus you have about a 4 inch 5 ring you are hunting. Just when you close your eyes to relax, sure as hell, there it is. The US National Guard runs a similar competition (American Forces Skill at Arms Meeting) in Little Rock, Arkansas annually, however it is not open to civilians.

CFSAC has given me the opportunity to compete against international level shooters and has allowed me to see other countries weapons systems and operational techniques. The firing positions used by Canadian Forces service rifle shooters are a good example of things that can be learned by attending these competitions. These positions, which violate just about every rule in the NRA High Power manual, are very interesting and are worth an article by themselves.

Another type of international competition worth mentioning are the Super Sniper Shootouts put on by Autauga Arms. These matches draw competitors from all over the world and are a sure way of testing yourself against the best the world has to offer.

Though my own experiences impressed upon me the importance of competitive shooting to sniping, a review of the history of military marksmanship would have led me to the same conclusion. Let's look at the military side of the question, which, if we are honest, keeps a

good portion of the US competitive rifle-shooting program going. I'll focus on the USMC as it is the most active of the services, and I know it well.

The USMC did not have a competitive program prior to 1900. In a letter he wrote to the NRA in 1943, Lt. Gen. Thomas Holcomb, Commandant of the Marine Corps during W.W.II, and a Distinguished Rifle shooter, said the following:

I was introduced to the N.R.A. in 1901. It was a rude introduction because our team was soundly trounced, finishing sixth in both the Hilton Trophy Match and Interstate Team Match-events, which the following year, were combined into the National Rifle Team Match. Naturally, we did not relish such a poor showing so we set out to learn how to shoot. By 1910 the Inspector of Small Arms Practice, U.S.M.C., reported proudly that "over one-third of the men in the Marine Corps are now qualified as marksmen, sharpshooters or expert riflemen!" How many of the present generation of officers realize that in those days the Army, Navy and Marine Corps were actually learning how to shoot from the civilians and civilian-soldiers who formed the backbone of the National Rifle Association? In 1911 the Marines won their first National Rifle Team Match, and by 1917 we had progressed so far along the marksmanship trail that every Marine who sailed overseas was a trained marksman.

General Holcomb and his men were not the only Marines lacking in sufficient rifle technique at the turn of the century. In the Sept 1971 MARINE CORPS GAZETTE, USMC shooting legend LtCol. W.W. McMillan wrote, "In 1899, Commandant Heywood was appalled to learn that less than a hundred Marines, officers and men, could not meet qualification requirements with the then current Krag Jorgenson rifle. By direction of Major C.H. Lauchheimer, the Corps proceeded to take shooting seriously, both for combat purposes and competition. Marksmanship became a highly prized skill and valued adjunct to leadership."

Prior to World War I, Marines like Calvin A. Lloyd, D.C. McDougal and then-2ndLt Thomas Holcomb advanced the respectability of match shooting, while pioneering instructional techniques and training methods for a far flung expeditionary Corps. In 1906 Marines began getting the M1903 Springfield rifle. Those who could shoot expert with it were rewarded with marksmanship qualification pay of \$3.00 per month.

The focus on rifle competition within the Corps reaped dividends in the coming years in Mexico, Cuba, Haiti and in the wheatfields of France. One of the better descriptions of the effects of improved marksmanship through competition is by CPT John Thomason, Jr. in his W.W.I USMC classic "FIX BAYONETS." "The Bosche wanted Hill 142; he came and the rifles broke him and he came again. All his artillery was in action and his machineguns scoured the place, but he could not make headway against the rifles. Guns he could understand; he knew all about bombs and auto-rifles and machine-guns and trench mortars, but aimed sustained rifle fire that comes from nowhere in particular and picks men off- it brought the war home to the individual and demoralized him". And "Already around Hautevesnes there had been a brush with advancing Germans, and the Germans were given a new experience: rifle fire that begins to kill at 800 yards; they found it very interesting!"

One need not take my word for it, or even the historical experiences of the USMC, to appreciate the importance of marksmanship competition to sniping, one need only look at the life and experiences of Gunny Hathcock, himself a top-ranked competitive shooter and a very successful sniper. Through competition -- whether High Power, under the auspices of the

NRA, or the Super Sniper Shootout – you can hone your skills and become the shooter that the bad guys have to worry about.