

SPECIAL OPERATIONS REPORT

INSIDE THE WORLD OF
POLICE AND MILITARY
TACTICAL UNITS



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Operator Development



By Scott Oldham

It had been a long, hard struggle to reach the hide site. After being inserted by helicopter several kilometers away, the sniper team had made its way for six hours in the dark of night, selecting a piece of high ground that would offer a commanding view of the village below, as well as providing escape routes should things go badly. Over the next few hours, before the daylight could betray them, the team had skillfully dug and camouflaged what would be their home until the high value target made his final appearance. Certainly it would have been easier to simply laser the target for a beam-riding 500 pounder, but the village was full of innocents, so the job had fallen to the sniper, his observer and their “old school” precision methods.

A sniper team trains on one of McMillan OpDev's vast ranges. The goal of OpDev is to simulate real-world conditions as closely as possible.

They both knew that there would only be one opportunity. The target would most likely be visible, and thus vulnerable, for only the briefest period of time. As the day dragged on the heat climbed steadily into triple digits, and even in the shade of the hide's overhead cover it was nearly unbearable. Then, as day turned to night, there was a rush of activity. Suddenly the target emerged from a village hut, moving quickly with his small entourage toward a waiting vehicle. Just as suddenly, the team's precision rifle bucked, and the match grade bullet found its mark.

This could well have been one of many successful sniper operations in war-torn

Iraq, the mountains of Afghanistan, or some other never-to-be-disclosed location where coalition forces are hunting those responsible for the terror that plagues our world. Yet in reality it was all a very elaborate, ultra-realistic training operation taking place at one of the nation's newest training centers, McMillan Operator Development.

In the world of military and law enforcement special operations, assaulters, breachers and snipers regard certain products and companies as legendary. Firms like Heckler and Koch, Colt, Safariland and Surefire are well known to most as their products cross “cultural” barriers. Within the sniper-observer

community, however, there are relatively few such examples; sniping is a precision task with exceedingly special needs. One of the legends on this side of the tactical house is McMillan, a standard bearer known for precision rifles, stocks and a myriad of custom accessories.

Although McMillan is an undisputed leader in the “gear” field, the company is acutely aware that all of its high-end equipment, precision hardware and custom accessories will do the end users no good if they don’t have the training necessary to complete the mission. With the ongoing Global War on Terror, McMillan saw a gap emerge in the training available to those going into harm’s way. As such, they set out to augment the training that has already been provided to the operator, with a series of specialty courses taught by a staff that can be considered a “dream team,” and set them all in a place best described as “perfect.” The philosophy of McMillan Operator Development is relatively simple: Experience and prior training set the tone for success in real world engagements, and they are in a unique position to provide the end user with a set of experiences that will allow them to successfully prosecute future missions.

The goal of McMillan Operator Development (OpDev) is to provide realistic, real world training that duplicates, as closely as possible, the conditions the warfighter will face in theater, or the law enforcement officer during a tactical call-out. To that end McMillan has recently opened an Arizona facility that features two separate and distinct areas: the Northern Forward Operating Base (NFOB) and the Southern Forward Operating Base (SFOB). Each of these areas is geographically huge with varying terrain and climates, and each provides a series of unique opportunities to conduct patrol, vehicle and aviation asset evolutions while training in a true 360 degree arena.

The dream team of the training cadre includes McMillan Operator Development Owner and CEO Ryan McMillan, who spent seven years on active duty with U.S. Navy Special Warfare units including two combat tours in Operation Iraqi Freedom. During his career, Ryan conducted a variety of missions requiring sniping, assault and personal protection skills, as well as training allied forces in all facets of the tactical operations world. McMillan’s Director of Training is Sergeant Major Mark Spicer, recently retired from the British Army. Spicer spent over 25



(Top): OpDev's dedicated helicopter assets offer precision shooting platforms, as well as insertion/extraction capabilities.

(Above): With enormous northern and southern FOBs, OpDev trainees can duplicate actual mission tasks and bring heavy firepower to bear.

years in the British Military serving primarily as a sniper and instructor, is known worldwide within the sniper/observer community, and is the author of several books dealing with this very complex art. For his long history of work in counterterrorism and sniping, he was chosen by the United States Department of Justice to be an expert witness on the subject of sniping during the prosecution of the “D.C. Area Snipers,” Chris Dillon, a principal of the well-known Dillon Aero, is McMillan’s Director of Aerial Operations, and David Agata serves as the Chief Instructor for Law Enforcement programs.

McMillan Operator Development offers all of the needed assets one could ever want or hope to expect. With on-site aviation assets and a group of instructors

who have all experienced deployments on real world operations, as well as a vast facility to conduct training evolutions out of public view, there is little that cannot be accomplished. Courses offered include Basic and Advanced Sniper and Counter Sniper, as well as a specific course on building a covert hide in urban terrain. Also offered are courses dealing with ballistic development and barrier research, taught jointly by Spicer and MIT Physicist Lyman Hazelton. One of the most unique courses is Aerial Platform, which teaches the art of accurately firing a weapon from a helicopter or other aviation asset. The course, a joint effort between OpDev and Dillon Aero (manufacturer of mini-guns seen on a significant number of U.S. Military

Photos: McMillan OpDev



(Above): Realistic targets, such as these rooftop RPG gunners and vehicles, offer long range training opportunities for OpDev snipers (left).

aircraft), allows students the opportunity to fire a variety of weapon systems including the mini-guns. The interest in the use of airborne law enforcement countersnipers has seen a dramatic rise in the years following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; law enforcement agencies, such as the New York City Police Department, have begun deploying officers on aviation assets armed with precision weapons for use in counterterrorist operations. The McMillan Aerial Platform course is one of the few such training opportunities available for officers tasked with these duties.

Mark Spicer, who has seen numerous real world deployments in a wide variety of spots around the globe, explains the depth of McMillan's commitment to the new facility. "The first step in forming the new McMillan Operator Development was to make a clear distinction that this was not the old McMillan Sniper School," says Spicer. "We realized that there needed to be improvements that the old school was simply not capable of achieving, so OpDev was formed to take the training to an entirely different level, a level far above what others in the field can offer."

While McMillan Operator Development had been in planning for several years, concept

became reality when Ryan McMillan retired from Naval Special Warfare and partnered with Spicer, who was leaving the British Ministry of Defense. After a year of searching for the appropriate site, they, along with the rest of the cadre, set about establishing training programs that offered not almost everything an individual student or complete unit would need to train for real world missions, but exactly what they would need.

Constant improvements are being made at OpDev, so that virtually any type of mission scenario will be possible. In the future, the already sprawling training area is set to add a complex MOUT facility featuring an extremely large "kill house" built by MGM Targets. This will further enhance the ability of operators to carry out training that will not only mimic, but should sufficient time and intelligence be available, exactly duplicate upcoming missions. With its aviation and ground mobility assets, OpDev has the capability to allow a unit to plan and train for a specific mission by doing real time work-ups with all operational assets, including insertion and extraction platforms.

One of the remarkable traits that sets OpDev apart from other training facilities is size and scope. At McMillan Operator

Development, a student can actually shoot mountain-to-mountain and rooftop-to-rooftop, situations that can't be duplicated at most traditional training locations. "OpDev shots are dictated by terrain, not instructors," Spicer emphasizes. "Scenarios are designed from the outset to duplicate what occurs 'out there,' not what is simply easiest."

With both the Northern FOB and the Southern FOB capable of being accessed via helicopter, it's possible for units to stage in one FOB and insert to the other, conducting live fire patrol and attack missions and then extracting back to base. The facility is also currently undergoing evaluation as a parachute drop zone, so that even more realistic and elaborate training scenarios can be undertaken.

The total goal of McMillan Operator Development is to provide simply the best training of this type in the world; "good enough" is not an OpDev goal. While the specific units and operational personnel that make use of OpDev training are not now, or will likely ever be known, the fact that they represent some of the world's best speaks volumes about what is transpiring not only in the training areas, but within McMillan Operator Development as a whole.

Designed from the ground up to assist not only free world military units but law enforcement as well, the training and facilities at McMillan Operator Development are truly world class. The experience of a company that is legend in the precision rifle community, coupled with real world operators teaching from a perspective of collective experience, offers a unique training opportunity that should not be missed.