

U.S. Army soldiers operating out of Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan maintain a formidable fighting presence with arms such as this ELCAN-equipped FN M249 SAW (l.) and Aimpoint-equipped M4 carbine, which contrast sharply with the iron-sighted Kalashnikov-based rifles (far r.) typically confiscated from enemy combatants.

Reports From Afghanistan

FIREARMS ON T



American Rifleman's man on the ground in Afghanistan reports on the arms used by our troops and the mission they face today. He found that they are proud to protect our freedom overseas —especially when they know the NRA protects their rights at home.

BY PHILIP SCHREIER

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In April, the NRA received an e-mail from Capt. Arslan Chaudhry of Task Force Warrior in Bagram, Afghanistan, asking if it would consider sponsoring a 5K Race to honor the memory of two Task Force soldiers who had been killed in action.

NRA Executive Director of General Operations Kayne Robinson agreed and approved the project, which was supported by the Missouri Valley Arms Collectors Ass'n, www.nrablog.com and NRA Publications. A number of e-mails and online forms later, I found myself standing in an active war zone. It was not an entirely unfamiliar situation. I had previously written a similar report on the war in Iraq for *American Rifleman* ("Rifleman At War: Iraq 2003"), which can be found at www.americanrifleman.org.



THE FRONT LINES

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Covering the race for www.nrablog.com was relatively easy, leaving me ample time to report on the arms and equipment of the U.S. military for *American Rifleman*. At Bagram Air Field (BAF) I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit with Task Forces Warrior and Gladius, as well as the Special Forces unit at Camp Vance, elements of the 38th Infantry Division and the Missouri Army National Guard.

It was evident from the stories told to me by the troops and from what I personally saw that the U.S. Army is still the best-equipped and most formidable fighting force on Earth. I was heartened to meet NRA members wherever I went, and I was proud to hand out some of the NRA's special military challenge coins by North West Territorial Mint as well as the complete inventory of coins my colleagues had assembled to commemorate my 20th anniversary as an NRA employee.

I did notice one stark difference in the reception I received from NRA members while "in country." Back in 2003, I often asked soldiers, "What can I and the NRA do for you?" and I received similar answers: "Send us care packages of *American Rifleman* and *American Hunter*, etc" This time the answer was universally different and, after hearing the same reply nearly a dozen times, I began to notice a common theme. Their the reply to that same question was, "We will keep up the fight over here. Please keep up the fight for us at home. We do not want to return to something less than what we left."

Arms: Hardware & Technology

While the following is not meant to be a comprehensive account of all U.S. military small arms in use in Afghanistan, it is meant as a brief introduction to the arms I personally encountered within the units I was



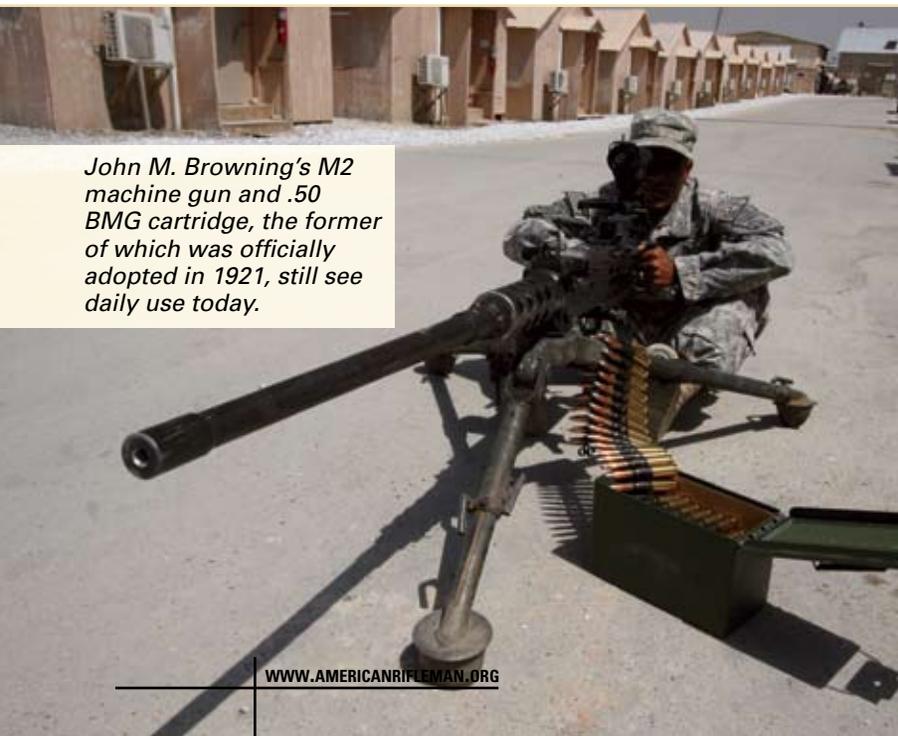
A soldier with an FN M240B 7.62x51 mm NATO general purpose machine gun stands at Bagram Air Field.

privileged to visit during my brief stay at BAF.

The primary service arm for U.S. Army in Afghanistan is the M4 carbine. A full 1½ lbs. lighter and significantly shorter than the M16A2 rifle, the M4, with its collapsible stock and modular rail mount system, provides a greater amount maneuverability and the ability to mount the best in accessories and optics. The carbine fires the 62- and 77-gr. 5.56x45 mm NATO rounds. It is capable of firing semi-automatic or three-round bursts. (The M4A1 can fire in full-automatic mode). The 14.5" barrel with its 1:7" twist can accurately place a bullet on mark at 500 meters. When decked out with a laser designator and night-vision optics, the M4 is a lethal machine with few superiors.

Most soldiers chose to attach a variety of equipment to their M4s in hopes of providing a tactical edge that can help make the difference between life and death. The military laser sights, AN/PEQ-2 and AN/PAQ-4, from Insight Technologies of New Hampshire, produce a beam of infrared laser light invisible to the naked eye. But when used with night-vision goggles, (NVGs), the infrared aiming beam appears on the target at night.

The Trijicon ACOG (Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight) series of 4X scopes and reflex sights as well as Aimpoint and EOTech red-dot sights are also popular with soldiers



John M. Browning's M2 machine gun and .50 BMG cartridge, the former of which was officially adopted in 1921, still see daily use today.



The well-outfitted M4 carbine today is likely to have a variety of optical and shooting aids—in this case a AN/PAQ-4 laser designator, Trijicon ACOG 4X sight and GripPod combination vertical foregrip/bipod.

who desire an advanced sighting system. Other “add-ons include vertical fore-end grips and Sure-Fire combat lights.

The M4 was designed to adapt to a series of modular rail mounted systems as well as accept the under barrel-mounted M203 grenade launcher. This single-shot, breech-loading grenade launcher fires a 40 mm projectile 300 to 350 meters with devastating accuracy and is employed frequently to dislodge enemy combatants from behind walls.

The most common sidearm of the troops is the Army-issue M9 Beretta 9x19 mm Luger semi-automatic pistol. Aftermarket and non-military issue magazines brought criticism to the M9, but it has become well known now that if the factory magazines are kept clean and free of dust, they function quite well.

Special Forces units have the privilege of using a variety of special arms, and the soldiers at Camp Vance were no exception. I considered it quite an honor to visit their arms locker and examine a SIG Sauer P228 marked “US M11” in 9 mm Luger. Also in the arms inventory was the Mossberg M590A pump-action and the Benelli M1014 semi-automatic shotgun in 12 gauge. These eight-shot “room brooms” have proven to be devastatingly effective during house-to-house searches.

The arms and equipment of scout/snipers have always been popular, and I was fortunate to handle an M24 sniper rifle made by Remington. An Army version of the Model 700 in .308 Win. (7.62x51mm NATO M118 Ball), the rifle I examined had a unique tiger stripe camo pattern.

There are currently four different belt-fed arms used in Afghanistan. The most prolific is the M249 SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon), a full-automatic

Task Force Warrior 5K Race

More than 900 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines registered to participate in the Task Force Warrior 5-kilometer footrace, the largest event of its kind ever held at Bagram Air Field. As a sponsor of the event, www.nrablog.com provided T-shirts, numbered runners bibs and NRA travel mugs to the participants. The race was held at 05:30 on 18 August.



(5:30 a.m. for civilians like me). Seventeen minutes and forty five seconds later, Lt. (j.g.) Ted Herbert, USN, of Virginia, won the race. Lt. Herbert, an NRA member and former track star at James Madison University, received a Springfield Armory XD(M) pistol donated by Springfield Armory CEO Dennis Reese.

When NRA was approached in April to sponsor the race, which was established to remember fallen comrades, only two members had perished in the fighting in Afghanistan. By the time it was held in August, that number had grown to 15.

Details of the race, including photos of the NRA sponsored t-shirt designed by NRA Publications' Susan Kilday can be viewed by clicking the “veterans” tab at www.nrablog.com.

—PHILIP SCHREIER



light machine gun in 5.56x45 mm NATO. The Fabrique Nationale-manufactured SAW is issued two per squad. Commonly mounted atop HMMWVs (Humvees) or MRAPS, the M249 is fed from a disintegrating 200-round belt carried inside a plastic or nylon ammunition box that clips under the gun. It can also feed from standard M4 or M16 20- or 30-round-capacity magazines. It weighs 15 lbs. unloaded and has a cyclic rate of 750 rounds per minute.

The M240B is the Army's replacement for the venerable M60. Firing the 7.62x51 mm NATO round, this 24-lb. FN-manufactured medium machine gun fires at a rate of 650 to 900 rounds per minute, and is often mounted on HMMWV's, MRAPs, helicopters and other armored fighting vehicles.

A personal favorite is the MK19, a fully automatic, belt-fed 40 mm grenade launcher. This General Dynamics-produced behemoth can launch a 40 mm HEDP (High Explosive Dual Purpose) grenade to

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ranges exceeding 2,000 meters, but is most effective at ranges up to 1,500 meters. It fires at a rate of 350 rounds per minute, only slightly slower than the old M3 Grease Gun. Many of the HMMWVs and MRAPs I saw were equipped with the MK19 or even the M2 .50 cal. and either the M240B or the M249.

The most venerable gun on the battlefield is of course the M2 Browning .50 BMG heavy machine gun, also affectionately known as "Ma Deuce." The Browning .50-cal. has been around since 1921—making it the oldest firearm in the inventory of the U.S. Army. Many soldiers crewing the M2 in country had no idea how long the gun has served American troops.

Summing Up

So I pass on this admonition from those serving in uniform in harm's way: Be ever vigilant in protecting our Second Amendment rights. Help keep the NRA strong for those men and women currently overseas. Sign up new members, support The Friends of NRA events in your area, donate until it hurts and encourage anyone you know in uniform to take advantage of NRA's free annual membership for soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. Have them visit www.nra.org/supportourtroops and sign up. And most importantly, as this Global War on Terror now enters its eighth year, please keep those cards, letters and care packages going to the men and women who keep watch over us while we sleep.



Scatterguns still have a place in modern combat. Here a soldier readies a Mossberg 590A1 pump-action 12 gauge.



The U.S. soldier's closest line of personal defense is the standard-issue Beretta M9 pistol in 9 mm Luger.

Rifleman Goes To War

NRA's original Official Journal publication has a long history of covering the small arms of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

William F. Shadel (1908-2005), who was editor of this magazine in 1942, was one of two dozen correspondents who covered D-Day first-hand. He was hired by Edward R. Morrow to work for CBS as a correspondent and provided coverage for *American Rifleman* and CBS for the duration of the war. Shadel went on to become the first host of "Face the Nation" and moderated the Kennedy-Nixon Presidential debate in 1960. He died in Renton, Wash., in 2005.

The latest NRA staff member to cover military arms in theater for the magazine, and author of the foregoing feature, Philip Schreier, is Senior Curator of the NRA's National Firearms Museum and has worked as a Field Editor for "American Rifleman Television."

He first received war correspondent credentials in 2003 as an embedded reporter in Iraq and after 30 days in theater, received a combat patch of the 101st Airborne Division from then-Maj. Gen. David Petraeus.

For his latest assignment, Schreier spent a week at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, in August of this year. His work currently appears in numerous NRA publications, as well as on www.nrablog.com and "American Rifleman Television." 



Few individual arms offer the firepower of an optics-equipped FN M249 with 200 rounds of 5.56x45 mm NATO ammunition on board.