

Marine Scout Snipers

By Bryan Mitchell

Tom Ferran can still vividly recall the mission. Memories drenched in fear linger long after a Marine has moved on from the Corps.

It was 1967 and Ferran was a corporal in an elite class of Marine Corps scout-snipers patrolling the Vietnam jungles, a group that included legendary rifleman Carlos Hathcock. They were tasked with high-priority missions demanding their unique skill set – oftentimes reconnaissance, but this tasking was decidedly lethal.

A North Vietnamese sniper was terrorizing Marines – killing at least eight – near Khe Sanh with a singular combination of stealth and accuracy. He was quieter than a footstep, light as a leaf and could extinguish life from 800 yards. And Ferran had to hunt him.

“This guy was a master sniper. And I was just a puppy sniper. I knew I was going against someone much more capable than I,” he recalled recently. “To use the word scared would not accurately portray the terror in my heart.”

The Corps assembled several teams of scout-sniper duos and dangled an enticement.

“They offered us his rifle and two weeks R&R in your choice of port of call,” Ferran said. “The Marine Corps wanted this guy bad because so many Marines were scared to go out. It made me realize the psychological power of a sniper because it takes a whole hell of a lot to scare Marines like that.”

Ferran, 20 at the time, spent weeks hunting the elusive NVA sniper, only to see a group of his fellow Marines eliminate him in close combat.

The fruitless hunt for the hunter was a significant step in Ferran’s scout-sniper maturity.

“You learn extraordinary discipline and the ability to think like your enemy,” Ferran said.

Ferran had his successes, nevertheless.

Called on to eliminate a NVA general, he used a combination of artillery and rifle rounds to perform the task. “We have pre-arranged reference points for the artillery based on how long it would take them to run along a treeline,” Ferran said. “After it was over, they recovered 17 bodies.”

Artillery fire killed 12. Ferran’s sniping felled the rest.

Over 40 years later, on Iraq’s urban battlefield, then-Sgt. Shane Hannaford’s scout-sniper team was protecting a convoy when it happened upon a team of insurgents installing improvised explosive devices.

Perched silently several stories high in a nearby building, Hannaford and his team watched from afar as the insurgents began their work.

“I don’t know if they knew we were coming or if they just thought they could get in and out,” he said. “But it didn’t take them long to realize we were there, and by then they realized it was not going to be a very good day for them.”

Now Hannaford thinks the scout-sniper is set to take on a new importance in the wide-open vistas and crumbling villages of Afghanistan. “This is a scout-sniper’s war,” he said.

Ferran and Hannaford are part of a unique brotherhood of Marines who go a step beyond the creed of “every Marine a rifleman.”

They served in different wars, fought different enemies and returned to vastly different Americas, but distinguished themselves through unwavering discipline and unrivaled marksmanship as elite Marine Corps scout-snipers – scouting as in deep recon, sniping as in killing on their own terms.

“One time we watched a guy finish his breakfast before we did what we had to do,” Ferran said. “It’s difficult to explain the unique power a sniper has over his enemy.”

Today, in the unlit corners of Mesopotamian cities and among the parched shadows of borderless snow-capped mountains, a new generation of Marine Corps scout-snipers propels the legacy of their predecessors.

Like their forerunners, the Corps’ 500 scout-snipers are attracted by the opportunity to serve in a select class of Marines, performing vital recon and eliminating the enemy one shot at a time.

“The personality of a scout-sniper coincided with the things I held near and dear. I like the clandestine nature of what we do. It’s not something that’s done in the limelight,” said Capt. Matthew O’Brien, officer-in-charge of the instructor scout-sniper school at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. “We seek the quiet satisfaction of doing a hard job, getting a little bit of rest and then going back at it.”

Marine Corps scout-snipers may not trace their heritage to the Corps’ birth at Philadelphia’s Tun Tavern, yet the group boasts a lineage that dates back to some of the Corps’ harrowing Pacific battles of World War II.

The first scout-snipers units were stood up on Guadalcanal after Marines were victimized by sharp-shooting Japanese soldiers perched in trees and hidden in tunnels. The first scout-snipers were selected from the battalions serving on the island, with an emphasis on Marines with backgrounds as outdoorsmen.

“People who started this community for the Marine Corps were hunters and trappers,” O’Brien said. “They lived in a house that didn’t have running water.”

Official scout-sniper schools were quickly established at Camp Lejeune, N.C., and Camp Pendleton, Calif., to train Marines in expert marksmanship and field craft – the backbone of scout-sniper excellence.

The Corps’ efficient training regimen paid off handsomely when a group of scout-sniper Marines, led by 1st Lt. William D. Hawkins, was credited with leading the charge that eventually seized Tarawa from the Japanese. Hawkins was ultimately killed as he continued to fight for Tarawa, but received the Medal of Honor posthumously.

The Korean War gave the Corps its first scout-sniper legend in Staff Sgt. John E. Boitnott, who reportedly used a fellow Marine as a decoy to root out Chinese troops fighting with the North Koreans. During that episode alone, Boitnott killed nine enemy fighters from a distance of 900 yards.

It was during the Vietnam War, however, that scout-snipers – and one man in particular – entered the mainstream American consciousness. The hair-raising exploits of

Gunnery Sgt. Carlos Hathcock launched both Hathcock and the lethal scout-snipers into mainstream lore.

Hathcock was thought to have the highest number of kills, at 93, until the 1991 book *Dear Mom: A Sniper's Vietnam* by a fellow Vietnam scout-sniper, Joseph T. Ward. The story highlighted the 103 confirmed kills by Pfc. Charles B. Mawhinney, who is also credited with another 216 “probable” kills.

Hathcock received the Silver Star for heroic actions unrelated to sniper duty and remained in the Corps for years as a scout-sniper instructor emeritus. Mawhinney, for his part, left the service in 1970 and resumed a quiet life in his home state of Oregon. Today, his rifle rests alone in the Triangle, Va.-based National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Since Vietnam, Marine scout-snipers have served in every major military operation and, as Hannaford attests, remain a vital tool for commanders in the contemporary wars.

Their indoctrination and training remains among the most exacting in the military and their equipment provides tools to slither like chameleons across terrain and eliminate America's enemy one by one from 1,000 yards.

There never seem to be enough scout-snipers to fill the Corps' requirements, in large part because of the difficulty of securing a position in a platoon.

Applicants need a squeaky-clean background, impeccable recommendations and unquestioned maturity and focus. The Corps demands a first-class physical fitness score – that's running three miles in under 18 minutes, 20 pull-ups and 100 crunches in two minutes, and strong swim qualification scores.

For those who pass the muster, a one- to three-week indoctrination with an operational platoon precedes a nine-week training course that hones their marksmanship, field craft and stalking abilities.

“As a young Marine, it's mentally demanding,” Hannaford said. “If you're not prepared for it, it will hurt you. You're tested mentally and someone who does not have the maturity would not do well.”

Stalking is one of the unique skills the scout-sniper acquires that separates him from a typical infantry Marine. The tactic employs one of the most singular pieces of gear in any military kit – the ghillie suit.

The ghillie suit is a cloth or net outfit to which the wearer attaches loose pieces of tree, bush and grass to create a natural foliage camouflage ideal for moving slowly along the ground unseen.

Hannaford described stalking as one of his favorite parts of being a scout-sniper Marine.

“Building a good ghillie suit can take up to 50 hours of quality work, but it is well worth it when you are in the field,” he said.

Scout-sniper Marines test the effectiveness of their skills and ghillie suit in a training challenge that requires they move undetected to within 200 yards of an enemy target played by a fellow Marine.

The ability to silently traverse vast terrain and unleash unflinching accuracy from 1,000 yards requires a smart assembly of weapons and supporting gear.

The scout-sniper's primary weapon is a \$3,200 Remington M40A5 7.622 mm sniper rifle. The 14-pound, 44-inch bolt-action rifle has a range of 1,500 yards and pulls from a

five-round detachable magazine box. Members of a platoon may also command an M82 .50 caliber scoped rifle. The 28-pound semi-automatic weapon employs a 10-round box magazine and can thwart a multimillion-dollar vehicle with a \$1 round.

Scout-snipers also carry the more commonplace M16 5.56 mm NATO standard assault rifle, a 9 mm pistol, and a large knife and sheath.

They keep their eyes on targets with a 20x M49 spotting scope, binoculars, night-vision scopes and goggles.

A five-pound AN/PVS5 laser range finder with 7x15 sighting and optics, a navigation-supported AN/PVS5 global positioning system and an ITT-manufactured SINCGARS (single-channel ground and airborne radio system) communications tool round out the gear package, which can run up to 100 pounds per Marine.

Armed with this intense training and diverse kit of weaponry, it's not difficult to see why scout-snipers continue to distinguish themselves on the modern battlefield.

No less than six scout-sniper Marines have been awarded either the Silver or Bronze Star with Valor for their actions in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Scout-snipers Sgt. John Place and Sgt. Jarrell R. Adams earned Silver Stars for their heroism in Iraq's once-restive Anbar province.

The Scout-Sniper Association welcomes members from the latest generation and supports Marines in the field with care packages designed with the scout-sniper in mind. Periscopes, wind meters and a steady supply of health and comfort items arrive downrange regularly.

The association is also an outlet for some of the members suffering from the psychological impact incumbent to their work.

Ferran, with 41 confirmed kills, acknowledged it's not uncommon for experienced scout-sniper Marine – himself included – to spend years fighting serious bouts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Yet they march on.

O'Brien, a formerly enlisted Marine and one of the few officers serving as a scout-sniper, has deployed to Iraq three times. Most recently he was part of a "surge" unit during last year's massive operation to retake the embattled nation.

"I traveled over there with the 15th MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit.) First into Kuwait, then Iraq. We cleared Haditha, Ramadi and Rutba," he said. "It was a long one. Two-month transition, six months in country, two-month transition home."

O'Brien said industry is now providing tools that will allow the scout-snipers to grow even more proficient, although he and other Marines declined to provide details. "The capabilities are going to grow, but the limits we have are going to diminish," he said.

Regardless of the kit, the Corps will always require the same from the Marine.

"Marines considering this line of work need to take a very hard look at if you're willing to do a very hard job with very little recognition," O'Brien said. "If the answer is yes, raise your hand."

