



SOG: THE MEN WHO GOTTED THE NVA

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**WILL THE M9
FIRE TWICE?**

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SOF Visits Combat Veteran Carbine Course

Text & Photos by Paul Avalone

It was Friday afternoon, the last day of the five-day course, and the final shoot-out was between the Prescott cop and the ex-Special Forces major. Their weapons, the personal carbines they'd shot with all week. The targets, steel silhouettes, two for each lane — one at 100 yards, the second at 200. The starting positions were standing unsupported, at the low ready, and on "Go" engage the close target until "Hit," then go to the knees or prone, shooter's choice, and engage the far target. The winner would be the first to put a shot each on the two targets, the best of five iterations. The judges were instructors with binos to discern the telltale puff of dirt indicating a miss and the absence



(left) Instructor Slawson, with M4, is former USMC sergeant major, presently a deputy sheriff in Colorado, owns EP company. (right) After a good sprint students stop, fire quickly in movement drill. Instructor in far background is Chris Matthews. L-R, four closest to camera: Lt. Cdr. Steve Johnson (Navy pilot), MA-1 "Sonic" Dominguez (Navy Raven); Lt. Col. Joe Knapp (Marines), Lt. Cdr. John Love (Navy M.D.)

of a puff along with the ping of a bullet hitting steel, for a hit.

The former SF major's rifle was an HK-91 (.308), with a Hensoldt 4x24 scope, with a laser sight built into the forearm. The Prescott cop's, a Colt AR-15 (.223) borrowed for the week from a firearms trainer buddy. Stripped down, with nothing but iron sights, the Colt had, as the cop admits, "a lotta wear on it." A short time earlier, each had won a similar shoot-out with the dozen others of their respective training group. There were the finals now. The best one from each group, with the other guys backing their own winner with joking encouragement.

The groups had been formed first thing Monday morning at the beginning of the course, more or less arbitrarily, half in each, 12 to 15 being a manageable number for class instruction, where 95% of the instruction would be on the ranges. Hands-on shooting. Shooting and moving.

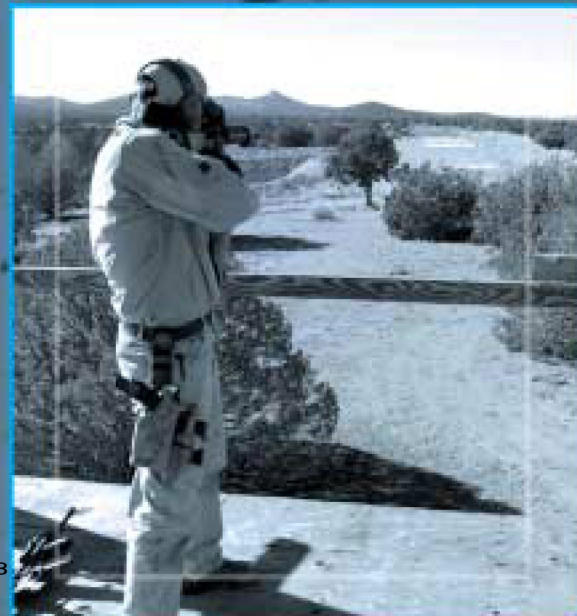
The time was early January of this year, the location was just north of Prescott, Arizona, at the famous Gunsite Academy, which has been called "The Harvard of the shooting schools." The course: .223/5.56 carbine firing and tactics. What made this particular course worthy of a visit from SOF? Gunsite was offering the instruction free to American military guys who had served in Operations Enduring Freedom



Marine LTC Joe Knapp fires Bushmaster with Aimpoint 3000 sight adapted from pistol ("it adapted real well..."), from behind barricade in utilizing-cover drill.

Honoring VETS at GUNSITE

Sgt. Robert Mendoza deployed to Afghanistan as active marine, to Iraq as a reservist, shoots Eagle Arms M4.



(left, from top) Retired Green Beret Major, Sam Pikula, firing in the shoot house. Marine Lt. Col. Joe Knapp (L) and Navy doctor Cdr. John Love (R) practicing rapid fire on the 25-yard range. Navy SEAL George remains anonymous as he shoots unsupported from the tower at black silhouette targets 300 yards down range. Army sergeant Aaron Garcia engages a target in a room of the shoothouse.

(Afghanistan or elsewhere) and/or Iraqi Freedom. As SOF publisher R.K. Brown told me when he called, "There might be some interesting stories there. Or, at least, unusual."

Months earlier, Gunsite had placed announcements in SOF, the Army, Navy and Air Force Times, the Marine Corps Gazette and S.W.A.T., offering four free courses in 2004, for veterans of the two operations — two in carbine and two in pistol, 30 slots in each, maximum. Through Gunsite's phones and Internet site, the slots were filled within a few days and waiting lists were started for each of the courses.

Mission Statement: Trigger Time

Colonel Robert Young (USMC, retired), Gunsite's operation chief (or, as he calls himself, "the XO"), reported to SOF publisher RKB that the majority of the responses by far had come from the announcement in this magazine. Hmmmm, even more intriguing to RKB. Typical of all magazine publishers, Brown noted, "try and keep your expenses down." And he added, rare for any publisher, "Make sure you get some trigger time yourself." Great, except I'd be traveling light — no carbine; just my trusty little Kel-Tec P11 9mm, which I try never to leave home without. Into my kit bag it went, to go cargo-hold on the flight. Sure, I'd prefer to have it with me as carry-on with my cameras and laptop, but those days are as long gone as Constellations, Pan Am and Elvis.

Navy Raven Frank Medrano sprints from one firing position to another during an turn at the Scrambler, a 7-8 station outdoor range with semi-wooded targets to be engaged from a variety of positions of cover.

Since 9/11, on active duty most of the time, I'd flown nothing but military, so I was surprised to find huge X-ray machines behind the Southwest Airlines check-in counter. When'd they start checking hold baggage, I wondered? The gun's unloaded, the kit bag's locked — no problem, I thought. Yeh, right, if only it

were that simple.

Forty-five minutes, a half-dozen TSA officials and airport cops, multiple forms to fill out and the purchase of a hard-body lockable case (\$43 from adjacent U.S. Airways for a \$7 case) later, and my little P11 was safe to be allowed aboard my flight in the baggage hold. Lucky for me I'm certified for concealed carry in my state, otherwise, for my "failure to report the presence of a firearm" in my luggage at the time of check-in, I would have forfeited the gun and been stuck who-knows-how-much-longer answering questions, filling out even more forms and trying to talk my way out of possible arrest. When did all that become law?

Shy of squeezing a live person into one's suitcase (or kit bag) and aboard a plane, what harm can a packed-away firearm do in-flight in baggage hold and why the hell does the state have to know it's there? You'd think the last people you'd want aware you have guns packed away would be the baggage handlers. Tell me otherwise. The point being, I had the uncomfortable feeling that this ever-increasing firearm regulation was a precursor to a not-



Turn and shoot drills require good gun-handling techniques.

that-distant future in which any airline travel with a gun, no matter how secure in baggage hold, will be outlawed. Come that day, if you live on the East Coast, for instance, and plan on attending a Gunsite course, you'll have to forget a five-hour flight and instead load up your car for a three-day road trip... if carbines and handguns aren't outright banned by then. Along with facilities like Gunsite.

In retrospect, the irritation has subsided, but it was on my mind heading west to Gunsite, and it wasn't a good start to the trip. But, did my outlook change when I made it to the academy and found a world completely different from the monster X-ray machine, hordes of TSA security guards and the ineffectual "remove your boots, please, sir" 'fraidy-cat airport regulatory ritual. At Gunsite, guns are everywhere and not feared. From staff to students, guns



The Scrambler is a seven-eight station range. Timed, one moves from cover to cover, engaging the half-hidden steel silhouette targets downrange. Dave Williams is a deputy sheriff with the Yavapai County Sheriff's Department. Because of the elevation of the terrorist alert to orange through the Christmas and New Year's holiday, nearly a third of the combat veteran active duty servicemen who had signed up for the course could not get away to attend. Thus, at the last minute, the Gunsite staff asked the local police and sheriff departments for volunteers to fill the slots, as the instructors and classes had already been scheduled.



(above) Running the Scrambler, former Green Beret major Sam Pikula fires at one of the downrange targets from one of the covered positions. (below) Lt. Col. Joe Knapp secures the shoot

house entrance prior to going in to engage the variety of targets within. Instructor Chris Matthews follows for safety and to offer constructive assessment and criticism.



With instructor Ed Head keyed downrange, listening for the telltale ping of a bullet striking the steel silhouette in the brush, Marine Lt. Col. Joe Knapp runs the scrambler, engaging here from the prone.



Marine sergeant Greg Topp puts two quick shots into each target during movement-fire drill, approaching the targets from an angle at a steady, assured pace.

are carried naturally, matter-of-factly, with confidence and respect. There is nothing frightening about the weaponry there. The academy's own safety rules, posted throughout the complex, even in the restrooms, say it all:

1. All guns are always loaded.
2. Never let the muzzle cover anything which you are not willing to destroy.
3. Keep your finger OFF the trigger until your sights are on the target.
4. Always be sure of your target

Imagine airports and airplanes with those rules posted. You might have one guy — one, once — try to hijack a plane, but the rest of the world's scumbag terrorists and psychopaths will get a pretty clear message when what remains of his bullet-riddled body is pulled from the plane. Ever since the days of the hue and cry, instant citizens' justice is quite a deterrent.

Guns and Good Works

One can dream. At Gunsite, though, it's not a dream. "We are a fighting school," Col. Bob Young (the XO) proudly claims. "No matter the political climate, we will remain a fighting school." Although Gunsite's facilities are 21st-Century modern, from mechanical range targets to live-fire shoot houses, to computer-projection classrooms, to a high-tech gunsmith shop, that "fighting school" spirit seems anachronistic in an age when a half-dozen airport security agents fret over a little Kel-Tec P11 stuffed into a kit bag in the cargo hold. And it's a welcome anachronism. Bob Young is simply echoing owner Owen "Buz" Mills' philosophy for his school: To teach the art of fighting. One who generally wears his patriotism quietly, without self-promotion, Buz Mills has publicly stated that his school is "doing God's work — keeping people alive. Training people to save live."

Those aren't just nice-sounding words to Mills either. A self-made entrepreneur, retired at least twice, Mills doesn't need Gunsite for monetary gain or to keep busy. He does it

for love and obligation: His love of shooting, one, and more importantly, what he sees as his civic obligation, given his successes, to provide to law enforcement and military personnel (as well as the general public) the basic and advanced tools that just might save their lives in their jobs or just everyday peaceful living on today's mean streets. Born in the rough-and-tumble of pre-World War II Texas, the son of a Navy war veteran, Mills did a stint in the Marine Corps until the early 1960s, when he went into heavy construction as an

ironworker. Through brains and brawn, hard work and an entrepreneur's willingness to gamble, Mills was very successful building, leasing and selling communications towers. An avid sport pistol shooter since the mid-1970s, Mills learned of Jeff Cooper's American Pistol Institute (later renamed Gunsite) and studied Cooper's shooting techniques even before meeting him in competition in 1980. Mills bought Gunsite in 1999, and since then has put some \$4 million into capital improvements. There are now 25 ranges on the academy's 1600 acres, with

expansion plans to soon add another 400 acres.

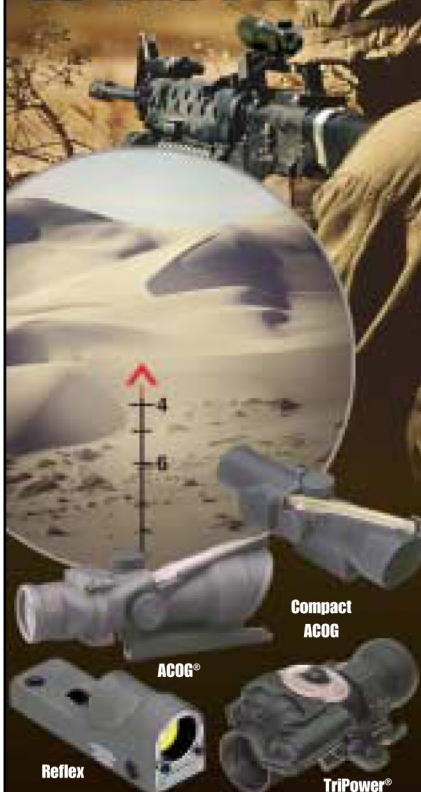
It was a roundabout way that Mills and the Gunsite staff came up with the idea to offer courses free to the combat veterans from the battlefields of America's war on terror. As XO Young explained, "We had given a tactical medical course to a group of Navy doctors and nurses who were going to deploy with forward Marines in Iraq, and we wound up hearing back from them, and I quote, 'The skills you taught us saved our lives.'" That struck Young. He and Mills were concerned that many of our soldiers were going into the combat zones without the proper gunfighting skills — in particular, for the close-quarters fighting so common today. At the same time, Mills and Young wanted to give something back to the men and women in uniform (all of whom are volunteers, remember, since there is no draft) who are sacrificing in Afghanistan, Iraq and wherever the



Taliban flag secured in Afghanistan was presented to the Colonel Bob Young and the staff of Gunsite by one of the OEF veterans attending the course, Sfer "Doc" Garrett (whose picture and overseas experiences were not used for security reasons).

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Vets At Gunsite

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war on terror takes them.

Tangible Support for the Troops

"We sat down and hashed it out," Young explained, "and came up with the idea of having four classes spread out during the year. Two pistol and two carbine. We had instructors who were more than willing to volunteer their time. That's important, because we couldn't do it without our instructors' willingness to give." It will be over \$175,000 worth of training offered for free, but Mills, a modest man who shies away from the limelight or praise, shrugged it off, reasoning that these new veterans "have sacrificed for us, and most are going back overseas or they'll end up in law enforcement." Meaning, as always for Mills, it comes down to his philosophy that Gunsite's underlying mission, beyond just training people, is to save lives.

And it isn't just Mills and the entire staff of Gunsite who are showing our vets their appreciation. The NRA is donating a year's membership to all who attend. PMC Ammunition Company donated 10,000 rounds of 5.56 for the first class, as did Arizona-based (and world-wide supplier) J & G's Gun Sales. Locally owned motels7 offered discounts on lodging and food for the students. Even the local in-home caterer, "Moe" of The Party Planner, is providing lunches at the academy for half price.

The final shoot-out between a recent veteran, the SF major, and a Prescott police officer resulted from an unexpected turn of events. Just before Christmas, the national terrorist alert level was elevated to orange, which kept some of the active duty vets scheduled for the course locked into their posts, unable to attend. "We lost about a third at the last minute," Young told me. With the volunteer instructors for the two groups already laid on, Gunsite put the word out to the local sheriff and police departments, and the vacancies were rapidly filled with eager volunteers. Nearly all were former servicemen, but, as irony would have it, not the Prescott cop, Robert Peoples, shooting against the SF major for the ultimate bragging rights. Peoples is a detective and is on Prescott's Special Tactical Unit, the department's part-time S.W.A.T. team.

The major, Sam Pikula, had only recently retired from the army, his last

assignment having been with Special Operations Command Europe. With his future wide open, he's thinking of taking up instructor Steve Slawson's invitation to join his executive protection firm; in particular, running a security team for Middle East linguists on a contract Slawson's firm is in the process of finalizing with the U.S. government.

Instructor Slawson is a story unto himself. He was a Marine in Vietnam in 1968-69 and afterwards a drill instructor, then a specialist in close-quarters combat. He retired a sergeant major and became a cop and then deputy sheriff in his home state of Colorado. He owns an executive protection service and spends a few months a year at Gunsite practicing his second love: teaching shooting techniques. His first: hunting. Last year he hunted in Zimbabwe, where he bagged an elephant and a buffalo, and then in New Zealand and Australia, where he bagged another buffalo. One can feel free to refer to him as "WCDU," he jokes. World Commander Defender of the Universe.

The other instructors volunteering for the vets' course might not be WCDUs, but their backgrounds, like Slawson's, are impressive. Chris Matthews, for one, is a Las Vegas, Nevada, policeman. A member of S.W.A.T., with seven years in the Marine Corps in the 1980s, he has been teaching at Gunsite part-time for 10 years. Another, Lamonte Kintsel, is a retired Ventura County, Calif., deputy sheriff and Army National Guard aviator (OH-58s) who recently relocated to the Prescott area, both for the beauty of the high desert as well as the proximity of Gunsite, to instruct.

A Class of the Real Deal

It was an interesting company, this first veterans' course, from the instructors to the local deputies and cops to the military guys for whom the course had been laid on. Among the vets, all four services were represented: Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. It was an eclectic group. Along with former Special Forces major, Sam Pikula, there were three other SpecOps guys — Green Berets Leo and Ken and Navy SEAL George — all who preferred "first names only" and thought it wisest for future operational purposes not to relate their respective experiences in Afghanistan or be photographed.

Army enlisted was well represented by Aaron Garcia, a sergeant who served with the 82nd Airborne in Afghanistan

and was eager to reenlist, provided he'd be stationed in Hawaii. In typical short-sighted fashion, the Army said no, that he was stop-lossed into his position in the 82nd. Rather than reenlist at the Army's whim, Garcia got out, and the Army's loss was the National Guard's gain, as he joined a Patriot unit and now serves on a full-time basis as part of the New Mexico Army National Guard's counter-drug task force, for which his week of Gunsite instruction might one day come in handy.

One doesn't normally think of the Air Force as being a repository for shooters (except for fast-movers at altitude), but that service was well represented at Gunsite by two enlisted men: Jon Copeland and Ron Saiz, a Master Sergeant in the New Mexico Air National Guard. Presently working in the Air Guard's counter-drug campaign that utilizes C-26 aircraft, Suiz will be moving over to his state's Air and Army Guard Combat Arms Training Company, where he will put to good use his Gunsite training as he takes over the combat-arms training of guardsmen scheduled to deploy to Iraq.

One of the four Marines who came for the training, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Knapp is assigned to Marine Air Logistics, and competitive shooting is more than just a pastime, as he's on the MAG-13 marksmanship team at his Yuma, Arizona base. He is proud of being part of the logistic program that fielded the Lightning Pod thermal sights for the Harrier, which proved so effective in combat in Afghanistan that the Air Force is now studying the feasibility of bringing it online for its own fighter aircraft. The other Marine officer, Major Andrew Roberto, commanded a recon company in Iraqi Freedom.

Two enlisted Marines attended the course. Sergeant Greg Topp had served and gotten out to pursue a career in law-enforcement, which, after a few years, he found not to be fully satisfying, so he reenlisted in his beloved Corps. And Robert Mendoza served in both Afghanistan and Iraq as a sergeant in both Active Duty and the Reserves.

Excluding SEAL George, the five attending from the Navy offer a contrast to most people's perception of a seagoing service in which combat shooting wouldn't seem to apply. Three are Navy Reservists based out of Point Mugu, California — Lieutenant Commander Steve Johnson, MA-1 "Sonic" Dominguez and MA-3 Frank Medrano. Johnson is an American Airlines pilot as a civilian and a C-130 pilot in the

Reserves. Dominguez and Medrano both have civilian law-enforcement careers in Southern California and are Ravens in the Naval Reserves.

And then there were the two Navy doctors: Captain Steve Temerlin (Army and Marine equivalent, full colonel) and Lieutenant Commander John Love (equivalent, major). Temerlin is a combat vet of both Afghanistan and Iraq, and Love of Iraq. In fact, it was Temerlin who, after serving as a Marine doctor in the initial conflict in Afghanistan (he was captive Johnny Walker's doctor at Camp Rhino), realized the need for tactical weapons training and attended a Gunsite course on his own. Impressed with the instruction, he arranged for Navy medical personnel (including Love) slated to join the Marines for the upcoming Iraq war to attend Gunsite's Tactical Medicine course. Both Temerlin's and Love's experiences in the wars are unique and compelling and will be highlighted in next month's SOF in "Navy Doctors at War."

It was quite a diverse collection of recent combat veterans and Arizona high-desert cops brought together for the week, and it was just by chance that the final shoot-off would pit one against the other. So, who won? The ex-SF major with his HK-91 with Hensoldt scope, or the Prescott detective and S.W.A.T. cop with his stripped-down, borrowed AR-15? It was close; the best of five, it went all five iterations. And in this age when we're all looking for a better scope or aim point or laser sight, it was a nice twist that the guy with the iron sights, detective Peoples, came out on top.

It was a satisfying end to a good week. These were guys who know and respect weapons, and were learning to use them more efficiently and effectively, all in a professional environment where guns are tools — not to be feared, but rather to be carried and used (if only rarely) in a dangerous battle against those who declare themselves our enemy, whether the thug on the street or the fanatic terrorist. Which is what our servicemen and law enforcement personnel do, up front and in the line of fire, and it was in thanks to the combat vets for their daily sacrifice that Buz Mills and his Gunsite staff offered the week's training and will offer three more in the coming months.

Paul Avallone, since 1978, has served with the 7th, 12th and 20th Special Forces Group (s) Airborne. ✕

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