

# Killing from a distance

## Army, Corps seek longer-range sniper rifle

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For decades, 7.62mm has been the sniper standard for long-range killing. But after more than six years of war, today's snipers also want a more potent caliber capable of killing enemy fighters well beyond 1,000 meters.

Both Army and Marine Corps weapons officials recently announced that they wanted a long-range sniper rifle designed to kill an enemy from as far out as 1,800 meters. The Marine Corps-led program is aimed at selecting an anti-personnel sniper weapon to complement the standard 7.62mm sniper rifle, which is effective out to 800 meters.

But there is also a lower-profile effort going on in the 25th Infantry Division to upgrade the venerable M24 sniper rifle from a 7.62mm NATO round to the more powerful .300 Winchester Magnum, a change that would give snipers the ability to hit an enemy out to 1,200 meters.

Late last year, the Army began replacing the bolt-action M24 with the M110 Semiautomatic Sniper System to give snipers a rapid-fire weapon for engaging multiple targets in urban areas. Many in the sniper community were critical of the decision, arguing that the M24's simple bolt-action design has fewer moving parts and is more accurate than a more complex semi-auto design.

This preoccupied 25th ID officials in Hawaii to write an Operational

Needs Statement that involved sending their existing M24s to the gun's maker, Remington Arms Co. in Madison, N.C., to be retrofitted to .300 Win Mag instead of turning them in to the Army, said Maj. Chaz Bowser, logistics support element commander for U.S. Army Pacific.

The caliber upgrade for the M24 is not a new concept. Special operations units such as the 75th Ranger Regiment have been shooting M24s chambered in .300 Win Mag since the late 1990s.

And there were plans to eventually upgrade the M24 to .300 Win Mag when the weapon was first adopted in 1989, Bowser said, adding that that plan became a "forgotten concept" because the Army wasn't involved in a protracted war as it is today.

"We weren't fighting bad guys; we were shooting ... at the National Training Center," Bowser said, referring to the Army installation at Fort Irwin, Calif.

Capt. Jason Lojka, who oversees Army Sniper School as commander of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment, at Fort Benning, Ga., said he was not aware of the 25th ID effort, but he acknowledged that "there has been talk of changing the M24 to a .300 Win Mag."

Capt. Keith Bell, Lojka's predecessor at Sniper School, agreed. It's an easy fix that requires minimal changes to the M24 and will result in a much greater capability, he said. Bell is assigned to a

military transition team at Fort Riley, Kan.

"It's a whole lot easier to hit a target between 800 and 1,200 meters with a .300 Win Mag," he said, describing the round's flat trajectory and reduced resistance to wind.

Many snipers see the upgrade to .300 Win Mag as a way to hold on to the M24, a weapon they say they believe is more reliable and accurate than the M110.

The M110 relies on the same gas system as the M16 and M4 carbine. When the round is fired, it directs the gas created down a tube into the weapon's receiver, and cycles the weapon.

The M24's action requires snipers to manually feed a round into the chamber after each shot with the weapon's bolt.

"I would just rather rely on my right hand and a piece of metal" to cycle that weapon as opposed to a gas system, Bell said. "A gas gun is going to fail more often than a bolt gun. Period."

To date, the Army has fielded about 500 M110s. Although it's still early in the process, some snipers have criticized the durability of the Knight's Armament Co. weapon.

A sniper section leader, who asked to remain anonymous, recently told Army Times that his unit has had to ship his section's three M110s back to Knight's Armament to be repaired.

"They're all broke, all three of them," he said. "Two of them



started firing two- to three-round bursts." The third M110 won't fire at all, he said.

Army weapons officials said they are aware of these problems and one M110 at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, that suffers from the same problem of so-called "double firing" on a single trigger squeeze, said Rich Audette, deputy project manager for soldier weapons.

Several snipers have told Army Times that some special operations units have experienced the same problem with the MK11

MOD 0 rifle, an earlier version of the M110 that Navy SEALs have used since the late 1990s.

### Trigger assembly

The problem may have to do with two special screws in the trigger assembly that are set at the factory, said Bob Galeazzi, product director for sniper systems under Product Manager Crew Served Weapons.

The Army experienced problems with the trigger screws moving during endurance testing on the M110's original design, said Reed

weapon comparable in weight to the Marine M40 series sniper weapon, the M110 and the M24, all of which weigh about 17 pounds.

Several sources have told Army Times that the Marine Corps has considered the .338 Lapua magnum, an extreme long-range round that is proving increasingly popular with special operations units. The .338 has an effective range of about 1,600 meters.

Marine Lt. Col. Tracy Tafolla, program manager for infantry weapons from the Marine Corps System Command at Marine Base Quantico, Va., acknowledged that the Marine Corps has looked at the .338 along with other heavier calibers, but he said "we are not dictating the caliber" for the long-range sniper rifle program. "It's performance-based."

The Marine program is leaving the door open for a weapon that could hit targets out to 1,800 meters, but Benning officials said they are looking at a requirement of 1,500 meters.

"After 1,500 meters, you are going to have problems identifying targets with the optics we have today," Bell said.

It will likely be about eight months before industry will see a request for proposal for this new system, Tafolla said.

In the meantime, Benning officials are considering a possible reversal of the decision on the M24 and to allow units to carry both it and the M110. For now, units will continue to turn in their M24s when they receive the M110s.

Although it's still only in the idea phase, Radcliffe said, "what we are talking about, conceptually, is we want to retain the M24 in the sniper team."

Keeping the M24 would give sniper teams two precision weapons until it could eventually be replaced by the longer-range antipersonnel system, Benning officials said.

There is no timeline for when a decision might be made on the M24, but Radcliffe acknowledged the criticism from many snipers in the Army on the decision to phase out the M24.

Part of the backlash is driven by emotion, Radcliffe said, but that doesn't make it any less important.

"It's real, and it is important that we pay attention to that," Radcliffe said. □



A soldier with the 25th Infantry Division practices with the M24 weapon, which the Army began replacing last year with the M110 Semiautomatic Sniper System.



Left, shooters like the reliability and accuracy of the M24 compared to the M110, but snipers want a more potent caliber than the 7.62mm with reach beyond 1,000 meters.

If there is a problem with these M110s, Knight said, they will be "fixed and sent back to the field."

"We don't want anything out there that is not what it should be," he said.

Some snipers have said they want to be trained so they can fix their M110s themselves. Army officials maintain that snipers are trained to make small fixes such as replacing the firing pin or extractor, but any major fixes on the M110 have to be done at the unit armor level or at Knight's Armament, Audette said.

In addition to reliability and durability, Bell and other snipers said they believe the M24, because of its simpler design, is more accurate than the M110.

"When you want to squeeze that

last bit of accuracy out of a weapon, you want a bolt gun," Bell said. "It's not that the M110 is a bad weapon, it just shouldn't be the only weapon."

The 25th ID's upgrade effort involves sending the existing M24s to Remington, where they will be fitted with a new barrel, a new bolt face, a special folding stock and a more powerful optic. Each upgrade would cost about \$4,000, said Mike Haugen, director of international military and law enforcement sales for Remington. Standard M24s cost about \$6,700, he added.

The 25th ID's leadership has approved an operational needs statement, Bowser said, but it still will have to be approved by senior leaders at the Pentagon.



ARMY PHOTOS

Soldiers fire a modified version of the M24 chambered for the .300 Winchester magnum.

Knight, owner of Knight's Armament. As a fix, the Titusville, Fla., company made the screws harder and changed the threading during testing in 2005.

Knight said he was surprised that this problem has surfaced in three M110s.

"I am a bit disturbed, because we think we have solved the problem," he said. "We have gone through two 5,000-round tests."