

Guns of the 101st Airborne—Iraq 2003

by Philip Schreier

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cost, as the 101st suffered higher combat losses than any other American unit. Fifty-eight Eagles were killed, and 384 were wounded.

This was all done with the most sophisticated infantry equipment that the United States has ever fielded. Long gone are the days where a soldier was a draftee, worth the sum total of his uniform, web gear and M1 Garand. Today's infantryman is a modern marvel of high-tech equipment worth thousands of dollars and even more thousands spent in training him to be proficient in their use. Behind each soldier stands a variety of equipment from trucks and howitzers to the flying-battleship AH-64D Apache Longbow helicopters; however, it is the rifleman that remains the prime focus. As an Air Assault unit, the arms and equipment of the 101st are often different than some of the other, heavier units that were involved in the move on Baghdad. This article will examine the various firearms used by the division during the yearlong campaign, especially the 101st's close-in cutting edge, her nine infantry battalions.

Small Arms

The primary service weapon for the division is the M-4 carbine. At six pounds, it's a full pound and a half lighter and significantly shorter (29 inches) than the 39-inch M16A2 rifle, the M4 allows the soldier a greater amount of maneuverability while the flattop Picatinny rail and the Rail Interface System, purchased separately from Knight's Armament, allow the best in accessories and optics. M4-equipped 101st troopers often jokingly refer to the 1980's vintage M16A2s of the rear echelon support units as "muskets." The M4 fires the NATO-standard 62-grain 5.56mm (.223) round, recognized by its green painted tip. With a maximum effective range of 500 meters, it is capable of firing semi-automatic or in 3-round bursts. The division's infantrymen are carefully schooled in semiautomatic fire, often in an urban warfare environment. Heavy cross training with their Fort Campbell neighbors, the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), in pre-deployment allowed the division's 327th, 502nd, and 187th Infantry Regiments an advantage in the close fight.



Flanked by friendly townspeople and a young admirer, a member of the 101st provides perimeter security for his company armed with a Beretta Model 12 SMG.



Shown here with its slide locked back, the 9mm Beretta M9 pistol was the most common side arm carried by soldiers of the 101st.

A trooper displays his well-equipped M4 carbine with attached PAQ-4C laser, iron sights and red dot day scope. Beneath the barrel is an M203 40mm grenade launcher.



The M4 is just the foundation for the integrated weapons system that gives the troopers their edge. The 101st infantry battalions are generously equipped with targeting equipment superior to what Special Forces units had a decade ago. Most obvious on almost every weapon are the M68 "close combat optics," the Aimpoint CompM2 red dot sight familiar to civilian shooters. These replaced the earlier CompMs the division had fielded for several years both in stateside training and in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Trijicon's ACOG (Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight) series of 4x scopes are also popular with soldiers who desire an advanced sighting system. Issued to some units later in the campaign, and in the hands of some soldiers who purchased their own equipment, this scope gave fire teams the ability to discriminate between innocent civilians and insurgents at greater range.

The night fight is where the 101st reigns supreme, and with every infantryman generally possessing night vision goggles, either PVS-14 monoculars or the older PVS-7s, it is an advantage undreamed of in even the first Gulf War. Infrared aiming lasers, either the standby PAQ-4C or the PEQ2A (with infrared spotlight) from New Hampshire's Insight

Technologies creates a glowing green dot in the night vision goggles at point of impact. Infantrymen also use them to mark targets for each other or for helicopters, and sometimes just signal each other silently.

For those times, like the close-quarters chaos of a room clearing or searching for prisoners, the blinding SureFire tactical light was the rifleman's new friend. The division procured several thousand just before the war. While darkness and careful use of night vision equipment is the preferred method for the infantry, sometimes nothing beats a good bright light and the SureFires provided that. A "Rakkasan," the nick-name adopted by members of the 187th Infantry in Japan shortly after World War II, told me how he had cut small strips of black electrician's tape and applied them to the SureFire lens in a "Happy Face" pattern. He informed me that, "It was the last smile that more than one combatant ever saw."

Another common add-on is the "gangster grip." Usually it was the vertical handgrip included with the Knight rail system; however, sometimes other add-ons were used. One soldier that I encountered in the 502nd Infantry mounted a metal spring clamp to his M4 forend and held it in place with duct tape as a field expedient "gangster grip." Not only does it improve the weapon's handling in rapid fire in the classic Thompson submachine gun style, it allows a convenient place to Velcro the pressure switches that control the SureFire or IR laser.

In the northern Iraqi town of Talafar, I saw one scout platoon sniper section from the 187th that had been provided with a variety of weapons including an M4 decked out with a Gemtech sound suppressor. Suppressor "cans" were often seen elsewhere in the 187th with one or two per platoon by October 2003. It proved to be a very useful combination employed from the rooftops of the often-hostile city, making it easier for the units to take shots from concealment.

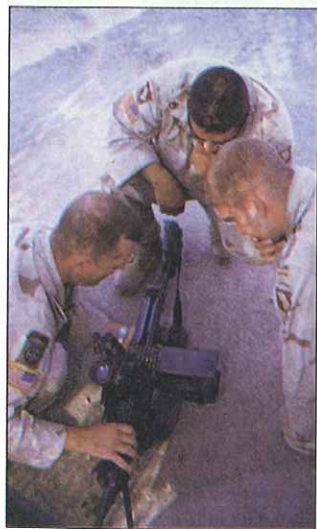
The M4 was also host to the "old reliable" late Vietnam-era M203 grenade launcher. This single-shot breechloader fires a 40mm high explosive projectile 300 to 350 meters with devastating accuracy and was employed frequently during the war to dislodge enemy combatants from behind walls. It also lofted illumination rounds when called for, and some soldiers prayed aloud for a supply of the Vietnam-era 40mm buckshot loading.

The most common side arm in the 101st was the Army standard Beretta M9, 9mm semiauto pistol. It was adopted in 1987 to replace the venerable Colt

"Rakkasan" Sergeant Yeater outfitted his M4 with an infrared laser, red dot scope and Gemtech sound suppressor. His carbine also features a Knight pattern handgrip.



In the course of the fighting, many troopers of the 101st acquired Iraqi Tariq 9mm pistols. The Tariq, manufactured at the Al Qadissiya plant north of Baghdad, was a licensed copy of the Beretta Model 951.



Sergeant Covington fits a SAW to one of the newly manufactured "Dohuk" mounts. The Dohuk swivel-mounts were designed and manufactured in Iraq to allow the SAWs to be mounted atop the division's Humm-Vs.

.45ACP 1911A1 and to equip the American soldier with a common caliber to our NATO allies. Not unlike any precision-made instrument, care and cleaning are important to function and dependability. Most of the complaints about the M9 stemmed from worn out or filthy magazines. Fellow NRA staffer and USMC Sergeant Eric Poole served during the war and had this to say about the M9: "The magazines were the largest problem with the M9, however, when they came to us to replace them we would find compressed springs where they had stored 15 rounds for months without ever removing the ammunition. Most springs in any pistol will suffer metal fatigue when placed under the stress of 15 rounds. When troops would give us magazines, we would disassemble them, CLEAN them, and stretch the springs. When reassembled, they functioned like new. As we would give them back, they would thank us for giving them new magazines ... little did they know." It is also important to note that unauthorized use of nonfactory/nonmilitary issue magazines also contributed to function problems.

As it often is with armies on the march, captured weapons get soaked up and assimilated by those with needs greater than their current equipment capabilities. Rarely has the United States soldier gone into battle where the enemy has had better firepower available for the taking. Iraq was a rare exception as numerous examples—albeit non-regulation examples—were spotted of 101st soldiers carrying captured firearms. Soldiers armed with rifles who desired a handgun for close-in work and vehicle security searched for an alternative to augment their weaponry. Browning Hi-Powers, leftovers from the British influence on the region, were the side arm of choice by those who could get their hands on one and a supply of magazines. Not only were the Hi-Powers rugged and effective, they fit reasonably well in US holsters and tac-



tical vests. One old GI 1911A1 was spotted in the 502nd Infantry at one point, and a Colt Series 70 was picked up on the battlefield, but the .45s were greatly outnumbered by 9x18mm Makarovs and Iraqi-made Beretta 1951 copies called "Tariqs." These varied in quality from very nice to abysmal.

The compact 9mm Beretta Model 12 provided swift and maneuverable performance in the cramped cab of an HMMWV.

Some HMMWV (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) drivers, plus other truck-driving types, sought a submachine gun that could be hung around their neck to allow hands-free driving and quick access to a short-barreled gun. The M4, even at 29 inches overall length, was considered too long for the task and more than a few guys acquired captured British Sterlings and highly prized Beretta Model 12s. Rarer were Egyptian copies of the Swedish K45 9mm submachine gun, and one mint H&K MP-5 that was picked up and carried by the 3/502 Infantry's Sergeant Major for a while.

Also making an appearance in the 101st's weapons inventory was the Mossberg 590 12-gauge pump action shotgun. The 8-shot "room broom" proved to be dev-



Sergeant Vaughn, of 101st MP carries a 12-gauge Mossberg 590 combat shotgun fitted with a Picatinny rail for accessories and a SureFire tactical light.

astatingly effective during house-to-house searches for Fedyaheen combatants, as well as lock busting during door breaches.

Sniper Weapons

The arms and equipment of scout/snipers have always been popular, watched and admired from afar by combat arms aficionados. The 101st's sniper teams, two per battalion in the headquarters scout platoon, use the Army standard M-24 sniper rifles. These are McMillan-stocked Remington Model 700s in 7.62x51mm NATO, using M118 Ball Ammo. The example I was allowed to examine was equipped with a Northrop-Grumman PVS-10, SNS (Sniper Night Sight). This sight allows use during day and night operations with 800 meters maximum effective viewing range during the day and 600 meters at night. Without the sight, the gun is a manageable 14.5 pounds.

The legendary USMC sniper Carlos Hathcock popularized the .50

Scout/snipers of the 502nd Battalion pose with the author (center). The marksman at right holds an M24 fitted with a 10x M3A scope and folding bipod.



caliber sniper rifle in Vietnam by installing his 10x Unertl scope to a Browning M2 "Ma Deuce" heavy machine gun and firing it in the rarely used single-shot mode. His effective and powerful rifle was not exactly a new idea on the battlefield. The German Army and Mauser developed a similar bolt-action 13mm single-shot rifle in 1916 to shoot clean through Allied tanks on the muddy battlefields of the Great War. Taking a page from the Mauser rifle and the field modifications Gunny Hathcock made to



the M2, Ronnie Barrett of Tennessee proved the impossible possible by designing the "Light Fifty," a semiauto .50BMG rifle he dubbed the M82. The Marines bought some, then Special Forces, and it has been type-classified by the Army as the XM107. The 30-pound, short-recoil semiautomatic rifle has a 10-round detachable box magazine. With an issue 10x Leupold scope, the XM107 was scoring aimed hits on enemy targets at 2,000 meters.

This M24 sniper rifle is outfitted with a PVS-10 Sniper Night Sight. The sight is intended for both day and night operations using a light intensifying night vision tube that can be easily switched to regular optics during daylight.

The Belt-Feds

The 101st has four different belt-fed weapons in its current inventory. The most prolific is the SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon), the Americanized variant of the FN 5.56mm Minimi, officially known as the M249. There are two per squad, each the centerpiece of the squad's two four-man fire teams. Feeding from a disintegrating belt of 200 rounds or from standard M4 (M16) 20- or 30-round magazines in a pinch, it weighs 15 pounds and has a cyclic rate of 750 rounds per minute. Right before deployment, Elcan 3.4x scopes were fitted along with Knight's Armament rail forends. This allowed SAW gunners to accessorize in much the same manner as their rifle-carrying squad mates.

As the normally walking 101st moved to more mounted operations, the SAWs were mounted atop HMMWVs. Ending the mounting difficulties this caused was a division innovation, a new pintle mount called the "Dohuk" mount. Named after the Kurdish town in northern Iraq where they were fabricated, the Dohuk mount provided an iron basket to hold and secure the ammo can to the gun while it bounced around as well as a cradle mount for the weapon. Designed and manufactured in the field, this mount is a testament to the continuing ingenuity of "Joe," the nameless riflemen who can adapt to and overcome any obstacle.

The M240B is the Army's replacement for the venerable M60. Joining the 30 other nations, from Britain to Israel, who use the Belgian-

designed MAG-58, the 26-pound gun feeds 7.62x51mm rounds and spits them back out at 600 to 900 rounds per minute. Two M240's form the cornerstone of every rifle platoon, and in time it will replace the division's remaining M60s.

My personal favorite is the MK19, 40mm grenade machine gun. This General Dynamics-produced behemoth, originally intended for Navy gunboats in Vietnam, can launch a 40mm HEDP (High Explosive Dual Purpose) grenade to ranges exceeding 2,000 meters and 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 that I saw in the 101st AOR (Area of Responsibility) were equipped with both the MK19 and the M240B or an M249 on a revolving turret. It has a distinctive firing sound as well as a signature slow rate of fire, bringing a smile and a sense of comfort to those nearby when it begins to engage the enemy.

The old lady of the battlefield is, of course, the M2 Browning .50 heavy machine gun, also affectionately known as "Ma Deuce." The Browning .50 has been around since 1923, making it the most venerable weapon in the inventory of the 101st. Having seen service in World War II, Korea,

A "Humm-V" convoy moves toward Baghdad. The lead vehicle is armed with an M19 grenade launcher as well as a side-mounted SAW.

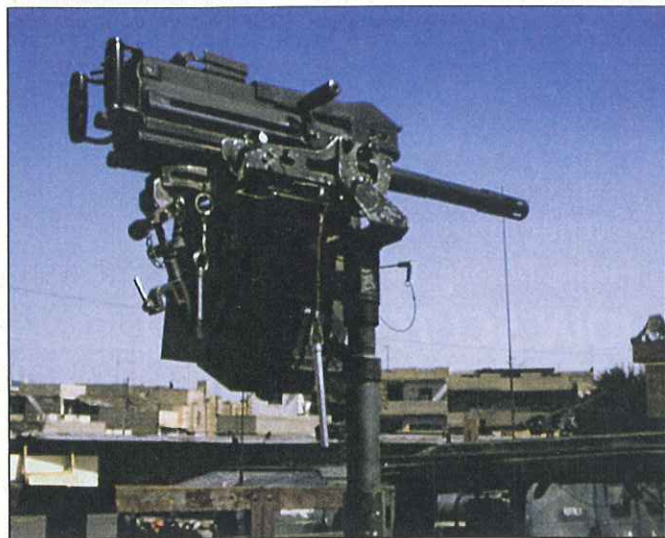


Vietnam, Granada, Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Afghanistan, Gulf War I and now Gulf War II, the old Ma Deuce still holds her own on the battlefield. Capable of firing as many as 450 to 1,250 rounds per minute, depending on the particular version, the M2 can be employed in every battlefield circumstance from anti-personnel to shooting down aircraft.

It's comforting to know that our fighting warriors have the best equipment and firepower on any field of battle and that in the hands of trained professional soldiers such as those of the 101st Airborne, few stand anything more than a fighting chance against our beloved Screaming Eagles.

(Editor's note: Philip Schreier, for the past 15 years, has been a Curator at the NRA's National Firearms Museum in Fairfax, Virginia. He ventured into Iraq as an embedded reporter last August-September, becoming the first NRA War Correspondent since WWII.)

Thanks to Division Commander MG David H. Petraeus, Division Master Gunner, MSGT J.C. Reich as well as SFC L. Covington and SGT D. Kemp.



The queen of the desert—the MK19 belt-fed 40mm grenade machine gun. The MK19 can deliver accurate, direct or indirect fire against enemy personnel and lightly armored vehicles.



"Ma Deuce"—a .50 caliber Browning M2 machine gun mounted on the roof of a "Humm-V."

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