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A Sniper's Precision View to A Kill

By Stephen Hunter
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The three quick shots off the fantail of the USS Bainbridge that terminated the piracy incident in the Indian Ocean early Sunday night made a number of points for various pointy-headed political pundits to chew on, cudlike, for a few weeks. But one they'll probably miss is the following: The three shots make clear to a wider public what has been clear to people who pay attention to such things -- we are in the golden age of the sniper.

He has become a kind of chivalric hero. He is the state, speaking in thunder, restoring order to the moral universe. Or he is civilization, informing the barbarians of the fecklessness of their plight. He is the line in the sand, the point of the spear, the man with the rifle, one of the few, the proud. He is also the intellectual of combat, in some ways, bringing a cool logic to what is normally hot, messy and exhausting.

We vest in him the right to kill in our name and it seems, at least to some extent, we no longer hold it against him that he does so from a long way out, usually in darkness and silence. Instead, we wish him godspeed. He's no longer Lee Harvey Oswald. He's Carlos Hatchcock, the legendary Marine Corps sniper, or Chuck Mawhinney, who holds the Marine Corps sniper kill record in Vietnam, or the two posthumous Battle of Mogadishu Medal of Honor recipients, the Delta snipers Randy Shughart and Gary Gordon. And now, he is the Navy SEALs who shot the Somali pirates and saved Capt. Richard Phillips.

Technology and necessity have combined to make the sniper the go-to guy in military operations, even given him a kind of glamour.

The business of felling a bad guy with one shot has never been more refined. Briefly -- this isn't Guns & Ammo, after all -- new optical hardware and ballistic innovations have made the sniper more effective than he's ever been. Since Vietnam, the military sniper weapon has been a bolt-action .30-caliber Remington rifle, effective to a thousand yards. In the past two decades, however, heavier-caliber weapons have been deployed to greatly further the shooter's range.

Now, using .50-caliber weapons, snipers regularly hit beyond a mile, and there's a whole new lineup of weapons between .30 and .50 calibers -- the .338 Lapua, the .416 Barrett, the .408 CheyTac -- that commandeer the range between 1,000 and 2,000 yards. On top of that, laser range-finding and chip-driven portable software enable the shooter to solve heretofore impenetrable ballistic equations, and index their sights precisely for that one-shot kill way, way out there.

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Sunday's mission demanded the utmost in skill and concentration, this after an arduous trek inward (by parachute and small boat to the Bainbridge at near dark on Saturday). Details will emerge, but I'm guessing the three SEALs were each equipped with a rifle called the SR-25, said to be the choice of SEAL snipers. It's a semiautomatic, for fast follow-up shots, and looks like an M-16 on growth hormones.

It almost certainly wears a tube at the muzzle, what you would call a silencer, what the community calls a suppressor. The point, for this kind of shooting, is that it's unlikely the three shooters would try to fire simultaneously; they probably shot over a few seconds, and the unthwarted report of the first rifle might have caused Targets 2 and 3 to withdraw. As it transpired, no pirate likely figured out what happened to his colleagues in the seconds before it happened to him.

Perhaps the pirates didn't realize the SEALs would be equipped with the refined technology of night vision. They thought they were safe, crouching behind the cabin of their life boat, peering over it at the big dark bulk of the Bainbridge 50 feet or so ahead. Actually, they were quite obvious to the shooters eyeing them through a somewhat awkward device, like a telescopic lens, but bloated, more complex, more powerful, built around the ability to intensify the ambient light. To the snipers, the pirates were as green as the witch in "The Wizard of Oz," and their eyes glowed. Meanwhile, some kind of index point -- cross hairs, a chevron, a simple glowing dot -- marked the bullet's point of impact, having been adjusted to the proper range in advance.

One thing that suggests the Navy may have had this ending in mind all along was the command decision to tow the lifeboat to calmer waters. Even at a relatively short range, shooting for blood from one vessel to another in high, rough seas would be a challenge difficult to meet, much less three times, more or less simultaneously.

So what is going on in the sniper's mind as he waits -- I'm guessing he's prone, the most stable shooting position -- in the dark, on the overhang at the extreme rear of the ship? He's crucially aware of his breathing rhythm, because he wants to fire between breaths. He probably doesn't think much about trigger pull. He wouldn't be here if he didn't know how to pull a trigger. He's not "pulling" it in the sense of exerting his muscle against it, so much as urging it to cooperate, massaging it into doing his bidding. If he hurries, if his finger is misplaced on its curve or catches on the trigger guard beneath it, it can all go wrong.

It can go wrong, too, if he neglects the follow-through, because like all athletic endeavors, shooting or pitching or throwing or tossing a crumple of paper into a wastebasket, the issue is the wholeness of motion, even long after the missile is dispatched.

Oh, and he has to do all that on instant notice with someone's life on the line, and if he misses, the burden of shame will be crushing.

What does he feel? The joke, much told, is that when asked what he felt when he took a man's life, the sniper answered, "Recoil." I suspect that's nonsense. But I also suspect these men are pure alphas, with unnatural levels of aggression and strength, which is magnified by their willingness to drive such larger questions down deeper and hold them far away from the duty mind. What they feel, then, is simple: None of your damn business.

Hunter, a former chief film critic at The Washington Post, is the creator of a series of novels featuring the sniper Bob Lee Swagger. His next book, to be published in October, is "I, Sniper."

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