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ATOP THE PYRAMID

By ERIC R. POOLE



McMILLAN'S TAC-50 STILL HOLDS THE RECORD: 2,430 METERS.

"Everybody I've shot with has taught me something," Rob Furlong said. "The credit for that shot goes to the entire team. My spotter...our security."

I sat down for an interview with Furlong at the 2010 SHOT Show in Las Vegas. I had written about his long-range exploit before, but this rare opportunity afforded me a better understanding of the person behind the world's longest effective sniper shot.

Working the Shah-i-Kot Valley, Cpl. Furlong was part of two three-man teams—or sniper cells, as he called them—that deployed from Canada to support Operation Anaconda in the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"Our main focus was to take the high ground and provide overwatch. We became the spotters for the area, calling indirect fire with our Leica Vectors and PRC radios provided by the American contingent. We didn't sleep a lot. There was always movement."

Canadian snipers had limited train-

ing on the TAC-50. The sniper cell had completed extensive and diverse training in order to perfect their craft, but the TAC-50 was part of a pilot program that has since been adopted as the C15 Long Range Sniper Weapon (LRSW).

"When we arrived at Kandahar, the dope on our rifles became useless," said Furlong. "We had to zero the TAC-50 at 800 meters, then pushed it out to 1,200. We held over for ranges beyond that."

American SF and a small number of Afghan fighters were expected to do the majority of combat in the largest ground offensive in the war on terror. Canadian snipers were asked to come along, just in case. The two sniper cells' first mission was on top of towers at the lonely end of an airport. If you've been there, you know which end he's talking about. When you count the rifle, Furlong was loaded with 180 pounds of gear, and his spotter, a heavier soldier, weighed in with 205 pounds. They were completely prepared to sustain themselves in case

support was unavailable.

The first day after leaving that airport took them 10 to 15 clicks up to the ridgeline of the Shah-i-Kot Valley. You estimate 10 to 15 because measuring distance while zig-zagging up a jagged Afghan mountainside is trying. They started their trek at daybreak and finished the ascent at nightfall.

Furlong's sniper cell was engaged right away from a technical (vehicle) firing at them from below. The sniper cell's security team, armed with C7 carbines and an M203, fired on the vehicle, but Furlong made it stationary with a single Raufoss round to the engine block. It was one of five or six shots he made during his deployment with the Mk 211 Raufoss, a super-accurate multipurpose cartridge with a projectile having an armor-piercing (tungsten core) and incendiary charge (RDX). "We were issued 90 rounds of Hornady A-Max, and when we ran out of that, we used standard .50-caliber

ball throughout the rest of our tour.”

Time passed, and Furlong had lost track of what day in the month of March it was. For 19 days the Canadian snipers impressed their American counterparts by disposing the enemy with relentless precision. Protected by U.S. troops, the snipers and their TAC-50 moved from hill to hill as needed, taking out enemy lookouts, protecting U.S. troops moving through the valleys and destroying menacing sources of enemy fire. His team was moving all the time to prevent enemy Taliban from zoning in on their valuable positions with mortars. Each day provided a target-rich environment, and they did as much “lazing” for indirect fire as they did actually shooting. But they did a lot of shooting with the TAC-50 using a range card, with each round recorded in the weapons record book. “We could fire 10, 15, 20 shots before we would have to move,” said Furlong.

The record shot was made on a day that seemed like many others. The night was cold, and each morning the sniper cell set out their ammo to heat up under the sun. Furlong’s spotter would cover the floor of the valley with optics at 9,500 feet. They weren’t very far from the spot where they racked out the night before. Furlong took his TAC-50, mounted with a Leupold Mk IV, and checked to make sure the knobs were working. He doesn’t like to have gear on him when he shoots, and this day was no different.

Furlong’s spotter ID’d a three-man RPK team and after calling it in, deemed it a target to be engaged. “They were either resupplying or setting up a nest,” Furlong said. “I can still remember the familiarity of getting behind the TAC-50. I didn’t have to think about it or take my eyes away from the scope. You learn not to take your eyes off target.”

At 2,430 meters the Leupold was maxed out of adjustment. The flight time of the .50-caliber bullet can be estimated at 4½ seconds after factoring in the air resistance. Over that time, the bullet drops nearly 100 meters before impact. It would take just three rounds to successfully engage that target.

“The first shot sounded through the valley and fell short. Better to fall short than overshoot, because you’ll have an easier time seeing the splash and making an adjustment. Splash is golden.” Furlong recalled, “They had no fear. They didn’t run. I guess they’d just been engaged so many times.”

The second shot hit the insurgent’s bag. The spotter had effectively done his job, and there was no dope adjustment needed for the third and final shot. It cracked and flew across the valley before violently striking the target’s torso. “You’re very focused at

the task at hand. That last shot wasn’t for myself, it was an accomplishment for every single guy on that team.” Furlong prefers anonymity over recognition. “It doesn’t matter who did it,” he said. “That guy was taken out, and he didn’t have an opportunity to kill anybody else, and that was it.”

Cpl. Furlong’s shot broke record for the longest recorded kill by a sniper in combat, previously held by the legendary Gunnery Sgt. Carlos Hathcock, a Marine who set the long-standing record of 2,250 meters in February 1967 using a scoped .50-caliber M2 in Vietnam.

Now a police officer of the Edmonton Police Service, Constable Rob Furlong is part of a 1,700-officer department that serves 850,000 people. The McMillan TAC-50 is still the only .50-caliber rifle Furlong has ever fired. 50



In addition to Operation Anaconda, Canadian snipers participated in Operation Harpoon. Positioned on “the whale,” a mountain overlooking the Shah-i-Kot Valley, the McMillan TAC-50 covered 500 Canadian and 100 U.S. troops, with dozens of hits at ranges greater than 1,500 meters, in the biggest ground offensive to that date since the Korean War.