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THE U.S. MARINES SEND THE HK M27 IAR DOWNRANGE.

By Larry Vickers

ONE OF THE HOTTEST SUBJECTS in the tactical small arms community in the past year or so is the Marine Corps' decision to adopt an automatic rifle to augment, not replace, the M249 SAW at the grunt level. The reasons are very simple: They desired a gun that was lighter and more maneuverable in a wide variety of combat situations, had greater pinpoint accuracy and allowed for an acceptable level of sustained fire for a significant number of the mission profiles they encounter. Based on the feedback I am hearing, and my limited time with the M27 IAR, the slightly modified carbine-length HK416 variant used as the basis for the M27 succeeds superbly at the roles it was intended to fill.



With all that being said, let's take a closer look at the gun and the accessories fitted to it.

THE GUN

The HK416 started life as an improved M4-style carbine. The intention was to keep the excellent ergonomics the M4 platform is known for and improve upon component life as well as adapt a different gas system (short-stroke gas piston) to the gun to better fit a wide variety of roles. I was involved with the project early on from the end-user side, and I immediately saw the potential the gas-piston, M4-style gun had in a short-barrel format. The unit I was in at the time desired a shorter firearm for CQB operations than the M4 carbine, as experience had taught us that barrel lengths shorter than 14½ inches with a direct-impingement gas system were not adequately reliable. In a variety of combat environments the short-barrel DI guns were found lacking, nor were they maintainable in a high-round-count, Unit-level issue profile. Other guns such as the SIG 552 and HK G36C were evaluated to fill the bill, but the familiarity of the M4 as well as its world-class ergonomics made a short-barrel, piston-driven variant the obvious choice. This, of course, was my gut feeling at the time, and my instincts have been proven correct. The ultimate expression of this was when bin Laden was dispatched in May 2011 by Naval Special Warfare personnel using 10.4-inch HK416s. To say that I am proud of this would be understating the situ-

ation greatly—the fact that I helped create the very gun used to kill the biggest enemy of our great country since Hitler gives me a sense of pride and accomplishment that no words can describe.

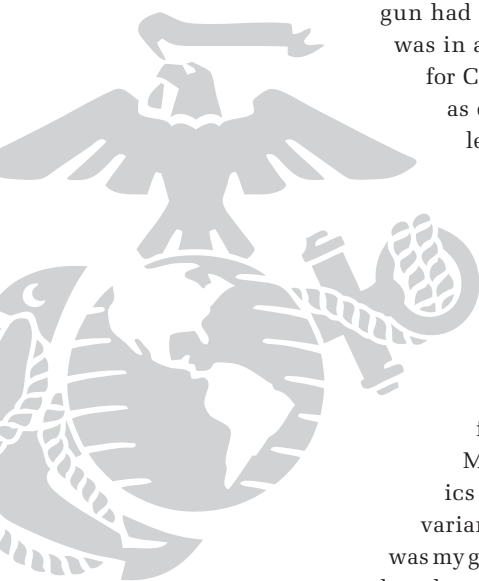
In addition, I have become friends with some of the same individuals who were on the UBL mission, and those memories will last me a lifetime. I say this because this is the mission profile I had in mind when I was working on the HK416 project. I did not envision where the HK-designed piston carbine would go next.

ENTER THE M27

Believe it or not, HK almost did not enter the 416 into the IAR trials. They had other irons in the fire and did not really have time to develop a specialized entry like Colt, FN and LWRC were submitting. So with this as a backdrop, and the fact that HK had extensive test data on the 416 series, which gave them the confidence that the gun could meet the firing schedule required by the USMC, they submitted what is essentially a 16½-inch carbine version of the HK416—no bells, whistles or horns tailoring the rifle to the automatic rifle role. And at the end of the day the KISS principle reigned supreme. Other than mounting a bayonet lug on the longer barrel and supplying the gun with a longer rail system, the M27 IAR is identical to the one used to dispatch UBL. The secret to the versatility being displayed here is quite simply the short-stroke gas-piston operating system. The same system that allows reliable functioning with a short barrel also keeps the operating parts cooler for a higher sustained rate of fire. It also validates my four basic questions that I recommend you ask yourself to determine whether a piston gun is right for you:

- Do I have a need for a barrel length less than 14½ inches?
- Do I expect to shoot the gun suppressed extensively?
- Do I have the requirement to shoot a wide variety of ammo?
- Do I have the need to shoot a high volume of fully automatic fire?

If the answer is “no” to these questions, then a quality direct-impingement M4-style gun will fit the bill superbly. Just lube it frequently, use good ammo fed from good magazines, and clean it occasionally and you will have a gun that will give you excellent service for many thousands of rounds. However, if the answer is “yes” to any of the four questions above, you need to take a hard look at a piston gun, and no one will dispute that the yardstick that all piston guns



are measured against is the HK416. It is not only the most famous piston M4-style gun, but also the most combat proven. This all makes sense, as it is the gun that started the current piston craze in the AR family of rifles, a craze that does not look like it will slow down anytime soon.

TRIGGER TIME WITH THE M27

Recently, I invited Robbie Reidsma from HK USA to come down as a special guest on my show, "TacTV," which airs on the Sportsman Channel as well as online in an extended format on Tac-TV.com. Season Two kicked off with the HK416 followed by the M27 IAR, which was one of my most requested show topics based on my past involvement with the 416. Robbie and I put the M27 through its paces and compared it with an M16A4 and an M249 SAW. We shot all three guns side-by-side in a variety of tests that highlighted the pros and cons of each. The results were in some cases predictable and in others surprising. Let me break it down drill by drill:

FULL-AUTO DISPERSION TEST

After shooting at a target 50 yards away and doing a series of shorts bursts with all three firearms from their normal prone full-auto support positions (M16A4 magazine monopod, bipod for the other two), the results were interesting. The M16A4 and SAW had nearly the exact same dispersion, while the M27 was dramatically less. In our opinion, the reason for this was the slightly higher cyclic rate on automatic and the greater stability offered from the Harris/LaRue bipod assembly. One advantage that was immediately seen was the ability to track all the shots of the burst using the highly visible partial-donut-style reticle of the optic issued with the M27, the Trijicon ACOG 3.5x35 Squad Day Optic. This is the same optic being used by the Marine Corp for the M249, so it made sense to carry it over for use on the M27. It has a Trijicon RMR red dot reflex sight mounted in



The author is seen here testing the M27 IAR alongside the M249 SAW while on the set filming an upcoming episode of "TacTV" that can be viewed on the Sportsman Channel or tac-tv.com.

a piggyback position for up-close (50 yards and in) work in case a Marine needs to use the gun for environments where the magnified optic is too slow. This was the first time I got to play with this particular ACOG, and even though I am a die-hard Aimpoint Micro and Schmidt & Bender Short Dot fan, I must admit I came away impressed with the M27's primary sighting setup. Piggyback red dot/magnified optic setups are always a compromise, but in this case it is probably the best possible solution, particularly when you factor in the results of the next test.

BURST TO PIN-POINT ACCURACY TEST

A steel torso-size target was placed at 100 yards, then another at 300. The test was to put one short burst on the close steel, then attempt to engage the far steel with one precise shot. Once again, first up was the M16A4, which suffered again from the monopod shooting position, as only one hit was recorded on the 100-yard steel. Switch to semiauto and the 300-yard shot was child's play, as it was fitted with a Trijicon ACOG also similar to the one issued on that platform within the Corps. Next up was the SAW, which excelled at the close steel. Surprisingly, I got the first hit on the far target of a very short burst. At this point it became clear why the Israelis put a semiauto as well as full-auto mode on their Negev 5.56mm LMG. The M249 is way overdue for this upgrade. And, as expected, this test was a cakewalk for the M27. With the prone bipod-supported stability, the slightly higher cyclic rate and the ability to switch to semi for the long shot, the stage was set to dominate, and it

Five Marine Corps units have deployed with the M27 IAR thus far. Three have already rotated stateside, while 1st LAR BN and 2/4 Marines from Camp Pendleton were deployed at press time. DoD photo





did not disappoint. The X factor that pushed the performance to yet another level was the reticle in the ACOG SDO, which allowed for easy and accurate holdover. After Robbie Reidsma from HK schooled me on the use of the reticle with the M27, 300m hits were automatic. It was at this point that I was sold on the M27. This burst-to-pinpoint accuracy test was tailor made for the platform, and it excelled. I know from personal experience that there is a time and place where the ability to put accurate full-auto bursts on target and then be able to switch to semiauto for a more precise designated marksman-style engagement is required. Therein lies the reason why the HK21 was used within the spec ops community, as it bridged the gap between these two combat engagement situations. I can see why the M27 has been popular among the Marines who have tested and used it. It quite simply offers a lot of performance for the size and weight of the overall package. The final test just demonstrated this further.

THE SAW VERSUS M27 RELOAD TEST

We all knew how this was gonna shake out. Any Jabronie knows that a magazine-fed gun is easier and quicker to reload than a belt fed, and of course this was proven once again when we filmed this segment for “TacTV.” In the time it took me to reload the SAW once, Robbie was able to reload several magazines (granted with a reduced capacity to highlight the ease of reloading for the show). The trade-off, of course, is the volume of fire between reloads. In a sustained-fire situation a belt fed is the king. In a dynamic-movement situation the ability to reload the gun quicker may be preferred over more ammo. Life is all about trade-offs and weighing out the features that are important to you at that given time and place. At least the M27 IAR gives the Marines another option besides a belt-fed, full-auto-only weapon system like the SAW.

BOLT-ONS

One thing the Marines did was try and set up the gun with accessories they already had in the system, then search out items needed to make it a complete package. Hence why you see things such as the Trijicon S.D.O. and the KAC flip-up sights and KAC rail-mounted vertical pistol grip—already in the system so why not use them? Two notable examples where they searched the market for items to meet their IAR needs are the rail covers and the sling. The rail covers are the AIM Manta rail covers that do a good job of insulating the shooter from the heat generated by full-auto fire. The sling is my very own Vickers Combat Applications Sling (VCAS), made exclusively by Blue Force Gear in Pooler, Georgia. We have sold a lot of these slings to the U.S. military and the Marine Corps in particular. In fact, the one on the M27 was just recently given the NSN of 1005-01-604-0627, so we expect to see a lot of Devil Dogs using it in harm’s way in the future. BFG and I are very proud that our product has been chosen by the USMC on their newest individual weapon system, and we pledge to make sure every one is as good as we can make it.

THE HOWS AND WHYS

I like the M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle—I’m sure that comes as no surprise. In addition, I have a special place in my heart for Marines. I have trained many of them over the years and consider many of them friends. I was personally involved in the development of the M27 early on in the HK416 days, and my namesake sling is on every one of them. That kind of personal attachment to any item is going to breed some strong emotions. But that involvement also gives me insight into the hows and whys of this small arm’s development. Let’s all hope it does what the Marines using it need it to do when things go sideways. Be safe, and *Semper Fi*. **AR-15**

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Harris/LaRue tactical bipod



Vertical foregrip M27 Operator’s Manual



A.I.M. Manta rail covers



OTIS cleaning kit

