weighs a honking 19 pounds. That’s one hellacious load to carry, especially in places like Afghanistan where it’s uphill in both directions. The result is a weapon that’s much better suited to benchrest matches than infantry combat.

Instructor Rick Furr, who also manages the Firebase Phoenix school, provided technical expertise. Using a Remington 700, he demonstrated how to remove a barreled action from the McMillan glass-bedded stock to cure a finicky safety or disassemble a bolt. Ordinarily only battalion and depot-level armorer are authorized to do such work, but Graves and Furr believe that shooters need to know how to repair their weapons in the field.

Furr also showed the Marines how to use simple devices to improve performance. Snipers usually are issued match-grade ammo, but careful selection can result in as much as a 10 percent improvement in accuracy. Furr advocates weighing each lot of ammo and setting aside heavy or light rounds for practice. Other checks are a concentricity gauge and a meplat uniformer to deburr bullet tips. He warns, “You can do everything exactly right and still miss at long range. But if you cull your combat ammo during your down time, it can pay off when you crosshair somebody who needs to go away.”

At the end of the course, the recon Marines had more information than they had been able to accumulate before. High on the list was valid scope settings for more than 30 distances, from seven yards to 1,000. Other benefits include use of the shooting sling (seldom taught in military schools), unconventional positions such as the Hawkins low prone, and live-fire stalks. Because of range safety concerns, military snipers conduct most of their training stalks with blanks. At Cowtown that’s not a limitation.

The In-Country View

After multiple tours, the Marines know what to expect when they return to Iraq. For instance, the resistance fighters prefer to spend the winter conducting secretive operations but often they come out in the summer. “They think they have an advantage because they’re used to 120-degree heat,” explains Sgt. Detrick. “They know that we’re all loaded down with armor and other gear, so they’re more willing to fight in the hot months.”

Despite the conditions, many Marines remain eager for repeat tours in Iraq. Their reasons are varied, ranging from patriotism to pro-

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