

Why are the Marine Corps Long Range Stocks Painted Red?

By Dick Culver

Interesting question, eh wot? And why would anyone give a rat's fanny? Well... the story has to do with a hurried "non-decision" made between one of my senior NCOs and watah in a moment of seeming good natured jibing. Alas, not everyone knows when you are "funning" 'em a bit!

I was stationed at MTU, Quantico during 1977 and as usual during our "off shooting season," we worked to bring all of our equipment up to snuff, try new barrel twists, and make sure all the rifle were properly bedded, etc.

Fiberglass stocks were not as prevalent in those days, and we were just then building our new M40A1 Sniper Rifles using a McMillan Fiberglass Stock. Now the Sniper guns were built on a stock with a built in camouflage pattern (taken off Jack Cuddy's personal Utility Shirt no less). While they were the cat's fanny for duty out in the boondocks, they didn't exude the professionalism we were trying to bring to our National Competitive Marksmanship Arena. Don't forget, the National Matches are as much a "*dawg and pony show*" as they are a contest of shooting skills.

Marine Gunner Neil Goddard was running our ordnance shop including building and maintaining all of our competitive rifles and pistols, and of course he was turning out the new M40A1s due to go out to the Fleet to replace the M40s with the walnut stocks. The accuracy our new M40A1s were exhibiting caused a council of war concerning bringing our long range (.300 Win Mag) bolt guns up to a maximum accuracy potential. We went to McMillan again since he had done an excellent job on our sniper stocks, and had him deliver a number of his best prone stocks for use in the long range matches. As an aside, the civilian shooting community had always suspected that the military was taking unfair advantage of a less well funded bunch of civilians and went around with their lower lips touching the ground.

Some years earlier, a near revolt by the competitive civilian shooters had occurred pointing out that the military had some sort of unbreakable lock on winning all the marbles at the Nationals. Some sort of compromise was called for and in order to keep peace in the competitive shooting arena, it was noted that the seemingly unlimited funds being available to the military shooters put the civilians at an unfair disadvantage. The civilians also noted that the purpose of the military was to practice shooting the service rifle to be able to kill the enemy more efficiently. Score one for the opposing team.

The military grudgingly admitted that there was a small amount of truth in the argument, but they didn't want to totally get out of bolt action rifle shooting because of the obvious application that long range marksmanship (shooting out past 600-yards) had for sniping. The civilian shooting community also grudgingly admitted to the logic in the sniping argument and a sort of devil's deal was cut. The Military would compete ONLY with the service rifle back to 600-yards, leaving the bolt gun competition essentially as a civilian enterprise at the shorter ranges. When it came to shooting such long range matches as the Wimbledon and Leech Cups (1000-yard matches) and other such long range endeavors fired from a "fur piece", it was a situation of Katy-Bar-the-Door. Now the Military wasn't exactly ecstatic over the new rules, but on the other hand they HAD been left with the long range rifles.

While we had been confined to/by the new rules for a number of years by 1977, we were still behind the power curve on the latest technology in modern stocking techniques. We had gained a fair amount of knowledge from building our new sniper rifles and logic dictated that the same techniques could materially improve our long range competitive rifles.

We decided to rebuild a few of our .300 Magnum Rifles with the new fiberglass stocks to see how well they performed. Immediate success followed, and Neil decided that all the long range guns should be rebuilt with the new stocks. I concurred and the stocks were ordered. Gunnery Sergeant Gary Gregory was in charge of the effort, and if nothing else he was meticulous to a fault. I knew that our new long range guns would be something to be reckoned with!

Time passed and we had many projects on our plate including getting our new Marine Corps Scout Sniper Instructor School off the ground. For those who have been around such an organization as MTU, you know that the so called "off season" ain't exactly a slack period. Matches have to be planned, ammunition ordered and tested, lesson plans had to be developed for the new S/S School, and Division Match Instructional Teams, rifles and pistols tweaked and tested, and new avenues explored to translate our competitive efforts into the combat arena. We were some busy puppies!

Since we had decided that our new long range stocks wouldn't be built with the camouflage pattern (I was *for* the camouflage pattern, but then I was a voice in the wilderness). Gregory said that the best possible finish would be a good spray job with some extremely tough (and extremely expensive) epoxy paint. I forget the exact price per gallon, but it was usurious even back in 1977! The bottom line was that you didn't keep a few gallons around for grins, you bought what you needed and a little extra for emergencies. Now that the stage is set, on to our story.

Gary Gregory and I were always "screwing around" with each other verbally. For instance I was attempting to design a Scout Sniper Qualification Badge (alas '*scotched*' by HQMC). Gregory being of German origin, and being possessed with an evil sense of humor suggested that the "links" suspending the badge from the bar be in the form of two German "lightening bolt '*S's*'" faintly reminiscent of the double S's on the collar of the German "SS" Troops in WWII. Arrrrgggg... "Gregory you idiot, out of my office!" I'd shout as he would flee ducking whatever I could find to throw at him. We had a lot of fun together, and a close friendship never bothered our professional relationship. Gregory however would often address me (within the office) as "*Herr May YORE*" with an emphasis on the last syllable of the "YORE" in German fashion.

At any rate this one spring morning, Gunny Gregory stuck his head in the office and said, "*Herr May YORE*, what color do you want the new long range stocks painted?"

I was involved in another project at the time, and without looking up I told Gregory, "why, Bright Red of course, I'd have told you if I wanted some other color!"

"Ja Wohl *Herr May YORE*, of course, bright red what a stupid question on my part!" and with that he let the door close and headed back to the shop. Had I only known!

Some period of time passed and I had almost forgotten my joking remarks to the Gunny when Gregory sticks his head in the door once again.

"Hey Skipper, come back in the shop and check out the stocks!"

“Stocks? What stocks? Having forgotten my joking remarks a couple of weeks previously.

I headed back toward the shop, and decided I should have brought my Ray Ban Shooting Glasses! The entire ordnance shop seemed bathed in a red glow. Those things could have been used to mark runways! Arrrgggggg...

“Gregory, what’in’ell going on?” I asked.

“Skipper, did you not specify BRIGHT RED for our new long range stocks?”

Now I was trapped. To admit I was joking would have been unthinkable! The Corps now had considerable time and money invested in my offhand remark about the stock color. I had to come up with a suitable answer. Think fast Culver, think fast!

“But of course Gunny, don’t you see how easily we’ll be able to identify our long range shooters on the 1000-yard line? They turned out better than even I had expected!” I lied.

“Ya know, I never thought of that, and since the major portion of the bright red color is under the stock, they shouldn’t bother the shooter at all!”

I was hoping Gary was right, as we now had considerable money and time invested in our new long range offerings. If it doesn’t work out, it’ll be my furry posterior! I took one of the rifles and headed for Charlie Reynolds’ office with my heart in my mouth!

“Hey Colonel, you know how hard it is to find our shooters on the 1000-yard line? Well, we’ve solved the problem!”

I was using some phraseology that would allow Gary to bask in reflected (in this case literally) glory for a triumph if Colonel Charlie liked the idea, and I could claim it was all my idea if Charlie Reynolds was planning a drawing and quartering party!

Charlie put the rifle on his desk and walked around it carefully.

“Ya know Culver, they did a really nice paint job on these, I like the idea!”

Whew... But the longer I looked at the darned things, they did kinda’ grow on me! ...And of course, scarlet is one of our sacred Marine Corps colors. ...And for sure, they were safe on the firing line, who in the hell would try to make off with a rifle that came very close to glowing in the dark?

I have never figured out if Gregory was deliberately screwing with me on the red color, or he really did think I was serious. I suppose it’s all immaterial what in the wash of many years. I don’t know if any of the long range stocks are still painted red, but for many years you could pick out the Marine Corps long range shooters on the line with a pad and pencil without even asking the scorekeepers. Kinda’ handy in retrospect, but you can bet I was a bit more careful when I answered any of Gary Gregory’s offhanded questions from there on out. Sometimes he was kidding, and obviously, sometimes he was not!

Semper Fi,

Dick