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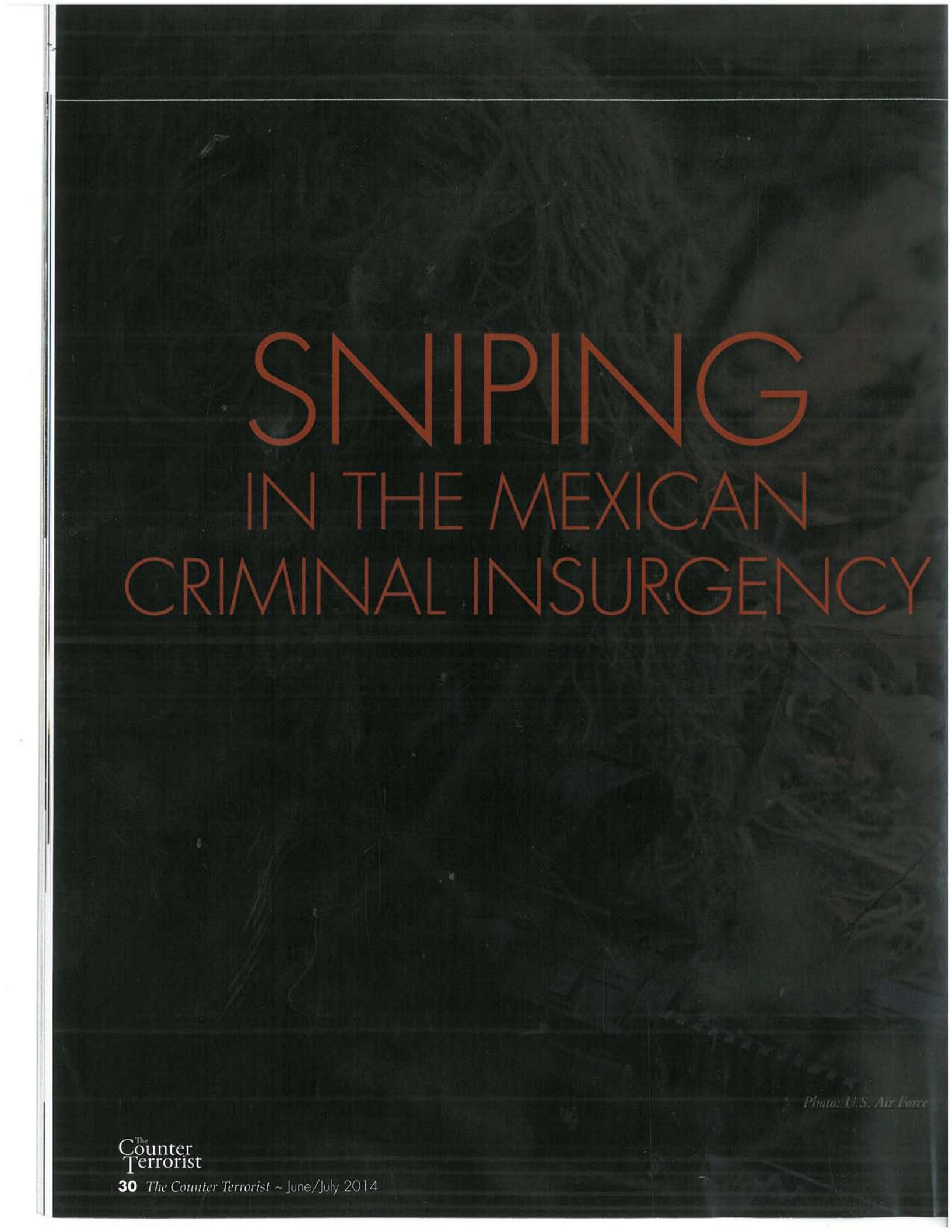
SNIPING IN THE  
MEXICAN CRIMINAL  
INSURGENCY



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# SNIPING IN THE MEXICAN CRIMINAL INSURGENCY

*Photo: U.S. Air Force*





**By Robert J. Bunker**

Mexico has been held in the grip of increasing narco-related strife for many years, with well over 80,000 killed and another 20,000 missing. Gun battles and engagements between opposing cartels and drug gangs and between criminal groups and Mexican law enforcement agencies and the military have become daily events throughout many regions of the country.

**T**hese criminal groups have paramilitary capabilities, utilize tactics that are both terrorist- and insurgent-like, and possess light infantry arms.

Cartel enforcers donning body armor, carrying assault rifles fitted with grenade launchers, and driving armored SUVs are quite common, as is the use of fragmentation grenades. Car bombs have also been used in the past, and light antitank weapons such as LAW rockets

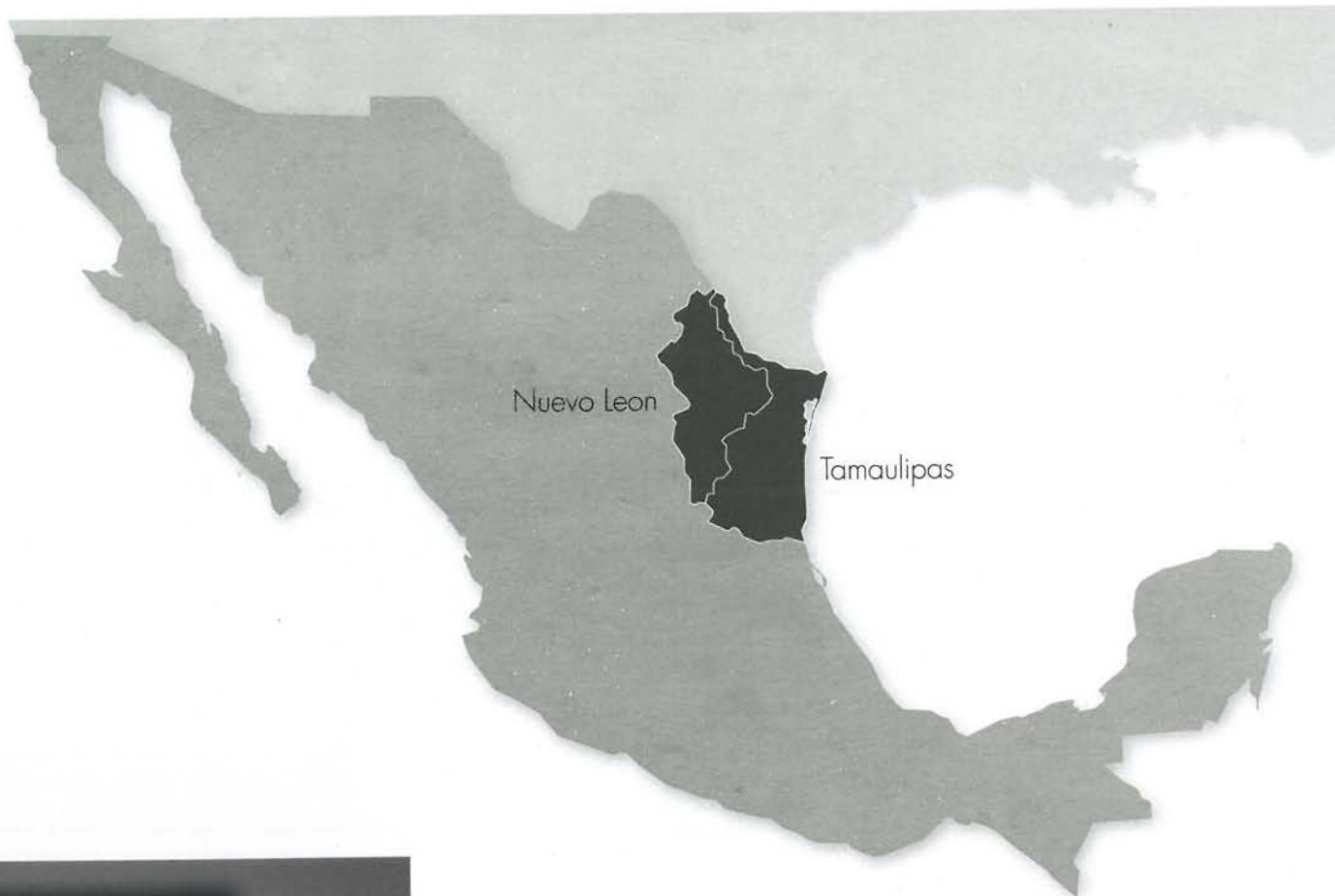
and RPGs are occasionally encountered.

Of all of these weapons, one of the most feared is the sniper rifle—not only those of standard rifle caliber that can be used to deliver precision fire at long range—but also heavier rifles in calibers such as .50 and 12.7mm. These rifles can defeat light armor, punch through buildings and vehicles, and deliver devastating effects on flesh and bone.

Unfortunately, much of our understanding of sniper rifle patterns

of use in the Mexican criminal insurgency is based on incomplete information due to the covert nature of their employment and the competing interests and motivations regarding tracking and disseminating this information. Additionally, since the new administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto came into office in December 2012, reports coming out of Mexico have diminished. This is mostly due to new governmental policies. However, regions





*President Enrique Peña Nieto.  
Photo by: World Economic Forum*

of the country such as Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon are also seeing a press black out dictated by the cartels themselves.

## CARTELS USING SNIPER RIFLES

Small arms and heavier man-portable weapons have proliferated across the major criminal organizations in Mexico. The following drug gangs and cartels have been identified as possessing "sniper rifles":

- Arellano Felix Organization (AFO)
- Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO)
- Cartel del Golfo (CDG)
- The Federation/Sinaloa
- La Familia Michoacana (LFM)

and its successor, the Knights Templar Cartel

- Juarez Cartel
- Los Zetas

No reliable information exists on the number of such weapons currently in the arsenals of the various Mexican criminal organizations. A conservative estimate would likely be in the high double digits, but this could very well extend into over a hundred of such dedicated rifles. Once again, at best this is an educated guess. Well over one hundred sniper rifles have been seized from the cartels to date, including more than 60 .50 caliber rifles either in cartel possession or intercepted while in transit for delivery.

...about 34 or so  
Barrett .50 caliber  
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border and delivered  
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Fast and Furious  
operation.

## TYPES OF RIFLES AND OPTICS SEIZED

Two types of rifles commonly identified as “sniper rifles” have been seized from the drug gangs and cartels in Mexico: quasi- and dedicated-sniper rifles. Dedicated-sniper rifles, in turn, can be further divided into standard rifle calibers and large caliber variants.

**Quasi-Sniper Rifles:** These “improvised sniper rifles” are created by employing optics with magnification on AR-15 and other styles of semi-automatic rifles and assault rifles. These are unsophisticated attempts to replicate the capabilities of “Designated Marksman Rifles” or “Special Purpose Rifles.” They can be used for delivering intermediate range precision fires.

**Dedicated-Sniper Rifles:** These are rifles designed for tactical employment at long ranges. Hunting rifles are likely counted in this category, as gun data is often collected and disseminated with a lack of precision, for a variety of reasons. Bolt action variants generally deliver greater precision, but are limited to specialized use when

facing opponents with standard semi-auto or select-fire rifles.

**Standard caliber variants:** The “Quasi-Sniper Rifles” are often 5.56 x 45mm, while “Dedicated Sniper Rifles” are often 7.62x51mm or similar calibers.

**Large caliber variants:** These are .50 caliber and 12.7mm rifles, as well as 20 mm and like calibers. Each of these can disable vehicles and have some armor-defeating capabilities.

Optics seized from gang and cartel members and discovered in weapons caches have fallen primarily into the category of basic optics: simple daylight telescopic sights. Electro-Optical (battery powered) sights appear evident in a few of the seizures. No evidence of night-vision devices has appeared in press photos of these seizures, though the Mexican narco museum has one example of what appears to be a laser targeting device mounted on a large caliber rifle. However, the cartels—and mercenaries in their employ—are known to possess night-vision devices. The volume of use of suppressors and special purpose ammunition is undetermined.



*42 weapons recovered by the Mexican military in Naco, Sonora, Mexico, 20 Nov 2009. Photo by: ATF*





*Cooperation of the forces special advanced of the Mexican army in the searches carried out in Michoacan. Photo by: Diego Fernández*

## SOURCES OF SNIPER RIFLES AND SNIPERS

Firearms employed by Mexican crime groups are purchased from corrupt government forces in Latin America, stolen from government armories and stockpiles, purchased from international vendors in shipments coming from China, India, and elsewhere, and on occasion purchased in the U.S. In fact, about 34 or so Barrett .50 caliber rifles were allowed to be taken south of the border and delivered to the drug gangs as part of the infamous Fast and Furious operation. Attempts to smuggle sniper

rifles off of U.S. Army and Marine bases for delivery to the cartels have also been reported.

Cartel snipers have come from Mexican special forces, army, and law enforcement deserters, and from the Kaibiles (Guatemalan special forces). Mercenaries—including former U.S. military personnel (who may have gang ties)—have also offered their services to the cartels.<sup>1</sup> The actual number of cartel snipers who have been deployed over the last decade is unknown. Who would qualify as an actual sniper is also up for debate. The best working

assumption is that a minimum figure would be in the dozens, with a potential threshold of a few hundred. However, only a fraction of such cartel personnel and mercenaries could be considered competent snipers; many individuals are simply unsophisticated operators of rifles with optics.

## DEPLOYMENT PATTERNS

Military sniper teams typically operate in two man teams with a shooter and a more senior spotter who may also provide security. In Mexico, tactics, terrain, and opposition forces readily modify sniper





*Kaibiles (Guatemalan Special Forces soldiers) may have offered services to the cartels.  
Photo by: Cpl. Daniel A. Negrete*

deployment, as do the training level of the sniper personnel themselves, and the hardware available. Past incident patterns suggest that cartel snipers are typically employed without the benefit of a spotter, with comparatively low levels of competence at limited engagement ranges.

**Antipersonnel:** The classic use of a sniper is to stealthily kill a high value individual—one shot, one kill—with the sniper escaping undetected. Politicians, military and policing officials, and the plaza bosses of competing cartels primarily represent high value targets in this conflict environment. From June 2007 through June 2011, at least ten Mexican soldiers have been killed by reported cartel snipers.

**Antivehicular/Antimateriel:** Larger caliber sniper rifles can easily be directed against infrastructure. Numerous photographs exist of sandbagged police stations in Mexico.

**Countersniper:** This deployment pattern has not been confirmed in the Mexican criminal insurgency but is assumed to have taken place in engagements between cartels similarly



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armed with sniper rifles. Technology-based shot spotters and countersniper systems are said to exist with some Mexican governmental forces, but no record of their successful use against a cartel sniper has been reported.

**Area/Aerial Denial:** Snipers can be tactically deployed for area (ground) and aerial (air) denial missions. Both uses have been alleged in the Mexican criminal insurgency. In urban ground operations,

area denial is utilized to deny responding forces entry to support adjacent forces during an engagement and also to create pre-planned kill zones by means of intentionally channeling opposing forces through pre-selected avenues of approach.

**Harassment & PSYOPS:** Ongoing sniping can have a detrimental and debilitating effect on an opposing police, paramilitary, or military unit. While this is not normally mentioned in regard to

cartel snipers, the implicit assumption exists that such snipers deployed over time can degrade the morale of an opposing force as part of targeted psychological operations. Note: Given the governmental special operations origins of Los Zetas, it is assumed that this technique has been employed over the years by that cartel.

**Integrated Small Unit Tactics:** Snipers in overwatch positions can also be



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integrated in support of tactical units for both defensive and offensive operations.

The complex crime and warfare environment found in the Mexican criminal insurgency—the above military-like deployment patterns of snipers—falls within broader organized crime, narco-terrorism, and criminal-insurgency themes.

## INCIDENTS OF INTEREST

Sniper rifles have been utilized in the Mexican states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Michoacan, Nayarit, Nuevo Leon, Sonora, and Tamaulipas, and have been seized in the states of Durango, Sinaloa, and Veracruz.

The following two relatively recent incidents show examples of sniper rifle use in Mexico by the cartels and drug gangs:

- The commander of the State Investigation Agency, Gustavo Gerardo Garza Saucedo, was assassinated during the early morning of 19 February 2013. An individual reportedly used a .50 caliber rifle to shoot him when he arrived home in Apodaca, 20 kilometers northwest




*Mexican special operations helicopter. Photo by: Wikiwritermex*

of the capital of Nuevo Leon. The standoff range was reported to be 60 meters, about 66 yards away. This is the distance where a tripod (possibly an improvised item) was reportedly found abandoned along with a shell casing, which possibly suggests a low level of skill and/or the desire for a symbolic act. The items were reported found in a vacant lot

near the Commander's home. The target was hit in the back with the lot, providing a clear line of sight to the parking and/or door of the residence.<sup>2</sup>

- On 18 December 2013 in the resort of Puerto Penasco in the northwest of Sonora, an engagement took place between two Mexican government helicopters and a cartel



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*Three policemen on the roof of the Huejotzingo municipal palace providing security during the 2011 Huejotzingo Carnival. Photo by: Thelmadatter*

element of ten SUVs fleeing a luxury condo complex next to the beach. The vehicles were hit by air-to-ground fire that resulted in their being destroyed, with five gunmen killed at the scene. The engagement was a result of a Mexican governmental attempt to arrest Gonzalo Inzunza, a top lieutenant of the Sinaloa cartel. It was reported, "Police found 14 sniper or assault rifles at the scene, which one federal official confirmed were of heavy caliber."<sup>3</sup> Video of the exchange, shot by an American tourist, seems to record the sounds of .50 caliber

rounds being fired during the gun battle, which suggests the cartel members may have been returning fire against the helicopters, though Mexican government forces also employ .50 rifles.<sup>4</sup>

For a listing of earlier cartel sniper incidents, see the Mexican Cartel Tactical Note listed in the references section.

## CROSS BORDER POTENTIAL

Rifle fire from across the Southern border into the U.S. has been an intermittent affair over the years. For example, in Imperial Beach, California,

in 1997, seven incidents took place, with one resulting in a Border Patrol agent being grazed by a bullet in the forehead.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, a rash of at least six cross-border sniping incidents occurred in the Douglas, Arizona area against Border Patrol agents, with a vehicle and a surveillance camera being hit.<sup>6</sup> By 2006, Congressional concerns had escalated regarding the possibility that U.S. Border Patrol agents could be subjected to .50 caliber sniper rifle fire from Mexican cartel personnel.<sup>7</sup> In 2010, smugglers even threatened to use snipers against Nogales police officers unless they quit engaging in off-duty drug seizures.<sup>8</sup>

During this period and up to the present, numerous encounters between armed cartel personnel and U.S. border patrol and LE officers have taken place. Further, sporadic cross-border use of lasers to harass and intimidate U.S. law enforcement has taken place. Accurate numbers regarding cross border fire against law enforcement officers seems not to have been tracked.

While Mexican drug gangs and the cartels possess the "capability" to target U.S. law enforcement officers via snipers across the border and inside our country, especially in desolate smuggling areas—such as in the Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas sectors—widespread 'intent' to do so does not presently appear to exist. What would change this present equation is unknown. This only adds to the present ambiguity of the sniper threat related to the drug gangs and cartels operating in Mexico. The Border Patrol appears to be taking some precautions. In September 2013 it was reported that:

To arm the precision marksmen who are part of the U.S. Border Patrol Tactical Unit's precision marksman/



observer program, CBP plans to procure 40,000 rounds of .308 Hornady 168 grain, A-MAX Tactical Application Police ammunition.<sup>9</sup>

Only time will tell if the Mexican criminal sniper capability will evolve to maximize the use of the cartels' equipment, or when there will be another cross-border sniper threat. ●

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Mr. Bunker is a Distinguished Visiting Professor and Minerva Chair, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For instance, see Deborah Hastings,

"U.S. soldiers accepting cash, drugs for Mexican drug cartel contract hits." New York Daily News. 13 September 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/drug-cartels-mexico-hire-u-s-soldiers-assassins-article-1.1454851>; and "Ex-Army sniper arrested, charged with doing security for drug cartel." UPI News. 28 September 2013, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2013/09/28/Ex-Army-sniper-arrested-charged-with-doing-security-for-drug-cartel/UPI-90661380397822/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2013/09/28/Ex-Army-sniper-arrested-charged-with-doing-security-for-drug-cartel/UPI-90661380397822/).

<sup>2</sup>Directly quoted from Robert Bunker, "Sniper Executes a Police Chief of Nuevo Leon with a .50 Caliber Rifle (Translation)." Chivis (a Mexican blogger with Borderland Beat) provided a translation of the incident in support of this note. Small Wars Journal—El

Centro. 25 February 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/sniper-executes-a-police-chief-of-nuevo-leon-with-a-50-caliber-rifle-translation>.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Stevenson, "Helicopter gunships used in Mexico resort battle." Associated Press. 20 December 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/helicopter-gunships-used-mexico-resort-battle-221805708.html>.

<sup>4</sup>"At least 5 killed in gunfight in Rocky Point's resort area." Arizona Daily Star. 18 December 2013, [http://azstarnet.com/news/local/border/at-least-killed-in-gunfight-in-rocky-point-s-resort/article\\_7d63a9e4-6807-11e3-b057-0019bb2963f4.html](http://azstarnet.com/news/local/border/at-least-killed-in-gunfight-in-rocky-point-s-resort/article_7d63a9e4-6807-11e3-b057-0019bb2963f4.html)

<sup>5</sup>Anne-Marie O'Connor, "Border Sniper Incidents Making Agents Wary." Los Angeles Times. 14 July 1997, <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/jul/14/news/>



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<sup>6</sup>"Snipers target border agents." The Washington Times. 3 February 2005, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/feb/3/20050203-125017-1369r/?page=1>.

<sup>7</sup>"Senator Feinstein Warns of Threat to Border Patrol Agents from .50-Caliber Sniper Rifles." 24 March 2006, <http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=7929e5fd-7e9c-9af9-7ec0-f35187000f02>.

<sup>8</sup>Sean Alfano, "Mexican drug cartel threatens to harm U.S. police officers who bust drug shipments while off-duty." New York Daily News. 22 June 2010, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/mexican-drug-cartel-threatens-harm-u-s-police-officers-bust-drug-shipments-off-duty-article-1.181411>.

<sup>9</sup>Jacob Goodwin, "Border Patrol wants 40,000 rounds of .308 Hornady ammo for its top marksmen." Government Security News. 6 September 2013, [http://www.gsnmagazine.com/node/32898?c=border\\_security](http://www.gsnmagazine.com/node/32898?c=border_security).

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