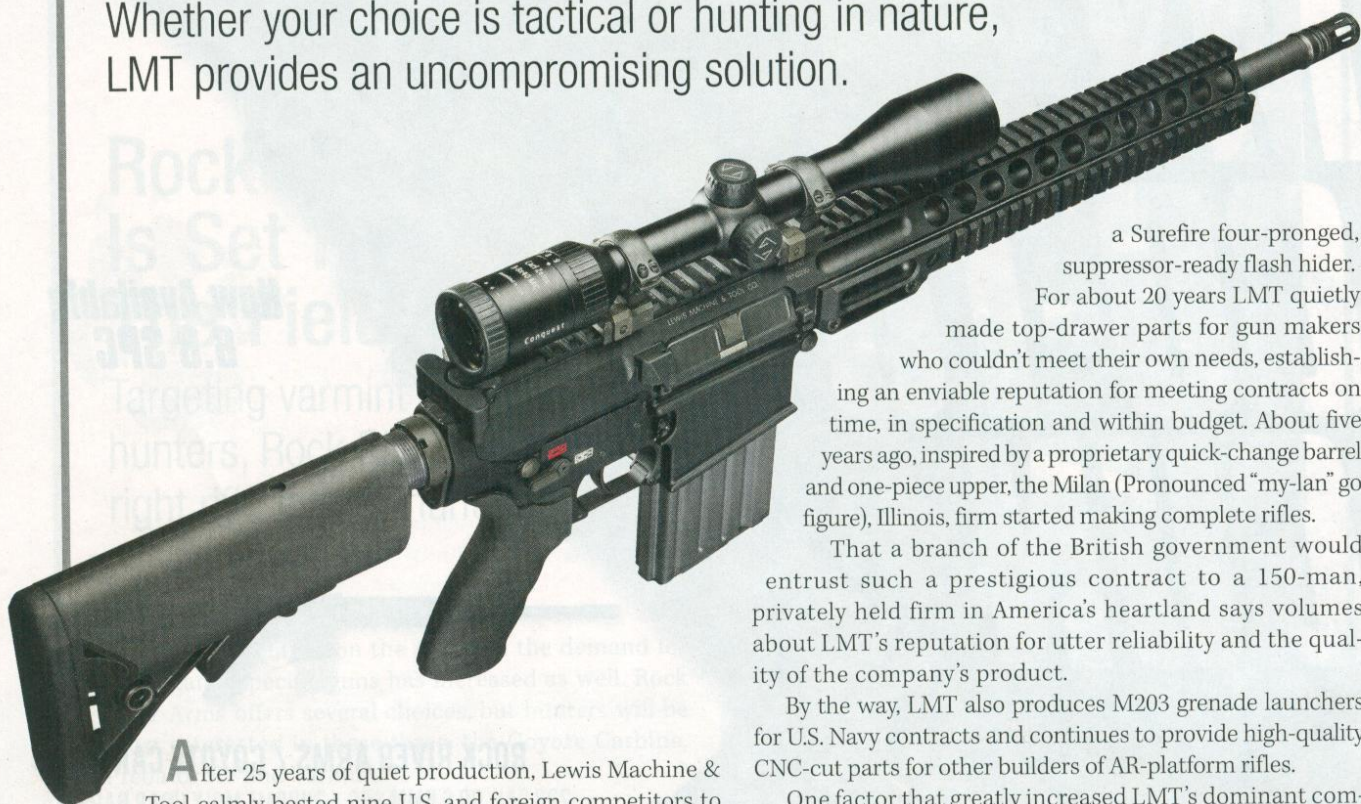


Lewis Machine & Tool

By Richard Venola

Whether your choice is tactical or hunting in nature, LMT provides an uncompromising solution.



After 25 years of quiet production, Lewis Machine & Tool calmly bested nine U.S. and foreign competitors to win the small, but prestigious contract to supply the British army with rifles for its Designated Marksman program.

As with our own GIs, British Tommies have discovered that at the ranges commonly encountered in Afghanistan, 5.56 just doesn't have any poop left when it gets to the target, and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) is doing something about it.

It's not just a function of hitting power but one of precision accuracy as well. "The Brits want rifles that can do the job with their NATO ball ammo, not just 168-grain Match stuff," says Karl Lewis, founder and president of LMT.

Apparently, the required standards of accuracy couldn't be coaxed out of surviving FALs in Brit inventory, so they went out-of-house. LMT's R&D had already been done, and the MWS was already in commercial production when the MoD put out its requests for proposal.

Mechanically, the rifle is identical to the MWS offered to U.S. shooters who want LMT's signature monolithic upper—which they call the Monolithic Rail Platform—free-floating barrel and Knights Armament magazines. In the interest of keeping reciprocating mass to a minimum, Stoner's original direct gas-impingement system is retained. Cosmetically, the tan SOPMOD buttstock, ERGO Suregrip and TangoDown rail covers set apart the L129A1. Finishing off the transformation from deer rifle to Taliban hunter is the Brits' requirement for

a Surefire four-pronged, suppressor-ready flash hider.

For about 20 years LMT quietly made top-drawer parts for gun makers who couldn't meet their own needs, establishing an enviable reputation for meeting contracts on time, in specification and within budget. About five years ago, inspired by a proprietary quick-change barrel and one-piece upper, the Milan (Pronounced "my-lan" go figure), Illinois, firm started making complete rifles.

That a branch of the British government would entrust such a prestigious contract to a 150-man, privately held firm in America's heartland says volumes about LMT's reputation for utter reliability and the quality of the company's product.

By the way, LMT also produces M203 grenade launchers for U.S. Navy contracts and continues to provide high-quality CNC-cut parts for other builders of AR-platform rifles.

One factor that greatly increased LMT's dominant competitive edge was achieving ISO 9001 certification. This international standard guarantees to customers that LMT adheres to a strict set of quality-control standards recognized by industrialists around the world. "By chance, the ISO inspectors were here when the inspector for the Ministry of Defense showed up. Together they were able to conduct a joint inspection that was extremely thorough," Lewis said.

Key to winning ISO certification includes LMT's use of magnetic particle inspection and trained, certified personnel to use it. This verifies that there are no microscopic cracks in any of the critical parts of the rifle. All LMT products are run through this, not just the L129A1. In fact, aside from cosmetics, the civilian/hunter version is built to identical standards and dimensions.

Accuracy standards are extremely high for dedicated sniper rifles, and most use custom ammunition or ammunition manufactured to extremely high quality—our national standard for LE work being the Federal Gold Medal Match topped with a 168-grain MatchKing OTM bullet. While researching this piece, this writer was introduced to a new term for high-end semi-custom loadings: boutique ammunition. It reminds one of a Tiffany lamp or Swarovski crystal wizard.

Because the L129A1 rifles will be used by Designated Marks-

men at the infantry platoon level, they are likely to find themselves in a full-blown firefight. The Brits insisted, therefore, that the accuracy be tested with NATO-spec 7.62x51mm ammo from their Radway Green plant. This is not blasting ammo. The plant has two production lines, one for high-volume machine gun ammunition, but quite another for high-quality ball ammo. Radway Green's rifle ammo is almost match grade, and it took full advantage of the LMT's abilities when tested.

Four editors from InterMedia made a pilgrimage to the LMT plant and were able to take the L129A1's civilian brother, the MWS, to the range. Firing 149-grain Federal FMJ loads built to Brit specs (with Crown stamped on the case), the better marksmen got sub-MOA groups at 100 and 200 yards. This bodes well for hunting accuracy using commercial game loads in the same neighborhood, such as Federal's 150-grain .308 Fusion.

The standard free-floating 16-inch chrome barrel is easily replaceable with longer or stainless barrels and requires a Torx bit (supplied with the gun, and LMT sells extras) and a torque wrench set at 140 inch-pounds.

Multiple QD sling attachments litter the weapon, including a unique LMT slider that attaches to any portion of the four 1913 rails available. And yes, there is a mid-weapon QD for enthusiasts of the three-point sling. As if this weren't enough, there is a two-loop double-attachment sling adapter endplate for use with a single-point sling by either right- or left-handed shooters.

The Brits were already using the Trijicon 6x48mm ACOG scope and were extremely pleased with it, so it was the designated optic for the L129A1. The scope is equipped with a bullet-drop compensator reticle matched to the ballistic path of Radway Green's 7.62 NATO 149-grain Ball and is shipped with the rifle. Backup iron sights from Knight's Armament fold down on the top rail fore and aft of the optic, should it be damaged. Those familiar with



LMT's British contract L129A1's are built to the same specs and standards as its hunting MWS rifles. The difference is in the cosmetics.

Trijicon products know that this would probably only result from the ACOG being struck by shell fragments or rifle fire.

While the ACOG is a superb sight for deep brush country and dappled forests, the 1913 rail will allow mounting of just about

any conventional optic the hunter would like, and any number of scopes would be suitable.

Additionally, eight Knight's Armament-built 20-round magazines, a cleaning rod and compact Otis cleaning kit are shipped with each weapon, all in a highly protective Pelican case. In the world of ARs, there are basically two types of magazines, ArmaLite and Knight's Armament, the latter being used by just about everyone except ArmaLite. DPMS Panther Arms offers a four-round magazine for its .308 family of ARs, and that magazine will run in the LMT rifle when you take it into the deer woods.

Long-time shooters might ask why the Brits didn't go with an M14. The answer is that M14s tend to gnaw at their bedding and so require maintenance after several thousand rounds to maintain high standards of accuracy. The same goes for the veteran FAL, called the L1A1 in British army nomenclature. In recent years, the American company DSA has been able to produce FALs with substantially tighter accuracy than the originals built in the '50s and '60s, but they still require maintenance when used for the sort of high-volume fire that results when a Mercian Regiment's patrol has just realized that the local Pashtun warlord's ambush has achieved fire superiority.

Lewis Machine & Tool is quite aware of the importance of hitting this nail on the head and is pushing the Brit L129A1 production as hard as it can while maintaining the superb standards that won the contract in the first place. All eyes are on LMT, and if the rifle performs to expectation, other Commonwealth nations may become interested. In the meantime, we expect to see more and more of LMT's MWS rifles in the field and on the range. ■