



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### The Ghost Dance at Big Sandy

Last week I was given the opportunity to step into the future. Those opportunities don't come around very often, and so with a magazine assignment in my hip pocket, I jumped at the invitation to attend — and bring a friend — to the Bushmaster Users Conference at the Big Sandy Range in Arizona.

The Bushmaster Users Conference — in only its second year — is an opportunity for several defense industry giants to display their latest and greatest weapons upgrades, munitions, targeting systems, and combat vehicles for interested clients. Those clients, who arrived by the bus-full on demonstration day, hailed from 21 countries around the world. They came in from Saudi Arabia, Norway, Lithuania, Poland, Taiwan, and elsewhere — military officers and procurement bureaucrats eager to see the next generation of warfighting technologies in action.

At the invitation of an old Marine Corps colleague, who now works for Bushmaster — a subsidiary of a gigantic company known as Orbital ATK — and who was serving as the Range Safety Officer, Jim Cornelius and I arrived early in the week, pitched a tent under the rich spread of the Milky Way in the ocotillo and scrub, and settled in for several days of extraordinary access to — and hands-on use

of — a host of weapons and equipment.

To a large degree, the success of any journey can be judged by the journey itself. We bombed out of the Siberian excesses of a Sisters winter, down through Nevada, turning hard south through the ranching community of Fallon — which is also home to the U.S. Navy's Top Gun School — until we reached the shores of Walker Lake, near Hawthorne.

I wanted to stop at Walker Lake for just a minute, because the historical irony was not lost on us. Walker Lake, you see, is the place where the Ghost Dance religion was born. A vision of the Ghost Dance came to the Paiute spiritual man Wovoka in a dream, on the shores of Walker Lake, in 1889. The Ghost Dance spread rapidly, and as practiced by the Lakota, also underwrote to no small degree the massacre at Wounded Knee, where nervous Army soldiers with Hotchkiss guns murdered some 150 (probably more) natives, including men, women, and children.

And so it is that today, on the southern tip of Walker Lake, consuming the town and everything around it, exists what the modern U.S. Army hails as the "Largest Ammunition Depot in the World."

And that is undoubtedly true. Stretching into the horizon are thousands of storage magazines and igloos. Mile after mile, the magazines spread out into the horizon of sagebrush and snowcapped ranges, and give some small



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

The venerable M2 .50 caliber machine gun overlooking the Big Sandy Range in Arizona.

notion of the incredible strength of the U.S. military.

So we stopped, gave a nod to Wovoka and the fevered dream he believed would help bring a better life to peoples utterly crushed by a culture with superior technology and, one can suppose, an on-going and insatiable appetite for resources.

At Big Sandy I was able to sit inside the next generation of the General Dynamics Light Armored Vehicle, the new Oshkosh Joint Light Tactical Vehicle — no pictures please — and to receive personal briefings from the designers of the vehicles, the weapons systems, and the weapons themselves. And the takeaway is simple: modern warfare is about to become more lethal, and to be fought from farther distances, than ever before. With air-burst munitions, soon-to-be-unveiled proximity munitions, and weapons whose ranges measure stand-off in terms of miles, warfare has never been more precise, or

destructive.

If it isn't point-and-click lethality, it is very close.

There was another irony in that. Jim and I had a lot of time to discuss what we were seeing, and where we were seeing it. It wasn't so long ago, just over a hundred years or so, that the ridges of the Big Sandy were solidly Apache country, and stand-off was measured in the length of an arrow shot. Times have changed, indeed.

It would be easy to confuse this experience with a glorification of war and violence. That would also be a mistake. Shooting machine guns and cannons is, without a doubt, a great deal of fun. I have never seen a reasonable human get behind a crew-served weapon, fire it, and walk away without a smile. But no one at Big Sandy was glorifying their potential for destruction. Certainly not the Polish and Lithuanian officers with whom I spoke, who are justifiably nervous about Russian intentions in their

backyards, and who have seen the horrors of aggressive warfare repeatedly visited upon them, have watched their cities reduced to rubble and their people enslaved by extremist ideologies.

That hard forge has made them realists. They know what they are up against, know that they are out-gunned, and they are seeking to defend themselves in a meaningful way from very real threats, with the most lethal and accurate weapons systems available.

War, in all of its horrors, is an escapable fact of human existence. It has been with us, in one form or another, from our beginning. It does not appear likely that we will achieve life on this planet without it. It may not even be desirable if, like the Lakota at Wounded Knee, the abandonment of armed conflict means that we surrender to those who refuse to abandon it, and whose designs for us are rooted in extermination and slavery.

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