Proven in the hinterlands of Afghanistan and Iraq, a .50 BMG sniper rifle is a game changer for law enforcement.
Typically these weapon systems— the M82A1, or the military Barrett, which is the M107— they’re used as an anti-materiel weapon, ” explains Will Riba, Barrett’s training manager. Anti-materiel is also the starring role a Barrett would play in law enforcement applications, which is what piqued our interest in this fascinating weapon in the first place.

A Barrett .50 is designed to be used against military and civilian equipment, including barriers, power generators, communications arrays, vehicles (including lightly armored ones) and small watercraft used in drug-running and smuggling operations. “Don’t get me wrong,” Riba adds with all seriousness. “If a human target presents itself, you can definitely take that target down with this rifle system.”

Which (spoiler alert!) is precisely what two of the film’s EOD soldiers do in the aforementioned scene. They return fire with their M107 at the insurgents, approximately 800 yards away. After taking out two of the bad guys (one with an incredible head shot on a runner in the open desert that’s vintage Hollywood fantasy), the remaining insurgents stay put in the cinderblock shelter they’re holed up in and return fire, apparently confident they’re protected behind a few hollow concrete blocks from this powerful rifle’s wrath.

They’re either very dedicated or very foolish bad guys, because relying on cinderblocks to protect your ass from a weapon that, according to Barrett’s own ballistics data for Barrett-brand .50 BMG M33 Ball ammo, launches a 661 gr. projectile that impacts said cinderblocks at nearly 1,700 fps and delivers over 4,000 ft/lbs of energy at 800 yards is probably not a good idea.

“One of the most memorable scenes of the 2009 Academy Award-winning film The Hurt Locker portrays a Barrett .50 caliber rifle in a role the big semi-auto was not primarily designed to play. Imagine that, Hollywood miscasting a gun. In the scene, a Barrett M107 is used as an anti-personnel rifle to take out some insurgent snipers who ambush a group of independent contractors and a three-man U.S. Army EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) unit in the Iraqi desert.

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“Certainly there are enough written accounts of what Marine Corps snipers have done, as far as distances and engaging,” says Barrett’s VP of marketing Bryan James, who admits to not being the biggest fan of how Hollywood typically portrays military tactics and weapons. “I guess Steve Reichert’s shot would be one of the best ones to reference.”

The well-known shot to which James refers was made by Marine sniper Steve Reichert, in Lutayfiya, Iraq, on April 9, 2004. Reichert’s shot, made with a Barrett M82A3 Special Applications Scopered Rifle (SASR) using a Raufoss Mk 211 .50 caliber round, took out three armed insurgents hiding behind a brick wall from a distance of just over 1600 meters. That’s one mile, for the metrically challenged.

The Raufoss MK 211 is a High Explosive Incendiary Armor Piercing (HEIAP) round that delivers fragments, blast, and incendiary effect after penetrating targets. It hit the brick wall
and punched a hole into it before its RDX explosive ignited and launched a tungsten-steel penetrator through the wall. At that point—in Reichert’s own words from a History Channel program detailing his famous shot, available for viewing on YouTube—“You have a shotgun blast of shrapnel and a penetrating dart flying through."

This “shotgun blast” did its job, neutralizing all three insurgents and painting the wall behind them red with their splattered blood.

So, yes, one of the roles the Barrett .50 caliber weapon system plays in modern warfare is most certainly that of an anti-personnel rifle. But we want to look at how its anti-materiel role fits for urban usage by American law enforcement.

It turns out, cops can benefit from having a Barrett in their SWAT inventory. Anti-materiel is where this impressive rifle really shows its versatility. And, in my opinion, The Hurt Locker missed the chance to highlight the Barrett M107 in one of its more popular roles—detonating unwanted ordnance.

CREATING STAND-OFF DISTANCE

Contrary to what movies may show, sometimes a better alternative to disarming a bomb is to just blow the damn thing up...from a safe distance, of course. That’s where a Barrett comes into play. With big-time penetrating power and range, it’s a natural for taking out “suspicious” bags or boxes or even cars that a SWAT team might otherwise have to delicately handle with a bomb disposal team—if such a team exists, which it normally doesn’t except for in the biggest cities, like New York or L.A.

“EOD units over there [Iraq and Afghanistan] actually use our weapon system to disarm IEDs,” explains Will Riba. “They use it to go ahead and explode the device without trying to send up a human person to do it, or waste millions of dollars sending a robot to get blown up.”

And we’re not just talking about stationary IEDs. Bombs have gone mobile in the form of VBIEDs (vehicle born improvised explosive devices), also known as car bombs.

“Currently the hot threat of the VBIED is being used continuously over there by insurgents,” adds Riba. “So this weapon system is actually a great hindrance to that in that it allows a very, very long stand-off distance and accurate shots to disable that vehicle.”
ENGINE FAILURE ON COMMAND

In other words, if it’s got an engine, a Barrett M107 can cause engine failure real quick. Especially given it’s a semi-automatic, allowing for quicker follow-up shots to an engine block should the first shot miss its mark. Or, even worse than engine failure for the occupants of that vehicle, it can punch holes in the vehicle — and them — even if the vehicle is lightly armored.

This is the primary role for a Barrett in a police application. A getaway car can be immobilized, for instance. But how effective is a Barrett at stopping a car? “It all depends on the projectile and the barrier being penetrated,” says Bryan James. He notes that the distance of the shot is a factor also.

With Barrett’s own 661 gr. ball ammo at 100 yards, James explains, “You’re knocking on the door with five tons of energy being transmitted, so you’ve got that nearly 10,000 foot-pounds of energy being deposited into whatever that bullet is striking.” And, there’s a .50 BMG cartridge type for virtually every application—from target practice to breaching a lightly armored vehicle. But, according to James, concentrating on all of these different types of ammunition is not Barrett’s priority; it’s mostly about focusing on the weapon system and teaching operators how to use it.

“Our intent is to manufacture the platform and provide the training on it. Then, mission-specific, the unit will decide what rounds they use for what. Whether it’s as simple as B-linked M33 ball, AP (armor piercing), API (armor piercing incendiary), APIT (armor piercing incendiary tracer), or the Raufoss rounds.”

A large part of what makes the Barrett .50 BMG semi-automatic weapon system so versatile is the wide range of .50 caliber BMG ammunition it accommodates. Here are a few of the more common rounds used in this weapon system.

**M23 Ball:**
A solid lead projectile, available in multiple weights. Used for anti-personnel missions and anti-materiel missions involving non-armored targets.

**M17 Tracer:**
A solid lead projectile that illuminates the bullet’s in-flight path and permits visible observation by the operator. Used for anti-personnel missions and anti-materiel missions involving non-armored targets.

**M23 Incendiary:**
Used in anti-materiel missions against non-armored flammable targets. Capable of initiating combustion of flammable materials upon target impact.

**M2 Armor Piercing (AP):**
Light armor-piercing capability for use against lightly armored vehicles, shelters, barriers, and other bullet-resistant targets.

**M8 Armor Piercing Incendiary (API):**
Similar to armor-piercing rounds but with the addition of an incendiary compound for starting fires. For use against lightly armored vehicles and other targets that may be flammable.

**M20 Armor Piercing Incendiary Tracer (APIT):**
Similar to the M8 but also with tracer capability for visually tracking shots. The tracer is dim at closer ranges, increasing in brightness as it gains distance.

**Mk211 Mod 0 (Raufoss) High Explosive Incendiary Armor Piercing (HEIAP):**
A projectile with an armor-piercing core, an explosive, and incendiary compound. Capable of breaching lightly armored targets and barriers and neutralizing personnel behind these barriers with an explosion of shrapnel.


**LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLE**

For military applications, the Barrett .50 serves as a barrier-penetrator, vehicle-disabler, ordnance-detonator, communications and power-destroyer, stand-off-distance-creator, and long-distance anti-personnel rifle used by pretty much every branch of the U.S. military. Are we missing anything?

“As far as applications for the Barrett for the military,” James adds, “the guys just like it because it’s a big stick.”

A rifle Teddy Roosevelt would undoubtedly have loved. But can that same “big stick” be used for law enforcement, homeland security, and other domestic applications, where the rules of engagement are different from the military? Or is a .50 caliber rifle too much gun with too much potential for collateral damage?

The answer is unequivocally yes. The Barrett can be, and currently is being, used by police SWAT teams. “Although,” clarifies James, “it has a limited law-enforcement application, due to urban environments and over-penetration.”

Clearly, over-penetration has the potential to be a bad thing in an anti-personnel rifle in a crowded urban environment. However, just as a Barrett can be used in Iraq or Afghanistan to breach a brick wall and take out an insurgent who thinks he’s safe behind it, so too can it be used to neutralize a terrorist or other threat in domestic situations—so long as the risk of collateral damage is minimal.

What about an active shooter taking cover behind a brick wall of a bell tower on a crowded college campus? Or a brazen terrorist wearing body armor and threatening to blow up a bomb in his backpack? Or even, says James, “As barrier penetrators with airport facilities, if they have to punch through the windscreen on a commercial airplane to take out a terrorist,” a not-so-unlikely scenario, given terrorists’ propensity for hijacking planes.

With its barrier-breaching prowess as an anti-personnel sniper rifle, there’s clearly a role for the Barrett M82A1 in domestic law enforcement. And when it comes to domestic anti-materiel applications, the list isn’t all that different from the military side, other than most domestic bad guys aren’t driving armored vehicles, and IEDs aren’t commonplace along U.S. roadways.

But disabling vehicles in high-speed chases, safely detonating bombs, and taking out a charging car or truck, to name but a few scenarios, are all things law enforcement agencies are charged to deal with. And the big Barrett is every bit as well-equipped to do these things here, while creating a safe stand-off distance, as it is overseas.

Which is why more and more metropolitan police departments, including major ones like NYPD, are turning to the M82A1.

“I have seen Barretts in law enforcement weapons inventories for a number of reasons,” says James. “I’ve seen them with big police agencies for interdiction of large vehicles, such as OTR (over-the-road) transport trucks, 18-wheelers, et cetera.”

You have a toolbox, right? In that toolbox is a versatile, go-anywhere-do-anything Leatherman called an M6 (at right), while the Barrett is a 4-pound sledge. How often do you use a sledge compared to a Leatherman? Not a lot. But try pounding with a Leatherman! Sometimes a Barrett is just the right tool for the job.
Teddy Roosevelt with one of his big sticks. Our nation’s boldest president and founder of the Rough Riders, TR was a non-nonsense man: Walk quietly but carry a big stick. We have no doubt—none—that our greatest president (sorry Abe) would heartily approve of the Barrett.
It doesn't take a whole lot of imagination to envision what type of damage a terrorist committed to wreaking havoc could do with a van, truck, or, God forbid, an 18-wheeler full of explosives as he charged toward his intended target. Now imagine that the intended target is a nuclear power plant or a major dam or some other strategic target where any damage to it could be devastating.

"Also on the domestic side," Riba interjects, "Some of the border police and border protection agencies use our weapon systems on the speedboats that are trying to traffic in drugs or smuggle in anything else."

"Customs and ICE use them in traffic interdiction, whether it’s people or drugs or whatever," James adds. "And the Coast Guard has them as well. They are designed simply to do off-shore interdiction with these high-speed boats. They will engage the outboards from the air and disable the boat by taking out the engines."

In fact, the Coast Guard disables high-speed drug-trafficking boats not just by air, as practiced by their Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON), but also from Coast Guard Cutters, for which Barrett developed a special carbine version of their M82A1—the M82CQ (CQ stands for close quarters)—which has a shorter barrel for more maneuverability and a special finish that’s more resistant to saltwater environments. It seems the Barrett is every bit as versatile on the domestic front as it is in military applications.

"So," I ask Bryan James and Will Riba, "any thoughts on future uses for this weapon system?"

"Not unless aliens start attacking," James says with a laugh. I chuckle back. But even as I do, I can’t help but suspect that somewhere, someplace, somebody’s probably already at work on a .50 BMG round capable of breaching flying saucer skins.

Stop this! A semi driven by a terrorist and loaded with explosives—heck, a semi loaded with popcorn is a problem—needs some serious “stopping power.” Call Mr. Barrett.

A Barrett is the all-time simple gun to field strip. Two pins hold the upper to the lower. Note the massive buffer spring, one of the processes that reduce recoil in this weapon system.