

**On the Firing Line:
The Blackwater Training Center in Moyock teaches soldiers, cops and
ordinary citizens how to keep their edge in an increasingly dangerous world.**

By Rick Skwiot
(Published in *PortFolio Weekly*)

The most dangerous creatures lurking in The Great Dismal Swamp that spans the Virginia-North Carolina line are not the 600-pound black bears, rattlesnakes or water moccasins. Rather, they're the men and women—soldiers, sailors, SWAT teams and civilians—taking aim with live ammo in the 5,200-acre Blackwater Training Center. Fortunately, they're on our side.

Despite abutting North Carolina's largest broccoli farm and hosting quail and songbirds along the four-mile gravel road leading from its gate to its core, Blackwater is anything but bucolic. You might find Marines from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, moving through a "jungle trail," taking out targets in the brush with live carbine fire. Or, in the dead of night, a Canadian SWAT team stealing through a "shooting house" (fitted with bullet-proof walls and pop-up targets) ready to shotgun their quarry. Or a group of Ford Motor Company executives polishing their recreational shooting skills.

Or the five-year-old son of the owner pointing a pistol at you as you saunter around a corner of the headquarters building.

"It's okay," Jim Sierawksi, Blackwater's director of training reassures. "It's not real."

Taking on a Downsized Military

Most everything else at Blackwater is real: the guns, the ammo, and the scrubbed soldiers in camouflage gear. The feeling, however, is surreal: a dreamlike world of regimented violence amid the peaceful woods and fields, now populated by staunch soldiers with oiled black weapons.

Since September 11 the military has dominated Blackwater's firing ranges. That's due not only to the increased need for wartime training but because many of the military's own training facilities were shut down during the 90's, according to Blackwater President and Chief Operating Officer Gary Jackson.

"In the late '90's, 350 military firing-ranges closed," says Jackson, 45. Some due to budget cutting, others to meet environmental laws or to protect endangered

species, he says. That left the military scrambling to train and annually qualify sentries and soldiers with firearms.

"They shot with laser beams, not with real guns. They had people standing sentry who hadn't shot a real gun," says Jackson.

So, when the real shooting started, that left Blackwater—close to military installations at Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; Ft. Bragg, North Carolina; and Camp Lejeune—in an ideal position.

"And here we don't have any endangered woodpeckers," says Jackson.

A Safe, Dangerous Place

This year Blackwater—the four-year-old brainchild of ex-Navy Seal Eric Prince, 32, and billed as the world's largest privately owned firearms training facility—expects to train some 9,000 people and rake in \$15 million.

Though those numbers will likely grow. Bulldozers are at work turning other patches of the swamp into firing ranges.

All 9,000 trainees will have been vetted to make sure no unsavory characters, say, criminals, mercenaries, or terrorists, are trained. Says Director of Training Sierawski, another ex-Seal and former Virginia Beach cop: "Many of our customers are law enforcement folks and military. We want them to know we're not training people they'll be going up against. Besides, someone who wasn't right with the law wouldn't feel comfortable here."

Even a law-abiding citizen might be made to feel uncomfortable. With the pop of carbine fire, the flash-bang of concussion grenades, shot-up vehicles parked behind buildings, and camouflaged soldiers moving through the streets of a mock city, Blackwater looks and feels more like a war zone than North Carolina backwater.

But despite all that, Blackwater has been a safe place. Maybe because the management recognizes the capacity for human error. The Blackwater Web site features a quote from Albert Einstein: "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former."

Cautioned by Einstein's Theory of Infinite Stupidity, Blackwater has managed to avoid any accidents since it opened, with target ranges and instruction designed with safety in mind. Safety has to be foremost, it would seem, when you have an

armed SWAT team moving through a darkened house and taking down targets with live fire—an exercise, says Sierawski, that is inherently dangerous.

The only apparent casualty at Blackwater is a stand of blackened woods adjacent to the 1,200-yard firing range where one misguided shot set off a forest fire.

Tailored Training in the Classroom

Nonetheless, much of Blackwater's training happens not on the firing range but in lecture halls.

Within classrooms in the headquarters building and in temporary structures perched in newly cleared woods, Blackwater instructors teach law enforcement, military and security personnel a range of skills and tactics: hostage rescue, explosive recognition, body and vehicle searching, nightstick use, and more.

Much of this comes at the behest of the Navy and other government agencies. Blackwater's adjunct instructors—largely working law-enforcement and ex-military officers—are first trained, for example, by the Navy, then turn around and train recruits in things like basic sentry skills.

They also offer customized courses to meet specific wartime scenarios. Like downed-pilot training, with flyers firing live ammo from mock cockpits—training seemingly inspired by the ill-fated Mogadishu, Somalia, raid recounted in the movie *Blackhawk Down*.

Says Jackson, yet another ex-Navy Seal: "We've had trainees from almost every government group you can name: ATF, Army, Navy, and Coast Guard. This summer we'll max out, with 250 shooters day-in and day-out, around the clock."

But with growing demand, Blackwater plans to grow even further. Much of its early success has seemingly resulted from its ability to deliver what the government needs better and faster than the government can do it itself. That in turn seems predicated on the lack of bureaucracy at Blackwater, the youngest of the four major U.S. firearms-training facilities.

Death to Bureaucracy

Gary Jackson, gaunt and black-haired, sits in his corner office with the door open. When staff people want something from him or from his desk, they simply walk in without knocking or hail him from the doorway. When five-year-old Christian Prince presses his nose against the glass behind Jackson's desk, Jackson

slides open the floor-high window and lets the boy enter. That lack of protocol and decorum seems to permeate the business-like atmosphere at Blackwater. Expedience, not etiquette, rules.

"We want to build a training facility dedicated to the Navy and lease it back to them," says Jackson, holding up an artist's rendering of the building. "If the Navy was to build it themselves, the whole process would take seven years. But we can build it and give it to them in 270 days."

Jackson attends shows and conferences, like the recent National Rifle Association meeting in Reno and the Southeast SWAT Conference, to help drum up both government and corporate business. As a result, Blackwater has trainees from large corporations, college security forces, and local and state law enforcement agencies, as well as from U.S. government agencies. They've also trained law enforcement and military personnel from France, England, and Germany. Now they're negotiating to provide training to a counter-sniper force guarding the 2004 Athens Olympic games.

Still, the bulk of Blackwater's future business seems likely to come from the federal government. For example, just one Norfolk-based aircraft carrier, says Jackson, might have as many as 3,000 sailors aboard who pull sentry duty and thus need to be re-qualified on firearms once or twice a year. And not enough facilities remain in the downsized U.S. military to get the job done.

More Fun Than Golf

The emphasis on military and police notwithstanding, Blackwater continues to serve civilians, who now make up about 10 percent of their business, as opposed to 35 percent before 9/11. Commonly they'll come in groups of 10 to 12, usually affluent corporate executives, for whom Blackwater provides custom training.

"These are men who don't particularly want to play golf," says Jackson. Rather, they're gun owners, hunters, and trap shooters who book a day or a week at Blackwater for recreational shooting and firearms training with moving targets.

"It's male camaraderie," says Jackson.

But it's camaraderie for guys and gals with checkbooks. A five-day pistol course, for example, might cost \$1,500, says Jackson. That would include a private room in the 70-bed Blackwater bunkhouse, continental breakfast, and lunch. But for just \$150, a shooter who brings his or her own pistol or shotgun and ammunition can get eight hours of instruction and lunch. (But don't forget to bring your rain gear: Training continues whatever the weather.)

Blackwater offers basic courses in carbine firing as well. Other courses include executive security and protection, pistol and carbine instructor training, and tactical and specialty training in things like high-risk hostage rescue, counter-surveillance, law enforcement sniping, tactical canine handling, aircraft assault, low-light shooting, and extreme survival. The last, for example, designed for law enforcement officers, includes realistic, live-fire vehicle stops, high-risk arrest scenarios, and more.

It's that kind of specialized training—with moving fire in obstacle courses, city streets with bullet-proof buildings and sniper towers, moving computerized targets, and experienced instructors—that lures the Marines, Special Operations personnel, and hundreds of law enforcement units to Blackwater.

Needless to say, a lot of shooting goes on at Blackwater. Which led to a spin-off division, Blackwater Target Systems.

"None of the target systems we could buy stood up to the punishment we were giving them," says Sierawski. The solution was simple: "So we started making our own."

In a metal building beyond the bunkhouse men cut, weld, and assemble electronic and pneumatic pop-up target systems that can cost up to \$15,000. Customers include Wal-Mart, gun clubs and the federal government.

Constant Change

Places like Blackwater may signal the future for much military training. Their ability to react to the market and respond quickly in time of war to the needs of a short-handed military often mired in bureaucracy makes sense both financially and strategically. Says Sierawski, "We're an academy in constant change."

Blackwater strives to produce what the customer wants, responding, as it did after 9/11, to new needs, such as upgraded sentry- and search-skills training. And they do it in a pleasant, businesslike manner, not like Marine drill sergeants might "instruct." Sierawski says of his instructors:

"Nobody I hire has any attitudes. The guys I pick are people people. They get along with everybody and they know how to instruct and how to listen. Nobody says, 'You do it my way or else.'"

But giving such kinder and gentler instruction may actually result in a meaner, leaner and perhaps better-trained military. At least they'll be accustomed to the

sound of live fire and professionally schooled to react deftly in the potentially lethal situations they may likely face.