

The Use of Firearms and Tactics in the Movie *Sicario*

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Abstract. This research paper analyzes and addresses the issue of firearm usage and military tactics depicted in the movie *Sicario*. It mainly uses the movie as a primary example to study the portrayal of firearms and tactics within, comparing their performance and expression with reality and rectifying inaccuracies. The research finds that while the use of firearms and tactics in the movie *Sicario* is largely realistic, some concessions are made for the sake of plot development and character building, such as inconsistencies in machine gun portrayal and incorrect disassembly of a Glock 19 pistol. However, these elements do not affect the film's potential as a reference for other movies of similar genre. Therefore, this research aims to offer insight to researchers in related fields for future practical operations and meaningful contributions.

Keywords: *Sicario*, firearm, tactic, critique.

1. Introduction

Written by Taylor Sheridan and directed by Danny Villeneuve, *Sicario* follows a righteous FBI agent working with a government special law enforcement unit to investigate cross-border narcotics. As drug control advances, accompanied by increasingly ruthless methods, the endeavor exposes both the darker side of the operation and human nature.

Considering the emphasis of previous military movies on aspects like cinematography, editing, and story plot, as well as a deeper explanation of governmental or political-related topics, it is noteworthy that even the critiques of *Sicario* focus more on plot, characterization, and other literary aspects. Firearms and tactical details have received limited appreciation. Therefore, this research aims to offer a distinctive yet vital perspective for critiques, information, and guidance. It primarily employs the movie itself to scrutinize the usages of firearms and tactics, evaluating their alignment with reality and rectifying any discrepancies. In order to illustrate these aspects, specific scenes from the movie are selected, including the "opening breaching scene," "border shootout scene," "tunnel shootout scene," and the final "revenge scene."

2. The Use of Firearms

In the movie *Sicario*, a traditional crime vs. law enforcement genre motion picture, the use of firearms can broadly be divided into two categories: those used by law enforcement agents and those used by antagonists [1]. Law enforcement agents use many recognizable firearms, such as the classic Glock 17 pistol, Glock 19 pistol, Heckler & Koch G36C short barrel rifle, and M4A1 assault rifle. On the other side, Mexican cartels employ different brands including Sig Sauer P226 pistol, Beretta 92FS pistol, Mossberg M590 Shotgun, FN Five-Seven pistol, as well as Smith & Wesson M76 submachine gun. Notably, two types of M4A1 assault rifles are seen in the movie: the first type is generally used by the US FBI/SWAT team members, featuring a rail-mounted holographic sight; the other type used by CIA agent Matt Graver (starring Josh Brolin), is a M4A1 variant designed by Denial Defense Company.

The former version primarily appears as a standard service weapon for the FBI's SWAT team. The Picatinny rail-mounted holographic sight comes from the American Tactical Company EOTech, which is the first to manufacture holographic sights, night vision devices, thermal imaging equipment, and tactical sights [2]. The company's history can date all the way back to the post-World War II era. The company's first compact hologram was introduced in 1996 and by combining the features of

holographic projection and a helium-neon laser, the scope was soon adopted for police and military use [3]. The model that appears in the movie is 552.A65, which not only increases night vision over the prototype but also increases water resistance from 33 feet to 66 feet [4].

The later version M4A1 used by Matt Graver (starring Josh Brolin), the CIA agent, is a modification of the original M4A1 by the famous Daniel Defense Company. Founded in 2002, the company originally produced rails, sights, and cases for assault rifles. In 2009, after gaining popularity with their “home-made” DD M4 assault rifle, the company shifted its focus from producing various versions of AR rifles [5]. Daniel Defense Company now has a wide range of firearms products, for amateur, law enforcement, and even special forces. The modified M4A1 boasts a 14.5-inch barrel and a weight of only 6.09 pounds, making it the lightest of the entire M4 series [6].

It is important to note that the AR rifle used by Steve Forsing (starring Jeffery Donovan) is similar to the Smith & Wesson M&P15 Sport II but is actually a G&P M4 MOE CQBR rifle, an airsoft replica without the ability to fire live ammunition. As a result, it is not hard to see that this rifle only serves as a prop to substitute other AR series rifles.

Moreover, in the US-Mexican border shootout scene, assassin Alejandro Gillick (starring Benicio Del Toro) is seen using a Heckler & Koch MP5A3 submachine gun with a suppressor attached in front. This weapon fires 9mm Parabellum bullets and features upgrades from its previous model, MP5, including a better free-floating barrel and a telescoping metal stock [7]. In the movie, the MP5A3 is remodeled again, the original handguard is modified for fitting more technical attachments, and the M68 red dot sight is mounted on the upper Picatinny rail [8].

An error occurs in this scene where Alessandro’s original MP5A3 submachine gun is switched with an MP5SD3 with a red dot sight tapped on top after the shootout. The main difference is in the suppressor with the MP5SD3 featuring a fixed suppresser barrel.

Finally, in the revenge scene, Alessandro used a Heckler & Koch MK23 pistol equipped with a suppressor. This pistol was originally designed for the US special forces and its superior performance outcompeted Colt OHWS pistol and other opponents during the same period, passing the tendering of the United States Special Operation Command in 1990 [9]. However, the use of competition-quality barrels leads to pistol’s larger sizes and weights, making it a less favorable combat firearm by front-line combat personnel [10]. The MK23 in the film is attached with a suppresser and is easily distinguishable from the HK USP pistol by its long barrel and rear safety switch.

3. The Use of Tactics

In the opening scene, an FBI SWAT team led by Kate Messer (starring Emily Blunt) employs traditional hostage rescue tactics. After the armored truck breaches the wall, the police throw a stun grenade, making suspects lose their ability to react instantly. When clearing the room, the SWAT members continue to cover, communicate situations to their teammates, and issue warnings to suspects. These tactics align with the principles of Urban Close Quarter Operation, emphasizing “surprise, security, simplicity, speed, and use of violence” [11].

However, in this same scene, Kate and her teammates also make three fatal mistakes. Firstly, when entering the third room, they do not throw any flash or shock-related grenades before breaching, which offers time for the in-room suspect to react and resist – violating the “surprise” principle. Secondly, after the shootout, Kate Messer neglects to disarm the suspect on time – violating the “use of violence” principle. The focus should have been checking the suspect’s status and “preventing a reactionary response [11]. Lastly, a teammate should have stood next to Kate for increased security instead of behind her – violating the “security” principle. Here, the right thing for her teammates to do is to always “maintain a 360-degree security [zone]... [because] the mission is only complete once [they] leave the urban environment” [11].

Back to the border shootout scene, the tactics used in this scene can be seen as a textbook example, appealing to military enthusiasts. The director successfully uses the squad’s encounter with a traffic jam as a *Mise-en-scene* to create a nerve-racking situation since nobody has any idea which vehicle

will lead to a life-threatening situation for the whole squad. As soon as the suspect vehicle is spotted, the agents immediately set up an all-around alert, reporting information between members and aiming their weapons towards different directions, ready to fire. One notable detail in this scene is Alejandro's seemingly disdainful gesture of sweeping his muzzle across Kate Messer's face as she prepares to draw her pistol. According to the plot of the movie, this action may symbolize his contempt for Kate, but given the limited space in the car, tactically avoiding such a situation would be challenging [12].

After receiving permission to engage suspects, the squad immediately gets out of the car and marches side by side in an L-shaped formation to avoid accidentally hurting a teammate during a shootout [12]. As the research progresses, squad members do not cluster in the same direction to engage enemies as seen in typical action movies, instead, each team member focuses on their own direction section. Except for Matt, who is responsible for keeping the hand-cuffed suspect to prevent him from escaping, others cover different directions, maintaining situational awareness while one engages. This strategic approach allows the squad, which consists of only a handful of people, to gain the advantage of a fast-respond-firing. Later, when verbal warnings to suspects are ineffective and repressive violence needs to escalate, the squad also professionally employs single shots at close range to minimize the chances of accidental civilian harm. Lastly, when the squad finally resolves this crisis and prepares to withdraw, Alejandro nevertheless decides to open the trunk for a rearguard since the dangerous elements still have not yet been eliminated, and any unpredictable situation can still happen anywhere on their way back.

The tunnel shootout scene, a night battle between law enforcement and Mexican drug dealers, is perhaps the most visually striking part of the entire film. There are two notable details in this scene: First, all squad members wear night vision monocular goggles throughout the entire action. The reason why the team chooses monocular goggles over traditional binocular goggles is their adaptability to varying light conditions within the tunnel [13]. Studies show that "The monocular goggle, again, showed no consistent difference from the binocular goggle [when it comes to target detection in the dark]" [14]. Monocular goggles offer compact efficiency, crucial for maneuvering through confined spaces. Second, Kate's primary weapon is destroyed by an enemy bullet at a tunnel junction, a consequence of her failure to check corners promptly.

However, a few tactical mistakes are evident in this scene. First, the absence of a suppressor during a night operation detracts from authenticity, possibly chosen by the director to increase both visual and auditory impact. The second mistake is that none of the members of the squad wear an IR patch. The so-called IR identification badge is a single security device that allows troops to distinguish themselves from the enemy in the dark, preventing accidental injury under night vision equipment [15]. The mistake mentioned above will only lead to a higher chance of friendly fire when it comes to real life.

4. Other Military-Related Mistakes

Given that *Sicario* can be seen as a professional military movie, it still contains some other military-related mistakes in the movie.

The first mistake emerges during the Mexican border scene. The light machine gun mounted on a Mexican police vehicle has a bullet chain of the wrong caliber. The FN M249 SAW depicted in the movie is designed to fire 5.56 NATO caliber bullets, but the movie presents the chain as 7.62 caliber. Then, at the border shootout scene, Steve Forsing (starring Jeffery Donovan), is holding a bolt-stopped M4A1. With no footage of guns firing in the foreground, and this M4A1 is an airsoft prop, the possibility remains that the actor might accidentally press the trigger at some point while the camera is rolling.

Moreover, in the tunnel shootout scene, Alejandro delivers a hip shot towards Kate. Hip firing lacks accuracy except for extremely close range. Though it is plausible that, holding a hostage, Alejandro avoids traditional shoulder-firing, the decision to hip-fire at a colleague only because of some personal conflict can be seen as a total ruthless act. Fortunately, the two shots both hit Kate's bulletproof vest.

Nevertheless, at the end of the movie, after the conversation between Kate and Alejandro, a mistake surfaces as Alejandro disassembles Kate's Glock. However, this procedure does not follow the accurate "legal" disassembly of a Glock 19. Correct steps encompass: removing the pistol magazine, sliding back the gun's slide, pressing the quick-disassembly button on the side of the slide, and removing the spring and subsequently the barrel [16].

Contrary to this, the movie shows that Alejandro directly removes the magazine and then violently peels the Glock into two halves. This reveals the pistol's status as a prop designed for quick disassembly, indicating a lapse in authenticity.

5. Summary

In summary, the uses of firearms and tactics in the movie *Sicario* are mostly accurate when it comes to the compilation of reality, but there are still a few military-related errors due to necessary compromises for plot development and character building. A compilation of errors is identified within the movie, including the employment of an airsoft AR15 series rifle, inconsistencies in machine gun caliber portrayal, abrupt transition from Alejandro's original MP5A3 to an MP5SD3, failure to adhere to "series," "use of violence," and "security" protocols, and omission of suppressor attachment, absence of an IR bridge, and incorrect disassembly of a Glock 19 pistol.

Again, the primary goal of this research is to facilitate further scholarly exploration into the portrayal of firearms and tactics in a wider military film genre. Rather than completely neglecting these aspects, it is essential to recognize that a good application of props and tactics directions in a military-related film is equally important as having a good storyline, astonishing visual effects, fancy camera movement, and sophisticated character-building.

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