Marine Corps Fields New Service-Wide Pistol



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Michael Pritchard, 423rd Security Forces Squadron (SFS) patrolman, fires an M18 handgun during a qualification course, at RAF Molesworth, England, July 28, 2020. The M18 is now being adopted by the U.S. Marine Corps.
U.S. Air Force / Senior Airman Eugene Oliver

QUANTICO, Va. – For the first time since former President Ronald Reagan's Administration, the Marine Corps is fielding a new service-wide pistol replacement.

The M18 comprises capabilities previous pistols lacked. For example, the M9 – the most widely issued pistol among Marines – is a steel-framed, single-action/double-action hammer-fired pistol. This means it is a heavier, metal gun with two different trigger pulls for single- and double-action.

Conversely, the M18 is lighter and does not include two different trigger pulls.

"For some Marines, having two trigger pulls, like with the M9, is difficult to get used to because different forces are acting upon the gun," said Sgt. Randall McClellan, pistol program manager with the Weapons Training Battalion aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia. "With the M18, the trigger is going to be the same weight every time."

The M18 has increased modularity when compared with previous pistols. The gun includes interchangeable components to fit small, medium or large hands. It comprises a receiver module inside the pistol grip that enables Marines to remove the trigger mechanism and insert it into a new grip size, said Nelson.

The weapon also includes an accessory rail that enables Marines to attach lights or lasers underneath.

“Marines can attach more things to the M18, such as a red-dot sight, once approved for use,” said McClellan. “The modularity and ergonomics of the gun benefits the warfighter, as they can change parts out more easily.”

Army collaboration

The handgun is an Army-led program fielded in 2017. The program consists of the M17—the full-size pistol—and the M18. MCSC is only purchasing the M18, the compact variant, as well as holsters through the Army contract.

The Marine Corps’ Combat Development and Integration collaborated with the Army on the development of the M18 requirement. CD&I requirements managers and other Marines actively participated in the assessment and selection of the MHS.

“The M18 is unique in that it is a utility player capable of supporting a broad range of missions in which a handgun is required,” said Billy Epperson, the Infantry Weapon Capabilities Integration officer at CD&I. “Because of this versatility, the M18 will replace the four pistols in the Marine Corps inventory.”

Tom Vass, the Army’s project officer for the M18, believes the weapon will greatly benefit Marines, noting how it is a more reliable, accurate and effective pistol than previous ones.

“Overall, the adoption of the M18 by the Marine Corps is an extremely positive decision that will benefit the Corps and enhance Marines’ safety and effectiveness when conducting missions,” said Vass.

‘Very emotional’ transition

In June 2020, a group of Marines and civilians from various Marine Corps organizations, including PMO and Marine Helicopter Squadron One, converged upon a firing range aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico to learn and qualify with the M18 during the Instructor and Key Personnel Training.

After the two-hour event, Marines and subject matter experts spoke about the benefits of the system. Sgt. Journey Granados, a weapons trainer with MCB Quantico’s PMO, said the M18 is much easier to grip and shoot than other Marine Corps pistols.

“I feel more comfortable holding the M18 than I do holding the M9, largely because of the interchangeable grip,” said Granados. “This pistol is definitely easier to shoot, is a lot more accurate and should improve Marines’ qualification score.”

The requirement for Marines to qualify with a pistol will not change. Those required to qualify annually will still do so, said Nelson. Combat Marksmanship Trainers will qualify with the M18 during New Equipment Training, and these individuals are responsible for qualifying other Marines.

“The only thing changing in the qualification course now is the verbiage in regard to single action/double action and the decocking,” said Nelson. “WTBN will hold the marksmanship symposium later this year, and they will review data to decide if the course as a whole will need to be changed.”

Maj. Mike Brisker, weapons product manager in MCSC’s Program Manager for Infantry Weapons, expressed excitement for the M18 because of its capabilities and its potential in helping Marines carry out their missions.

“This is the first service-wide replacement of the pistol since the M9 in the 1980s,” said Brisker. “The M18 is important in terms of modernization and lethality.”

Fielding the M18 is part of a larger effort to modernize and increase the lethality of Marines. The addition of the M18 to the Marine Corps inventory will be an exciting experience for many Marines, said Nelson.

“This is the first new service pistol in more than 30 years, so it’s going to be a very emotional transition for Marines,” said Nelson. “Fielding the M18 is a big step for the Marine Corps.”