

On Target: Company sets its sights on Marine Corps scope

By Lorraine Halsted
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Winchester — Robert “Bob” S. Thomas developed an uncanny ability — milking spiders to obtain their web-making material.

Combined with the lens-making skills he learned in the Navy, this gave him the foundation he needed to launch Premier Reticles.

The 63-year-old company, now owned and operated by his grandson Chris Thomas, got its start producing reticles — crosshairs, fine lines, and dots that create a focal point on an eyepiece — for rifle scopes.

But in recent years, reticles have taken a back seat while the company has moved into rifle-scope production.

Premier Reticles is poised for major growth if the Marine Corps agrees to purchase a new rifle scope, the first to be designed by the company.



Randy Ritter of Stephens City, an assembly technician at Premier Reticles, checks for dust in one of the company's variable-power rifle scopes.

Photo by Jeff Taylor

If that occurs, it will become the Marines' official rifle scope and will likely lead to more contracts with U.S. allies.

“It's going to be a domino effect,” Chris Thomas said in the company's production facility on Commonwealth Court in the Kernstown area.

For Premier Reticles, that means production will increase from about 2,000 rifle scopes to about 10,000 per year, and its staff of 15 will more than triple to handle the extra work.

Spiders and crosshairs

When Bob Thomas started the company in 1946, reticle production had been an unusual niche with a strong demand.

He had honed his skills making naval gunsights and optical lenses for the Norden bombsight — used to help bomber aircraft hit their targets more accurately during World War II.

After the war, Thomas started repairing telescopic sights and binoculars for servicemen who had returned home.

He also perfected the use of spider web material to create reticle crosshairs.

Chris Thomas said the material was ideal at the time because it was thin and pliable.

"He would hold the spider under a microscope and force it to spin a web," he said, adding that his grandfather would agitate the spiders, making them produce the web material.

Bob Thomas also patented the tools and equipment he used to make his reticles. But by the 1950s, other, better reticle materials were introduced to the market.

When Bob Thomas died in 1978, his son Richard "Dick" L. Thomas took over the company and eventually moved into rifle scope production.

A change of focus

In the company's early years, it operated in Washington, D.C., and Florida.

Then Dick Thomas and his wife Sherry operated the company from their home in Wardensville, W.Va., for 30 years before moving it into its current facility in 2000.



High-quality reticles for a rifle scope are checked for dirt and flaws at Premier Reticles. Reticles are crosshairs, fine lines, and dots that create a focal point on an eyepiece. The 63-year-old company is now moving beyond reticles to designing and producing rifle scopes.
Photo by Jeff Taylor

Three years later, Premier Reticles had formed a partnership to assemble rifle scopes for the German-based company Schmidt & Bender.

It was a good move, Chris Thomas said, because the company's business had been dropping as more competition moved into the market and some of its clients — mostly rifle-scope producers — went out of business.

"The problem for Premier Reticles is that we've always had to rely on other companies," Chris Thomas said.

When Dick Thomas died in 2005, Chris Thomas took the helm of the company. And by 2007, when Schmidt & Bender had a change in ownership and management, he lured its design team to Premier Reticles.

Thomas quickly put the team to work on the design of a new rifle scope for the Marines.

If approved, it will replace the Schmidt & Bender rifle scope that Premier Reticles has been assembling and supplying to the Marines since 2005 under a \$15 million contract.

Premier Reticles also has other federal clients in the military, special forces, and law enforcement agencies such as the FBI.

Next: A scope for hunters

When FBI officials want to try out some of Premier Reticles' rifle scopes, they fly directly to the facility, said Sherry Thomas, who oversees the company's finances.

"We have a grassy area out front, and they just come down in their helicopter and run inside the door," she said.

Other clients, including representatives of the Marines, also make periodic visits to test the rifle scopes in the facility's shooting tunnel.

Since many of the scopes are purchased by the military, Chris Thomas said they are built to withstand extreme conditions. Before leaving the production facility, they undergo testing for water submersion, extreme temperatures, impact, and shock.

"We get all failures out of the way here," he said. "We push things to a breaking point."

Other clients who purchase Premier Reticles' rifle scopes include local law enforcement and special weapons and tactics teams.

Military gun collectors and hunters also buy them. But at \$3,000 each, Thomas said the scopes are somewhat expensive for the average hunter.

The company is now designing a new hunting-rifle scope that should hit the market by 2010 and sell for half the price, he said.

While Premier Reticles has shifted its focus to rifle-scope production and design, it still produces a small number of reticles for several Asian-based companies. But sales of that product now only amount to a fraction of the company's revenues.

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