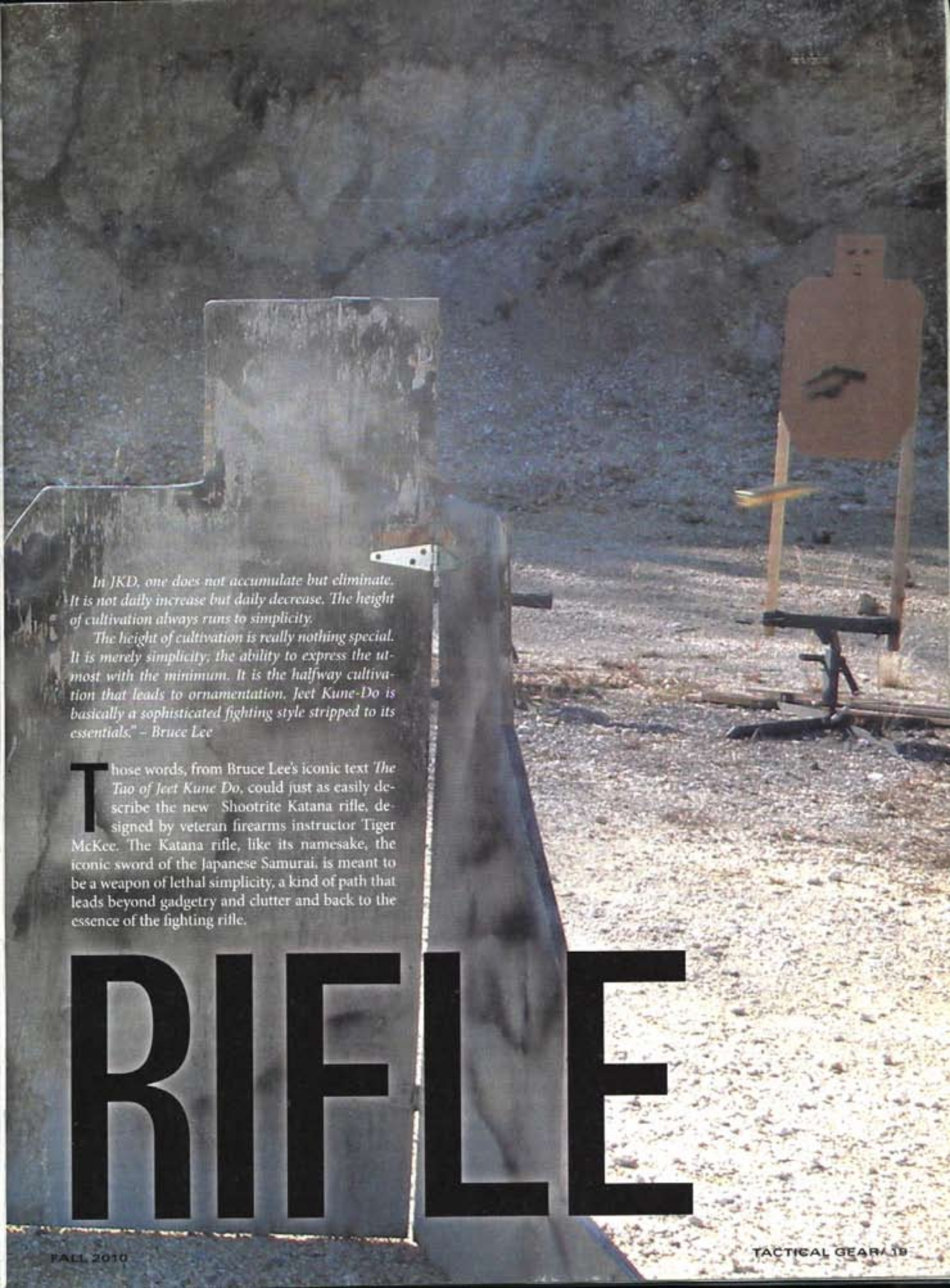


A person wearing a dark cap, large headphones, and safety glasses is shown in profile, aiming a black rifle with a scope. The person is wearing a dark jacket. The background is a concrete wall and a gravelly ground. The lighting is bright, creating strong shadows.

» BY HAL HERRING

The Shootrite

KATANA



In JKD, one does not accumulate but eliminate. It is not daily increase but daily decrease. The height of cultivation always runs to simplicity.

The height of cultivation is really nothing special. It is merely simplicity; the ability to express the utmost with the minimum. It is the halfway cultivation that leads to ornamentation. Jeet Kune-Do is basically a sophisticated fighting style stripped to its essentials." - Bruce Lee

Those words, from Bruce Lee's iconic text *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, could just as easily describe the new Shootrite Katana rifle, designed by veteran firearms instructor Tiger McKee. The Katana rifle, like its namesake, the iconic sword of the Japanese Samurai, is meant to be a weapon of lethal simplicity, a kind of path that leads beyond gadgetry and clutter and back to the essence of the fighting rifle.

RIFLE



"I saw the trend that all the manufacturers were following," McKee says, "Building heavier and more complicated rifles. I wanted just the opposite, a fighting rifle that was true to Eugene Stoner's original vision for the AR platform - a simple-to-operate, lightweight rifle - but updated with bomb-proof modern components for reliability."

But the market trend toward complex rifles meant that such a rifle was unavailable, McKee said. "So I decided to build it myself."

Gone from consideration were the heavy barrels, thick-railed handguards, vertical foregrips and tactical slings of the new-wave ARs. Folding sights and complicated lighting systems were out. In was a thin 16-inch barrel, a standard 1-in-9 twist, and no change to the round; it's good old 5.56.

"The lightweight barrel is short enough to maneuver in tight quarters, quick and easy to handle during conflict, and it is plenty accurate. More accurate than you are going to be able to shoot it under actual field conditions," McKee explains. He added a carbon fiber handguard, a simple one-piece unit with the barrel nut permanently attached. A rail section at eleven o'clock (for the right handed shooter) allows for the attachment of a light. "That eleven o'clock position is the best for rolling out from behind cover and for clearing both left- and right-hand corners," McKee said.

One of the first things you notice looking at the rifle is the flat-top upper receiver, ready for mounting the optics of your choice, and the absence of any

external forward assist. McKee quotes Stoner, the genius behind the original AR-15, "When you get a cartridge that won't seat in a rifle, and you deliberately drive it in, usually you are buying yourself more trouble." The simple concave cutout behind the exposed part of the bolt carrier provides the same assist function, but without the leverage of an external assist. That is leverage that will force a bad cartridge into your rifle and put you out of business. Simply put: if the bolt won't seat a cartridge with the pressure of a finger in the cutout, that cartridge needs to be cycled out of the rifle, not jammed into it.

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In the same vein of pragmatism, the rifle comes with a fixed front sight and removable, A1 drum style rear - although the drum can be adjusted for windage, there is no elevation adjustment, because almost no one will adjust elevation in a firefight. The sights can be left on as backup for a red-dot system, (supplied by the buyer) or used as the primary sighting system.

Among the "bombproof" modern components installed on the Katana is a mil-spec bolt assembly with an MPI bolt - the firing pin is held in with a solid retaining pin rather than the flimsier split

cotter found in other AR bolts. Extractor and ejector springs are chrome silicon alloy for durability, trueness, and corrosion resistance.

In his years of almost daily experience as a firearms instructor, McKee says he has witnessed innumerable instances of bent and twisted charging handles on ARs, and he vowed to find one for the Katana that would stand up to whatever the operator could dish out. "A bent charging handle is one malfunction that will really put you out of commission," he explains. "When a charging handle twists, it locks up the bolt carrier, and you are done." To solve that problem, the Katana is equipped with Bravo Company's new Gunfighter charging handle. "It's a top-quality part, in a crucial function."

The lower receiver on the Katana sticks tightly to the basics, mil-spec components and trigger, with nothing fancied up to go wrong in the heat and dust of reality.

"I see these three-pound triggers, these aftermarket adjustable triggers assemblies, and they are just inappropriate for a fighting rifle," McKee says, "You see them sold as 'match triggers,' or 'competition triggers' and they are fine for that function. But you are introducing variables that can lock up or break, and what might be just a hassle on the range will mean something entirely different in the field." The standard trigger assemblies have proven reliability, an acceptable and crisp pull, and most important, a positive trigger reset that the operator can feel in

his trigger finger, an attribute that McKee calls "essential" in a fighting rifle.

When the Katana is in production, buyers will be able to choose between a stan-

dard A1 stock (5/8" shorter than the A2, and a better fit for most shooters) and a Magpul CTR adjustable, which has a six-position buffer tube. On the A1 stock, the rear sling mount is installed on the side of the stock, which lets the rifle hang flat against your body, a very small adjustment that completely changes how the rifle carries, and dramatically shortens the time it takes to go from a carry to a ready position.

The first Katana was a rifle that McKee put together for his own use, but the concept has taken on a life of its own.

"As my students became familiar with



the one I made for myself, they were asking me how they could get one. I started out just building the uppers for them, but the idea kind of ran off on me. Demand outstripped my ability to build them, or keep up with it, on my own."

Luckily, McKee knew where to turn. He approached his friend Will Hayden of Red Jacket Firearms, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. At first, Hayden was reluctant. "We got our fame working on AKs," Hayden says, in his south Louisiana drawl, "and we didn't see any reason to focus on anything else. But when I saw Tiger's design, I recognized a kindred spirit. The more I looked at what he was doing, the more I wanted to be a part of it."

Like McKee, Hayden believes that the highest form of a fighting rifle is the simplest, most reliable version, and that the farther you get from that, the more the tail begins to wag the dog, in the case of a fighting rifle, dangerously so.

"It's funny, isn't it, how going back to what works can seem so revolutionary?" said Hayden. One of the assets of the Katana, Hayden explains, is the match-grade barrel. "It's a not a chrome-lined barrel, which is inherently more accurate. We knew we didn't need the chrome. This isn't 'Nam, and we're shooting mostly good ol' American ammo, and we even get a chance to clean our guns once in awhile, so you don't need it."

But the Katana is first a fighting rifle, so the barrel is trued not to .223 specs, but to actual 5.56, an important distinction. "It's a big difference," Hayden said. "And nobody who knows that difference will go out the door with a .223 barrel.

The .223 is too tight for military spec ammo, and using it will get you into trouble eventually. What we are producing is a fighting rifle that stays with match-grade specs. We want our customers to be able to win a competition with their fighting rifle, if that's what they want to do with it. Basically, it's a competition gun that has not lost sight of what you are training for. That pretty much sums it up."

On a cold Alabama morning we took the Katana out on the Shootrite range to put it through its paces. The first thing that was obvious was what a difference it made to have the sling mount on the side of the stock. The rifle hangs so flat to your body that it is almost a part of you. Going through doors, turning, crouching, the rifle stays close and ready-to-hand. Raising the Katana for dry fire practice, the 16-inch barrel and overall lightness of the rifle is immediately apparent. As McKee has become suspicious of ever-heavier fighting rifles, I've become suspicious of ever lighter sporting and varmint shooting rifles. I may be a cave man, but some of the lightest modern rifles feel to me like shouldering and pointing an aluminum yardstick. I can't find the balance point, and I'd rather carry an extra pound than shoot a rifle that feels wrong against my shoulder. But the Katana rises and steadies like a fine dueling pistol. Wearing a heavy jacket, the shorter A1 stock places my cheekweld exactly against the comb of the stock, my eye dead-on through the sights.

Starting offhand at 25 to 30 yards, I'm able to shoot a very respectable 2 1/2-inch group. McKee doesn't keep a bench and

sandbags on the range. His belief is that the current obsession with hyper-accuracy among American shooters is taking away from the real need for practical rifle shooting skills. "You want a rifle that will shoot better than you can shoot it, and that's it," he says. Running malfunction and reload drills is effortless with the lightness of the rifle. So is clasping the rifle tight to my chest in the transition-to-pistol exercises. My favorite varmint and plinking rifle is an AR-15 I bought in 1995, a 20-inch barreled Colt Sporter, H-Bar, with no bells or whistles. I love the gun. But compared to the Katana, my old reliable handles like 39 inches of hickory 2x8.

The stripped down nature of the Katana is especially apparent during the fast-paced work from the Wall, a series of structures, doorways, stacks of tires, concrete block walls, and various other objects that simulate the situations of urban engagements. Doing the limbo with a rifle has never been easier for me, and, working from 60 and more yards, it was a real pleasure to keep banging the steel targets with ease, practicing every firing position and using the cover, enjoying the mobility. Recoil is negligible, muzzle-blast very acceptable. Although it was far from mastery on my part, I had the feeling that, with the Katana and an unlimited amount of time and ammo, I could almost see mastery from where I was lying, prone, firing away. In a two-hour session, working from 10 feet on paper targets to a little over 100 yards on steel, I fell in love with the little rifle.

McKee is accepting orders for the Katana. Priced at \$1849.95, the Katana includes a copy of McKee's manual "The Book of Two Guns" and a twenty-five percent discount on a class at Shootrite.

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