

OWNING THE NIGHT!

AT SHOT '23 OUR AA LEGIONNAIRE AND US-LEAD DAN SAT DOWN WITH TOM CERASO FROM AMPED AIRSOFT TO DISCUSS THE RISE AND USE OF NIGHT VISION EQUIPMENT IN AIRSOFT, AMPED AIRSOFT'S PLANS FOR NATIONAL EVENTS, AND WHERE THE FUTURE OF NIGHT VISION MIGHT BE HEADED!

Major industry shows are always an opportunity to get together with friends from every part of the airsoft community, and to speak with experts in specific fields. It was my pleasure to meet with Tom from Amped Airsoft based in Pittsburgh and discuss with him "all things NVG", so without further ado, let's get into it, there's a LOT we talked through!

Tom: Hi, name is Tom and I am with Amped Airsoft. I am head of the Tech Department, Head of the Night Vision Department there (which is kind of connected to the Tech Department) and I am Head of National Operations. So, any of the national operations we go to, I help coordinate with and I go to probably about 40 -50% of them.

AA: Can you tell me more about Amped Airsoft's role in the national operations?

Tom: So we started going to events, I want to say, about 6 – 8 years ago, actually going outside of Pittsburg and Pennsylvania events to national events. But this past two years we kicked it up like crazy, and now we go to all the way to New Mexico with our mobile store and we drive all the way there. We hit about 65 events last season doing a variety of MILSIM events. And this season we're going to probably kick it up an even higher notch from last year. It's pretty crazy.





AA: Are you operating out of a booth?

Tom: So what we do is kind of a booth. What we have is a 24' racecar trailer that we converted to hold a bunch of grid-wall, a bunch of tables, and a checkout area. We drive that to any event we go to and it's pretty much a gigantic mobile store. It's a crazy, crazy setup and we have a whole crew of guys that help out with it. And because of that, we started getting into the night vision side of it, because a lot of people at events want to use NOD's. They want to rent, they want to buy, and they want to be able to use it at events.

So with that we started looking into it. We tried to reach out to a few industry partners and just didn't really get anywhere with it. We looked into it a little deeper and found out Photonis was one of our neighbors, they're actually located in Lancaster Pennsylvania, that's where one of their headquarters is. We took this crazy idea and were like *"alright, let's just call them!"* They took our phone call and started working with us.

After that we got in a lot more housings, like PVS-14's from Carson, Tanto's from Nocturn Industries... We carry DTNVG's, RNVG's, any housing you can think of, we make sure that we have it in. So we pretty much have a full catalogue. We carry L3 tubes, we carry ELBIT tubes, so pretty much any tube manufacturer in the USA, we try and carry those. It's become its own beast. It's kind of crazy that we're at the level we are at.

And it's kind of funny that when you show up to an event like that, or you even show up to a real firearms event (because there's a lot of those around us that we show up to and do the rentals for) you show up and are like *"hey! I'm with an airsoft company and they're looking at you like "Are those real NOD's or are they...?"*

AA: Yeah, they are expecting something like sub-standard knock-offs...

Tom: Yeah, they are expecting like a digital thing or something that has terrible glass. Nope, they are real. We have a full suite of equipment to make them. It takes a little bit of shellshock first, then they're like *"Oh! Wow, this is actually a thing! This is actually to the standards I normally see."*

AA: How many units do you say you rent out at an average event?

Tom: 10 – 15 an event, at any one event we go to. By the end of this season our goal is to have the rental fleet sitting at 40 units. Currently we have two dual-tube units, but we're probably going to be working with Nick and Jeff at Nocturne to get more Tantos in the fleet because of their Daisho bridge.

The Daisho bridge is a powered bridge unit that you basically take two of their version of the PVS-14, so you take the two Tanto's and the Daisho bridge goes together and now you have a device that basically looks and operates like a dual tube unit. So what we hope to do with that is get in a bunch of the Tantos and then when people want to upgrade to a dual-tube unit we can just throw a bridge on it and they're good to go for that event.

AA: Yeah, I think I saw in one of the airsoft or night vision groups where Nocturne was showcasing that...

Tom: Oh yeah, Nick and Jeff are all over that (laughs).

AA: Well that's cool. Do you see night vision use in airsoft expanding more? It seems like its really gaining traction here in the US in the last few years.

Tom: Absolutely. Especially here in the States. What I would really like to see more of is the EU side of stuff picking up more, which I know is really hard because of ITAR regulations in the US, so we can't export any of the L3, Elbit or anything that meets the standards. But I think specifically here in the states you're going to see a big uptick in their use. I think if you continue to provide options for people to access them outside of buying them, so like renting is a good way for people to use and use, until they finally build up enough money to buy one. They'll go: *"Hey, this is something I have been using a lot throughout the last year and now I'd like to buy one."*

AA: Right, they build up that familiarity with them...

Tom: Yes. Once they build up that familiarity, that's where a lot of our sales happen: If they've ever met us at a show, or we've demoed it for them at a MILSIM event, or they've rented them from us... most of the people who are buying from us have also rented from us because they had previously never tried it out before. And once they try it out they immediately go *"Oh God! I need this!"*

AA: It's easy to sell someone on night vision, you know, from the cool factor. But I think you'd agree

"MOST OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE BUYING FROM US HAVE ALSO RENTED FROM US BECAUSE THEY HAD PREVIOUSLY NEVER TRIED IT OUT BEFORE. AND ONCE THEY TRY IT OUT THEY IMMEDIATELY GO "OH GOD! I NEED THIS!""



with this: the biggest hurdle is going to be the entry price!

Tom: It's 100% the entry price. That entry price is something that we have looked at that we are trying to be creative in with providing ways for discounts or maybe some rent-to-own plans. Stuff like that.

AA: Right. I know a lot of manufacturers offer a payment plan system.

Tom: So we have a payment plan through PayPal on our website right now. If anyone wants to break in, we can do it like that. We are going to be looking at a few other companies for different options. But that's a big issue, that's where it is, just that initial price. I know it took me a very long time myself to afford a set of night vision units. It's ridiculously expensive, ridiculously expensive.

AA: I actually was a night vision dealer in the past through another company I worked for. We were able to get it at dealer pricing, of

14! And that was something off the used market that I don't think the guy realized had a Gen 3 tube in there because he let it go for cheap. Which I got very lucky on. Then I opened it up and realized this is an OMNI 7 green-phos tube that was really not very blemished at all. That was very lucky that I got that. But still, that was like US\$1600 - \$1800 used. That price is something I laugh at, because I'm like, even if we sell them used it's still more expensive than any of our custom HPA builds. That price is nuts, man. It's something we are constantly battling.

Especially since airsofters do not necessarily have the same budget that real firearms owners do. Real firearms are very expensive, and if you are buying multiple firearms a year, you could probably take one or two of those, not buy them, and buy a PVS-14 instead. With airsoft, it's more like if you don't buy like 8 or 9 guns, then you can maybe afford something like this. (laughs)

course, but even then it was very expensive. It's always been expensive. Back then we didn't have dual-tube anything; it was PVS-7's or PVS-14's and that was really the top end stuff you could realistically get. And that's where I'm at right now with my personal set. But I would love to make the jump into duals.

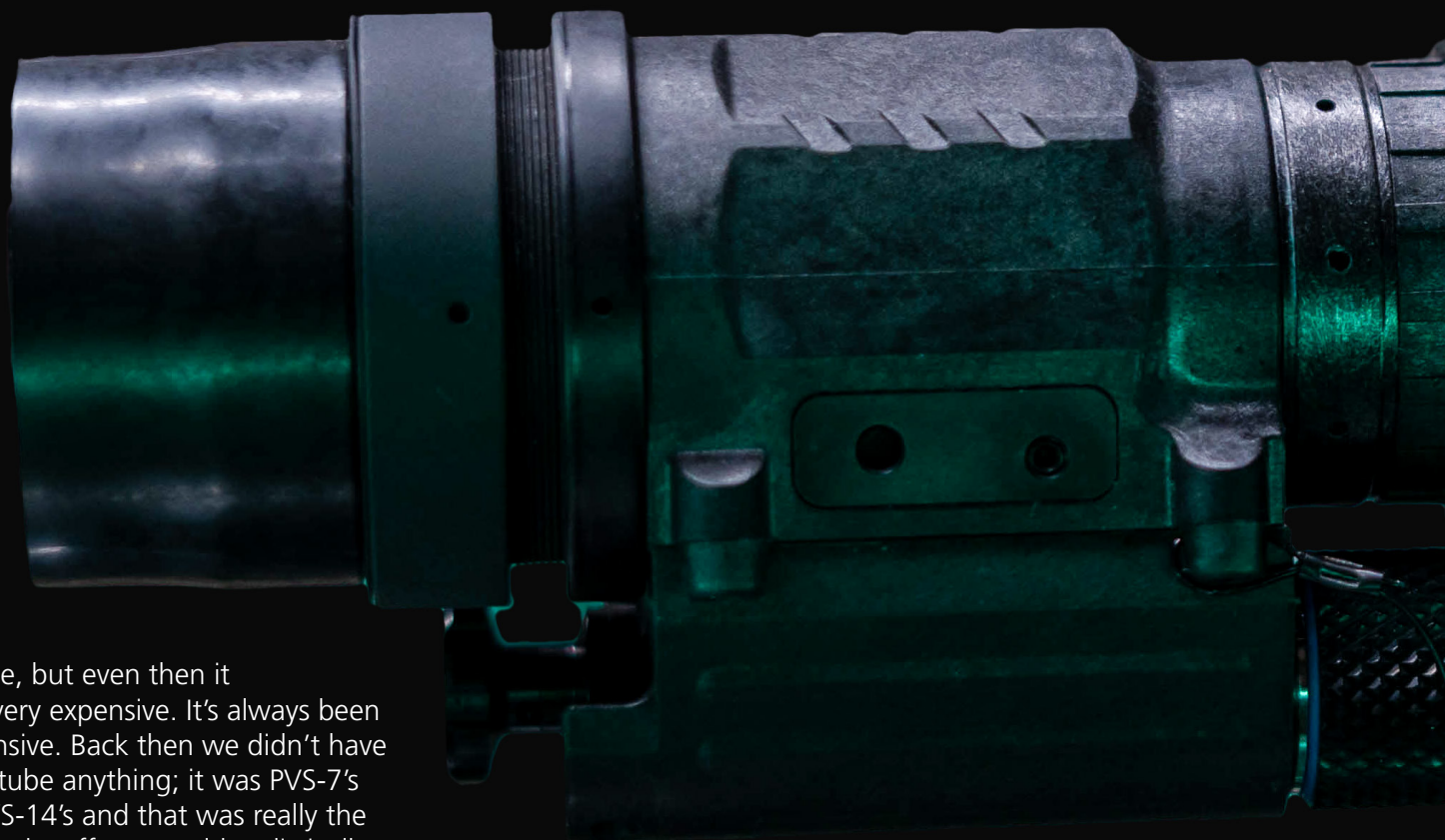
Tom: Yeah, so what's the 14 you have?

AA: It's actually a MUM style housing, but it's the MV-14 Pinnacle, which is a Gen 3 with 72lp/mm. It was a hand picked unit and at the top-end spec you could get at the time.

Tom: It's funny, my first unit was actually a MUM-

AA: (laughs) Yes, some of us spend a lot on our airsoft guns...

Tom: Oh god yes. Me and West, the head of our media department, we were talking about how much money do you think you have invested? Do you think you have more money in your guns, or more money in your gear sets? And we both just looked at each other like, "I don't even want to think about that answer or put it on paper (laughs)."



AA: (laughs) I'm really guilty of getting a new airsoft gun and I'll literally write myself a blank check for what I want to do to it... But kind of leading off of the last point regarding expense, do you think there's going to be any sort of major market disruption in the night vision industry, say someone like Holosun steps into the market and starts flooding the market with cheap night vision?

Tom: Yep, yep. So I think Holosun is a very good example of this. Specifically because they are a cheaper (I shouldn't say cheap!) they are a more affordable option for optics that have night vision compatibility. They have night vision settings on it. I think their new product, from what I see Nick Chen posting on it, I think that's them saying "hey, we're going to start doing that market

an airsofter using a night vision unit, you could save possibly a US\$1000 and just go with a Photonis tube in your PVS-14. For a lot of people, that's a lot of money, especially for people in airsoft. That's what I highly recommend.

To a lot of people in the night vision world who aren't industry people, I would say look at this like a Gen. 2+ hybrid. The fact of the matter is, the performance in most use cases for Photonis is very good; comparable to gen 3, L3 filmless or Elbit thin filmed. They are absolutely not the same, mind you, especially when you start to get into very dark, dark conditions. Then Elbit or L3 are going to completely do better. But for what I like to say the 95% of use case that airsofters will be seeing, Photonis units are absolutely fine.

So getting back to price, I think Photonis units were definitely a market disruption. I think the adoption of night vision into airsoft, that was a market disruption. I think about 3 - 4 years ago when Sionyx came out, that was also another market



disruption you are talking about." Because they have the cheaper manufacturing ability that a lot of companies in the States unfortunately don't have... but that's also why the cost is so high here.

But also, if you look at Photonis they're really high quality tubes, but they come in at a much lower low price point. A lot of airsofters I talk to are like "I want L3, or I want Elbit." You should definitely try and afford those if you have the budget. But for the vast majority of instances that you are going to be

disruption. I actually had a Sionyx Aurora Pro, and I'll be honest, it works in about 30 -40% of use cases for an airsofter. For me, that's not enough, and there's a very big restriction on performance. Now the OPSIN, there's an increase in refresh rate, but marginally and for me it's still not there.

I think what's going to happen in the next 5 to 8 years, digital is going to catch up. I think what we're going to see is digital isn't going to really outperform, but it's going to be more of an apples to apples comparison instead of an apples to a 'weird orange-

thing' comparison. And it's going to be more of a debate of "I can buy this digital thing for US\$1,500 or I can buy this Photonis for US\$3,000." As digital comes up in performance, analog is going to go down in price. Now that's probably going to be a little hard to do just because of the chemicals and processes involved in making an image intensifier. But I think just because of how things have gone in that market, I do think that digital will eventually come up. Digital offers a lot more too, things like augmented reality features. There's a lot more that digital offers, that analog units have to have built in to offer that stuff. You'll probably start seeing some digital stuff from L3, Elbit and so forth.

As far as airsoft goes, and it kind of sucks, whatever happens in the gun industry, airsoft will pick up on.

AA: Yes, they're more interlinked than people realize. Even though a lot of the gun industry likes to segregate themselves from us.

Tom: Oh definitely (laughs). We are definitely the red-headed stepchild. Definitely the red-headed stepchild! But it's very cool that we have guys like Garand Thumb, Mojo with Travis Haley, Lucas...

AA: ...The Administrative Results guy...

Tom: ...Yes, those guys are really pushing it. I met all those guys at Copperhead, AMS, and those guys are so supportive of our industry and I really do appreciate those guys.

AA: It's really cool to see that kind of open mind from the firearms side. They see the value in it too. Sometimes when you try to explain it to a guy who's got his foot firmly entrenched...

Tom: ...Yes, "That can't be good! What's wrong with you? That's a toy!" But then you have COVID and ammo prices started going up in the firearms industry and people didn't want to pay those prices. Instead of paying US\$150 for 500 rounds of 9mm you started paying US\$400 - \$500 for the exact same quality and exact same amount. So a lot of people started picking up airsoft guns for training.

AA: Yes, that's what I noticed when the pandemic hit. It was beyond my expectations, but Airsoft actually made a stratospheric rise. They were my

busiest years ever, but you know, the product wasn't always there to deliver to people. But it's been cool to witness that.

What is your opinion on the controversy regarding IR lasers in Airsoft?

Tom: So I am really close friends with Gun Gamers, and I bring that up because they just started Gun Gamers Productions, and they are one of the only people I know of who are running games and checking if lasers are actually eye safe. Now I think that's a really good thing. One, because civilian grade lasers are going to be less likely to bloom too, and also they are eye safe. That's a lot better for people who don't really know, or don't have the background to know what good muzzle discipline is. If you don't have good muzzle discipline, then you probably are not going to have good laser discipline.

I think the thing with lasers in airsoft, is it's been a thing for a while and it's been a big debate for a while. A lot of people don't care. They want their lasers and I completely understand that. I run a laser on my gun for night vision, but I don't run it in the day. I have it on my platform, but I don't run it during the day because I don't need it. I run it for night vision because it is a good way to signal people with or without night vision. You can be like "Hey, white light users (vis laser on) shoot in that general area."

I think high-power though; I think a lot of people need to recognize that it's regulated for a reason. But if you treat it responsibly, I don't think there's a reason for people to not have it. I just think that for what we are doing, I think there's ways to get very cheap civilian grade lasers for very cheap. Most of the cheaper high powered devices are coming from Taiwan or China and they're labeled as a toy or something like that and they are not regulated. I would advise people that if they have the ability to grab an eye safe laser, to do so, if they are trying to get into airsoft and night vision. Holosun specifically. Holosun makes very effective units.

If you go for a really cheap unit, like a clone PEQ...

AA: ...Somogear or the like...

Tom: ...Somogear is really



interesting because it's like a US\$400 unit and will in some cases even hold up to recoil. It's a really cool unit.

AA: You can pay an extra \$10 to have it potted and it will handle recoil better.

Tom: Yes, but if you compare something like an FMA, you're paying something like US\$60 - \$80 and that thing is not zero-able. I think a lot of the time when you get someone buying these cheaper units, they don't recognize that I can't really zero this thing, or maybe I can, but it doesn't work that well. Then they try and use it at night and are like *"Why am I not hitting anything?"*, well it's because your laser is like a red dot, and a lot of people just think *"Oh it's a laser, I'm just going to point and shoot..."* and they haven't actually zeroed it to their rifle.

90% of Airsoft is about "looking good", we all know this! So if you want to throw that PEQ on your gun, by all means. It looks hard as hell. But recognize that you shouldn't point it at someone's face. Just be careful where you are aiming these things because you can damage people's eyes.

AA: One of the things I have noticed with night games is the rise of more passive aiming solutions, so now your OPFOR has night vision. It used to be I was the only guy showing up on the field with night vision and it was like 'God Mode' and I would kill everything and everyone! It's not like that anymore.

Tom: Absolutely (laughs). 100%. You would go to a game and they'd allow an hour or two of night play, and you would dunk on everyone. Those days were fun, but they are totally over now!

AA: I went to one event, and this guy had what I think was a 6x Raptor on his bolty and a full ghillie, everything. You just could not spot him. Even with our night vision, we had a full squad of night vision equipped guys, he was just picking us off. Totally passive aiming through his scope.

Tom: Yes, passive aiming, and you see it already in the gun industry, where you have guys who are moving totally to passive aiming now. We do a lot of rentals for firearms trainer facilities too. Most of the dudes there who are running NODS don't have a laser, or if they do, its use is very minimal. Most are running a SIG Romeo 5, or a Holosun, or a Vortex, and it's like the US\$200ish model that has night vision compatibility. And honestly, passive aiming is a lot

better if you're not going to or need to be signaling.

A US\$200 sight is a lot easier to acquire and use than a US\$1,500 laser. And honestly it's even cheaper than a US\$400 Somogear that's zeroable and is probably the cheapest end high power device you could go. With that, the only downside to passive aiming is that it's almost not really doable with monocular's. Or it is doable, but you need to have very clear glass through whatever red dot you're talking about, and then you start stepping up in price. But using a red dot at night is inherently easier for people to learn as they're also using it in the day too. Like you said, I think everyone is going to start doing it.

AA: I usually tell guys, *"Hey, just get the Holosun HR403R. It's got night vision settings and is only US\$145 roughly."* It's one of the cheapest most durable optics you can get into for airsoft use.

Tom: Absolutely. It's a great optic. And honestly you have some of the higher end VISM, NcStar stuff that gets up into US\$110 that will kind of work too.

AA: They even have a lifetime warranty now.

Tom: They do! But they don't always have good night vision compatibility, and their glass is not as clear as Holosun glass. They don't have the light permeability to feed the tube so you can actually see what you're doing or get a good picture on who you're aiming at. So if you're the person who's going to buy a VISM sight, in my opinion, for night vision you should go out and buy the Holosun because it has the actual night vision settings.

The one thing I did want to touch on is we are not the only ones in the game right now or in the airsoft world. But the one thing we are trying to do is push it so people have as much access to it as possible. I think it would be a disservice for me to not touch on Night Vision Inc. They were one of the first guys to do night vision rentals and they are still partnered with MilSim West. They're the ones who provide MilSim West with their night vision rentals.

However, pretty much any other game you go to, we want to be providing night vision rentals. We want to provide it at the 150 person game for the people who don't have experience with it and we want to be providing at the 900 person Copperhead games so that everyone who goes to those can have it.

The more you can integrate night vision and airsoft use together, I think it's just always going to be a

"I HAVE NOTICED... THE RISE OF MORE PASSIVE AIMING SOLUTIONS, SO NOW YOUR OPFOR HAS NIGHT VISION. IT USED TO BE I WAS THE ONLY GUY SHOWING UP ON THE FIELD WITH NIGHT VISION AND IT WAS LIKE 'GOD MODE' AND I WOULD KILL EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE! IT'S NOT LIKE THAT ANYMORE."

net positive. The more availability people can have to it, the more fun people will have. And it's going to attract more people from the gun industry too. Because they'll say, "Oh I actually now have a quote-unquote real world use for my night vision that I sometimes only use for hunting."

AA: Exactly. I know a lot of guys who have it, but only use it maybe once or twice out of the year for 30 minutes at a time. That's very little experience in practice.

Tom: It's a good excuse for people. It's a big excuse for these types of people. Night vision is actually a really big way to get gun guys into airsoft. It's a really attractive feature.


AA: One of things I mention when trying to convert gun guys is your average airsofter spends more time under their NOD's than the average square range shooter throughout the year. You can go to something like a MSW or AMS game and it's 48 – 72 continuous hours and you might be under those things for like 8 hours or something... all night long.

Tom: Yeah dude, the only other games I've ever had to switch

out the batteries on my NOD's was at a Grimnir event because they did 48 hours as well. RealSim is someone we will be working with as well; they also put on a 48 hour event. A lot of people when they're renting for the first time they have this idea that 'okay, I'm just going to lightly do it' especially for a 48 hour event, or they're in the other camp going into the dark totally blind.

Then they get into it and are like "I need night vision. I literally met an enemy force and I can't see them or the hand in front of my face. And this dude? I've been holding his shoulder all night and I'm sure he's very annoyed with me." I was that guy once. I was literally holding a shoulder trying to go through a bush and it was like "Okay, I'm not having fun and I'm sure this guy does not like me being on his back right now. I can't see anything, and I'm just fearing for my life and holding my ankles waiting for death."

My thanks to Tom for spending so much of his time with me, and you can check out Amped Airsoft's selection of night vision devices and what events they'll be attending at www.ampedairsoft.com **AA**



NVG Page: <https://ampedairsoft.com/nvg/>
NVG Rentals: <https://ampedairsoft.com/nvg-rentals/>
Upcoming Events for Rentals:
<https://ampedairsoft.com/amped-event-schedule/>