



# THE M-16: AMERICA'S BLACK RIFLE

**PART IX** This is the ninth of a 10-part series on the shoulder arms that waged America's wars from the Revolution to Afghanistan.

At 50 years, the M-16 has the longest front-line service use of any rifle in U.S. military history. It became the iconic weapon of the Vietnam War.

BY JOHN L. PLASTER

Only months after adopting the M-14 rifle in 1957, the U.S. Army began evaluating a revolutionary rifle. Designed by Eugene Stoner, the ArmaLite 15 (AR-15) incorporated space-age synthetic materials with an ergonomic safety, magazine release and bolt release, and offered semi- or full-automatic fire.

(Stoner, by the way, was a Marine aviation ordnance tech who served in the Philippines, on Okinawa and in North China during WWII.)

The low-recoil rifle produced a cyclic rate of 600+ rounds-per-minute, most effectively fired as 3-to-5-round bursts. Impressively, a GI could carry twice as many loaded 20-round AR-15 magazines for the same weight as loaded M-14 magazines.

The AR-15 fired an equally revolutionary cartridge—the 5.56mm (.223 caliber), with a 55-grain bullet that rocketed at 3,200 feet-per-second. A popular myth spread that its bullet tumbled in flight. Actually, the rifle's earliest load barely stabilized in flight and often tumbled upon impact, creating particularly gruesome wounds. Amazingly, its tiny, high-speed bul-



The M-16 became as much a symbol of the Vietnam War as the UH1 "Huey" helicopter. The rifle also became as controversial as the war itself.

let could not penetrate a 2x4 at close range—it shattered upon impact—but sailed clean through a 2x4 at 200 yards due to lower velocity.

## FROM AR-15 TO M-16

The Air Force evaluated the AR-15 several times in the early 1960s, but it was only after Gen. Curtis LeMay test-fired it that the AR-15 was acquired to arm Air Force Security Police.

In September 1961, the AR-15 was combat-tested in Vietnam, producing such positive feedback that—with further refinements—it became the U.S. Army's XM16E1. As issued, the XM16E1 weighed 6.5 lbs., with 39 inches overall length and a 20-inch barrel. Eventually, it became the M16A1 in 1969. The Army rated the M-16 and its 55-grain bullet effective to 460 meters.

During 1962 in Vietnam, 1,000 South Vietnamese troops received M-16s. American advisors carried them there at least as early as 1963. The Dominican Republic in 1965, however, was the M-16 rifle's first major combat, carried onto the Caribbean island by 82nd



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**Pfc. John Henson, 327th Inf., 101st Abn. Div., cleans his M-16 in Kontum province in 1966. Proper lubrication and frequent cleaning were essential in Vietnam.**

Airborne Division paratroopers.

As symbolic of the Vietnam War as the Huey helicopter, the XM16E1 rifle was issued in 1965 only to Air Force Security Police, U.S. Army Special Forces, airborne units and the 1st Air Cavalry Division.

At the famous Battle of the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965, 1st Cav Division troops fought with the unmodified M-16 (the original AR-15). Lt. Col. Hal Moore, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, proclaimed: "Brave soldiers and the M-16 brought this victory." Officers of the division reported to Gen. William Westmoreland that "the M-16 was the best individual infantry weapon ever made, clearly the answer to the enemy's AK-47."

Just one year later, Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, requested 403,905 more M-16s. Between 1965 and 1966, the number of M-16s in South Vietnam leaped from 32,000 to 191,000. The Marines and some Army units that had arrived in Vietnam with the M-14 had it replaced mid-war, generating problems in maintenance training and a shortage of proper lubricants.

So many malfunctions were report-

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## M-14: The Last of its Breed

*Officially adopted in 1957, this rifle remained on duty in Europe until 1970, seeing combat in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam and Korea's DMZ (1966-69).*

**WHEN THE 3RD BATTALION**, 9th Marines landed near Danang on March 8, 1965—the first U.S. combat troops to deploy to Vietnam—they carried ashore M-14 rifles, still America's official standard shoulder arm.

Built of wood and steel with an operating system similar to the M-1 rifle it replaced, it even felt like the M-1. And like the Garand, this rifle, too, would soon be replaced.

The M-14's design began just after WWII, with variations tested, discarded and refined until adopted on May 1, 1957,

as the, "U.S. Rifle, 7.62mm, M-14."

Almost a pound lighter than the M-1, the M-14 rifle weighed 8.7 lbs. with a 22-inch barrel and 43.5-inch overall length. Unlike the M-1, the new rifle used a 20-round, detachable magazine and could be converted to full-auto fire by removing its "selector lock" and installing a selector lever.

The M-14 fired a new U.S. military cartridge, the 7.62 x 51mm, soon standardized as NATO's rifle and machine gun round. Although described metrically, this actually was a re-labeled



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**His M-14 ready, his face camouflaged, Pvt. "Doe" Morris, Recon. Bn., 3rd Marine Div., is ready for a mission in 1967 in I Corps, Vietnam.**

.30-caliber, identical to a civilian sporting cartridge, the .308 Winchester. Compared to the earlier

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ed that the military, and later Congress, launched investigations. Experts testifying before Congress explained that the switch from a 1:14 rate-of-twist barrel to the faster 1:12 had reduced lethality by 40%.

The 5.56mm cartridge was designed to use IMR 4198 powder, but in a cost-cutting move the Army had substituted with surplus WCC-846 powder, which burned dirtier with a higher chamber pressure that boosted the rate-of-fire beyond specifications.

As America's first automatic rifle to blow carbon directly into the receiver, carbon buildup was a major cause of malfunctions, along with such a high rate-of-fire. Chrome-plating the chamber reduced failures to extract, while a new buffer slowed the rate-of-fire. Commanders emphasized that GIs properly maintain their rifles and new lubricants arrived.

Another issue— never really proven— was the general belief that the 20-round magazine's follower spring was too weak to load the final few rounds. Thus, almost universally, soldiers and Marines loaded only 18 or 19 rounds in their magazines, just in case.

Some GIs were armed with the shortened M-16 carbine—the XM177E1 and E2, popularly called the "CAR-15"— primarily Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group cross-border Green Berets and some Long-Range Recon Patrol (LRRP) teams, especially those of the 75th Ranger Regiment.

## ACTION ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Whether the CAR-15 or M-16, this rifle proved itself in the hands of gallant soldiers and Marines such as Sgt. Michael Brown, chief scout of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. On Aug. 9, 1968, he learned that enemy forces on Hill 310 in Quang Nam province had let loose devastating fire upon a Marine unit.

At the battalion command post, Brown grabbed his M-16 and maneuvered across 700 meters of dangerously exposed terrain to join the besieged company. "He then moved to the enemy's right flank and fearlessly launched an assault against a hostile position," his

military .30-06, the shorter 7.62 x 51mm cartridge offered roughly 10% less range, lethality and barrier penetration.

The M-14 went into production in 1959. Among the first GIs overseas to receive it were members of D Co., 6th Inf., 2nd Battle Group, based in Berlin, in September 1961.

With the M-16 rifle's adoption on the horizon, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara halted further production contracts in January 1963. By the time M-14 production ended in 1964, some 1,380,000 rifles had been built. It remained the standard U.S. Army rifle for GIs in Europe until 1970.

## TRIED AND TRUE IN COMBAT

The M-14's first significant use in combat came not in Vietnam but in the Dominican Republic in April 1965, by members of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines. This largely forgotten intervention prevented pro-Castro forces from seizing power at the cost of 27 Americans KIA and 172 wounded. GIs stationed along Korea's DMZ during 1966-69 also used the M-14 in fire-fights with North Koreans.

In Vietnam, on Aug. 18, 1965, Marine Sgt. Robert E. O'Malley demonstrated what one tough Marine could do with his M-14. During *Operation Starlite*—the Marine Corps' first Vietnam combat operation—O'Malley's 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, found itself heavily engaged near An Cuong. Rushing ahead of his squad, the New York native assaulted

across a rice paddy and into an enemy trench line.

"Jumping into the trench," his Medal of Honor citation reads, "he attacked the Viet Cong with his rifle and grenades, and singly killed eight of the enemy." Hardly finished, he reloaded his M-14, continued to advance, "and fired with telling effect into the enemy emplacement."

Despite being wounded three times, O'Malley refused evacuation, and placed covering fire for his squad's helicopter extraction, and only then permitted himself to be extracted.

One year later, in 1966, Marine combat units in Vietnam began receiving M-16s, and by 1967 had entirely converted to the newer rifle. Vietnam-based U.S. Army units, too, had switched to the M-16, although Army snipers employed a modified M-14 rifle as the M21 Sniper System. Worldwide, the U.S. armed forces converted to the M-16 by the early 1970s.

However, the M-14's saga did not end. Delta Force Sgt. 1st Class Randall Shugart and Master Sgt. Gary Gordon were using M-14s when they died defending a downed U.S. helicopter crew in Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993. Both were awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.

In the 21st century, thousands of M-14s have been rebuilt and scoped as Army and Marine designated marksman rifles. These marksmen—with one assigned to each infantry platoon—have seen considerable combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 7.62 x 51mm round offers long-range shots beyond the maximum range of M-16 rifles.

Silver Star citation notes.

After silencing the dug-in enemy with a grenade, Brown assaulted into the enemy fortifications with his scout squad and attacked two more enemy positions. M-16s were used to lethal effect.

During December 1967's *Operation Pershing* in Binh Dinh province, Spec. 4 James Lynch of the 12th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, fired his M-16 at numerous enemy soldiers. To protect three wounded comrades, he rushed a nearby trench, firing his rifle to kill two North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers at point-blank range.

As Lynch's Medal of Honor citation

notes, when his company was forced to withdraw, he remained, alone, to defend the three Americans. Firing his M-16 and tossing one grenade, the Chicago native protected them for two hours, killing five more enemy soldiers, some only yards away, until a relief force arrived.

Spec. 4 Gordon Roberts, a 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, rifleman, was in the hill country east of the Ashau Valley on July 11, 1969. From high ground, NVA troops pinned down an adjacent company, as well as Roberts' platoon. The Ohio native leaped to his feet, rushed uphill through intense fire and, firing his M-16, silenced one NVA

bunker and continued to the next only to have his rifle shot from his hands.

Roberts grabbed another M-16 dropped by a wounded comrade to continue his assault, silencing not just the second bunker, but a third, employing hand grenades. The Medal of Honor recipient then fought through heavy fire to reach an isolated sister company, assisted its link up, and then helped evacuate wounded fellow paratroopers.

During *Operation Crazy Horse* in Binh Dinh province, on May 18, 1966, Staff Sgt. Jimmy Stewart was a squad leader in the 12th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division. That morning at dawn, an enemy platoon attacked his squad's position, wounding every soldier but Stewart.

Firing his M-16, the West Virginia native stood his ground. His Medal of Honor citation reads: "Virtually one man against a hostile platoon [and] fought like a man possessed, emptying magazine after magazine at the determined, on-charging enemy."

His ammunition expended, Stewart crawled to wounded men, retrieved their loaded magazines and continued the fight. He held his position for four hours, protecting his fallen comrades until he was mortally wounded.

A relief force found Stewart's body with eight dead enemy around him and blood trails where another 15 had been dragged away. But those he protected survived.

Though too often overlooked by the media, there were many such accounts of courageous riflemen in Vietnam giving their all.

As for the M-16, after the war it replaced the M-14 worldwide, among all the armed forces. It would see action in Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf War (1991) and Somalia.

Five decades after its adoption, its story continued with 21st century combat in Iraq and today in Afghanistan, making the M-16 and its evolving models the longest-serving standard shoulder arm in American history. ☛

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