

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Machineguns in the Infantry

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What is happening with the machineguns in the Army? This seems to be the question of the year and with good reason, since so much has happened in the past two years with regard to these weapons. The rumors that abound are as varied as the men who make up the infantry. I hope this article will shed some light on the direction the infantry and the Army are taking with machineguns.

For some background, it is necessary to return to 1989 when the Chief of Staff of the Army decided the M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) would replace the venerable M60 machinegun. This decision was based on a side-by-side evaluation of the two weapons, as well as a number of economic factors. To begin, M60 production had stopped, and the M60s in service were almost 30 Years old. The M249, however, was in production, and fielding in the automatic rifle role was under way. Additionally, the cost of an M60 was two and one-half times that of an M249. The M249 also used the same 5.56mm ammunition as the M16, which was also lighter per round than the M60's 7.62mm ammunition.

On the basis of this decision, tables of organization and equipment (TOEs) were changed to reflect the M249 as a replacement for the M60. But the

fielding of the M249 in the machinegun role was not scheduled to begin until 1994, because fielding in its automatic rifle role took priority. The fielding of the M249 SAW began right away, and this seemed to be somewhat confusing. Some units assumed the M249s they were receiving were replacements for their M60s and proceeded to turn in the M60s. To date, no M249s in the machinegun role have been issued to the field, only those for the automatic rifle role.

What is the difference? Physically, there is none. The only distinction is in the weapon's employment. For clarification, however, the M249 in the machinegun role should be referred to as "the M249 light machinegun (LMG)," and in the automatic rifle role as "the M249 light machinegun in the automatic rifle role."

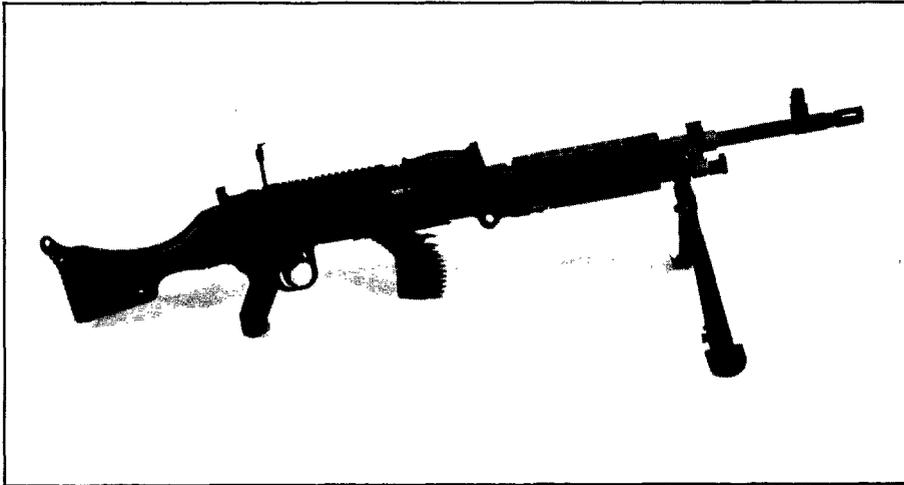
Throughout the early 1990s, the TOEs reflected M249s in both roles, but units kept their M60s, again confusing the issue. On the basis of the units' concerns, the former commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) directed that "a holistic review of machineguns in infantry units" be conducted. This review would include weapon system adequacy and training on its employment.

A task force established at the U.S.

Army Infantry School in late 1993 found no reason to recommend against replacing the M60 with the M249. It did, however, recommend that machinegun training be increased at all levels of non-commissioned officer training—the Primary Leadership Development Course, the Basic and Advanced NCO Courses, and other appropriate areas. This recommendation has been implemented.

On the basis of the task force's recommendation, the commandant of the Infantry School continued to support the M249 LMG as the M60 replacement. He did, however, direct that the M249 not be issued in the machinegun role except as a complete system. The M249 LMG system would consist of a tripod, a traversing and elevation mechanism, and the training manuals. Meanwhile, infantry division commanders—still concerned about the ability of the M249 light machinegun to meet their operational needs—continued to press for the retention of a 7.62mm machinegun.

In January and February 1994, after the final report of the task force, reports from units returning from Somalia indicated that the M249 did not have all of the capabilities expected of a machinegun. Both the M249 and the M60 received high praise from soldiers, but for different reasons. The M249 was



The M240E4, showing feed-tray cover with integral rail and a heat shield and hand guard around the barrel.

easier to carry in the urban environment but could not match the penetrating power or the psychological value of a 7.62mm weapon system.

The fielding of the M249 machinegun was being delayed to accommodate the infantry commandant's requirements to field it as a total system and to correct deficiencies noted during production testing. This delay meant that some units would not receive their M60 replacements for several more years. The Infantry School felt that infantry units had to have a reliable machinegun while they waited for the M249 replacement. In March 1994, the School received approval and began a program that would develop a medium machinegun upgrade kit for either the M60 or the M240 (the coaxial machinegun used on the M-1 Abrams tank and the Bradley fighting vehicle) and provide it to active infantry units.

In May 1994 the Infantry School commandant met with several division commanders and agreed to look again at the M249/M60 issue. As a result, a proposal for the selective retention of the 7.62mm machinegun was sent to TRADOC and Headquarters, Department of the Army, for approval. It was agreed that active infantry platoons would keep the M60, which would then be replaced by the weapon selected for the medium machinegun upgrade kit program. This program was considered a priority, and testing was completed in mid-August 1995.

The M240E4 won the competition, and active infantry companies can expect a weapon similar to the European MAG 58. The M240E4 differs from the MAG 58 in several areas, but the most noticeable differences will be a feed-tray cover with integral rail, and a heat shield and hand guard around the barrel. Additionally, the M240E4 will be fielded with a new concept—the flex mount.

Active infantry units can expect a significantly improved 7.62mm machinegun, which will be fielded to the first units in Fiscal Year 1997. Both the commandant of the Infantry School and the commander of TRADOC were adamant in stating that the upgrade kits would be placed on new weapons, not on used or rebuilt weapons. Reliability was the main emphasis of the program.

The 1994 approval for active infantry units to retain a 7.62mm capability was not intended as a complete reversal of the 1989 decision by the Army Chief of Staff, only as a selective exception. This decision meant that the Army would, in fact, have two machineguns—a 5.56mm light machinegun and a 7.62mm medium machinegun.

As the concern grew that the loss of their M60 machinegun would diminish operational capability, commanders continued to support the retention of the M60. The problem was due largely to a misconception of the M249's capability to meet all operational needs. In October 1994, TRADOC tasked the

Infantry School to conduct a complete review to determine the Army's total requirement for medium machineguns. The Infantry School contacted all the proponent schools and received input as to the current and recommended machinegun mixes within their respective organizations. Based on the need for commonality of equipment and ammunition within units, weapon costs, and training requirements the Infantry School recommended that the M249 light machinegun be retained as the machinegun in all units except infantry, armor, and selected combat engineer units. These units would retain a 7.62mm medium machinegun.

As a final note, the M249 light machinegun is an outstanding weapon and more than adequate for all but the most demanding general support missions. Units issued the M249 LMG will see no degradation in their warfighting ability. However, it is recognized that the infantry, armor, and selected combat engineers have a unique requirement for a 7.62mm machinegun. This mixture of light and medium machineguns will significantly enhance the firepower and lethality of the force. The foregoing plan for distribution of the M249 and M60 machine guns will apply equally to the reserve components, and will be executed according to the Department of the Army Master Priority List (DAMPL) sequence.

Questions or comments on this issue may be addressed to the U.S. Army Infantry Center, Directorate of Combat Developments, Fort Benning, GA 31905. Points of contact are Major Baldwin, Mr. Medeiros, or Captain Hodge. Phone DSN 835-3181, commercial (706) 544-3181, or E-mail to BALDWIN@BENNING-EMH2.ARMY.MIL.

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