

# INFANTRY LETTERS



## IN PRAISE OF THE M79

Most *Infantry* readers probably don't remember the M79 grenade launcher—the predecessor to the M203. One man in each fire team carried this handy, lightweight weapon, which was designed to take out machinegun positions and enemy soldiers in bunkers and rooms. It resembled a small shotgun, was easy to use, and could be carried in one hand, yet could be brought up to a firing position without changing grip. Since the M79 was a single shot, a grenadier carried a .45 caliber pistol as well.

When I reported to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg in 1970, each infantry platoon had six M79s. Arriving in Vietnam in 1971, I found that the M79 had been replaced by the M203. This gave me a chance to compare the merits of the two.

The key advantage of the M203/M16 combination was that you could fire the grenade and then function as a rifleman without having to take time to reload. (None of the soldiers wanted to engage the enemy with their .45s.) The platoon got six more rifles without having any more men.

There were several important disadvantages to the M203 as well. First, the combination was heavy. Carrying two weapons in one with both calibers of ammunition was tough. Second, unless specially trained and experienced with the weapon, the M203 gunner tended to fire his loaded grenade, then function solely as a rifleman. The weapon without quadrant sights was less accurate than the M79 and, when the quadrant sights were used on the weapon, they tended to catch on things and break. Finally, in the confusion of the moment, gunners sometimes pulled the wrong trigger. (Once, an M203 gunner to my left rear aimed with his rifle sights at a target beyond me and pulled the gre-

nade trigger, causing a grenade to impact nearby. Fortunately, it had traveled less than the arming distance and did not detonate.)

As an infantry platoon leader I initially carried a rifle, just as the book suggested. Part way through my tour, I was struck by the idea of carrying an M79 and a pistol instead. I could carry it in one hand, with the other hand free to operate the radio—an important duty while in contact. A shot round in the chamber could provide a quick burst of self-protection if needed, and I wouldn't even have to change my grip or take careful aim. Another advantage was that I could use smoke rounds to mark enemy positions for armed helicopters instead of smoke grenades to mark my own position. I could also use smoke or high-explosive rounds to mark targets for my machineguns. I quickly scrounged an M79 (there were plenty still around) and carried it for the rest of my tour. Luckily, I did not have to put my ideas to a real acid test, because things had calmed down after the Easter Offensive in 1972.

Well, all that's very nice, I can hear you thinking, but it isn't relevant to infantry now or in the future. Perhaps—but consider the objective individual combat weapon (OICW). This weapon of the future is a 20mm grenade launcher and a 5.56mm rifle in an over and under configuration; if it is not a son of the M203/M16, it is a close relative. It offers a lot of benefits: long range, integral rangefinding, air burst, etc. It also is heavy, unwieldy, and complex. Would the infantryman be better served by a different combination?

Consider the benefits offered by fielding three personal weapons in the squad: an improved M4 with integral sights and rangefinder from the OICW; a 20mm grenade launcher with the rangefinder, sights, and ballistic com-

puter; and an M9 pistol. Each weapon would be much lighter and less complex and easier to handle under almost any conditions, particularly in confined spaces such as urban areas. Each would be easier and cheaper to build and maintain. The savings could be used to expand the ammunition selection for the 20mm. A shot round and a slug round would allow the 20mm to take the place of the combat shotgun (XM1014). Smoke and illumination rounds could be used the same way I used them in Vietnam. Less-than-lethal rounds could be developed as well.

Imagine the flexibility offered by arming each two-man buddy team in the squad with one M4 and a 20mm. New tactics and techniques would arise to take advantage of this effective combination. And for once, we'd really be lightening the infantryman's load, at least in comparison to the M203/M16 combination or the OICW. So, let's explore this alternative (it's the same technology, after all) and test the concepts, head to head, before a final decision is made.

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## THE HUMAN ANIMAL CHANGES "NOT MUCH"

Reading Lieutenant Colonel Albert Garland's review of our book, *Dear Harry . . . Truman's Mailroom, 1945-1953: The Truman Administration Through Correspondence with "Everyday Americans"* (May-August 2000, page 51), I am struck by how different things can look—even for like-minded individuals—when they view a common problem from radically different vantage points.

Our access to the president's personal papers and senior Administration offi-

cial leads us to conclude that the president did indeed view his actions during the drastic reductions of the armed services as a sort of rear guard in the face of a continual and significant decline in military funding. Though Truman narrowly won the 1948 election, he was painfully aware of the grim budgetary realities imposed by an unfriendly Congress. While one can rightfully criticize some of his decisions, it must be remembered that he had very little maneuver room. And through it all, young professional officers such as Al Garland had to deal with their own set of grim realities at the unit level.

Diary entries by Truman and his boyhood chum Charley Ross, then serving as press secretary, offer some insights into Truman's thinking. It is also worthwhile to remember that the time between the end of World War II and the Korean War was quite brief; far shorter in span, for example, than that between the 1st Armored Division's crossing of the Sava River and today.

When the diary entries were made in late 1946, Truman was in the midst of presiding over a demobilization that speedily culled seven million men and women from the armed services. Returning veterans came home to find that jobs and places to live were scarce. At one point, nearly 100,000 veterans were looking for work in Chicago alone. Rationing was still in force, and inflation was skyrocketing. As more than one million workers walked off their jobs, labor unions, free of their wartime promises not to strike, were demanding—and receiving—large “catch up” pay hikes. As if all this was not enough, the new president had to deal with a rising tide of pacifism and had recently fired his commerce secretary for criticizing the administration's emerging Cold War policy toward an increasingly aggressive Soviet Union.

In September 1946, Ross wrote: “The President showed me today a little piece he wrote yesterday, September 26, the anniversary of the Argonne Offensive of 1918. It was a very simple and vivid piece of writing. The point is that we are now going through the same experiences that followed the last war.”

Truman, referring to himself as “a

service man of my acquaintance,” wrote that piece as he reflected on mankind's apparent inability to learn from experience:

*Sept. 26, 1918, a few minutes before 4 A.M. a service man of my acquaintance was standing before a battery of French 75[mm]s at a little town called Neuville to the right of the Argonne Forest. A barrage was to be fired by all the guns of the Allied front from Belgium to the Swiss border.*

*At 4 A.M. that barrage started, at 5 A.M. the infantry in front of my acquaintance's battery went over. At 8 A.M. the artillery, including the 75 battery referred to, moved forward. That forward movement did not stop until Nov. 11, 1918.*

*My acquaintance came home, was banqueted and treated as returned soldiers are usually treated by the home people immediately after the tension of war is relieved. The home people [soon] forgot the war. . . . They began to talk about disarmament. They did disarm themselves, to the point of helplessness. They became fat and rich, special privilege ran the country—ran it to a fall. In 1932 a great leader came forward and rescued the country from chaos and restored the confidence of the people in their government and their institutions.*

*Then another European war came along. We tried as before to keep out of it. The great leader warned the country of the possibility. He was vilified, smeared, misrepresented, but kept his courage. As was inevitable, we were forced into the war. The country awoke—late, but it awoke and created the greatest war production program in history. . . .*

*Unfortunately, the great leader who had taken the nation through the peace time and war time emergencies passed to his great reward just one month before the German surrender. What a pity for this to happen after twelve long years of the hardest kind of work, three and a half of them in the most terrible of all wars.*

*My acquaintance who commanded the 75 battery on September 26, 1918, took over. The same elation filled the home people as filled them after the first*

*World War. They were happy to have the fighting stop and to quit worrying about their sons and daughters in the armed services.*

*Then the reaction set in. Selfishness, greed, jealousy raised their ugly heads. No wartime incentive to keep them down, labor began to grab all it could get by fair means or foul. Farmers began black-marketing food, industry hoarded inventories and the same old pacifists began to talk disarmament. . . . The human animal and his emotion change not much from age to age.*

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### LONG DISTANCE MARCHING

I was very interested in the World War II article on “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell and his walk out of Burma (*Infantry*, May-August 2000).

There is a clear lesson to be learned from this account: The most necessary exercise is long-distance marching. In my view, they ought to scrap the current PT test (pushups, situps, run) for a four-mile march with a standard uniform and weapon.

This would have two immediate results:

First, it would do away with the perception of “gender norming.” True or not, the charge remains because of the different standards for men and women. All soldiers should have to complete the march in the same passing time. If my memory serves me correctly, a forced-march pace is historically four miles in 50 minutes. If a soldier can't do that, he or she does not belong in any service!

The second effect of this reform would be to give loyal commanders more flexibility to implement their own PT programs. Right now, most units do the same thing every day—pushups, situps, and run—because that's what's on the PT test. This new PT test re-

quires no special training or facilities; just ramp up the marching one month out from the test.

Finally, while we're at it, let's do away with the photo for the promotion boards—and the weight control program! If you can pass the PT test, who cares what you look like?

Good walking!

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#### WHERE THE U.S. LEADS. . . .

In his letter in *Infantry* (September-December 2000, page 6), Ward Wright proposed that infantry units be armed with the ArmaLite AR-10 rifle. Since this weapon fires the 7.62x51mm cartridge, riflemen equipped with it would have urban combat capability superior to that of the 5.56mm M16A2, while using NATO-standard ammunition.

This idea does have considerable appeal, because the AR-10 and M16A2 have the same configurations and some degree of parts interchangeability. One aspect that could be a problem, however, is that the AR-10 uses an M14 magazine that has been altered in such a way that it might not be "G.I.-proof."

A more serious drawback to this proposal lies in the lack of a suitable squad automatic weapon (SAW). An automatic rifle version of the AR-10 would have the same flaws as the M14A1—inadequate controllability in full-auto mode, and insufficient continuity of fire from the small-capacity, 20-round magazine.

It does not seem possible to build a belt-fed, 7.62mm SAW of the same weight as the M249, but with the requisite durability, reliability, and controllability. The design of the 27-pound

M240B does not lend itself to any appreciable reductions in weight or length, which rules out an M240 SAW. The best that has been achieved to date is the 19-pound M60E3 (which is still used by the Navy SEALs, along with the M14 rifle).

Were it not for two factors, it would make more sense to reissue the venerable M14 to riflemen and use the M60E3 as a squad automatic weapon. However, there are almost certainly too few M14s still available, and it is not likely that the Army would acquire any M60 variant, having only recently fielded the M240B.

The only practical, off-the-shelf 7.62mm weapons are the Heckler & Koch G3 for riflemen and either the HK21 or the G8 for the SAW role. Being belt-fed, the HK21 light machinegun would have better continuity of fire than the nearly identical G8, but the latter can feed from either a 50-round drum or standard G3 rifle magazines.

The G3 and G8/HK21 offer a variable interim solution to the need for greater effectiveness in urban warfare, but would nevertheless still be hampered by the weight and bulk of both weapons and ammunition. For the long term, I still think the 6mm Optimum concept is so superior that it should be developed regardless of the eventual fate of the OICW (objective individual combat weapon) project. [See "*Is 6mm the Optimum Caliber? A Common Cartridge for Rifle and Machinegun*," *Infantry*, September-December 1999, page 6.]

To those who say we can't "force" another cartridge upon NATO, I must say, "Nonsense." We adopted the 7.62x51mm cartridge, and NATO accepted it. We adopted the 5.56x45mm, and so did NATO. Same for low-velocity and high-velocity 40mm gre-

nade rounds. If the 20mm OICW and 25mm OCSW (objective combat squad weapon) enter service, their bursting munitions will be adopted by NATO. Where the U.S. leads, NATO will follow.

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#### FIRST INFANTRY DIVISION REUNION

The Society of the First Infantry Division (Big Red One) will hold its 84th annual reunion from 14-18 August 2002 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Society of the First Infantry Division is composed of soldiers who served in World War I, World War II, Vietnam, *Desert Storm*, the Balkans, during the Cold War and in peacetime.

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EDWARD J. BURKE  
Executive Director

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#### 45th INFANTRY DIVISION ASSOCIATION REUNION

The 45th Infantry Division Association (Thunderbirds) will hold their annual reunion 29-31 August 2002. Contact me at (210) 681-9134.

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