

# INFANTRY LETTERS



## SLING ARMS: NOT ALWAYS THE BEST BET

*The convoy jolts along the dirt road, black-out lights picking out its uncertain advance in the pitch-black night. Suddenly there is an explosion, and then the flash of several RPG-7s and small arms tracers light the convoy's eastern flank. Some vehicles speed out of the kill zone while others slam to a halt to return fire and let their infantry dismount. The infantrymen grab their weapons and stumble into the confusion of a close fight. This is the first engagement for one young private, and he is concentrating on doing everything right. He holds tightly to his M16 as he jumps to the desert floor. He sees his squad mates moving in the direction of the firing and runs in that direction. He doesn't see the narrow ditch ahead and falls three feet down inside it. As he is trying to get up and regain his orientation, a grenade rolls into the ditch. The blast picks him up and tosses him out of the ditch. He's bruised and confused, but apparently there are no serious injuries. Belatedly he tries to switch on his NODs, but it is not working. And his M16 ... Where's his weapon? He's in his first fire fight and he*

*does not have his weapon!*

Daily, the television news shows U.S. infantrymen patrolling or guarding sites in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their slings dangle uselessly under their weapons as they remain at the ready position surveying the passing vehicles and populace. They may remain at the ready position for four or more hours at a time. That is a long time to stay alert and still expect cramped arm and shoulder muscles to respond in an emergency. Other nations, and U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF), have solved the problem of keeping a weapon ready for instant use without wearing out the infantrymen. Their solution — using an “assault sling” or similar device which keeps the weapon slung across the chest, ready for instant use, but freeing the infantryman's hands and shoulders until needed. The M4 carbine has a hands-free sling that is very convenient. The basic infantry weapon, the M16, has a sling that is basically the same design that U.S. infantrymen used when fighting Mexico in 1846. That sling has long supported the musket, rifle, automatic rifle and assault rifle on the shoulder of the U.S. infantryman. Granted, it is hard to stack arms on the parade ground without the current sling, but does that make it the optimum sling for today's infantrymen?

During trips to Afghanistan and Iraq, I have noticed that infantrymen have come up with

their own solutions (as usual). Some have rigged makeshift, hands-free slings with parachute cord. Others improvise their own across-the-chest slings from their regular sling by looping it through the front sight and then using paracord and heavy duty tape to attach it to the rear stock. Others dangle it straight down on their side using a strap to attach it to their LBV (load-bearing vest) or camelback® strap. However, these efforts disappear with the first order to “get everybody straight and uniform.” Many Soldiers dig into their own wallets and buy commercial assault slings. Instead of having Soldiers buy commercial “assault slings” or improvise their own, it is time to investigate the merits of such slings, determine which one is best and then issue it to combat troops. There are several types available that should be considered. The “Chalker® sling” is used widely by the U.S. SOF community. It includes a body harness to which a weapons strap is attached. The “Snap Shot®” assault sling keeps the weapon slung across the chest and an elastic keeper strap holds it close to the body when the firer takes his hands off of it. The “Mamba®” is similar. A quick search on the Internet shows some 20 more types.

The infantryman needs to have his weapon ready and retrievable if knocked from his hands. A hands-free, across-the-chest sling is the answer for many other armies. Our Army should also consider adopting one. With all the emphasis on expensive high-technology, the Army should not be too busy to look at low-tech concerns that will help the infantryman do his job.

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