



Making a Case for the Military Shotgun

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Our deployed Soldiers have engaged in almost continuous combat operations during their missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these combat operations have been conducted in urban, “house-to-house” environments. Long gone are the days of entrenched Soldiers exchanging volley rifle fire across several hundred meters of open ground. Today’s Soldiers often face an enemy that appears from behind a vehicle or in a window opening just long enough to fire an automatic weapon or rocket-propelled grenade. The majority of our regular forces face this enemy with one of several versions of the issue M16A2 rifle with which they have zeroed and qualified. The M16 family is a proven series of weapons, but in my opinion our Soldiers are not armed as efficiently as they could be for some close-quarters operations in urban environments. This article will introduce the 12-gauge military riot shotgun as a valuable supplemental weapon for close-quarters urban combat.

The military rifle, carbine (the M4 for example), and the M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon are all designed to accomplish offensive and defensive tasks in a variety of situations and terrain. As such, they cannot be perfectly suited to every possible task. The military shotgun, however, is much better suited to urban patrol,

checkpoints, and guard mission confrontations that are quite often defensive in nature. Outside of the Special Operations community, the shotgun is rarely used in the offense. The military shotgun has several characteristics that make it the right choice for guard and urban patrol operations. These characteristics include high first round hit probability, reliable lethality within likely engagement range, simple and safe operation, ballistic versatility and high visibility and deterrent value. NOTE: These observations pertain to the military shotgun as a stand alone weapon.

The new Lightweight Shotgun System (LSS) suspended underneath an M4 carbine should be considered a specialized breaching tool. The LSS does not share many of the positive attributes of the conventional military shotgun and in my opinion has yet to prove its worth.

Combat shotgun marksmanship involves simpler skills than those required for the high speed aerial targets of trap, skeet, and sporting clays. The military shotgun is simply pointed from the shoulder, underarm or hip, held firmly, and fired. The high first round hit probability is due in part to the multiple projectiles available in a single round of shotgun ammunition. The projectiles, known as “shot,” are available in many sizes from quite small to well over a quarter-inch in diameter. The bore of the military shotgun





Specialist Clinton Tarzia

Paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade's 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, prepare to enter a building during a mission in the village of Pir Ahmad, Iraq.

barrel is much less constricted or “choked” than that of civilian sporting shotgun barrels. This openness of choke contributes to the spreading pattern of multiple projectiles. Within combat shotgun distances, arms reach to approximately 30 meters, the average Soldier who keeps his or her eyes open is highly likely to achieve first round hits on a stationary or moving human target. Most military shotguns feature nonadjustable bead sights that are not zeroed to an individual. A given shotgun can therefore be fired with equal effectiveness by multiple Soldiers without concern for the last firer’s “zero.” The latest military shotguns feature an adjustable “ghost-ring” type aperture and post sights. Shotguns equipped with these sights and zeroed initially with the issue ammunition will also shoot to the same point of impact for a variety of firers. A company-size unit could arm their patrols from a pool of shotguns issued as required. Shotguns require only a few rounds of familiarization fire rather than a full qualification. A shotgun familiarization course of fire is easily accomplished on any 25-meter range with full-sized silhouette targets such as the paper M9 pistol target. The short barreled, straight-stocked military pump shotgun when fired with full powered, multiple lead projectile ammunition does offer more significant recoil than the M16A2 or M4 firing ball ammunition. The newest military self-loading shotguns such as the M9200 and the M1014 offer reduced but still noticeable recoil. However, recoil management skills can be easily taught and practiced during the familiarization course of fire.

The military shotgun is safe and simple to operate. With a few

exceptions, the majority of U.S. military shotguns for the last 100 years have been slide or pump operated. For those unfamiliar with the slide action shotgun, its operation is similar to that of a trombone. The pump handle doubles as a forward hand grip that surrounds a tubular magazine underneath the barrel. Pulling the hand grip smartly and fully to the rear brings a live round out of the magazine tube, extracts and ejects any round in the chamber, and cocks an internal hammer. Pushing the hand grip fully forward chambers the new round and locks the action closed, ready to fire. The safety may remain in the “ON” (safe) position throughout this process. From port arms or from a firing position, the shotgun with an empty chamber and ammunition in the magazine tube can be made ready to fire in approximately two seconds. The M16A2/M4 weapons with an empty chamber and loaded magazine inserted may be charged as quickly.

However, one hand must be removed from a firing grip to operate the charging handle. With the pump shotgun, both hands maintain a proper firing grip on the weapon throughout the charging process. The newest issue self-loading shotguns are also quite fast and easy to manipulate but require one hand to operate a bolt handle or release the bolt to chamber a live round. Of course, any of these weapons would likely be carried with a round already chambered in a combat environment.

The military pump shotgun features a simple, sturdy design and manual operation that is not dependent upon the performance of the ammunition to function. In the unlikely event of a misfired round, the pump action required to clear a malfunction is the same action required to operate the weapon normally. The malfunction clearing procedure known as “Immediate Action” is therefore easy to teach and learn. The military pump shotgun is a very reliable weapon since it is manually operated. The mechanism is uncomplicated and easy to disassemble quickly for field cleaning. The large diameter shotgun bore does not hold water by capillary action as does a smaller diameter rifle bore. The newest self-loading military shotguns are also quite reliable but remain dependent upon serviceable ammunition as do any other self-loading weapons. The loaded military shotgun averages a few ounces lighter in weight than the loaded M16A2. The exterior of the pump shotgun is relatively free of projections. The only controls other than the trigger are the safety button and a disconnect button that allows unlocking of the bolt and safe “unchambering” of a live round. Some issue shotguns feature a magazine cutoff button. When activated, the magazine cutoff holds ammunition in the magazine tube while other type ammunition can be manually loaded, fired, and ejected. All controls are within easy reach of the firing hand. Military pump shotguns as well as the M9200 and M1014 self-loaders are devoid of any recoil system in the stock. As such, they can be adapted to special purposes and made more portable with the addition of a folding stock or pistol grip. There are commercial adapters available that allow the fitting of an M4-type telescoping buttstock on the military Mossberg M500/M590 shotguns as well as the military Remington M870. The streamlined exterior and reasonable weight of the shotgun make it a weapon that can be carried during a patrol or guard shift with minimal fatigue and manipulated quickly when needed, even with gloved hands. This

is not to imply that the shotgun is in every way superior to other weapons. For example, the modern M16A2/M4 magazine carries at least 30 rounds of ammunition while the military shotgun carries nine rounds at best. The shotgun magazine tube is also slower to reload because it is not readily detachable. It must itself be reloaded while installed on the shotgun. The most obvious disadvantage of the military shotgun is its limited effective range.

Careful consideration should always be given to any ammunition issued to our Soldiers. The long range and potential penetration of a poorly aimed or accidentally fired round of rifle ammunition can have catastrophic consequences in populated urban combat environments. Excessive range and penetration are not a problem with conventional shotgun ammunition. Shotgun projectiles are usually spherically shaped and made of soft, unjacketed lead. The round lead shot possesses inefficient ballistics and will not travel with the velocity, range or flat trajectory of jacketed military rifle ammunition. Shotgun pellets usually deform and lose energy quickly upon

impact with any hard surface. They are much less likely to ricochet for that reason. Stopping an enemy or a dangerous intruder to a guarded area does not necessarily require killing the individual. It may at times be desirable to capture enemy combatants for interrogation. Nonlethal projectile technology has existed in shotgun ammunition for several years. A full powered round of 12-gauge ammunition loaded with a small number of .30 caliber rubber balls or one large rubber projectile will still incapacitate an attacker. The nonlethal ammunition represents an even lower threat to nearby citizens while still maintaining the energy to take the fight out of an attacker at reasonable combat shotgun distances. The most modern military shotguns accept the complete range of this and other special purpose ammunition without a stutter. The magazine cutoff can be used to hold full powered rounds in reserve while special purpose ammunition may be loaded singly, fired and ejected. Modern shotgun ammunition with a high metal base and plastic hull is much more reliable and waterproof than earlier ammunition. The all brass shotgun shell of World Wars I and II would grow verdigris

once exposed to moisture. The verdigris would collect dust and cause chambering and extraction failures. The commercial-type paper shotgun shells of the same era would swell with moisture making chambering difficult and allow contamination of the powder charge.

Although the military shotgun enables the trained Soldier to effectively defend against a close-quarters attack, not being attacked in the first place is desirable. The presence of the shotgun on guard or patrol can be a significant deterrent to a violent threat. American police have long since learned that even an enraged attacker will think twice before confronting someone armed with a riot shotgun. The deterrent value to an attacker comes from facing the .72 caliber/12-gauge bore with the realization of the devastating wounding potential of a single round of full powered ammunition. It is likely that terrorist threats against our Soldiers on patrols and at checkpoints are preceded by clandestine observation of the readiness posture of our forces. The adoption of shotguns at checkpoints and on patrols would be immediately noticed and interpreted as readiness to engage a threat.

This article did not intend to address all the possible administrative, tactical and logistical issues regarding the selection of weapons for our Soldiers in the arena. The objective was to introduce the many attributes of the military shotgun and to perhaps stimulate further professional discussion of the subject.



Specialist Ben Brody

Soldiers from the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, prepare to enter a building in Baghdad where insurgents are believed to be hiding.

Command Sergeant Major Robert "Bob" Brizee, U.S. Army, Retired, spent more than 27 years on active Army service in numerous weapons maintenance, logistics and leadership positions. His assignments include several years as a gunsmith with the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit on Fort Benning and the Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg. Brizee's other duty stations include four years in Panama as a small arms repairman and 11 years in Germany as a first sergeant and command sergeant major. He is a graduate of the Sergeants Major Academy and has attended numerous military and civilian armorer's courses including Heckler & Koch, Smith & Wesson, Glock, Ruger, Feinwerkbau and Hammerli.
