

SHOTGUNS IN COMBAT: LETHALITY IN THE CLOSE FIGHT

The shotgun has been a part of the American experience since the earliest colonists brought their muzzleloading smoothbore muskets and blunderbusses ashore in the New World. These crude weapons enabled colonists to feed and defend their families and to later wrest our independence from Great Britain. Even when the development of rifled weapons extended the range and accuracy of individual weapons, the weapon capable of firing several shot pellets at a time remained the most common frontier weapon. The shotgun offered a far greater chance of a successful hunt, and in the close combat against other colonists or hostile Indians — themselves armed with either edged weapons or trade muskets — a shot charge or a combination of shot and ball (commonly referred to as buck and ball) could be relied upon to quickly disable or kill an adversary. The primary musket caliber in America from the Revolutionary War until the middle of the 19th century was .69 caliber, and for this reason Civil War soldiers armed with shotguns were told to arm themselves with a 16-gauge weapon, because the standard .69 caliber ball best matched that bore size. The double-barreled percussion shotgun shown in Figure 1 dates to ca. 1845 and was of the type typically carried by Confederate cavalry.

Cavalry favored the shotgun for horseback engagements because of the difficulty of accurate aiming and the greater hit probability offered by either a charge of buckshot or the buck and ball load of one ball and three to six buckshot. General George Crook and a number of his officers and men carried shotguns during their campaigns against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Apaches up until 1886. Likewise, officers fighting in the



Photo courtesy of David S. Stieghan, USAIC Historian

Figure 1 — Double-barreled percussion shotgun ca. 1845



Photo courtesy of Frank Hanner, Director, National Infantry Museum

Figure 2 — Winchester Model 1897 12-gauge shotgun

Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 also favored the shotgun because of the close-range advantage it offered. Long the weapon of choice for home defense, the shotgun has also earned a reputation as a fearsome killer on the battlefield. The most familiar of these is the trench gun of World War I, originally a Winchester Model 1897 12-gauge pump action shotgun (Figure 2) used in the close-range business of clearing enemy trenches. This weapon and similar models made by Stevens served throughout World War II, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam, the Stevens Model 77E being commonly seen in Southeast Asia. U.S. forces have preferred the pump action shotgun for its reliability and ease of reloading. The Remington Model 870 and the Winchester Model 1200 (the latter with

a bayonet attachment resembling that of the Model 97 trench gun) were standard military shotguns from 1966 through Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and continued to see service up into Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Model 1200 replaced the Model 870, and has itself been replaced by the Mossberg M500. All of these have been issued in 12 gauge, due to the size of the shot charge, availability of ammunition, and their robust reliability.

Infantry Magazine has featured articles in the September-October 2005 and September-October 2006 issues, and copies of these issues can be provided upon request. These earlier articles feature descriptions of the weapons, specifications, qualification standards, and the types of ammunition currently available.