

Thoughts on the Weapons We Carried

By James R. Teller



I carried an M-16 rifle my whole tour in South Vietnam. On the right forearm was a carving of a wheel with a broken spoke and the words “Broken Spoke” were carved around it. It had belonged to Larry Farris who was wounded by a mine. Years later Craig Slocum would visit Larry at his ranch the “Broken Spoke” near Colgate, Oklahoma.

It is difficult for me to remember just exactly what I thought of the M-16 at the time I was in Vietnam. I know I made a special effort to keep it clean. It was a rather small .223 caliber or 5.56 mm and the stock and forearms were made of black plastic. I suppose I defended its use and probably used the military explanations to defend it. Mainly that it was light weight and so was its ammo. Its safety was also a selector switch and it could be fired on semi or full automatic.

Years later after having done more hunting range shooting and collecting military surplus rifles I developed a definite opinion that the .223 caliber 5.56 mm was not a large enough or powerful enough cartridge for use in combat. It is unsuitable for hunting anything as large as a white tailed deer and many would say that it is not suitable for hunting coyote sized animals. This makes it a medium range varmint cartridge for use on prairie dogs, fox and jack rabbits out to 200 or maybe 250 yards on a still day. Please remember that we were hunting men who carried rifles and other weapons and whether we lived or

died depended to some extent on the knock down power and lethality of the weapons we carried.

However, I wasn't aware of these facts then. I accepted what I was told about the M-16 and I did what was necessary to make it work. It was light and it pointed well. I used a G.P. strap (general purpose strap) and hung the rifle around my neck. One other weapon that I carried was a bayonet. I used this as a pry bar and abused it but what I really used it for was to fix it on the end of my M-16 and stick it in the ground during the wet season. In this way my rifle stayed handy and clean.

There isn't a gun writer who would say that the M-16 is anything except a fine military battle rifle. At the same time there isn't a gun writer who would recommend its cartridge for hunting a white tailed deer because it just doesn't have the knock down power or lethality that a good deer rifle cartridge needs. I know that the experts say that it is better to wound the enemy than to kill one because it ties up more manpower to take care of him. I wonder though who it is better for. If I'm in a firefight I want to disable my

opponent quickly and forever and I want to be able to do it with a shot that may not be well placed. I don't want to get killed by a wounded man any more than I want to be killed by an unwounded one. I want to remove the threat to my life as quickly as possible and you just can't accomplish this with a .223 caliber 5.56 mm cartridge and I don't care how much ammo you can carry. With a well placed bullet you can kill a deer with a .22 caliber rim fire cartridge and you can carry even more ammo but that doesn't mean it's suitable for deer hunting and it certainly doesn't make it adequate for combat.

In short I wouldn't rate the M-16 very highly as a battle rifle. It was originally designed to use the .308 caliber 7.62 cartridge and if they had left it that way it would have been a fine rifle capable of adequate knock down power and with a great deal of lethality. If they wanted to go with something smaller then I suggest that a .243 caliber or 6mm cartridge would have filled the bill better than the .223 and would still have provided light weight ammo. You still would have

to keep it clean but it would have been more powerful.

Today the M-16 is still being used. Soldiers still complain about its lack of power and ammunition manufactures are still experimenting with replacing it with a 6 mm cartridge. I resent the fact that I was sent into harm's way with less rifle than I would take deer hunting and I am ashamed that today's soldier isn't fairing much better. The idea is to disable or kill the enemy; not wound him and while the M-16 may be able to wound someone to death it is not a killing machine. I doubt very seriously that if given a choice of cartridge selection that a gun writer would opt for a .223 caliber rifle in a life and death situation in the bush and I'll bet the idea of wounding his opponent isn't what he would be trying to accomplish.

Reliability is also a factor. The M-16 will work if it is kept clean. Get it dirty and you may have a weapon that will not work. I took the cellophane wrapper off a C-Ration spoon and put it over the muzzle of my freshly cleaned M-16 and tied it in place with a pipe cleaner. I also had

half a green towel tied just in front of the carrying handle so that I could cover the action when choppers were coming in, picking us up or putting us down. It could easily be removed for extended firing and didn't get in the way of the first magazine. What you want in a combat rifle is one whose tolerances aren't very tight and one with a lot of room inside it so dirt and sand have a place to go rather than jamming things up. I like things that work; keep working and work in poor conditions. The M-16 is not my kind of rifle because it is not reliable enough and it is not powerful enough. I want to know that my rifle is going to work and I want to know that it is powerful enough to disable a soldier with a poorly placed bullet.

The basic load for an M-16 in our outfit was 20 magazines with 19 rounds in each one. The magazines held 20 rounds but we only loaded 19 in an effort to keep them from malfunctioning. I also carried an extra bandoleer of ammo in the bottom of my pack and I carried a loose round in my pocket for myself. Charlie didn't take grunts

prisoner and I had no intention of being taken alive.

To illustrate this I remember one firebase we were on and the bunker I was assigned to basically could not be defended. We found a 40 pound crater charge buried in the floor rigged with a claymore blasting cap and wire that was tagged to identify it. We dug it up and checked the wiring. I asked the squad if they wanted to leave it in place or take it out and they all voted to leave it in place. The idea being that if we got overrun the last guy would blow the bunker and everything in it. Every grunt I ever saw that could have been taken prisoner was killed.



I never carried an M-79 grenade launcher but I have a great deal of sympathy for those who did. It basically was a single shot break open weapon that fired a bullet shaped high explosive

round or a canister round that was a version of buck shot. The M-79 man also carried a .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol. From my experience the M-79 grenade was also underpowered. I've seen VC running and an M-79 round land among them, knock two or three down, who then got up and ran faster than they had before. I was also knocked down twice by M-79 rounds that were shot in an effort to give myself and Lt. Miller cover fire. We were both knocked to the ground both times and neither of us was hurt. We didn't check to see if we could run any faster but we sure had some interesting words for the M-79 man.

The M-79 because of its trajectory could be lobbed over obstacles at the enemy and used at night it didn't have much in the way of muzzle flash. I called it a psychological weapon meaning that it had more effect on the mind of the enemy than it was lethal. Oh, I've seen one or two VC killed with one but not with any regularity. We called it the blooper or thumper because of the sound it made when being fired. In the movies

M-79 rounds explode and blow everything to hell. Well, if real life it was a little different.



We also carried the L.A.W. (light antitank weapon) or law. It was a single shot; throw away 40 mm rocket launcher. Not everyone carried one and not everyone could be persuaded to fire one. They were in my opinion a piece of junk. The longer they were carried in the bush the better the chances were that it wasn't going to fire. A hang fire meant that it could still take off so you had to worry about both ends. The one the rocket came out and the one the back blast came from. We carried them for use against bunkers and other fortified positions but

basically by the time you broke one out, got into position to fire it, had a hang fire, re-cocked it and fired again the war was over. I must note here that if you can see a bunker well enough to target it the guys in the bunker can also see you. This means you'd better have your poop in a group. When we came in we would fire up all the laws we had so we could draw new ones. I refused to fire them because I saw one more of our guys hurt by laws than laws had hurt NVA or VC.

Compared to the R.P.G. (rocket propelled grenade) that was used by the enemy the M-79 and the L.A.W. weren't even very good ideas in the first place because the R.P.G. was a very good weapon that had been around for awhile before Vietnam and in the second, third and fourth place it is not a throw away, it is reliable and it is lethal. Whoever thought up the ideas of the L.A.W. and the M-79 was out of touch with reality, what was needed and what was available. Why we didn't copy the R.P.G. before Vietnam or certainly after it I have no idea. But, if you listen to the news and newly returned veterans

they both speak as to the effectiveness of the R.P.G. because it is still in use today.



The M-60 machine gun was a belt fed, gas operated, full automatic, gun which fired a .308 caliber or 7.62 mm cartridge.

It was a great weapon and it was the heart of every infantry squad that was fortunate enough to have one. It was reliable, had knock down power and was lethal. It was carried by a machine gunner who had an assistant gunner to help carry ammo and assist the gunner with anything else he might need. Machine gunners were special people who generally volunteered to carry the gun although some were assigned to the position. Anyone who carried the gun for any length of time is a special person and I will

forever be grateful to the men who carried the M-60's for 2nd platoon. Oh and how do gun writers rate the .308 as a deer cartridge? Well, pretty damned highly. The M-60 was without doubt the best machine gun in the war. It worked. It worked in hard conditions and it kept working when others fell by the side. The M-60 was a killing machine and if I had to do it again I'd take one and one of our machine gun crews and I'd be half way home.

The .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol was carried by officers, platoon sergeants, M-79 men and machine gunners. It was meant for close in fighting or as a backup weapon. Now, here was a weapon that possessed knock down power and lethality. A shoulder hit or a hit to the leg often completely disabled the enemy. It wasn't the most accurate of pistols and it had pretty strong recoil but it was reliable and did its job very well.

Alpha Company humped an 81 mm mortar in the field. The weapons platoon humped the mortar and we humped the extra rounds for it. It worked fine in the lowlands but in the mountains where there was triple canopy it couldn't be used,

so it was left on a firebase where it was set up. I don't have any strong opinions about this weapon one way or the other. I have no idea how we stacked up against outfits that didn't carry one but it did give us more options and having options is a good thing. What I'm trying to say is that the 81 MM mortar was a good enough weapon but I'm not sure it made us that much better having one along as opposed to having it set up on a nearby firebase.

Another weapon we carried was the hand grenade. I think two was the basic load but you could carry more if you wished. These fragmentation devices were meant to be thrown at the enemy and dropped down tunnels where the concussion was somewhat effective. Over all they were a lot better than the grenades that Charlie had and I liked them a lot.

At night we'd set up claymore command detonated mines. These were basically a shaped charge of C-4 explosive faced with ball bearings. They had an electric blasting cap and were set off by use of a small hand generator. We used them defensively and offensively at night on ambushes.

These weapons did their job, were reliable and were worth their weight when making up a pack.

In my humble opinion the way it stacked up was three weapons that were weak, four weapons that were solid and one weapon with no opinion. I'm sure there were guys who loved their M-79's, M-16's and maybe even the L.A.W. just don't count me among them. Having spent a year in the infantry in Vietnam and forty years of reflection I think I'm entitled to my opinion. I reload rifle and pistol ammo; spend a fair amount of time at the range and do a little competitive shooting. Does that make me an "expert"? Hell no and I have no intention of claiming to be one. Why the M-16 hasn't led to a better rifle is mainly because the government believes in wounding its enemies rather than killing them and until that changes there is no reason to upgrade. Oh, I know the experts will say it's more complicated than that but make a change and they'll all get behind the new rifle and the rationale behind it. Then they'll turn right around and repeat all of the short comings of the old rifle as reasons for the change.

The idea is to provide our troops with reliable weapons that do a job on the enemy and don't cost a fortune to build and maintain. I don't think if you look back through history objectively that the United States has always done such a good job of this, at best they seem to get it right about half the time and usually end up with expensive weapons systems rather than the simple and inexpensive types.

During the space race the United States spent a lot of money developing a pen with would work in a zero gravity environment. The Russians just used a pencil. In Vietnam it was said that we would "bomb them back to the "Stone Age", which I suppose sounded pretty good until you realize that most of Vietnam wasn't that far out of the Stone Age.

What we should have learned in Vietnam is to not involve ourselves in conflicts that we are not prepared to win. The Army seeing that nothing would change in this regard opted for an all volunteer Army hoping that professional soldiers would draw less anti war protests in a "bad" war

than draftees. So far it's worked out deployment after deployment.

I want to make this clear. Draftees did an outstanding job in Vietnam, especially when one considers the anti war protesters, lack of an exit strategy or a clear and fundamental idea as to why we were there. They served when others would not. They served in all sorts of capacities but shined as they shouldered their seventy pound packs, readied their M-16's, M-79,s and M-60's and headed to the bush for weeks and sometimes over a month at a time. With experience they became team leaders, squad leaders and even platoon sergeants. The fact that the generals and politicians couldn't get their shit together and decide to either win the war or get out of it was not the fault of the GI and to say that the war couldn't have been won is complete bullshit. Hell, Nixon almost won the damned thing by accident near the end, trying to bomb North Vietnam back to the peace table; but he was too dumb to know it. He then proceeded to accept basically the same proposals that were on

the table when he came into office two years earlier.

If I sound a bit bitter I am. You don't drop out of college, give up a deferment, volunteer for the draft and go to war in an infantry unit without developing some strong feelings. What was needed was a sound assessment of the military situation and a commitment to victory or a decision to disengage and now I'll get off my soap box.

I'll stand by my assessment of the M-16. Anyone who goes into the bush to hunt armed men with less rifle than he would take white tailed deer hunting is a damned fool.

The M-79 was a single shot weapon that was underpowered. The only kills I saw it make were direct hits as opposed to landing near someone and producing a kill in that way.

The L.A.W. was not a good weapon for the conditions of the war that we fought in and I did not consider it worth its weight on my pack.

War is serious business and the people who bring it about should spend the lives of their soldiers prudently. Equip those troops with weapons suited for the task at hand and restrain from involvement in situations that are not necessary to the defense of the United States or its allies. Instead of selling its citizens on the correctness of a conflict it would be quite an improvement if America would convince its citizens that their actions were the intelligent thing to do in regard to a conflict for in this way the voice of reason would surely be heard and reasoning was the one thing that was missing from our side of the war



