



## Marksmen issued better rifles in Afghanistan

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The Army is doubling the number of 7.62mm weapons in the infantry squad, increasing soldiers' long-range killing power in the wide-open expanses of Afghanistan.

Since the beginning of the war, a typical nine-man infantry squad has included a single squad-designated marksman, armed with a surplus M14 rifle for engaging the enemy beyond the 300-meter range of M4s and M16s.

Today, squads are deploying to Afghanistan with two SDMs, each armed with the M14 Enhanced Battle Rifle, a modernized version of the Vietnam War-era weapon that's accurate out to 800 meters.

"It's a very precise weapon system," said Spc. Andrew McMeley, a squad designated marksman serving in Afghanistan with B Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment. "All the improvements on it are fantastic."

The EBR features a standard M14 barrel, plus a receiver and trigger assembly that's fitted with a Sage International adjustable aluminum stock, a Leopold 3.5x10 power scope and Harris bipod legs.

“Units have been requesting this capability for a while,” said Maj. Elliott Caggins, assistant product manager for Sniper Weapons. “It provides more shootability than the old weapon.”

The Army began building 5,000 of these modernized M14s early last year in response to the growing need of infantry squads operating in Afghanistan to engage enemy fighters at longer ranges.

“Comments from returning noncommissioned officers and officers reveal that about 50 percent of engagements occur past 300 meters,” Maj. Thomas Ehrhart wrote in his Nov. 30 position paper “Increasing Small Arms Lethality in Afghanistan: Taking Back the Infantry Half-Kilometer” at the School of Advanced Military Studies at the Army’s Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

Many engagements extend out to 800 meters, weapons officials maintain. The shift to these longer-range engagements is forcing the Army to rethink 5.56mm focus in the squad.

“We are looking at 7.62mm in the squad,” said Col. Doug Tamilio, who runs Project Manager Soldier Weapons. “We have always had a policy in a nine-man squad that we would keep 5.56mm flat across that.

“The fight in Afghanistan is showing us that 7.62mm, in certain aspects, is needed and required.”

The idea of supplanting the 5.56mm round in the squad will surely add fuel to soldier criticisms that the 5.56mm is ineffective for today’s battlefield.

Special Operations Command has already adopted this concept with its fielding of a 5.56mm and a 7.62mm version of the Special Operations Combat Assault Rifle.

Despite concerns over the increased weight of the 7.62mm ammunition, Tamilio said, “I think we are starting to think of a mix” of 5.56mm and 7.62mm within the squad.

As a short-term solution, “we have given them EBR14s — two per squad” until the Army develops a standardized squad-designated marksman rifle.

The squad-marksman role was hatched during development of Stryker brigades. Placing specialized shooters in these highly mobile, rapid-deployment units bolsters an individual squad’s precision-shooting capability when snipers are otherwise unavailable.

Infantry units deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq, whose missions in many ways have been expeditionary, have embraced the idea of a precision shooter at the squad level since late 2002.

The EBR effort also illustrates how the M14 has continued to evolve after its brief eight years of service when the M16 replaced it in 1965 as the Army's standard infantry rifle. Patterned after the popular M1 Garand of World War II and the Korean War, the M14's robust design features a gas operating rod system, wood stock and 20-round magazine. A more accurate version of the M14 — dubbed the M21 — served as the Army's official sniper rifle from 1975 until 1988. The M21 featured a more accurate, match-grade, barrel.

The M14 didn't see widespread conventional use until current combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The M14s, equipped with various commercial optics, have proven highly effective at extending the killing range of the infantry squad. Despite the M14's popularity, units have been calling for a more modernized design.

The EBR concept, which was first used in 2004 by Navy SEALs, features a rigid, aircraft-grade aluminum chassis that secures the barrel more effectively, helping to increase accuracy, Caggins said. It's equipped with a Picatinny rail system for mounting lasers, lights and other accessories. There's also a removable Kydex hand guard that protects the shooter's nonfiring hand from heat buildup during rapid firing.

The folding stock can be adjusted to different lengths and also has a multiple-position cheek rest for different shooter preferences. This is one of McMeley's favorite features on the EBR.

"The adjustable cheek piece makes it to where, in a quick reflex situation, when you have a target of opportunity, you can just slap your face up against it and get the same spot on your cheek every single time," he said. "All this adjustability makes the EBR more comfortable to shoot."

The EBR also has a M16/M4-style pistol grip.

Weapons officials include a three-day new equipment training program when the EBRs are delivered to a unit. The program includes two days of classroom instruction and one day on the range.

Despite its improved design, the EBR isn't perfect, weapons officials said. It's just under 15 pounds unloaded, compared with the standard M14's unloaded weight of 9 pounds. An unloaded M4 weighs just 6.5 pounds.

"We are looking at making it a little lighter," Caggins said.

The EBR's more complex design also makes it difficult to maintain, said Sgt. Paul Bullock, another SDM in B Company.

“The only thing I dislike is that you have to go through so much just to take it apart,” Bullock said.

With the older M14, “You just pull a few things and you’ve got it apart. With this one, you’ve got to take apart seven or eight different screws ... I’ve spent a ridiculous amount of time pulling it apart and putting it back together. But, the weapon system doesn’t get as dirty as the original so you don’t have to worry about it as much.”

It’s not cheap to produce, either — EBRs cost about \$3,000 each.

But weapons officials view the EBR as just another step toward the Army selecting a standardized SDM rifle.

Fort Benning, Ga., officials are working on a requirement for the SDM rifle that should be ready sometime next year, Tamilio said.

Beginning this spring, Benning officials will assess different optics and different weapon systems and try to figure out what is the optimal solution for a squad-designated marksman: what works and what doesn’t work, Tamilio said.

For now, units deploying to the combat zone can request M14 EBRs by submitting an operational needs statement to Army’s office of the G-3, Caggins said.

Currently, the Army has issued about 3,750 of the 5,000 EBRs being built, he said. Units return the EBRs to the Army when they come back from deployment. The weapons are then reissued to other units.

While there is no set deadline for units to submit an ONS before a deployment, Caggins said, “earlier is always better.”

“We haven’t had a problem getting them the weapons before they deploy,” he said. “It’s a relatively quick process.”

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Senior Photographer Rob Curtis contributed to this report from Afghanistan.