

ARS ACROSS THE BOARD

Why? Because they're the Swiss Army knife of rifles.

By Patrick Sweeney

WHICH IS THE BEST AR?" IS A QUESTION sure to start arguments, perhaps even fistfights, as just deciding on what details count as something for or against a rifle is a subject that would tax the patience of a Benedictine monk. "Best" depends on what you want—defense, competition, hunting, etc. With that in mind, here are a few of the AR makers whose products I've tested, owned or seriously abused in classes and from which I've had more than satisfactory results.

ALEXANDER ARMS—Alexander Arms is Bill Alexander, designer, engineer and nice guy. Before anyone had fielded an AR in the Soviet 5.45 chambering, he had it. The biggest step he has accomplished for the AR is the invention of the 6.5 Grendel. While fans of the 6.8 will vainly argue otherwise, the 6.5 Grendel pushes a bullet with a better BC to higher velocities, and in its most efficient loads, the bullet will still be supersonic at 1,200 yards. He also developed the .50 Beowulf, which hurls a half-inch-diameter bullet to better than .45-70 velocities. You can have ammo, uppers or complete rifles in the 6.5 or the .50. (www.alexanderarms.com)

ARMALITE—The one who started it all, ArmaLite has something new up its sleeve: the SPR Mod 1. A monolithic upper in 5.56 with a removable lower rail, it expands the company's already extensive line of Stoner-system rifles. You can have your traditional ArmaLite in 5.56,

6.8 SPC or 7.62 Nato in a host of sizes, handguard options and stock designs. If you want something along the lines of the rifles our snipers are looking for, the AR-10 SuperSASS might be just the boomer you're after. (www.armalite.com)

BUSHMASTER—Offering both direct-gas impingement and piston systems (in fact, two of them: a dedicated and a conversion system), Bushmaster has been making rifles for more than three decades. Not only does the company offer rifles (and handguns) in 5.56, 6.8 and 7.62 NATO, you can have a Bushmaster in 7.62x39 as well. The big boomer of the company lineup is the .450 Bushmaster, which pushes a 250-grain Hornady FTX at 2,200 fps. (www.bushmaster.com)

CMMG—CMMG has come on strong in the last few years. From parts and uppers in the beginning, the company now offers complete rifles in all the

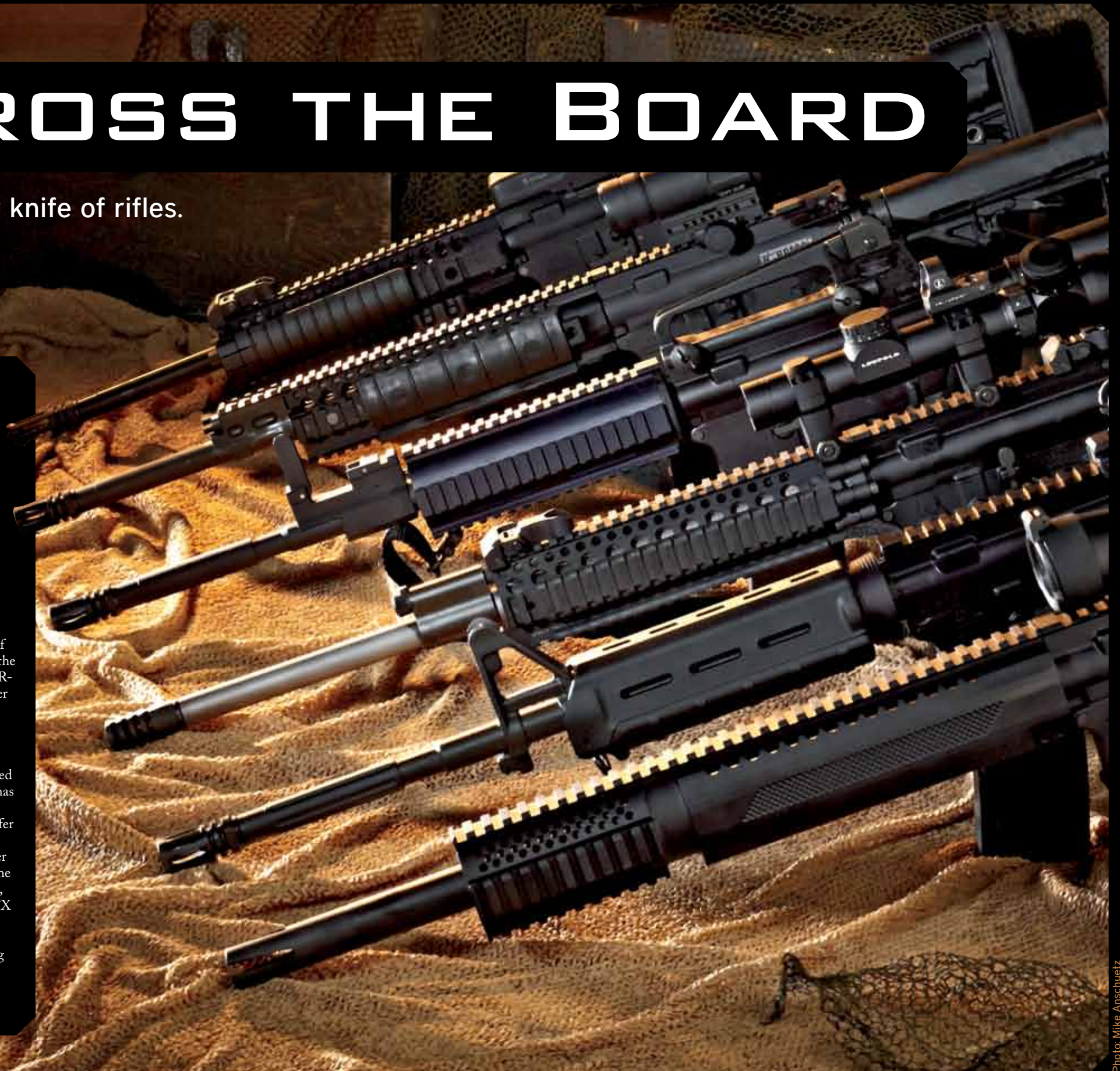


Photo: Mike Anschuetz

usual calibers, with 5.56 and 6.8 in both direct-gas-impingement and piston versions, as well as 9mm carbines and handguns (as in AR handguns). On the horizon is a .308. There's also a .22LR conversion kit that's as tough as an anvil. (www.cmmginc.com)

COLT – It is fashionable to “dis” Colt in some circles for not being innovative enough or offering the wide variety of options that other companies muster. But since the company's main customer is our military, Colt sticks primarily with what the government wants. What Colt offers is the gold standard in quality. Each and every Colt rifle is made to the same standard, mil-spec. While the ones we get aren't select-fire, they all pass the same tests and inspections that a military M4 does. The gun shop commando who tells you the civvie guns are the QC rejects and don't get the same quality parts as the military ones is talking out of his shorts. (www.colt.com)

DANIEL DEFENSE – Starting with anvil-tough rail systems, Daniel Defense expanded to uppers, sights and other accessories and finally into barrels and complete rifles. Its barrels are cold hammer-forged, in lengths from 10.3 inches (all NFA rules apply) to 18. The rifles, in 5.56 and 6.8, are built on DD uppers and lowers, DD barrels and DD rails, and they

many of those that give you 72 choices of stocks, handguards and sights. If you want what works and aren't interested in multiple bells and whistles, Doublestar is right up your alley. (www.star15.com)

DPMS – DPMS offers perhaps more rifle and carbine options than any other AR maker extant. If DPMS doesn't make it, it used to, and if it never has, you can probably convince it to make an R&D project out of your heart's desires.

In between bone-stock M4 carbines and high-end suppressed .308 sniper variants, I've seen stainless steel lowers (and even a brass one) and every caliber that will fit or can be wrestled into an AR platform, 5.56 or .308 size, and even some that made me scratch my head and wonder “How'd they do that?” If you want what your shooting buddies don't have, DPMS is the place to start your search. (www.dpmsinc.com)

DSA – Also known as the U.S. producer of first-class FALs, DSA makes ARs, starting with forgings it machines in its own CNC machining centers. While the company offers standard production/catalog items, it's more than willing to

custom-build a rifle to your specs, provided the parts actually exist and aren't just something you dreamed up. Its barrels are now nitride-treated, making them super hard, smoother and more uniform than chrome-plated and corrosion resistant to a degree that stainless cannot match. Despite the brilliant nitride treatment, DSA barrels do not cost any more than other barrels, and the extra wear and service life you get comes essentially for free. (www.dsarms.com)

LARUE – Known best as a maker of optics mounts, LaRue has been expanding into uppers with its DMR and Stealth Sniper uppers. Well, once it began mak-



ROCK RIVER LAR-B .308

Photo: John Hafner

ing lowers as well (the ordering list is hard to get on, but worth the wait), it was only a matter of time. Still in the final stages of production, the OBR (.308) and OBR Lite (5.56) will no doubt be as popular, rugged and ubiquitous as LaRue optics mounts on tactical ranges. (www.larue.tactical.homestead.com)

LES BAER – Les Baer makes all the major components that go into his rifles. Unsatisfied with delivery times and product quality, he invested in his own barrel-making machinery and now makes his own. Those barrels go into uppers and lowers he makes and are driven by bolts and carriers that he also machines in-house. And if all that weren't enough, Les personally test fires each and every rifle that his shop produces. If it doesn't perform up to spec, it gets rebuilt or scrapped. (www.lesbaer.com)

LEWIS MACHINE & TOOL – LMT pioneered the monolithic upper. Starting with an oversize forging, LMT machines an upper that is one piece from charging-handle seat to railed handguards, right up behind the front sight assembly. The design also allowed the company to make the upper take its proprietary quick-change barrels, where you can swap a toasted barrel for a fresh one in mere minutes or change calibers as quickly. If the RP is not to your liking, LMT also makes



DPMS PANTHER PDW

are built to mil-spec details, right down to such items as a mil-spec carrier, staked keys and castle nuts, and ASE 4150 barrel steel. (www.danieldefense.com)

DOUBLESTAR – Not as well known as some companies, Doublestar doesn't go for the flashy product items, just rifles that fit the category of “value for money.” A Doublestar may not have the options, but it will come at a lower price than

LWRC M6A2 TRICON

A modern 5.56mm piston-driven warfighter.

LWRC INTERNATIONAL's TRICON rifle is the ultimate 5.56-chambered combat carbine. Teaming with Jeff Gonzales, former U.S. Navy SEAL and president of Trident Concepts (www.tridentconcepts.com), LWRC presents a piston-driven M6 featuring mission-critical accessories and wearing flat dark earth.

"Using LWRC M6 rifles in our training, we were achieving high round counts," says Gonzales. "After 12,000 rounds without cleaning, one of these rifles had a small spring break. We replaced it and decided to keep the round count going, again without cleaning it. By 19,000 rounds we were very impressed...at that point we actually performed our first precision shooting evaluations. With the same rifle, we were shooting sub-MOA groups."

In developing the M6A2 TRICON, the staff at Trident Concepts wanted to see the same quality, but also something that the end user could just grab and go.

"There is such a variety of aftermarket accessories, many shooters don't understand what they need," Gonzales says. "With the TRICON, all you have to do is choose an optic."

Part of the project involved reducing weight. The solution: spiral fluting. Piston guns are usually weighted toward the muzzle, but spiral fluting negates this.

Glancing at the M6 TRICON, you can't miss its appearance. The receivers are finished with a protective FDE Cerekote, and the rifle is outfitted with FDE-colored furniture.

"One of the things I was adamant about is that I didn't want a black rifle," says Gonzales. "I wanted something that was a little less obvious in the terrain I was in and didn't burn my hand. And the Cerekote is a tough finish. We beat the crap out of our rifles."

The TRICON utilizes a 14.7-inch cold-hammer-forged barrel with a pinned flash-hider (to meet barrel-length requirements) that visually stands apart with unique spiral fluting that cuts 20 percent from the weight of a standard barrel without compromising rigidity.

Keeping with the Naval Special Warfare (NSW) influence, the Tricon encourages proper cheekweld utilizing the battle-



Top-end additions: Bravo's Gunfighter charging handle and Troy Industries' backup folding rear sight.

proven Crane L7A2B SOPMOD stock from LMT. Created by Dave Armstrong of NSW-Crane, this retractable buttstock is sought after for its angled cheekweld and two storage compartments, sometimes used by troops to keep spare batteries.

Folded and waiting for deployment is a pair of Troy Industries' backup iron sights. The A4-style rear sight is low profile, and its design eliminates elevation adjustments, which are often superfluous in close combat. The dual peep permits a wide sight picture and can be adjusted to shift target impact .33 MOA on any M4-style carbine. Troy's folding backup iron sights are simply the best solution for any rifle in this category.

Like most things, Stoner's design has evolved based on field experience and user feedback. Bravo Company USA offers the Gunfighter charging handle developed in conjunction with Vltor to address two significant issues. The tiny roll pin on the original M16 charging handle is considered a weak point, and the body is redesigned so that when the TRICON's charging handle is pulled, it moves straight and to the rear without movement to the outboard side. This translates into smoother and more reliable opera-

tion while providing more surface area to manipulate the handle.

Gonzales trains students to put maximum rounds on target in a compressed time frame, and there are a few features on the TRICON designed to facilitate this. Magpul's Mission Adaptable grip allows a choked-up hold so operators can manhandle the rifle while positioning it into the shoulder. The MIAD also has interchangeable front and rear straps while possessing storage options in its core.

A stubby TangoDown vertical grip comes fixed to the free-floated quad rail for muzzle control. Whether it's a single-round drill or a multiple-magazine exercise, the grip helps to keep the rifle on target and allows the shooter to suck the rifle into his shoulder.

This is not the average production AR. The TRICON crest engraved on the right side of the magazine well complements the Latin phrase, which translates, "It is worth the effort."

Each rifle is delivered with a certificate that states that each rifle is part of a limited run of 500. It's delivered with a case and sling that were also inspired by Gonzales' shooting philosophy. MSRP is \$3,100. For more information, visit www.lwrci.com. —Eric R. Poole



The M6A2 TRICON's distinctive feature: A spiral fluted cold-hammer-forged barrel with a pinned flash-hider.

mil-spec-style rifles. (www.lewis-machine.net)

LWRCI—LWRCI is all pistons, all the time. No DI gas for this company. From the relatively plain-Jane M6 to the big REPR (Rapid Engagement Precision rifle) to the stubby, hard-hitting PSD and M6A2 pistol, LWRCI rifles all work with the company's patented short-stroke piston. LWRCI also offers mil-spec-grade anodizing of the aluminum parts in various camo patterns. Like Marpat? Woodland? LWRCI does those and more. And for those who want one, there are uppers in 5.45x39. Yes, with a piston. No more worries about corrosive commie ammo creating a mess. Shoot dirt-cheap ammo and have an easy-to-clean piston system as well. (www.lwrci.com)

NOVESKE—John Noveske started making barrels noted for their precision, accuracy and durability. However, the best barrel indifferently installed can become an average shooter. So he branched out to uppers, complete, and branched out again to full rifles and carbines. If you want a tough, sniper-accurate AR, you really should be looking at Noveske. But be aware that Noveske's is a small shop, and production runs sell out like tickets to a winning baseball team. (www.noveskerifleworks.com)

OLYMPIC ARMS—One of the oldest AR makers around, Olympic does what no other maker can match: The company makes everything in-house. From machining the forgings to making barrels, bolts, carriers and firing mechanisms to molding stocks and handguards, it does everything. When I began building and upgrading ARs back in the day, Olympic was there, and I still have some of the many rifles that passed through my hands. They continue to serve as ably as ever. (www.olyarms.com)

PARA USA—The Para Tactical Target Rifle uses the DIGS, not exactly the classic direct-gas-impingement system and not a piston either. The DIGS uses a shortened bolt carrier that holds a longer-than-usual carrier key. That nestles over a shorter gas tube, and the recoil spring surrounds the whole system. The end result is a rifle that has no need for a buffer tube, spring or weight. The Tactical Target Rifle thus can (and does, where allowed) have a folding stock that folds into a compact package, not a goitered mess of parts. The barrel (there is one TTR, with your choice of forearm design) has a

chrome-lined 16½-inch barrel with a 1:9 twist that's wonderfully accurate. (www.paraord.com)

PATRIOT ORDNANCE FACTORY—POF makes piston systems of a design that comes from the fertile mind of Frank DeSomma. The internals and the inside of the uppers are plated for ease of cleaning and resistance to corrosion. No, they're not mil-spec; they far exceed mil-spec. In 5.56, 6.8 SPC and .308, they have am-

bidextrous bolt releases, anti-walk pins, ambi selector levers and a gas block that allows you to select normal or reduced gas flow. POF barrels are mil-spec steel, but treated to be harder (how does 70 Rockwell sound?). To reduce friction even more, POF rifles have the rectangular cam pin replaced with one using a roller on the cam head. Rolling instead of sliding friction reduces wear to an amazing extent. (www.pof-usa.com)

ROCK RIVER—When AR shooters



CZ P-07 DUTY



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ARMALITE AR-10 A4

became insatiable, Rock River closed up its 1911 custom shop and devoted the bench space and labor to making even more first-class ARs than it had before. And then it expanded. Rock River makes 5.56, 6.8 SPC and .308 rifles, as well as 9mm carbines and handguns. The newest item is a piston system. However, unlike other systems, which simply install a piston over the barrel, Rock River has managed to design one that eliminates the buffer tube, spring and weight. This allows installation of a folding stock on the Performance Piston system. With its ambidextrous, non-reciprocating charging handles, it promises to rewrite the

idea of just what an AR is. (www.rockriverarms.com)

REMINGTON—If you had suggested two years ago that Big Green would be offering an MSR for sale, people would have given you a wide berth. But not only did Remington do so, it invented a new cartridge for deer hunters who wanted a .30 round that didn't require a honkin'-big AR-10-type rifle to put it in. The .30

Remington AR is a 7.62x39-size round, but without the taper and a lot more fps to go whacking whitetails with. And you can get it already done up in accepted hunting camo. Show up in hunting camp with one of these and no one will give you any grief. (www.remington.com)

RUGER—Yes, Ruger now makes an AR. The SR556 features the company's chrome-lined, hammer-forged barrels, a four-position gas regulator and a piston

system that is easy to clean and disassemble. As if all that weren't enough, Ruger decided that a plain AR wasn't for them, and each rifle comes complete with a Ruger-specific Troy railed handguard, Ruger-marked Troy folding iron sights, M4 telescoping stock and three—count 'em, three—Magpul PMag 30s. For those who want something just a bit more compact, Ruger now offers a carbine version with a 16.12-inch barrel and integrally machined flash-hider. (www.ruger.com)

SABRE DEFENCE—Recently awarded a government contract to

LARUE TACTICAL OBR 5.56



Photo: Mark Finger

produce M16A3 and 'A4 rifles, Sabre has been making M2 machine gun receivers and barrels and barrels for other machine guns for the government for many years. Now the company makes M16s as well and ARs for the rest of us. Not just DI gas guns, but a piston system as well, and barrels, bolts and rifles in 5.56 and 6.5 Grendel. If you want a Three-Gun competition gun, defense carbine or precision rifle, Sabre has the rifle or barrel and bolt combo for you. (www.sabredefence.com)

SMITH & WESSON—If a few years ago you had said that S&W would not only be making a 1911, but an AR rifle as well, you would have been restrained and sedated. Now the company offers both, and the AR is not just a plain "M4gery."

LES BAER ULTIMATE AR 6.5 GRENDL

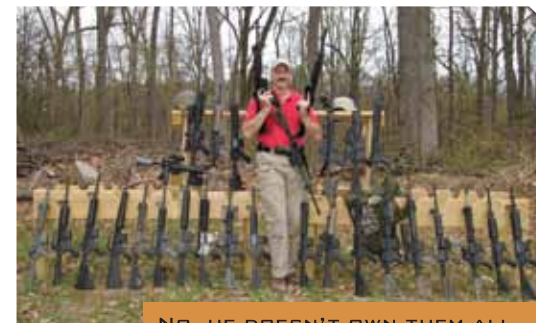


You have options, like getting an M&P 15PC, a varminting tackdriver that you can even have in hunting camouflage, or the M&P 15PS, a piston-driven rifle. The eye-opener is the M&P-15R, chambered in 5.45x39. Why would you want a rifle in a corrosive commie round? Cost. At half to a third of the cost of new 5.56 ammo, the 5.45 offers much the same performance. (www.smith-wesson.com)

STAG—Viewed by some as the new guy in AR manufacturing, Stag is actually a decades-long producer of AR parts, assemblies and upgrades. Along with the carbines and rifles, the piston and DI-gas, and the

5.56 and 6.8 SPC options, Stag also offers a true left-handed AR. Not just a regular upper with an ejection port milled out of the side and the bolt reversed, the upper and internals are mirror images of the right-handed AR. You can get rifles, uppers, barrels, parts, lowers, anything that goes into assembling an AR, all from Stag. Want to build from scratch? Find an FFL-holder for the lower and get the rest on your own? Stag has it all. (www.stagarms.com)

And to answer the question "Which one is best?" That's simple. Any one of the above, which I myself have adjusted, tested and zeroed. *That's* the one. **G&A**



NO, HE DOESN'T OWN THEM ALL, BUT THE AUTHOR HAS SHOT HIS WAY THROUGH THE WHOLE LINEUP.

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