

US Military Shotguns

The US military has used shotguns for a long time, starting with the blunderbuss in eighteenth century. As these went out of fashion being replaced by muskets there was heavy use of buck and ball (with a musket ball and buckshot being loaded simultaneously, which was used extensively in War of 1812. The Battle of New Orleans being the height of its use explaining disparity of casualties between the two sides (but most British only lightly wounded and returned after battle as the higher probability of a hit was offset by the poorer casualty causing capabilities of the buckshot at any significant range).

This use continued through the American Civil War – buck and ball was especially popular with cavalry. The conventional shotgun also made a come back with Confederates using shotguns heavily for cavalry rather than buck and ball (their descendants in the Twilight War also loved shotguns for the same reason, accuracy from an unstable platform).

At the turn of the century, US Marines in Philippines used shotguns in the close quarter fighting of the jungle, valuing its ability to take down fanatics at close range where the impact of a highly concentrated shot pattern was more effective than a rifle cartridge (it was also the war that resulted in the US moving towards the heavy .45 pistol round for the same reason). Similarly Pershing in pursuit of Pancho Villa issued shotguns. In both cases using pump action riot guns.

In the First World War the Winchester M1897 (used up to and including Korea) and M1912 (used up to and including Vietnam) were issued to replace the police style riot guns. Short barreled and capable of slam firing as there was no trigger disconnect (the round is fired when action pumped as long as trigger is held). Both were shorter barreled, could be fitted with bayonet and were made more robust for the hardness of military life. Germany lodged a protest that the weapon was inhumane due to the severity of wounds inflicted and stated it would execute troops captured with one. The US responded that it would respond in kind and the matter was dropped with no recorded executions (it would however be likely that front line troops may have meted out their own rough justice in the same way that flamethrower crew and sometimes machine-gunners were treated).



Illustration 1: Soldier of the 1st Armoured Division enjoying the sun while cleaning his shotgun. June 1997 (New York Times)

“I carried a pump shotgun on the outside of the M1, I didn't fancy just having an M9 if we had to dismount. I'd always loved shotguns since my dad taught me, my brothers and sister to use one coon hunting. Well when we were hit I grabbed it as we hauled ass. It came in real useful as we tried to leg it back through the forest, the M231s two of the others carried were fine but they ain't no good at taking down Ruskies and well, the 12 gauge did, just like ten pins. I carried it throughout the war and wouldn't be here now without it.”

Sergeant George Lee

1st Cavalry Rgt

Quoted in “The Lee Family Goes to War” Action Press 2019

By World War Two the shotgun was firmly entrenched in the US military with 6 different models used. The most popular were the M97 and M1912. A big disadvantage in the in Pacific (where they were most heavily used due to the short engagement ranges) was the lack of a decent ammunition carrier, the issue ammo pouch only holding 30 rounds— troops tried to scrounge the scare First World War SL3 Grenade Vest for its carrying capacity. Improvised and home made carrying methods were common. A bigger disadvantage was the paper based cartridges swelling with moisture and causing stoppages even after they were dried out. As a result all brass cartridges were used until plastic became common. General MacArthur disliked them and discouraged shotguns but they were popular with the troops, General Patch carried one personally when leading an attack at Guadalcanal. Shotguns were routinely issued for guarding prisoners and were used to help teach the concept of leading in aerial gunnery.

“One of the team had really modified his Ithaca 37, he cut down the barrel as short as he could, cut the stock down to a pistol grip, fitted a duckbill choke and fitted a bungee sling using duct tape. Then he put a laser pointer on it, not a laser sight, a laser pointer so he knew roughly where the centre of his shoot would go. Usefully as he was left handed it ejected downwards. While I hated room clearing, following him in made it easy, you knew if he pointed that at someone they were going down.”

Anonymous quoted in “Seals in Korea” Naval Press 2024

Also in service from the World War Two era was the Ithaca Model 37 which was still in service during World War Three. It is the most common shotgun seen in use by SEALs in Vietnam where its lack of openings made it popular with these troops who were constantly exposed to mud and water.

Shotguns were used to a limited extent in Korea but the longer engagement distances tended to reduce their use to raiding parties and other specialist use. Shotguns were used extensively in Vietnam,

not just by special forces but also by line infantry units where they were especially popular with point men and tunnel rats (here particularly in cut down versions). The SEALs experimented with flechette rounds through Ithaca 37 (a flechette round contains a large number of finned darts instead of round balls). They also trialed the fully automatic Special Operations Weapon. Neither were particularly successful and soon dropped.



Illustration 2: US Air Force security using an 870 to scare off birds. Turkey 1995

The Remington 870 was also used extensively by USAF, not just in a security role but also as a bird scarer. For base guards the shotgun was often an ideal weapon as it could also be loaded with birdshot, tear gas, rubber bullets or similar to reduce lethality. By the mid 1990s, a large series of experiments were being conducted with low lethality rounds for this purpose although few were ever given field trials after the

outbreak of the war.



Illustration 3: M590 training by men of the 82nd Airborne, Iran 1999

In addition to the 870, the Mossburg 500, 590 and 590A1 (all variations on the same design) were all used from the 1960s (and progressively upgraded). These were used by the US Marine Corps, Army and Air Force. This was also used in the same roles as the Remington 870 and could be fitted with the M7 bayonet.



Illustration 4: Unusual photo of a HK CAW being fired from a Russian training film. Note the ejected all brass cases

The 1980s saw the US CAWS programme for a fully automatic shotgun. This was to obtain a shotgun using modern production techniques and ideas. It was aimed at the Berlin Brigade, 75th Rangers, special forces and for the USMC. The USMC quickly dropped out as they felt the weapons they had were adequate for the job and they did not feel the expense of replacing them necessary. The US Air Force considered the idea for their security details but also decided the expense was not worth it. With the programme floundering only an interest by the

The HKCAW in German Territorial Use

It is worth noting the shortage of HK CAWS was largely due to their use by German territorial units for home defence. Urban based units were sometimes organised along the Landwehr 93 Model. This had sections equipped as follows:

Section commander with Uzi or HK CAW

Section second in command with Uzi or HK CAW

Marksman with G3A4ZF

Gunner with MG3 (occasionally PKM)

Number 2 with HK CAW or Uzi

5 Jaeger with HK CAW

Some units substituted G3s or G74s for the HK CAWs due to lack of availability. Armbrusts were widely issued.

This was the ultimate evolution of the World War 2 German squad as ammo carriers system. At long range the marksman and MG3 dominated, at close the HK CAWs came into their own.

German Army in a similar concept for their special forces and territorial troops kept the newly combined programme alive. Perhaps because of this the preferred candidate became the HK CAW. With German unification the programme was reduced, Germany cut back on its planned purchases (limiting it to some urban territorial units only) and the US no longer needed them for the Berlin Brigade. Only the reinstating of the cancelled order from the G11 stopped Heckler Und Koch from financial ruin. In US service the weapon was known as the M190 Shotgun but everyone referred to it as the CAW. The CAW returned to using brass cases in a special belted format due to the high chamber pressure (normal 12 bore rounds will not work and will cause jams as the plastic melts).

The 1980s also saw a new idea in shotgun design, the British SAS had pioneered the use of a shotgun firing a Hatton round to destroy hinges on doors for building entry, this often resulted in a shotgun being carried slung as well as a main weapon.

The US Knight Armaments

Company developed a solution, the Masterkey, a pump action shotgun based on the Remington 870, that fitted below the barrel of an M16 or M4. This had a three round magazine plus one round in the chamber but could not be fired without a weapon mounting it as the M16/M4 magazine acted as a pistol grip in the same was as on the M203. This was quickly adopted by special forces and in 1992 issued in limited numbers as the M870 Breaching Device.



Illustration 5: US Green Beret with M4A1/M870 in a Polish forest June 1998 (US Army)

Around the same time C-More Systems announced the Ciener Ultimate Over/Under which was a similar device (even using the same Remington 870 shotgun as a base). This was used by Delta Force but not to the same degree as the M870 Breaching Device. This was given the designation XM25

An improved version of the XM25 was developed in 1996 by C-More Systems in an attempt to win back ground. This was very similar design but was bolt action (which can be set for left or right handed use) and used detachable 3 or 5 round box magazines. Limited numbers were bought for trials but no formal adoption was made.



Illustration 6: M12 demonstration by an unidentified infantry unit for Fox News' "Army Weapons" Note the large non-issued 32 round drum for which special ammunition carriers were required as they did not fit in any military pouch. The 20 round would fit in a SAW ammo pouch or a slightly modified Claymore bag.

wide range of patterns were seen, often originally of civilian origin.

As the war started the demand for shotguns (in particular the CAW) was high. As an interim measure while production was set up in the US, the US bought the off the shelf AA12 which was called the M12 shotgun in service (it had previously been used by the SEALs but never type standardised). This had the benefit that it used standard 12 bore cartridges which were available locally. In addition large numbers were used in Korea taken straight off the production line (Daewoo had purchased the rights to the design in the mid 1980s). They were also issued to South Korean troops for special operations and urban combat.

Another area that shotguns were common was the US Coast Guard who found them ideal when boarding vessels. They were also incredibly common in militia units in the States being used by both MILGOV and CIVGOV, especially in urban areas. Here a



Illustration 7: Peter Cornwall's evocative photo of a Coast Guard patrolling looking for signs of Soviet saboteurs won a number of awards. Note the M870P with scope. New York Post