

PROS —AND— CONS

OF THE AK-47

BY LEROY THOMPSON

Author with Poly Tech AK-47.

I guess I started off with a built-in prejudice against the AK-47 since I first encountered it while running ambushes in Southeast Asia. If we saw the distinctive AK upper and banana clip silhouetted, we assumed we were facing the VC, NVA, or Pathet Lao. That's why only special ops troops in "Indian Country" ever carried AKs. Using one in most parts of Vietnam was an invitation to get shot since the distinctive look and sound generally drew fire. And, the distinctive "click clack" sound of an AK-47 safety was guaranteed to draw fire from any U.S. troops close enough to hear it. In my mind, the AK-47 was a bad guy's gun. It's interesting how that impression can last deep in one's psyche. More than a quarter century after I had returned to "the World" I was attending a performance of Miss Saigon. During one sequence where the NVA characters were dancing around on stage, their pith helmets and AK-47s silhouetted against the lights, I found myself squirming and my trigger finger feeling an impulse to start shooting.

Though the AK-47 still had that effect on me in the darkened theater, I have grown to appreciate the AK over the years. I've trained enough counterinsurgency or special operations forces in areas where the AK-47 was ubiquitous that I've had to learn to shoot it and maintain it. I've also worked VIP protection details in areas where insurgents were using AKs so I had to be quite familiar with its capabilities to counter it.

Perhaps my greatest appreciation of AKs came when I was training businesspersons and government personnel who were deploying to "troubled lands." At one point I taught an awareness and survival course which incorporated basic techniques to counter a kidnapper or other attacker. Basically, I taught a few simple methods to quickly incapacitate an armed enemy, lever his or her weapon out of their hands, instinctively find the safety/selector, and turn the gun against its owner. Though we dealt with other standard "National Liberation" weapons such as

the SKS, Czech Skorpion, CZ-52, and Makarov, we spent the most time with AK-47, and the more shooting I did with the AK, the more I grew to appreciate it.

By the beginning of the 21st Century, some 70 million AK-47s had been produced; obviously an enormous number of soldiers appreciated the AK-47. By observing a lot of third world troops armed with the AK-47, as well as doing a substantial amount of shooting with it myself, I've come to some conclusions about its strengths and weaknesses which I thought might be worth discussing in this column.

The greatest strengths of the AK-47 are undoubtedly its toughness and reliability. Designed to keep functioning in the hands of conscript troops and "freedom fighters" with little or no maintenance, the AK-47 will keep shooting in conditions that would render most other weapons hors de combat. I have seen captured AK-47s that obviously had been dragged through all manner of dirt or sand and had never been



The AK-47 is especially well suited to guerrilla movements. Shown here are Contra rebels fighting against the Sandinista regime.

cleaned. They were filthy, but whenever we tested one it fired. Closer to home, I had a friend who bought one of the first semi-auto Poly Tech AK-47s imported into the U.S.A. and shot it for years to

the tune of 12,000-15,000 rounds of corrosive ammunition without ever cleaning it, yet every time he pulled the trigger it fired. Fortunately for those of us who like to shoot the AK-47 a lot, rea-

sonably priced non-corrosive ammunition is now available. I normally use Cheetah from Zimbabwe.

Three of the AK-47's other strengths contribute to this reliability. The chrome-lined barrel helps the rifle stand up to a steady diet of corrosive ammunition, and the non-adjustable gas system keeps untrained troops from messing with it—a key element of soldier proofing. Additionally, AK-47 magazines are generally made of steel or tough polymer and are designed to stand up to as much abuse as the weapons they feed.

In simplest terms, the strongest point of the AK-47 is that almost invariably when one pulls the trigger it will go off. For U.S. shooters, the ready availability of inexpensive ammunition in 7.62x39mm is an additional advantage—as is the availability of inexpensive AK-47s which contain enough U.S.-made parts to be "post-ban" legal.

There are, however, a substantial number of negative aspects of the AK-47 as well. Many of these are based on ergonomics. For example, many shooters find the stock too short, though it must be borne in mind that this is a rifle

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which has seen a great deal of use in Asia where most soldiers are much smaller than in the West. In fact, the export Poly Tech and Norinco AK-47s with which we're familiar have a special longer stock than those used domestically. I have used some of the Chinese AKs with the "Asian" stock and that one is, indeed, too short. I don't mind the one on most I've used, however, and it does work well with body armor. Most real shooters prefer the fixed stock to the folding stock on the AK-47. The under folder, especially, is not very comfortable and after some use gets rather loose. The side folder is better, though it is still not especially comfortable.

One of the greatest ergonomic weaknesses of the AK is the safety. This safety not only has a distinctive and loud sound as it operates, but is also poorly designed for operation with the shooting hand. It is not particularly well located, either, for operation with the weak hand. Usually, one just lets the trigger guard rest on the hand and wipes it off with the thumb before moving the finger to the trigger. On the other hand, considering how often the AK-47 is issued to conscript troops or marginally trained third world soldiers, the fact the safety cannot be readily flicked off for a fast shot may be a good thing!

One other weakness is the trigger guard which does not lend itself well to trigger operation wearing heavy gloves. Considering that the Russians, Chinese, and North Koreans, all of whom may operate in very cold conditions, have issued the rifle it seems odd that a hinged trigger guard was never developed.

There is one very good ergonomic feature—the magazine release. The AK's mag release is easily operated with either hand, though one does have to get used to the method of loading the magazine into the mag well by rocking it in.

I normally do not do well with the AK-47's sights, the rear "V" not allowing very precise work. I think this is one reason the Soviets issued a lot of Dragunovs—so that units had some long-range capability. I have had friends who could shoot well at 300 yards with the AK-47, but for me it's a 200-yard rifle. Past that, I just don't shoot it well. I do, however, like the sight adjustment system which allows one to zero the rifle by adjusting the front post for both elevation and windage. This is a system consistent with the AK's toughness and with preventing troops from tampering with it.

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One of the AK-47's disadvantages is only apparent if one uses the military full auto version. The wooden handguards can overheat on continued full auto fire and, reportedly, have been known to catch fire if enough mags are fired quickly on full auto. The average infantryman won't be carrying enough mags normally for this to be an issue, however.

The AK's sling system may be an advantage to some and a disadvantage to others. It generally allows only for standard mounting to carry the rifle slung and does not lend itself to the use of tactical slings, though I have seen some developed for Russian Spetsnaz. I actually like the simplicity of the AK's sling since I often find myself befuddled by tactical slings that I can't figure out.

When I weigh these pros and cons, I generally come down in favor of the AK-47. I have been in situations where my "oppos" were armed with it, and I've been in situations where I was armed with it. I own three—a Poly Tech Legend, a Maadi, and a Hungarian underfolder. At least once a month I take one of those to the range and put a hundred rounds or so through it and always have a good time. However, I also generally take along my AR-15. I shoot the AK-47 at 100 yards and 200 yards, while I shoot the AR out to 500 yards. Admittedly, I have an ACOG on the M4 and open sights on the AK-47s. Still, if I had to choose one for combat I'd normally choose the AR, either my 16.1-inch LE AR-15 or a real military M4. That is, of course, based on the assumption that I would have access to cleaning gear and an armorer. If I found myself heading off as an advisor to a guerrilla force when I was going to be in the field for months without proper cleaning gear or an armorer, then the AK-47 would become much more appealing.

An interesting aspect of the M16/M4 or AK-47 debate may well be playing out in Iraq as you read this. I understand that many of the armored units which have been or are being deployed to Iraq only have two M4 carbines per four-man crew. Since the crewmen are being used on ground security duties and need rifles or carbines for each trooper, plans are to issue captured AK-47s to some. I'm sure this will lead to a great many discussions of the merits of each weapon based upon the experiences of troops familiar with both. ☉



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