The 0351 Infantry Assaultman

Crippled by the SMAW

by Sgt Nicholas Miner

Today's 0351s, or infantry assaultman, face a serious problem. This problem is debilitating, costly, and renders the assaultman almost combat ineffective. It isn't a problem of training or individuals, but rather the weapons system that the 0351 has to work with. That weapon is the SMAW (shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapon). An aging, costly, underpowered, and ineffective system, its lack of usefulness means that line companies have very little in the way of antiarmor capabilities. Why does the Marine Corps continue to attempt to update and use this ineffectual weapon when much better options are available?

This is the first piece of work that will cover the problems that I think face today's assaultmen. While there are other problems to be addressed, a dysfunctional weapons system is by far the most troubling. The SMAW's full nomenclature is the MK 153 MOD 0 SMAW.[1] Throughout this article, it will be referred to as either the MK 153 or the SMAW, both referring to the same system.

Marine assaultmen face serious problems with weapons systems. *(Photo by Bill Johnson-Miles, MCSC.)*

The MK 153 MOD 0 SMAW

At the time of this writing, there was not one company in my battalion that had a full complement of working SMAWs. My section had three, and the other two companies had four each. That is not the fault of our company or battalion staffs who have done everything they can to ensure that we have the prescribed six SMAWs for the Assault Section. The problem lies in the SMAWs themselves. SMAWs simply are not durable enough to last under today's combat demands. Made of fiberglass and epoxy with the MK 9 Mod 0 Spotting Rifle attached by brackets, they cannot endure the continuous trauma that comes from the demands of today's infantryman. The spotting rifle is constantly jarred out of its BZO (battle zeroing) due to buddy rushing and being banged around. When the spotting rifle loses its BZO, the entire weapons system has essentially become ineffective. Because the iron sights and spotting rifle are adjusted to the LBS (laser bore sight) of the tube, if there is any movement in either of them, then there is no guarantee that the rocket will strike home. Assaultmen are trained to use the spotting rifle to predict where the rocket will hit. However, if the spotting rifle is off, and the gunner adjusts to the now incorrect impact of the spotting rounds, then the rocket will correspondingly miss. Even with constant LBSing,

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and BZOing of the weapons system, the spotting rifle will lose its zero just by simply bouncing off the gunner's gear while he is maneuvering on the battlefield or training area renders the system ineffective. There is simply no reliable way to employ the SMAW while not in a static position.

Another issue the SMAW faces is its selection of rockets. The maximum effective range of the rocket capable of the most range—the MK 6 MOD 0 HEAA (high explosive antiarmor) rocket—is only 500 meters. And by doctrine, it is only capable of penetrating 21–23 inches of cold rolled homogeneous steel. Not only are most of today's battle tanks capable of firing the main gun and coaxial machine guns at ranges greater than 500 meters, they are also protected by much more than 23 inches of steel. If they are outfitted with reactive armor plating, which prematurely detonates rockets before their shape charge can penetrate the tank's armor, then the rocket is completely useless. The only use the HEAA rocket would have then would be against armored personnel carriers and other light-skinned vehicles, which, while useful, denies the infantry an antitank weapon at the squad level, as well as negating the MOS title of "antitank assaultman." While the MK 3 MOD 0 HEDP (high explosive dual purpose) rocket has more uses than the MK 6 MOD 0, it is also in danger of constantly missing its target due to the inefficiency of the spotting rifle. The MK 80 MOD 0 novel explosive round, while highly effective against caves and bunkers, is not a rocket that I have personally ever used or even seen, nor have I ever talked to a fellow assaultman who has seen or used one. The selection of rockets, with their limited capabilities, as well as the defects of the weapons system, causes the SMAW to be an outdated weapons system. While the assaultman is also taught basic urban breaching skills, these skills are considered secondary to his rocketeer abilities, as well as being unpractical for a variety of reasons.[2]

So what can be done to combat these problems? I believe that a different weapons system is required to further the assaultman's capabilities. Thankfully, the military has a variety to choose from. However, the two that would be most beneficial to the 0351 would be either the LAAW (light antitank weapon) or the Carl Gustaf.

LAAW versus SMAW

The infantry rifle company already uses the solution to the organic rocket problem: the M72 LAAW. Lightweight, one-man operated, easy to employ, and disposable, it is a simple and eloquent solution for the assaultman. With multiple variations of the weapons system capable of firing from enclosure, an improved antiarmor capability, and the ability to fire on troops in the open, the multiple uses of the LAAW can easily become an integral part of the 0351's rocketeering capabilities. The light weight of the system means that each 0351 can carry multiple LAAWs and still carry less weight than the typical load out for an assault rocket team which consists of the SMAW and one rocket for the gunner and two rockets for the assistant gunner. Also, having the 0351s carry the LAAWs would in turn "lighten the load" for the 0311s. With the less weight that the general infantryman has to carry, he will tire less quickly and be able to move more quickly on the battlefield. With every assaultman in the section carrying two LAAWs apiece, every rifle platoon would be afforded four rocket shots versus the three from a SMAW. The weight of one LAAW is 5.5 pounds. This means that a typical two-man assaultman team would carry a total of 22 pounds, with four total rocket shots.[3] Compare this to the current load out, which is three rockets plus the SMAW, which totals 55.62 pounds at its lightest possible configuration, with only three rockets. The advantage of the LAAW is also clear. Also, as MSgt Bogart, an explosive ordnance disposal master technician, explains, the LAAW actually has greater penetration capabilities than the SMAW rockets because of the superior shape charge it contains.[4] However, overall penetration for the LAAW is much less than the SMAW's HEDP rocket, with only 10–12 inches of penetration verses 21–23 inches for the SMAW.

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The Carl Gustaf

The other option for assaultmen would be to move to an entirely new crew-served system. The choice is clear cut: the Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle. The reasons for doing so are almost limitless, primarily because of the types of rounds the Carl Gustaf has. For true antiarmor purposes, the Carl Gustaf utilizes the 84mm HEAT 751 round, which has penetration exceeding 20 inches as well as a protective shield and standoff to defend against explosive reactive armor (ERA). Almost all modern tanks are outfitted with some form of ERA which defeats normal rockets by exploding outward when penetration occurs, thus defeating the warhead of the rocket. For multipurpose, there is the 84mm HEAT 551C and HEDP 502, both of which boast the ability to engage lightly armored targets as well as bunkers and buildings. The MT 756 uses the "follow-through grenade" principle that the newer E-SMAW uses: it completely negates the need to fire in through a door or window and instead punches a hole through the wall and detonates behind the wall. For destroying buildings and other urban constructions, there is the ASM 509, and for engaging troops in the open

(a capability the SMAW lacks), there is the high explosive 441D, which can be set for impact or air burst detonation. Perhaps most exciting, however, are the smoke 469C and illumination 545C rounds which are smoke and illumination rounds, respectively. These give the infantry squad the capability to screen and mark targets as well as illuminate them all on the fly. If there is no time to call for mortars and there are no 203 rounds left with the squad, this could prove to be lifesaving.[5]

For cost effectiveness in training, the Carl Gustaf has four types of practice rounds, which are two subcaliber and two full caliber rounds. This would allow for more cost effective training not only in School of Infantry, but also in the Operating Forces. While slightly heavier than the SMAW (the Carl Gustaf weighs 19 pounds versus 16.92 pounds for the SMAW) and much longer (43 inches for the Carl Gustaf versus 29.92 inches for the SMAW), the Carl Gustaf would still be easy for assaultmen to adjust to. The Carl Gustaf also comes with a Picatinny rail system for mounting both day and night optics or it can be fired with the iron sights which are fitted with illumination dots for night firing.

During 13–15 October 2014, Saab introduced a new variant of the Carl Gustaf: the Carl Gustaf M4. Weighing in at 15.43 pounds and with a length of 39.37 inches, it shaves nearly three pounds and four inches off the M3 Carl Gustaf variant, as well as being a 1.5 pounds lighter than the MK 153 MOD 0 SMAW. The new variant also includes adjustable grips and shoulder rests for improved comfort, a round counter for maintenance purposes, and can even be carried fully loaded for faster use in combat. The new M4 variant is also able to use all previously developed rounds for the Carl Gustaf as well as support all future rounds. All of these things lead to an even more lethal assault section. Imagine being able to quickly load and carry HE rounds to quickly engage armored threats that arise, and then firing an illumination round for improved visibility at night. If contact is made, assaultmen could switch to an air burst round for engaging troops in the open or fire smoke rounds to screen movement to an objective. The Carl Gustaf also boasts new FFE (fire from enclosure) rounds to fire from inside buildings, negating the need of a large clear back blast area. A majority of these rounds is already available as mortar rounds, but being able to carry them as an integrated part of the squad means they will be quickly available and be able to switch out as the situation dictates.

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In December 2013, the Marine Corps tested out the SMAW Mod 2. This new version replaced the MK 9 spotting rifle with a laser range finder and thermal sights as well as removing the iron sights in favor of a flip-up sight. Overall, these changes have reduced the SMAW's weight by 3 pounds to a total of 13 pounds.[6] While these are steps in the right direction, there are still crucial problems with the SMAW. A poor design, expensive and limited munitions, and now a sight that will have to be properly cared for while getting jostled during buddy rushing and other tactical maneuvers bodes ill for the future of the SMAW.

Replacing the SMAW with the LAAW or—even better—the Carl Gustaf would be a huge improvement for assaultmen, line companies, and the warfighting capabilities of the Marine Corps as a whole. And with the introduction of the new Carl Gustaf M4, the weight and length limitations are even further reduced while offering even more useful and tactically advantageous benefits. While I understand that the Corps prides itself on doing more with less, replacing the SMAW with a newer system would greatly increase combat efficiency as well as continue to keep the 0351 a relevant part of the warfighting community.

The Carl Gustaf. *(Photo by en.wikipedia.com.)*

Notes

1. U.S. Marine Corps, *Technical Manual 08673A – 10/1B Launcher, Assault Rocket,*

The SMAW is an outdated weapons system. *(Photo by Sgt Alex C. Sauceda.)*

83MM, (SMAW) MK 153 Mod 0, (Washington, DC: 2005) 1-1.

2. Capt E.M. Biel, "The 0351 Military Occupational Specialty Realignment," *EWS Contemporary Issues Paper,* (Quantico, VA: February 2006), 1–3.

3. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3–21.8, The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad,* (Washington, DC: 2007), Appendix B.

4. MSgt Daniel Bogart, EOD Master Technician, USMC. Any misrepresentation of the Master Sergeant's words is the fault of the author.

5. Canadian Army, *B–GL–385-009/PT–001 Carl Gustav–Short Range Anti–Armour Weapon (Medium),* (Canada, 2005), 16–21.

6. Bill Johnson-Miles, "Marines test SMAW Mod 2 with new modular ballistic sight," accessed www.marines.mil, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2013).

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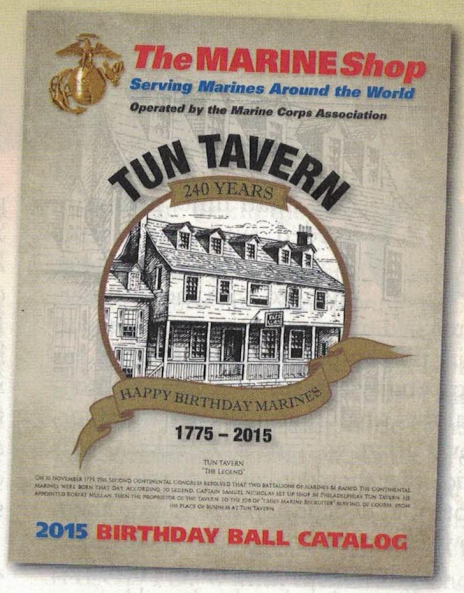

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