

# HANDGUNNER

S·O·R

## SERVICE RIFLE SCANDAL

### NEW U.S. M11 SERVICE PISTOL

### BRITISH SMG'S



### BROADSWORDS

### MAUSER K98K RIFLE

### BERETTA BATTLE PISTOLS

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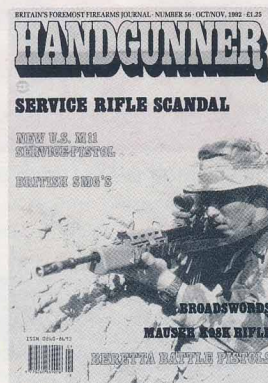
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## COVER

"How fares the SA80?," we ask ourselves from time to time, feeling an obligation to bring a bit of light and truth to bear on the rifle which for six years has been our emblem, appearing on this masthead in every issue since No. 36. As those of you who have been the route know, we have not shirked that duty. With this issue, our coverage of the SA80 to date reaches 61 published pages and constitutes a contemporary record unrivalled for any other small arm, and one that has assumed particular importance these past few weeks. Fleet Street, you may have noticed, has discovered that the SA80 performed badly in the Gulf: it does not cope with sand. The MoD has known this for years. The rifle resolutely refused to pass the sand tests prior to adoption. And post-adoption, it was sent off to Oman with the Royal Marines as part of Operation Swift Sword, a massive, multi-arm desert warfare exercise: a dry run for Granby. Shown here are men of 40 Commando taking defensive positions on the island of Masirah. Photo courtesy the Royal Navy.



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by Jan A. Stevenson



# SERVICE RIFLE SCANDAL

Well, how did the rifle perform in the Gulf?" we asked rhetorically in No. 54 (p. 3). We put the same question to a General, recently back from the Middle East. "About as we expected," he replied stonily, turning away. One hadn't the impression that his expectations had been particularly sanguine. Meanwhile, photographs and scuttlebutt coming back from the War had painted the sort of picture you would expect, if sending an army into the desert with a rifle that had been adopted without passing the sand tests. In the case of the SA80, we were told, it had been resubmitted three times and never did pass.

After every major campaign, of course, the Army conducts an extensive debriefing and review of equipment and doctrine. As far as infantry weapons went, this took the form of a formidable docu-

ment called the *Landset Report* in the distribution of which there was soon a thriving black market. We received a copy in due course as did *The Observer* which, being a weekly, beat us into print. Their feature, headlined "Secret Report Damns Army's Assault Rifle," was top centre of the front page of their issue for Sunday, 16 August, 1992, with a five-column colour photograph captioned, "Hit and Miss: the SA80 is 'a half-assed product hastily adopted for ulterior reasons'." The subtitle read, "Gulf troops unsure if £300m guns would fire or jam." The article filled 62 column inches, concluding on the back page, and was scarcely of a nature to go unnoticed.

Quoting extensively from the report, *The Observer* noted that, despite the long standing practice of plastering the gun in masking tape (because the dust covers

chronically break off) malfunctions were a severe problem.

"In a summary of the SA80's performance, the document concludes: *The Individual Weapon and Light Support Weapon did not cope with the sand. Infantrymen faced the enemy in close combat unsure whether their weapons would fire or stop. Tactical drills were affected, in that provision had to be made to cover a man with a stoppage. Some section and platoon commanders considered that casualties would have been suffered because of weapons stoppages, had the enemy put up more resistance in close combat.*"

It was found that 20% of the bayonets had broken points; most were not sharp even though the issue whetstones had been worn out trying to get them to keep an edge. Radway Green ammunition was appallingly



bad, and the magazine for the rifle, also of RG manufacture, was universally regarded as shoddy and as a further source of malfunctions. U.S. Colt magazines were much sought after. Bayonets fell off in combat, triggers failed to return forward, firing pins broke, all the usual plastic bits broke, the magazine release dumped the magazine inopportunistly and the cleaning kit was practically useless.

Late editions of the paper concluded with a statement by an MoD spokesman denying the existence of the report. "The Defence Ministry was very happy with the SA80; it did not jam easily and was not prone to stoppages, [the spokesman] claimed." He also claimed it was not particularly susceptible to sand.

The next day, Monday the 17th, *The Daily Telegraph* picked up the story, either spontaneously or at the invitation of the MoD. In any case, their article, entitled "MoD Happy with Army's SA80 Rifle," served as the vehicle for a further repudiation of *The Observer's* allegations. "Claims that a 'top-secret' Ministry of Defence report has condemned the performance of the Army's SA80 assault rifle in the Gulf war were dismissed yesterday by the ministry.

"A ministry spokeswoman said: 'we are very happy with the SA80 and have no knowledge of a report saying it put lives of British soldiers at risk.'" However, Menzies Campbell, MP for Fife North East and Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, was minded to take *The Observer* more seriously, and had immediately written to Sir Nicholas Bonsor, chairman of the Commons Defence Select Committee asking for an investigation into the substance of the article: the claim that the rifle had proved unreliable.

One result of *The Daily Telegraph's* piece was that it inspired a reader to send them a copy of the *Landset Report*. Their journalist handling the story confronted the MoD with it on Friday to find them still denying its existence. This, evidently, was the line that had been decided on, and it took him all day to force them to concede the report's authenticity. By evening, the new line was that the MoD had been honestly mistaken. According to Saturday's *Telegraph*:

MoD officials said spokesmen were being truthful last weekend when, in answer to questions raised by the media, they said they were unaware of an internal "top secret" report condemning the performance of the SA80 in the Gulf War.

It was on being supplied with more information from the copy of the report sent anonymously to *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday that they found the references to the SA80 in a section of the "restricted" *Landset Report*.

So the report existed after all, but there was no point getting excited about it.



*Lord Trefgarne, Minister of State at the MoD, tries his luck with Royal Ordnance's new political time bomb. Moments earlier, he had said that the SA80, "the culmination of a £500,000,000 development programme," was "the finest rifle ever built at Enfield."*



*At home on the range. The SA80, with 4-power SUSAT and good ammunition, is a minute-of-angle service rifle. That's the good news...*

Officials were now anxious to make clear that, "the problems raised were either already in the process of being modified or modifications were in hand."

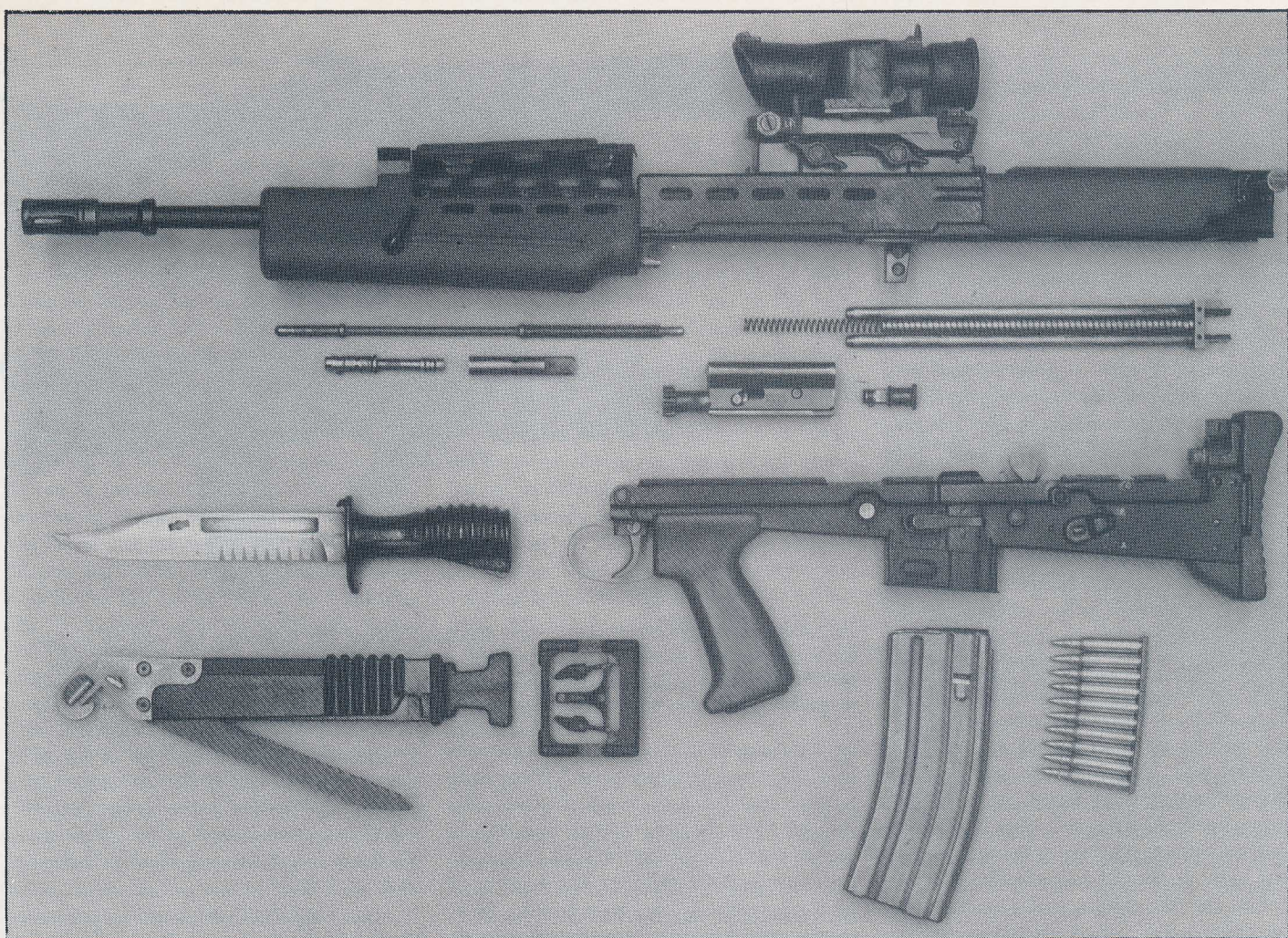
The MoD has described itself as being "very happy with the SA80" and last night senior officials spoke up in defence of the rifle....Another official said: "There is no evidence that the SA80 was more prone to stoppages than [were] other comparable weapons in the Gulf."

An assertion by the MoD, in reference to anything at all, that there is "no evidence," normally means that they are lying. They had just conceded, reluctantly, the existence of the *Landset Report*, and even *The Daily Telegraph* was unable to avoid noticing that the report itself said that the rifle "could not cope with the sand" and that malfunctions were so frequent and difficult to clear that "tactical drills were affected in that provision had to be made to cover a man with a stoppage." And further,

*The SA80 did not perform reliably in the sandy conditions of combat and training. Stoppages were frequent despite the*

*considerable and diligent efforts to prevent them.*

Now these findings from the report itself, combined with knowledge that the SA80 had failed the sand tests on adoption at least three times and, if we are correctly informed, never did pass them, would be regarded by the chap on the Clapham omnibus as **evidence**, evidence in the first place that the rifle had performed very unsatisfactorily in the Gulf, that moreover it had been almost certain to perform poorly there, that it is unlikely to perform very well anywhere, and that it would be remarkable indeed if other small arms used during that campaign (notably the Kalashnikov, the M16 and the FAMAS) had performed as badly. As far as that goes, *Handgunner* has devoted some 54 pages to the SA80 system over the past seven years, acting as the journal of record for this "ordnance débâcle," as one of our correspondents, a serving armourer, put it. Is this not evidence? Some miles downmarket, the *Sun* and the *Star* have both run features denouncing various of the rifle's shortcomings, after receiving



**"The SA80," it was said uncharitably, "is nothing but the AR18 shoved up the arse of the EM2." While not a tour de force of design originality, nor was it, on the face of it, an inauspicious combination. Royal Ordnance should have been able to make a good rifle of it. But the MoD seem to want a bad one. They are "very happy." The troops are very unhappy.**

vehement letters from serving soldiers on the subject. Engineers, armourers and instructors write to *Handgunner*, squaddies for the most part write to the *Sun*; in both cases they have done so because official channels did not work: for reasons unknown if not unfathomable, the MoD have not, after seven years in service, made this rifle into an acceptable item of issue. But the point we were making is that service personnel do not carry complaints of this sort to the press if the normal channels work. There has been an enormous volume of criticism within the using services in recent years that has not been effectively acted upon. Seemingly, the MoD does not regard that, either, as "evidence" of serious problems with a weapons system with which they are "very happy."

Like a newly elected prime minister, the SA80 enjoyed a bit of a honeymoon. Despite the assertion that it had been fourteen years in development, it was clearly an unfinished design when, in 1985, it was hastily adopted in the run-up to Royal Ordnance's planned flotation. We, and the services, accepted it as such, confident that the bugs that should, in the normal course of events, have been worked out during development and trials, would be rectified during the first couple of years' service. And so it seemed. Within three months of adoption, several problems had been identified and

production was suspended for six weeks while the trigger and safety were redesigned and the gas port dimensions were recalculated. We were dubious about some of the changes, but at least the system seemed to be responding. That was before we hit the real problems.

We rather liked the rifle, and were keen in any event to give it a fair chance. Several drawbacks, of course, were inherent or irremediable. The SA80 could not be used off the left shoulder, hence could not be used round the left of cover; moreover, the high line of sight meant that a low prone position could not be taken. But the latter fault is shared with all straight-stock designs, notably the M16, while the former defect—the inability to fire round the left of cover—though exacerbated by the rifle's reciprocating cocking handle, mounted on the bolt carrier, is pretty much inherent in the bullpup configuration. And if the French, Austrian and Australian armies had thought the advantages of a bullpup outweighed the disadvantages, our own Ministry of Defence might grudgingly be forgiven for having arrived at the same conclusion.

The appallingly bad balance of the piece, with most of the weight crowded just ahead of the buttplate, was again largely a function of the bullpup configuration; we hoped that it could be overcome in training. It would pretty well have to be, for there was

no likelihood of shifting the balance point forward by adding weight to the barrel, for the gun was already grotesquely overweight (the SA80, with its sight, was heavier than the SLR it replaced) and that with a sheet metal receiver only 1mm thick.

How the thing can possibly be so heavy baffles everyone who has thought about it, save possibly the engineers who designed it. But once fire is exchanged, the weight becomes an advantage, and it is easy to forgive a heavy gun that proves itself reliable. And in this respect, at least, the portents augured well, for the design was based on that of the Armalite AR18, which struck us as fundamentally sound, and Enfield had improved upon it in several particulars. And as far as we are aware, there were no complaints of excessive malfunctions during the period immediately following adoption. We were not aware at the time, that the rifle had repeatedly failed the dust tests.

The final nuisance that we should doubtless have to endure was a diabolically fiddly process on reassembly of trying to fit the longest bit of the three-piece gas piston and operating rod into a small hole at the bottom of a blind tunnel. This was a powerful disincentive to proper maintenance and simply could not be done under stress.

But these points aside, all else was rectifiable. The parts that broke or fell off



could be made stronger and more secure; even the receiver, if it proved too flimsy, could be made of heavier gauge sheet. Most newly adopted small arms go through a teething period of greater or lesser severity, but evolve into good, reliable weapons through a process of ongoing improvement. The M16 is the prime example of a rifle that gave horrific problems early in its service career, but has evolved into a fine weapon. It might never be our first choice, but it is very good none the less. The SA80, on the other hand, has been looking more and more like one of those jinxed items like the U.S. M60, doomed never to be worth a damn. But we are unpersuaded that it had to be that way. Certainly, the SA80 will always be an overweight, butt-heavy bullpup, gruesomely ill-balanced. But it is splendidly accurate and there is no obvious reason why it should not also be reliable, robust and free of the scandalous catalogue of faults upon which *The Observer* is currently so happily battering.

There have been a few improvements: the firing pin retaining pin now has a rubber retaining grommet, and magazine latch shrouds are belatedly being fitted. But the majority of problems, minor and major, seem to have been swept under the carpet. So determined is the MoD to be "very happy" that the British Army is now in the lunatic situation of having a telescopic sighted service rifle that is fired almost exclusively on full-automatic (because the troops cannot get through a magazine without a malfunction on semi-auto) and often from the hip (because the gun is awkward to shoulder) while at the same time having a section support weapon (the L86A1 light machine gun) that is fired exclusively on semi-auto because it splits groups on full-auto and cannot be used for supporting fire without fear of shooting the section's own assault element in the back.

Meanwhile, a ballistic engineering firm called DateStyle, Ltd., has developed a muzzle brake of the same size and external dimensions as the SA80's flash hider which, it claims, both cures the split-group problem with the LSW and eliminates practically all of the malfunctions in the rifle. It costs no more to manufacture than the standard flash hider, hence would not add to the cost of the rifle unless retrofitted. DateStyle's explanation of how the device works is cogent and makes sense; they are willing to prove it in a 10,000-round comparative test. The MoD, how-

***Intended as a new generation of light individual weapon, the 5.56mm SA80 with SUSAT is heavier than the 7.62mm FAL SLR it replaced. Landset notes coyly that, "...there are still many influential members of battalions who do not feel at home with the SA80." In other words, they still remember a rifle that worked.***

ever, have rejected it out of hand on grounds that "there is no requirement." There is no requirement, because current doctrine calls for the LSW to be fired on semi-auto only in the support rôle, hence the split groups on full-auto are not a problem. The doctrine of giving supporting fire on semi-auto, however, was developed because the split groups made full-auto fire dangerous. The argument is circular. It is also bizarre.

Royal Ordnance, by the way, is quite interested in the DateStyle compensator. So is the School of Infantry at Warminster, who tested it on a commercial basis for the designers. It is, no doubt, premature to assign blame for the SA80 scandal. But when that time comes, our guess is that it will rightly land on those "very happy" people in Whitehall.

*The Observer* returned to the subject the following week, the 23rd of August, opening the story with a ten-inch trailer on the front page titled, "MoD Told Gun was Useless in 1985." Inside, the whole of page 7 was given to the story under the headline, "Revealed: MoD Told in 1985 New Rifle was a Dud." A five-column photograph of Sandhurst cadets on parade was captioned, "Jam tomorrow..." while the sub-title indicated that the rifle was only adopted to help fatten Royal Ordnance for privatisation.

The journalist, Callum Macrae, based in *The Observer's* Edinburgh office, had spent the week talking with engineers and others involved in the adoption trials in 1985.

*"Almost all the problems identified in the Gulf were identified in troop trials in 1985, but nothing was done," said one Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers warrant officer who took part in them.*

*A former Royal Ordnance weapons designer said that when the Army first took the weapon for trials in 1985, he was*

*convinced it would be rejected....The most damning revelation is that so many of the difficulties revealed in the secret Gulf report—and complained of by soldiers in Northern Ireland—were identified during trials in 1985.*

Identified seven years ago, complained about ever since, and still uncorrected. Even amazingly trivial items. The oil bottles leaked in 1985. In the Gulf War, they were still leaking, so much so that the troops were using salvaged foot talcum tins to carry oil in. Now if the MoD can supply foot talcum tins that work as oil bottles, one wonders why they cannot design or procure an oil bottle that works as an oil bottle. This vignette, in fact, is the SA80 story in microcosm.

The cleaning brushes broke up in 1985; in 1991 they were still breaking up. In 1985, the bayonets broke, would not sharpen, fell off and were not much use as wire cutters. Ditto in 1991. The MoD had still not made the cleaning rod as long as the barrel, and the pull through still would not go through. And so forth.

Macrae evidently was not told that the rifle had repeatedly failed the sand tests, but it was conceded that, "it quickly became clear that the guns were particularly susceptible to sand," and because of this, "a special gun was designed for a mysterious small order of SA80's manufactured in 1986-87, apparently to be used for a Saudi royal bodyguard." If Royal Ordnance redesigned the rifle for reliability in a desert environment on order from the Saudis, one wonders whether the MoD was appraised of the nature of the redesign, and what their response was.

Since the *Landset Report* was *The Observer's* route into the SA80 story, they have inevitably focused on how the rifle performed during the Gulf War: that is to

say, in a desert environment. They have only just begun to look at how it copes with an arctic environment, in the hands of Royal Marines in Norway, and have not yet addressed the question of how it stands up in the jungles of Belize. Hopefully, they will do, for their handling of the subject so far has been meticulous and in the best traditions of responsible, inquiring journalism. And, as Charles Kirby would say, "There's more." Lots more.

This morning, for example, brought news of what must be the SA80's most humiliating setback to date: its recent rejection by the Falklands Island Defence Force in favour of the Steyr AUG. FIDF conducted comparative trials and found that the AUG outperformed the SA80 in every respect and vastly outclassed it in terms of functional reliability. WO Mike Hanlon, the FIDF permanent staff instructor, said that "the British SA80's had jammed four times more often than the Steyr." Significantly, Australia, New Zealand and the Irish Republic have also adopted the AUG in favour of the SA80. But it was left to the Lilliputian FIDF to really twist the knife. Working, as they do, in close conjunction with the British garrison, the practical and logistical advantages of using the same small arms system would have been substantial. Not substantial enough, however. As one senior British officer commented enviously, "For the time being, we are stuck

with the SA80." The distinction, of course, is that the FIDF had the power of choice; the British Army has not. They use what they are told to use. The only unit in the British Army with the effective power of choice is 22 SAS, who are notoriously disinclined to use the SA80.

To get back to the *Landset Report*, the MoD, you will recall, had finally conceded on Friday to *The Telegraph's* A. J. McLroy (on the press side, the whole thing is being run by Scots) that it did exist, but that it was "a perfectly routine procedure" and that the problems it described "were either already in the process of being modified or modifications were in hand." They could scarcely thereafter say otherwise to *The Observer*. They could modify the line though, and the latest spin, also on Friday, seemed to be to repudiate the report's findings. An MoD spokesman told Macrae, "The Landset report has not been endorsed....Subsequent analysis reveals some of the criticisms do not stand up to close analysis."

It will be interesting to see which line they take when Parliament reconvenes in October. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats will be pressing for a Parliamentary enquiry, possibly by the Public Accounts Committee but more likely by the Defence Select Committee chaired by Sir Nicholas Bonsor, Bt. So far, ministers have been maintaining a prudent silence. They

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**The SA80 in Section Support**  
The L86A1: a worse scandal. No. 50.  
**See also letters in Nos. 50, 51, 52 and 53.**

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would be wise to refrain from comment until after the Parliamentary committee establishes the facts. We shall follow the hearings attentively. In the meantime, though, soldiers we have spoken to are apprehensive about the possibility of ground action in Bosnia. Mr. Rifkind could earn some gratitude if he bought Soviet surplus AK's for them. They work.

*Next issue: Kirby's back. Don't miss it.*

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