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CLASSIC MILITARY RIFLES: The FAL

By John Marshall

It's been called "The free world's right arm," and with good reason. The list of countries that have tested, adopted, or manufactured this rifle is impressive. They include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Venezuela, Israel, Argentina, Belgian Congo, Luxembourg, Germany, Paraguay, Qatar, Kuwait, Austria, Peru, Indonesia, South Africa, Chile, Saudi Arabia, Ecuador, Holland, Portugal, Thailand, Brazil, Greece and Bolivia. As a full-power main battle rifle, nothing has come along to equal its general effectiveness and acceptance since it was first developed in 1952. Accurate, reliable, powerful, robust, easy to maintain and nearly ergonomically perfect, this rifle still instills awe wherever it is encountered.

The man primarily responsible for the development of the Fusil Automatique Leger (Light Automatic Rifle) was Dieudonne' Saive, an understudy of the master, John Browning. During his employment at F.N. (Fabrique Nationale d'Armes de Guerre) in Liege, Belgium, Saive was the co-designer of the Browning High Power pistol with Browning, and the main designer of the SAFN-49 semiauto rifle that was introduced after World War II. The gas-actuated tilting-block locking action of the SAFN-49 was to be later adapted for the FAL.

Initial prototypes of the FAL were chambered for an assault rifle cartridge, the German 7.92mm Kurz. This round and its vehicle, the MP44, had attracted a great deal of attention from the Allies during and after the war. In 1947, a prototype "light automatic carbine" was demonstrated for British officers in Belgium. However, the British wanted a more powerful cartridge, and suggested the new UK .280 round which had been developed for the proposed EM-2 bullpup rifle in Britain. The British officers provided sample rounds, and promised more to come. Aside from specifying a 20-round magazine, they left further specifications and development to F.N. A prototype chambering the .280 was completed by F.N. in January 1949. In addition to this conventionally configured rifle, an alternate "bullpup" design was also crafted. Trials were conducted in England.

Meanwhile, in the United States, development was underway on a .30 caliber round shorter than the standard .30/06, but almost equal in power. F.N. then covered its bets, initiating parallel development of the .280 and also .30 caliber rifles based on the commercial .300 Savage cartridge. Further trials were made, and the British visited the U.S. to get specs on the new "T65" cartridge which was later to become the 7.62mm NATO round. The .280 cartridge was then somewhat modified to match the rim and extractor groove dimensions of the T65. This round was dubbed the .280/30, or .280 "New Rim." Further trials were conducted at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in the U.S. in 1950 with the older cartridge. New tests of the .280/30 were conducted in Belgium in the same year. But it was apparent that the Americans were unwaveringly devoted to the .30 caliber. The U.S. had the cartridge, and F.N. had the rifle. They were wedded on March 14, 1952.

In preliminary tests at Aberdeen, the American T44 and T47 rifles malfunctioned badly, but the new FAL prototype digested the American ammo without a hiccup. On the spot, the U.S. Ordinance Dept. offered F.N. a contract for 10 prototypes at $10,000 each! The offer was accepted immediately. To make a long story short, some American-made FALs (T48s) and prototype M14 rifles (T44s) went head to head in extensive trials. The U.S. finally opted for the M14 in 1957, not because it was clearly superior to the FAL, but ostensibly because it could be made on easily modified M1 rifle manufacturing equipment. The U.K. caved on the cartridge, and in 1954 adopted the FAL in the new 7.62 x 51 NATO round developed by the Americans. As manufactured in the U.K., the FAL utilized inch measurements...