

'YOU GETS JUST WHAT YOU PAYS FOR... ..'

by Capt (Retd) Peter Laidler, REME, Armourer at the Weapon Collection

A short but fascinating insight into a very special gun.



Come with me if you will, into room two of the Weapon Collection here at the Corps HQ at Warminster. Hand up anyone reading this whose mum has described value for money as '*...it's like shopping at Marks and Spencer. You gets just what you pays for.*' I use this same analogy when singing the praises of one particular great ball of fire on display at your weapon collection. And just what an exhibit it truly is. It's what the remainder of the world knows as the FN MAG-58. Or in REME technical language as the Guns, machine, L7A1 and 2 or to you and every other soldier as simply the tried and trusted GPMG.

Getting a boy to do a mans job

During the early 60's Britain wished to replace the old tried and trusty belt fed .303" Vickers water-cooled medium machine gun that entered service in 1912 and was still on the front line, certainly in Malaya and Aden. It was VERY old but equally, VERY reliable although spares had not been produced since 1954. What we needed was a gun that was equally as tough, trusty and reliable as the Vickers. The truth was that we'd been looking to replace the Vickers since before the last war but events had enabled it to continue on. Indeed, it was mooted that the Czech ZGB33, the trusty Bren might replace it. But try as they might, a Bren, albeit a good gun, even with variables such as a lensatic sight or telescopic sight or bipod or anti-aircraft mount or quick change barrels - is still a Bren. Some wag even suggested that maybe the Czech ZB37, later produced as the heavy BESA tank machine gun might be a suitable replacement for the Vickers. We won't go into that any further but the phrase '*...popular as a snake in a rabbit hole*' seems appropriate! So it was a case of leaving the big stuff for the big boys that the trusty Vickers stayed.

This brings us up to the early 60's. However, by now, with advances in metallurgy and technology with regard to the dissipation of heat that there MIGHT be a gun that could replace both the Vickers and the trusty Bren light machine gun. One outstanding example was the German MG42 of course. There was a trawl to see what was on offer and several of the worlds sustained fire medium machine guns were put up for trial. Several were shoved into touch very quickly such as the Danish Madsen/Setter that was withdrawn quickly because it was unprepared for the harshness of the trials while the Swiss 55/2 could not be adapted to suit the UK requirements. The French AA-52 showed promise but was simply not as reliable as the remainder. The British offerings were a TADEN machine gun designed and developed at Enfield by Harold Turpin who found fame as the 'T' in Sten while the second British gun was the X11E1 which was in essence a belt fed Bren. Another contender was the US T161 E3. This was rejected by Britain for several reasons including the complicated quick change barrel system, constant volume gas system and was described as 'technically suspect' That's what we thought but this gun went on to become the US military M60 machine gun. What is not generally realised is that the gun that went on to eventually replace the M-60 was, you've guessed it, the FN MAG-58, albeit US made! And if it's good enough for Uncle Sam... ..

The belt fed Bren fell by the wayside as the external mechanism for lifting the belt just wasn't either reliable or man enough for the job in hand. The FN MAG was the only real choice...., and what a wise move. Sure, there were a few teething problems. For example, the bipod leg struts were flimsy and broke quickly. The feed cover axis studs were weak and soon collapsed but otherwise, it just went from strength to strength. There were some technical problems too. For example, the gas system was considered just TOO complicated. Britain subsequently purchased just over 600 or so guns from FN in Belgium and some of these very guns, identified by the markings BL62A followed by the sequential serial number are still in service.

A man to do a mans job

Retired Major Maurice Fogwell told the author that he was summonsed to the Director of Infantry's office one morning and the conversation went something like this:

D of Inf; I have to make a decision to the Minister of Defence at noon about which gun we're to take as our replacement for the Vickers and the Bren. What's it going to be?

MF; The FN MAG

D of Inf; It's very expensive, even if we make it at Enfield.

MF; The FN MAG

D of Inf; The licence alone will cost hundreds of thousands, are you aware of that?

MF; No, but the FN MAG

D of Inf; Every time we want to make a subtle change or simple modification, we're into big money. Some are already hankering to move the butt sling loop to the top. That's going to cost us!

MF; The FN MAG

D of Inf; The FN it is then. But before you leave, if this comes back to haunt me, I'll hang you up by your bicycles.

I didn't quite catch exactly what Maurice said, but it certainly sounded like bicycles!



'YOU GETS JUST WHAT YOU PAYS FOR... ..'

(continued)

The rights to manufacture the guns at Enfield were completed quickly and to the benefit of the UK. Simple reliability modifications, such as incorporating stronger bipod leg struts during manufacture were free of charge. What a bargain this gun was. It was during 1964 that the author got his first glimpse of the GPMG while an Armourer apprentice at Carlisle. It was with those now absolutely worn out trials guns that we were trained for 4 months under the eagle eyes of ex Armourer Warrant Officer Harry Weekes -, known to us apprentice boy soldiers as 'sir'. What Harry must have thought when he saw what was to replace the Bren and the Vickers is best left unsaid, but I recall him commenting that the gun, built to a price, using modern lightweight steel alloys, fabricated spring technology, high quality steel and chrome plating simply wouldn't last the course. As we dissected a gun piece by tiny piece I remember noticing that the body of the gun, its skeletal chassis, was riveted together as a testimony to its sound design. Vibration is the killer of welded joints while riveting keeps the whole of the frame as separate parts, allowing minute movement between the parts, rather like a living thing. This way, the trusty GPMG is allowed to expand and contract at different rates to suit its needs. It also allows the shock waves caused by firing, at ten times a second, to be absorbed. And when the rivets become loose, well the Armourers have special jigs to tighten or re-rivet them. Clever lads these designers at FN! And just to emphasise the point, some of these old ORIGINAL FN guns dating back to 1962 are still quietly doing the rounds giving sterling service with the British Army around the world, not least, here at Warminster. As for that complicated gas system, it certainly was! I just learned it by rote, parrot fashion sufficient to get me through my trade tests and only truly understood it recently when I took the time to skeletonise one on the milling machine!

By coincidence, the author's first posting from Boy Service was to the old School of Infantry here at Warminster where trials were being undertaken to see whether the final hurdle to the GPMG fully entering service could be eliminated. The Vickers still reigned supreme in the overhead fire role due to its rigidity on the old solid Mk4B tripod. One wag commented that the Vickers tripod was made by the people that built Stonehenge! You've guessed it already The Canadian designed, buffered GPMG was more than a match for the Mk4B Vickers tripod and in 1968, this simple fact spelled the end of the road for the Vickers. The last Vickers saw service in 1968 with the Parachute Regiment in Aden and the Gurkhas in Borneo.

It wasn't the end for the L4 Bren LMG though because while the GPMG was good, it was a bit of a handful in the jungles of Malaya and Borneo. But that's another story.

Superlatives are not sufficient to describe the trusty L7 GPMG. If the Sterling sub-machine gun was recently described as the Land-Rover of the small-arms world, the GPMG must be the Centurion Tank of the small-arms world. Whatever you do to it, whatever else you put on it, however much you neglect some important piece of maintenance, it simply carries on without a moan or wince of pain just like a faithful old beagle. Some have a recorded history of having fired many hundreds of thousands of rounds. One FN manufactured gun known to the author and captured in the Falklands, now used by a UK engineering manufacturer as a test bed, is so old that they re-started its life history again after a recent REME workshop rebuild at 210,000 rounds SINCE CAPTURE! They've simply been asked to do and been fitted to everything.

They've been designated L3's, L7's, L8's L36's L37's L41's, L45's and L46's. There have been barrels with fume extractors, different gas blocks, with and without sights. Guns with wooden butts, plastic butts, plain buffers, twin Vickers type grips, solenoid triggers and manual triggers, standard covers, tank 'feed-stop' covers Add to that C2 sights and night sights and the variables are simply endless. But remember this. As a testament to the sound time served engineering principles, skills of the designers and those who maintain them, while the variables all look slightly different, under the skin, they are all the same.

That's really brought the remarkable life of this little gun to an end, but given that it's official entry into UK Military service was in 1964, one thing has eluded it. Longevity! The longest serving bit of kit to date has been the Bren (with 66 years unbroken service from August 1938 to February 2002 followed by the Vickers). But with 40 years already under its GPMG belt, is there a slight chance that in 26 years time the GPMG will surpass it? If not, it'll certainly go into history as one of the greats but I've a warm feeling that someone who is joining the Army today will still be firing the GPMG when he retires in 2031



A corner of Room 2 of the Weapons Collection

It does just what it says on the tin (gunners comment)

So let's wallow in a bit of nostalgia for a minute. Every time I chance to fire a GPMG, it brings a warm glow to my insides. Now come in a bit closer and don't tell anyone or I might get into trouble. While on the ranges recently, accompanied by my little boy Robert, from his school CCF, I let him fire a GPMG. After all, it's only right that every 13 year old cadet should be able to proudly say "...I've fired a GPMG". Of myself, I recall recently sitting feet dangling into the fire trench watching a GPMG firing great long sustained-fire bursts. I idly commented to the gun commander "...great bit of kit isn't it?" He answered with a smug satisfied smile "Yep, does just what it says on the tin!"

Well, we've sung its praises, praised its reliability and lavished the same praise on its build and quality so it's only right that we draw attention to its vices too. If you know of any, please let me know Oh, and while we're here, let me ask you just one final question. Don't you just wish that those remarkable people who designed and perfected the magnificent FN MAG-58 GPMG had designed and built your car too?

Ed-

Any views on this article. There could be some Ex-MMG (Vickers) Instructor who may like to comment!