



AK vs AR



Pat McNamara (Mac) is a highly experienced military veteran, instructor and author of several books.



DO YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW TO SPARK A LIVELY DEBATE? Just ask a couple of gun guys, "Which is better, the AK-47 or the M16?"

These two military classics and their descendants have squared off in countless conflicts around the world. Over the years there has been an endless discussion over which rifle is more effective, more reliable, more durable.

No matter on which side of the debate you find yourself, there's one thing you have to admit: the

semi-automatic version of the AK-47 and the civilian edition of the M16—the AR-15—are both enjoying unprecedented popularity in this country.

We decided to put a typical example of each gun through a tactical course to see how they would fare. To do so, we headed to The Range Complex in North Carolina, one of the premier firearms training facilities in the country, with four experienced, knowledgeable shooters. Three are former military and one is law enforcement SWAT. All have been competitive shooters and all are currently elite firearms instructors. Here's how it went down.

1. Eddie, a combat veteran decorated for valor, produces archery television programs aside from his busy schedule as a firearms instructor.

2. Military veteran Greg Wilson is a long-time U.S. Army firearms instructor who now teaches at The Range Complex.





Police officer, Bryan Bailey, is the head firearms instructor and member of the emergency response team for the Fayetteville, N.C. police department.



“IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT BRYAN, AN AR GUY, SCORED BETTER ON FOUR OF THE SIX STAGES WITH THE AK THAN HE DID WITH THE AR.”

The Basics Of The Battle

Before you skim to the end to see which gun was the winner, let me save you the trouble. We're not making any final proclamations. That's not what we set out to do. We didn't realistically expect to draw any carved-in-stone conclusions based on such a limited trial.

We knew from the beginning this was not going to be a scientific evaluation. How could it be when we had only four shooters, a few handfuls of ammo and one day to get the job done?

To publish the shooting results in terms of scores wouldn't have much meaning either. It should be noted that Bryan, an AR guy, scored better on four of the six stages with the AK than he did with the AR. But to conclude anything based solely on that would not be valid.

Instead, we approached it this way: Each shooter would shoot each stage of the course twice, once with the AK (an I.O. Inc. Sporter) and once with the AR (a Daniel Defense DDM4V1.) At the end of the day, we'd all discuss our impressions of the guns.

Some of the criteria we'd use in taking a close look at each weapon would be accuracy; reliability; sights; ergonomics; control manipulation; intuitiveness and recoil management.

So, after running around in the hot sun, after firing these guns as quickly and accurately as possible, what did our four experts, Mac, Eddie, Bryan and Greg think of these two platforms?

Accuracy

Each shooter fired 10 rounds from each gun at 100 meters from the prone position using only the iron sights on the guns. This was done primarily for familiarization, because none of the four had ever fired these particular guns.

Because we devised the shooting course to focus more on the handling characteristics of the guns, 100 meters was the longest distance to a target on the day.

“For today's range fire, both platforms are accurate,” Mac said.

Eddie agreed. “I'd say they're accurate for the distance we were shooting.”

For the record, Bryan achieved the best group of the day by placing in shots into 3 ¼ inches, and he did it with the AK.

The courses of fire selected for our tactical shoot focused on the close-quarters handling characteristics of the guns tested.



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Reliability

The shooters said both guns were generally reliable. The AR experienced trouble at one shooting stage, but the problem was traced to bent lips on a particular magazine. The AK doubled once on Greg during the bullseye stage.

“For me, the AK was a little prone to malfunction with a little side torque on the magazine,” said Eddie.

Failures to feed occurred for him during the Contact Right vehicle stage as he rested the gun between the windshield and hood of the car.

“It didn’t happen with the AR, even though I used the same firing position, low over the vehicle,” he said. “You’re not getting the same thing with the AR magazines because they seat so much further up in the magazine well.”

Sights

Evaluating the sights on the two guns was a bit like comparing apples to oranges.

“I had a tough time picking up the front sight on the AK,” said Greg. “The AR wasn’t a problem because I was looking through a peep sight. There were a lot of times with the AK’s v-notch setup when I was actually looking at one of the wings on the front sight as opposed to the true front sight.”

Could it be that the AR’s peep sight is more natural to operate than the AK’s open sights?

“Could be,” said Mac, “but I don’t have a million rounds through an AK like I do with an AR.”



BOTH PLATFORMS HAVE BEEN PROVEN OVER TIME, BEEN PROVEN IN COMBAT. THEY'RE BOTH GOOD PLATFORMS. THEY WILL PERFORM AS WELL AS THE SHOOTER ALLOWS THEM TO PERFORM.” —MAC

The Rifles: BACK TO THE BASICS

We wanted the rifles used in our tactical test to be basic models. After all, we were out to evaluate the guns, not a lot of fancy accessories.

For the AK, we chose an I.O. Inc. Sporter AK-47 with a fixed stock in the traditional 7.62x39 chambering. For the AR, we chose a Daniel Defense DDM4V1 chambered in the usual 5.56x45.

The optic and foregrip were removed from the AR before the shoot. The AK was tested with the standard notch rear sight, while the AR relied on its aperture sight.



The I.O. Inc. Sporter AK-47 held its own against the newer design of the AR-15.

The Daniel Defense DDM4V1 was the AR-15 used in the tactical shoot.



The Range Complex (TRC) is a premier shooting and training facility and sits on nearly 1,000 acres near Fayetteville, N.C.



Ergonomics

The fit of the AK's fixed stock was obviously a problem for Greg, who is 6 foot, 3 inches.

"The AK had the short forearm that crowds you in instead of being able to get out further on the gun," he said. "The biggest thing for me is that the buttstock is too short. I had to really creep my head back to stay off the receiver. Even with fixed AR buttstocks, the A2 and the A1, I don't have that issue."

Eddie also mentioned how the short handguard of the AK affected the forward hand positions.

"Because of the exposed gas tube and the amount of heat up there, you're kind of limited in what you can do," he said.

Control Manipulation

The issue of control was a hot topic.

"The trigger wasn't horrible with the AK," said Greg. "They were comparable. I could shoot both triggers well. The AR's safety, though, was hands-down much more ergonomic, much easier to manipulate in between positions or when doing reloads. The AK, just the way it's set up, is not conducive to really using the safety."

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Eddie seemed to think the armies that use an AK find a way around the issue of the safety lever.

"The safety on the AK is designed for a conscript army," he said. "Typically they run with the magazine in the gun with no round in the chamber and the safety off. So when contact is made or when they perceive they're about to make contact, the first thing that happens is that they rack the bolt to put a round in the chamber. The first click is automatic and you don't see them aim too much. I mean most times you don't even see a buttstock on the rifle.

"I think maybe they went to that method because they were having such problems with guys using it, because it's not ergonomic to manipulate the safety under pressure. It's much easier just to grab and pull than it is to manipulate the safety and then get your hand back in there."

As a police officer and SWAT team member, Bryan saw the inability to manipulate the AK's safety as a big concern.

"Liability-wise for me that would make the AK a no-go right out of the gate," he said.

Differences in magazine changes were noticed not just because the shooters had more experience with an AR than an AK.

"I can release the magazine with my strong hand on the AR, and it drops while I'm going for another mag," said Greg. "With the AK, you have to manually remove the (empty) magazine with your support hand, then insert the (full) magazine. It's a two-step process instead of a combined one-step process."

Mac pulled out his fresh AK mag first and then pulled the empty mag out with the back of his hand.

"You always want to be doing a magazine change when you want to rather than when you have to," Mac said. "That being said, you always reach for your food (ammo) first. So I was grabbing, making sure I had food, and then dumping."

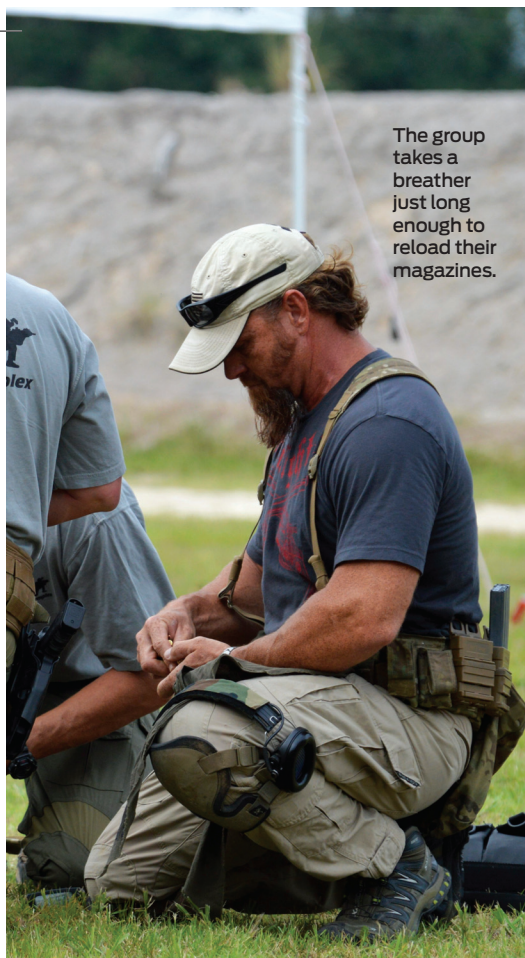
Bryan encountered a problem with the mag release on the AR, which was an extended, ambi release, not a stock release.

"It caused me to lose the mag when I was coming out of the car," he said. "The way I've been taught to manipulate the gun in the car was by the front of the mag well, so it's shorter. When I was coming out, my thumb hit the mag release. I had to reseat the magazine so it wouldn't fall on the ground."



1. Bryan Bailey shoots the I.O. Inc. Sporter during the bullseye stage. Using this AK, he turned in the best group of the day (Nine shots into 3 1/4 inches at 100 meters.)

2. Greg Wilson shoots over the hood of a car in the Contact Right stage.



The group takes a breather just long enough to reload their magazines.

The Courses Of Fire Kept The Shooters On The Move

We met with the TRC staff to discuss how we should set up our AK vs. AR tactical course.

It was agreed that to get some impressions of how these guns perform as intended, the stages of fire should feature plenty of movement and in-close, fast shooting.

We wanted the four shooters to exert themselves physically while they raced against the clock and each other to bring the guns to their shoulders and get off shots quickly and accurately.

These are the stages we included in the tactical course:

■ 1. Bullseye

This was the quick warm-up to give the shooters a chance to see where each gun was hitting. Each shooter fired 10 rounds through each of the two guns at 100 yards from the prone position using only iron sights.

■ 2. The Scrambler

For this stage, the shooters loaded three magazines with two, three and four rounds respectively for a total of nine shots to make the required seven hits.

At the fire command they had to turn, run to a barricade and, from a position of cover, engage three metal targets with one round each at 25 yards. Then they would run to a second barricade where they had to make four hits on a single metal target, also at 25 yards.

■ 3. Grid Of Fire

Plastic cones were placed on the range in a grid pattern from 25 to 10 yards. The shooters had to run forward, laterally and backward from cone to cone and fire two rounds from each station with one magazine change for a total of 16 rounds.

■ 4. Set It Off

Here the shooters loaded three magazines of three rounds each for a total of nine rounds. The shooters raced back and forth between two barrels and were required to make one hit on a target 25 yards down range from each barrel before moving to the next for a total of five shots. A five-second bonus was given for each bullet left over.

■ 5. Contact Right

This stage simulated that the vehicle you were in became disabled and you were taking enemy fire from the right side. The shooters loaded three magazines of five rounds each for a total of 15 rounds. On the fire command, the shooters got out of the driver's seat, and fired five rounds from the front of the vehicle, five rounds under the vehicle and five rounds from the rear of the vehicle at targets 25 yards distant.

■ 6. The Shoot House

This stage simulated a hostage rescue scenario. Shooters were allowed two magazines of 10 rounds each. One at a time, the shooters entered the building that contained one hallway and four rooms. They had to engage eight targets with two rounds each without hitting any of the "hostages" partially covering the targets.



Bryan fires the AK from the barricade as Mac runs the timer.

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Mac sprawls out over the hood of the car to stay low and aggressive.

Recoil Management (Sight Recovery)

Managing recoil and the ability to regain a sight picture shot to shot wasn't an issue with any of the shooters with either of the guns.

"If you noticed, when we all shoot, we're aggressive in our stances, whether it's at a barrier or standing or even in the prone," Eddie said. "We're on the gun pretty hard; our weight's shifted forward. All that helps with recoil management, which allows us to shoot a little bit faster. It's because of our technique which allows us to recover a lot faster on the gun."

Recoil was mitigated by the proper technique of everybody here, said Greg. "If you take a more amateur shooter, you're going to see more recoil issues with the AK than with the AR."

Final Thoughts

Although we didn't declare an official winner or draw any conclusions from the day's shooting, we received their final thoughts.

"I think you have to consider that both guns are rack-grade guns with rack-grade ammo," said Bryan. "The AK is as good as it's going to get in the form we got today. It was probably at the peak of its performance. The AR has unlimited potential to go beyond that."

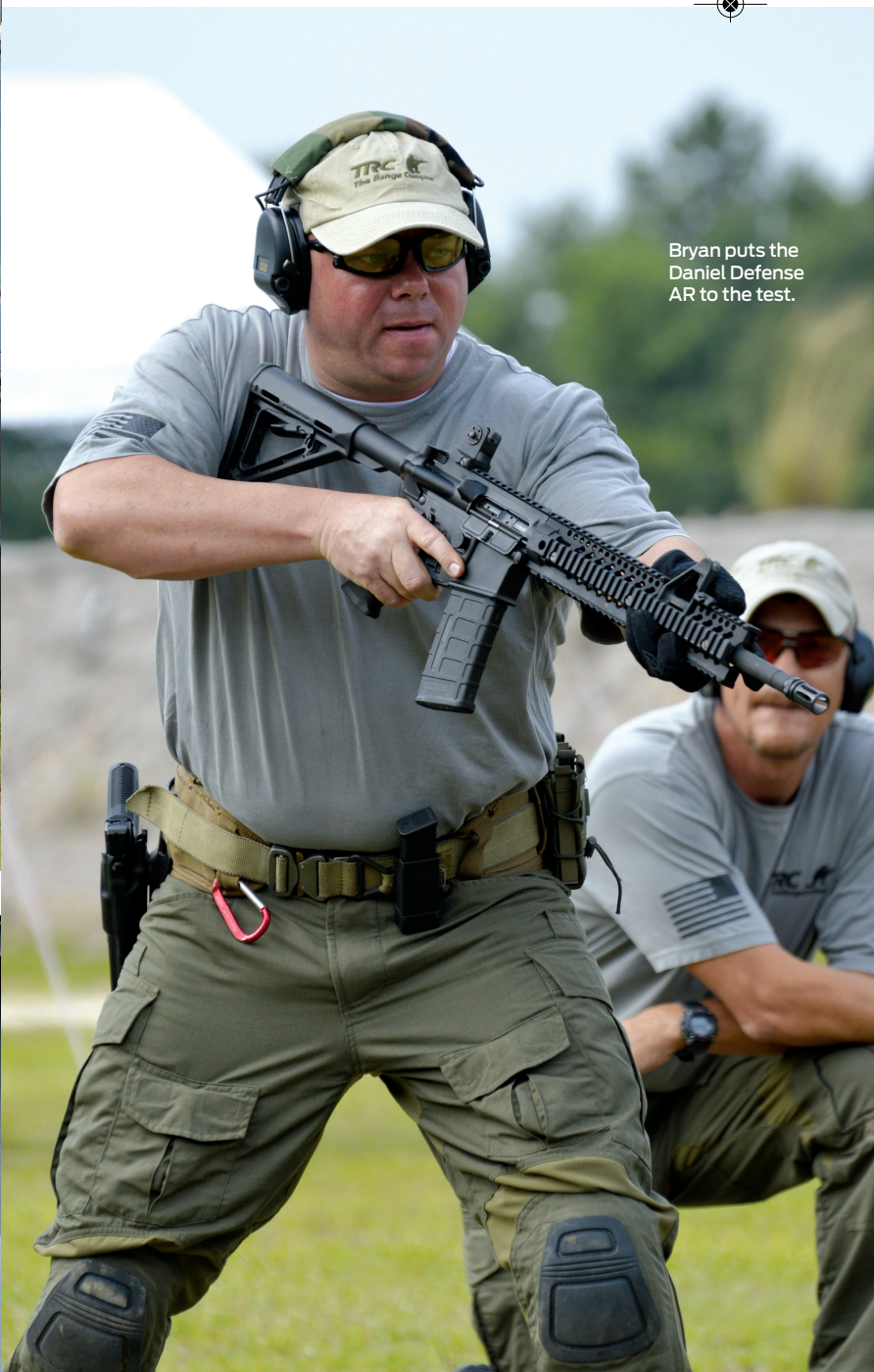
Mac said they are both good platforms.

"Both platforms have been proven over time, been proven in combat," said Mac. "They will perform as well as the shooter allows them to perform."



Mac fires under the car during the Contact Right stage. The car was low to the ground and dust kicked up as the shooters fired, adding to the difficulty of this stage.

"THE AR'S SAFETY, THOUGH, WAS HANDS-DOWN MUCH MORE ERGONOMIC, MUCH EASIER TO MANIPULATE IN BETWEEN POSITIONS OR WHEN DOING RELOADS." —GREG



Bryan puts the Daniel Defense AR to the test.



Eddie maintains an aggressive shooting stance as he fires the AR from the barricade.

The Range Complex

Serious Training For Serious Purposes

Simply put, The Range Complex (TRC) is one of the finest firearms training facilities in the country.

TRC sits on nearly 1,000 acres near Fayetteville, North Carolina, just 18 miles from Fort Bragg and 90 miles from Camp Lejeune. That's important because military units have often conducted training operations at the facility.

The training site was once owned and operated by TigerSwan, the world-wide, high-risk security outfit founded by elite military veterans to serve and protect those who must travel to the most dangerous parts of the world.

"TigerSwan divested its interest in the facility to concentrate on its overseas concerns," said David Cook, TRC's general manager.

He said that a group of investors bought the facility and it's been operating as The Range Complex since March, 2014.

The facility offers a prime training ground for elite military and law enforcement units, but it's open to civilians as well. There is open enrollment for many of the rifle and pistol courses offered. That gives civilians the opportunity to train under some of the best instructors our military has produced.

TRC has regular hours for informal target practice as well.

Here are some of the things TRC has to offer:

There are two 100-meter x 40-meter flat ranges, surrounded by berms 15-feet high x 31-feet wide (measured at the base) on three sides. They were designed from their inception to comply with Department of Defense safety regulations and Surface Danger Zone (SDZ) standards.

One of those ranges is designated as the Sportsman's Range and features 15 pistol and 10 rifle covered shooting stations with benches and portable target stands.

For longer distance shooting, there is a separate 600-meter range with reactive MOA-sized steel.

TRC has two CQB live-fire shoot houses with ability to conduct a sniper shot prior to breaching. The shoot houses feature catwalks to monitor the action. Cameras can be installed for training purposes as well.

The shoot houses are built with the latest shock-absorbing concrete (SACON) technology, which traps the bullets and prevents ricocheting and fragmenting.

It has buildings for SIMunitions training and two classrooms that will seat 32 students each.

It provides a weapons cleaning area equipped with a solvent tank and a compressor. There is a weapons and ammunition storage magazine on the premises that meets Department of Defense standards.

TRC has plenty of elbow room to conduct exercises for land navigation, dog search operations, search and recovery, active shooter and other training.

They even have a pond, 100 x 50 meters and 20 feet deep at the center for dive and zodiac boat operations.

The best part is that you don't have to be a government operator to train there.

"If you're going to make the investment in a firearm, you need to make the investment in the instruction," said Cook, himself a retired sergeant major (22 years with U.S. Army Special Forces, 14 years with 1st SFOD-D.)

"With firearms, where the margin of error is slim and the stakes are high, you need to learn from competent sources," he said. "Wisdom isn't free. Here at TRC we have the expertise and facilities to safely and effectively train a person to any desired skill level."

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Meet The SHOOTERS



Mac is all business as he enters the life-fire house. He took each drill as a serious training exercise.



Surprise visitor. Greg enters the shoot house door to rescue the hostages and take out the bad guys in this drill.



Not bothering to knock, Eddie clears this room of the shoot house.

PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHUTZ

Meet The Shooter

Pat McNamara

1

He is one of those people with an almost explosive intensity about him. When he says something, he means it and he's ready to stand by it. But you quickly understand he can transition from words to action in a heartbeat. With him there's no backing down. You'd never misjudge that. If he's involved, he's in it to win it.

Pat McNamara or Mac as everyone calls him, has 22 years of U.S. Army Special Operations experience, more than half of that with the 1st SFOD-D. He has extensive experience in hostile fire zones in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

He served on the Army's premier hostage rescue unit as a sergeant major. He also served as his Unit's Marksmanship NCO, he ran regular shooting matches to encourage marksmanship fundamentals and competitiveness.

Now 49 and retired from active duty, he teaches military and police units as well as civilians what he has learned through his hard-fought experiences about marksmanship and combat tactics.

But Mac is not just bravado and brawn. He is thoughtful, analytical in his training approach. Over the years, he has developed a methodology in his training that requires students to read situations and to think on their feet.

He's not one to sit still for long.

"I'm hobby-heavy," he said. "I run 30 to 40 courses a year across the country."

Some of that is through his own company, TMACS, Inc. (Tactics, Marksmanship, Adventure, Concepts, Security.) He also writes a regular physical training column for a weaponry magazine.

His book, "Sentinel – How to be the agent in charge of your own protection detail," was another of his passionate endeavors.

"It's got everything in it," he said, "from home defense to safe driving to combat strength training to hand-to-hand combat to shooting to safe travel to situational awareness."

He is also the author of T.A.P.S. (Tactical Application of Practical Shooting), volumes 1 and 2.

"It's a nuts and bolts range guide," he said. "I'm working on T.A.P.S. 3 right now."

Meet The Shooter

Greg Wilson

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He is tall and thin and speaks slowly with a Southern drawl only when he has something of value to say. Then you pay attention because you just might learn something from this modern-day Gary Cooper.

Greg Wilson, 45, is a 22-year U.S. Army veteran and a firearms instructor with vast experience and perspective.

"I was an electronics technician, and I worked military intelligence," he said. "I was part of the fielding agent for the Predator (unmanned aerial vehicle.) I worked on the Predator Project before the Air Force even owned it."

In his last 14 years of service, he was a member of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit (AMU).

"I was a 3-gun competitor and a pistol competitor in bullseye and USPSA," he said, "and I was the platoon sergeant for the action shooting team and the service pistol team while I was there."

While assigned to AMU, he instructed military personnel and civilians in both tactical and competitive marksmanship.

"I taught for years," he said. "I was the NCO IC for the training section for five to six years."

While deployed to Afghanistan, he developed marksmanship training plans for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Coalition Forces (CF).

"When I was over there, that was the AMU's mission: to train the Afghan National Army and to train the Coalition Forces on how to train the Afghans."

When he retired from military service, he started working for TigerSwan, the high-risk security firm that previously managed what is now The Range Complex (TRC) firearms training facility in North Carolina.

He is still active in firearms competition, shooting in the metallic division of the Bianchi Cup and in NRA Pistol bullseye matches.

Meet The Shooter

Eddie

3

He carefully measures and weighs his words. You will know only what he wants you to know about him. He appears comfortable and relaxed, but it's not because he's a casual and laid-back person. It's because after what he's experienced and lived through, everything else comes comparatively easy, a piece of cake.

Eddie, 45, would rather not give his last name because, you see, there are certain covert things with which he has been and/or perhaps still is a participant. In any case, not wanting that kind of man angry with me, I am respecting his wishes.

Eddie is a 23-year U.S. Army Special Operations veteran, who finished his career as an assault troop sergeant major.

He has extensive combat experience in Central America, the Balkans, and from multiple tours in the Middle East. He is the recipient of two Bronze Stars for valor along with four other valor awards and was presented the Purple Heart.

He has excellent credentials as an instructor because of his extensive operational and leadership experience in conducting and supervising low visibility operations to leading assault troops in numerous combat operations.

He was hired as an independent contractor to teach rifle and pistol courses at The Range Complex in North Carolina, starting back in 2010 when the facility was still part of TigerSwan.

He travels to work with police SWAT teams across the country and sometimes partners with a friend to work with professional sports athletes doing team building, professional development, leadership and psychological work.

He's an avid hunter, but despite all of his time behind firearms, he has hunted exclusively with a bow for the past 19 years. He is a field producer who hunts and films for Elite Archery's television show, Respect the Game, which airs on the Sportsman Channel. On occasion he guides deer hunts in the Midwest.

But he's careful not to let all of these activities interfere with his family life.

"I spent 10 months out of 12 deployed for most of my career, so now I'm reversing that and I'm trying to spend more time with the family," he said. "My wife—she's the glue. She kept things going when I was gone. And now as much as I can help it, I try to reverse things. So if I work a week here, I try to spend two weeks at home."



On the clock. Bryan hustles between barrels with the AK-47 in a shooting stage called "Set It Off."

Meet The Shooter

Bryan Bailey

4

His muscular arms are as big as my legs. Yet he will remain calm as long as you remain calm. While you're talking with him, he is cautiously studying you, sizing you up, anticipating your next move with perhaps just a bit of suspicion. That's what cops do.

Bryan Bailey, 40, has served as a police officer for the City of Fayetteville, North Carolina Police Department since 2003.

"I spent four years on patrol and four years as a detective," he said. "I've been assigned to training now for three years."

Aside from being the department's lead firearms instructor, he's also been a member of and an instructor for the department's Emergency Response Team for more than eight years. He's also an instructor at The Range Complex.

His list of training credentials is extensive, and he has been a lifelong competitive shooter.

"I started shooting competitively (3-gun and USPSA) in local matches here when I was a teenager," he said, "which for me was lucky because I shot matches with guys like Kyle Lamb and Larry Vickers. Those guys shot locally here before they made it big. Ken Hackathorn would come down here to shoot matches. Mike Voigt and Bennie Cooley would come and shoot. So I was fortunate that in my formative years I got to shoot with a lot of those guys."



Mac moved with lightning speed, making "kills" on the targets and rescuing the "hostages" as he cleared the live-fire shoot house.

AR-15



PHOTO COURTESY OF DANIEL DEFENSE

"There were no surprises," said Greg. "Both guns performed well."

Eddie agreed. "The AR has more pros," he said, "but it comes down to the shooter."

Outfitting the AK with an adjustable stock, longer handguard and peep sights might have made this a more balanced contest. Still, the experts agreed that much of it comes down to the importance of training and practice with whichever gun you choose.

"If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got," said Mac.

"Don't expect to rise to greatness as the stress level gets turned

up," said Eddie.

"It's the shooter, not the gun," said Greg. "If you're not a good shooter with an AR, you're not going to be a good shooter with an AK and vice versa." **AK/AR**

About the Author: Steven Paul Barlow, a retired sergeant/station commander and former firearms instructor with the New York State police, is the editor. An avid hunter and firearms enthusiast, he has been writing on outdoor topics for more than 30 years.