



Notes from the Bunker

Roleplaying Your Favorite Gun

by Rich Redman

"Six-shooter, huh? Lots of old-timers carry those."

-- Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in Lethal Weapon (Warner Brothers, 1987)

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**, and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

This month's topic is choice of personal firearms. The **d20 Modern** game offers a great many weapons to choose from, but which one would your hero select, based on his personality and profession? This month's *Notes from the Bunker* offers some practical advice about weapon choice based on your hero's combat style.

Introduction

This column represents a distillation of the kind of advice that I, as the "expert" on firearms for my group, provide when other players (most often my wife) are buying equipment and want the "right" guns for their heroes. The information provided here goes beyond the descriptive comments about specific weapons given in the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. It deals not so much with the numbers as with what's important to your hero, and what those values mean in terms of weapon selection.

If you're the firearms expert in your group, this kind of information will help you assist your fellow players. If you're a GM, you can use this advice to equip a GM character in a way that sends a clear message to your players.

Significance of Equipment

How you dress, what you say, how you pronounce words, and how you wear your hair all combine to project an image of who you are and how you feel about yourself. That's true of your hero as well. The challenge is that although you can clearly imagine your hero, you rarely see images of him or her -- unless you, or someone in your group, has artistic talent. Ask someone in your group what your hero typically wears, and you're likely to get a blank look. Ask the same person what equipment or items your hero typically carries, and you'll probably get a pretty accurate list. That's because items have a real, measurable impact on play. They protect the hero in combat, deal damage, and provide bonuses on various die rolls during the game. Clothes and hairstyle don't usually have such quantifiable effects.

But clothing and equipment do send a message about a hero's profession, no matter what game you play. In the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, for example, a player character who wears leather armor, carries a rapier, and is occasionally seen using thieves' tools almost certainly has levels of rogue. In the **d20 Modern** game, a hero who carries a medical kit and wears a uniform and latex gloves is almost certainly some kind

of paramedic or doctor (or is cleverly disguised as such). Most of us can draw this sort of conclusion either from experience with our chosen game or from everyday life. Few of us, however, understand the choice of firearms in the same sort of depth. That's where this column can help.

Forget the Numbers

A quick survey of the firearms presented in Chapter Four: Equipment in the *d20 Modern Core Rulebook* reveals that they all have the same threat range, and all firearms of the same caliber deal the same damage. The significant details are range increment, rate of fire, magazine, and size. Those aspects have an impact on play, but they don't impact roleplaying. That arrangement was a purposeful design decision for the game. Keeping firearms similar to each other allows players to focus more on roleplaying and less on the details of combat. Thus, if you're the firearms expert in your group, pay enough attention to the numbers to make sure your team can function in combat. Otherwise, don't worry about them.

Long Arm or Small Arm?

A hero who carries a small arm most likely plans to be in combat shooting engagements, generally at ranges of 20 to 30 feet. Most police forces in the United States consider 21 feet to be the "magic number" for range because a suspect at that distance or closer can probably strike an officer before the officer's firearm can prevent it. Very few military or police units train their members to fire handguns at targets farther away than 30 feet.

Because long arms are so much harder to conceal than small arms, possession of one indicates that the hero expects to be able to bear it openly. Such a hero might be a police officer, a soldier, a hunter, or a particularly brazen criminal with utter contempt for law enforcement. A hunter may carry a revolver or an autoloader as well.

Based on the above logic, a hero with a military, law-enforcement, or criminal background is likely to carry a small arm. She may carry a long arm as well, or she may possess one but leave it in the trunk of her car until needed. The same is true for GM characters.

Concealment or Damage?

Several weapons, most notably the Pathfinder .22 revolver, the Derringer .45, and the SITES M9 autoloader, are purposely designed for concealed carrying. Secret agents, undercover police officers, and criminals hoping to slip a firearm past a pat-down search are all likely to carry concealed weapons. The tradeoff for easier concealment is that such weapons either deal less damage or carry less ammunition than comparable firearms. The choice, therefore, is between concealment and dealing lots of damage.

Smaller, more concealable small arms are the best choice for a hero who is (or was) an undercover cop, a spy, or a criminal more interested in talking than shooting. A uniformed law-enforcement officer, a brazen criminal, or a hero who expects circumstances to improve weapon concealment potential (for instance, someone who plans to sit in a car and hold the weapon below window-level), probably wants a large small arm that deals more damage. GMs may also want to consider the value of concealed weapons because they can make for very nasty surprises in the hands of tricky GM characters.

What's the Best Mechanism?

The *d20 Modern* game offers weapons with any of three basic mechanisms: single shot, semiautomatic, and automatic. The choice of mechanism says a lot about what considerations are most important to the wielder.

Single Shot

Very few heroes need or want single shot weapons, but sometimes there is no choice. A hero who wants a concealable pistol that still deals a lot of damage carries the .45 Derringer, despite its single shot rate of fire.

Semiautomatic

Also called self-loading, semiautomatic weapons fire as fast as the hero can pull the trigger. In the game, the actual number of shots per round depends on the hero's Base Attack Bonus (+6 or higher BAB needed for multiple shots) and whether or not the hero uses the Double Tap feat. Heroes carrying small arms usually prefer this mechanism. Hunters and marksmen prefer semiautomatic weapons because they know that circumstances may require several shots.

Automatic

Automatic fire allows a shooter to put a lot of lead downrange very quickly. Unlike the other two mechanisms, effective automatic fire requires investing in an additional feat: Advanced Firearms Proficiency. Heroes who prefer automatic weapons may also want to take the Burst Fire and Strafe feats. Those choices represent a strong commitment to combat.

Most automatic personal weapons allow the hero to choose either semiautomatic or automatic fire. Hunters and marksmen generally regard automatic weapons with disdain, but many counterterrorist units around the world equip their snipers with modified assault rifles specifically because of this additional flexibility. In any case, automatic weapons are for heroes who relish the opportunity to trade shots with the bad guys.

Other Considerations

Once you've chosen between a long arm and a small arm and decided on a mechanism, there are still a few other points to consider.

Revolvers or self-loading pistols?

Many people consider revolvers old-fashioned, but the truth is that these weapons have fewer moving parts than self-loading pistols do and therefore tend to be more reliable. However, the line between the two weapon types has been blurring for decades. Many revolvers now carry more than six shots, and self-loading pistols have become more and more reliable. The choice of a self-loading pistol usually indicates a more progressive hero, or one with a background in either the military or law enforcement. Self-loading pistols also tend to be more expensive than revolvers, so possession of the former may also indicate better economic status.

Machine pistol, submachine gun, or assault rifle?

Assuming that your hero takes the feats required to be accurate and effective with automatic fire, the choice of weapon then boils down to concealment versus accuracy. Submachine guns are harder to conceal but tend to be more accurate. Machine pistols are easier conceal but tend to be less accurate. Assault rifles are designed for organizations whose members have the legal right to carry them openly, so concealment is less of a concern than accuracy, range, and lethality.

Groups such as the United States Secret Service favor machine pistols, military counterterrorist units favor submachine guns, and infantry and other conventional military units prefer assault rifles. Criminals favor whichever weapons they can get their hands on.

Rifle or shotgun?

Two factors are involved in this choice: intimidation value and range. The rifle has a longer range than the shotgun, but the shotgun looks more intimidating. In real-world situations, this intimidation value often results in confrontations ending without no shots fired at all. Hunters make the choice based on what they intend to shoot. Police and military personnel carry shotguns for close-range engagements (generally against unarmored opponents) and for their intimidation value. Police officers facing armored opponents usually opt for assault rifles. Recently, officers of the LAPD began carrying assault rifles in the trunks of their patrol cars because of the increase in the use of body armor among criminals.

Heavy Weapons

Possession of a heavy weapon usually indicates some military training. Most weapons in this category are as useful against vehicles as they are against people, and some are designed specifically for use against vehicles (the M72A3 LAW, for example). Using these weapons generally draws a lot of attention, either from law enforcement officials or from the opposition. Thus, a hero who carries or uses a heavy weapon is probably expecting a fight against some very tough opposition.

Accessories

In general, the more accessories you own and use, the more focused you are on your firearm. Very few serious shooters bother with pearl or ivory grips -- they leave such affectations to pimps and other criminals. On the other hand, chrome plating is very useful for heroes who expect to expose their firearms to salt water.

Summary

- Carry small arms if your hero expects short-range combat.
- Carry long arms if your hero expects to be able to carry a firearm openly.
- Carrying easily concealed firearms means sacrificing some damage potential.
- Semiautomatic weapons are usually the best choice for heroes who want to carry small arms.
- Possession of an automatic weapon indicates that the hero expects heavy combat.
- Automatic weapons require a considerable investment in feats before the user is truly proficient.
- Use of a revolver indicates a preference for simplicity and reliability.
- The choice of machine pistol, submachine gun, or assault rifle depends on which is more important: concealment or accuracy.

- A shotgun offers better intimidation value, but a rifle has longer range.
 - Heavy weapons represent an insane escalation in the level of violence, so using one means you're prepared for the consequences. Then again, maybe it just means you're crazy.
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About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to Wizards of the Coast RPG R&D department, he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast's Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer, having worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the ***d20 Modern Roleplaying Game***, the *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game*, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and performs yoga.

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