

RUGER MINI-14 VS. THE AR-15

And the Winner Is...

By Denny Hansen

The following evaluation is based on direct requests from *S.W.A.T.* readers. Hearing from friends, acquaintances and posting on bulletin boards that Ruger's Mini-14 is not as reliable or accurate as AR-15 rifles, our readers requested an impartial evaluation of the two rifles in a head-to-head comparison. The results may surprise some, while confirming others' opinions.

For the test I obtained a stainless steel Mini-14 from Ruger. The rifle came with the recently introduced factory synthetic stock and a 5-round magazine (catalog number KMINI-14/5P).

The AR used in the test was a pre-ban Olympic Arms CAR-15 with an 11.5-inch barrel and permanently attached 4.5-inch flash hider to make it comply with the Federal law requiring a 16-inch barrel. This rifle is basically stock with three exceptions. The bolt has been treated with Robar's NP-3. The rifle also has new green stocks from Rock River Arms and an Ashley tritium dot front sight.

Before going on to the field tests, let's look at some pros and cons of both rifles.

In terms of initial cost, the nod must go to the Mini-14. My favorite local gun shop lists the Mini-14 (as tested) at \$469. Their least expensive AR-15 is a post-ban gun carrying a price tag of \$795. A used pre-ban AR in like-new condition is listed for \$1,395—almost three times the cost of a new Mini-14.

When it comes to spare parts and repair, the scales tip in favor of the AR guns with numerous manufacturers making parts for them, not to mention surplus GI parts.

I, for one, don't consider magazines for semiautomatic arms to be "accessories." Without magazines the weapons become awkward single-shots. Here again, the AR-type rifles have a huge advantage over the Mini-14 as reliable 20 and 30-round mags are readily available at a reasonable price. I have seen non-

restricted factory high-capacity Mini-14 magazines listed for as high as \$120 each. A person who would buy three or four factory magazines would quickly see a diminishing return on the initial price of the rifle itself. With this in mind I obtained several "cheap" high-capacity magazines for the Mini-14 to see how they would work for the average guy on the street. More on this later.

For shooting up close in a CQB-type

environment, it is my opinion that the Mini-14 is better than the AR. This is due to the high sight/low bore line on the AR, which forces a shooter to aim high at close range. In the event a head shot is called for, a shooter must actually put the front sight at the very top of the head (or even slightly above) instead of holding dead on the target. For all intent and purposes, this is not a factor with the Mini-14 as its sights are mounted closer to the barrel.



The author practices getting quick hits on the target starting from the ready position.



Test guns were Ruger's new synthetic stocked, stainless steel Mini-14 and a pre-ban Olympic Arms CAR-15 with new green stocks from Rock River Arms.

Safeties are a toss up and depend completely on the individual. Personally, I like the way my thumb rides on the AR safety and allows me to keep my trigger finger straight along the trigger guard. I am acquainted with several individuals whom I consider experts, however, who swear by the Garand/M14-type inside-the-trigger-guard safety on the Mini. Ergonomically speaking, both are superb.

Only a fool goes into battle without making sure his firearm is charged and ready and I frequently press check any firearm I am carrying. From a tactical perspective, I like the Mini better than the AR when it comes to press checks. The Mini can be press checked—both visually and tactilely—while retaining a firing grip on the stock. Quietly pushing forward on the charging handle will ensure the round is fully chambered.

The AR, on the other hand, can be easily checked visually during daylight

while retaining a firing grip but is impossible to check by touch without much more manipulation. Also, due to the fashion in which an AR locks up, it may or may not easily go back into battery when the charging handle is released. This necessitates one to either use the forward assist or withdraw the bolt almost to the point of extraction and letting it slam forward—not a good idea if noise discipline is important.

In regards to changing magazines, a speed (combat) reload can be accomplished faster with the AR by all but the most skilled tacticians. In my hands a tactical reload is slightly faster with the AR, but the difference is so small as to negate any real advantage with either rifle. And as it pertains to self-defense, if you have a 20-round magazine in place how many times do you intend to miss?

OK, so much for the pros and cons. On to the test.

The ammunition in the test consisted of Black Hills 55-grain FMJ and reloads using homemade jacketed 55-grain bullets. For those who have not tried Black Hills' ammo, you need to have your local dealer get some for you. Regardless of caliber, this is some of the finest, most consistent ammo I have ever fired.

The home-brewed bullets use fired .22 Long Rifle cases swaged with lead cores on Corbin swaging equipment—a very economical way to burn a lot of .223 fodder.

I used GI 20 and 30-round magazines in the AR and a combination of factory, Ram-Line and USA 20 and 30-rounders in the Mini-14.

Since the AR has had thousands of rounds fired through it, the Mini-14 was given a 200 round break-in period to make the test fair. No malfunctions were experienced during the break-in.

The official test crew (my son Flint) and I fired both rifles at distances of 3, 15, 25, 50 and 100 yards. As expected, the Mini-14 was a little faster on simulated hostage targets up close as we did not need to slow down for the above-mentioned high sight/low bore line that the AR has. Groups averaging around an inch or so were common out to 25 yards. At 50 yards off hand, groups from the Mini-14 averaged just under 3 inches, with the AR doing slightly better with 2.4-inch groups.

With both of us firing from prone at 100 yards, Flint was able to keep the Mini-14's groups at around 6 inches, while I was only able to manage 8-inch groups. Changing to the AR, I was able to



The Mini's bolt hold-open device is a button located on the top left of the receiver.



The AR's bolt hold-open is located on the left side of the frame and also serves as a bolt release.



The magazine release for the Mini-14 is the lever-type, located behind the magazine.



The AR's magazine release is a button located on the right side of the receiver. For speed loads, the author feels this is a better system.

keep a 5-round string barely under six inches, while Flint inexplicably shot a larger group of 7 inches with the AR. This reversal of who shot better with what gun may be explained by the fact that Flint can't quite seem to get used the Ashley dot front sight, and I kept losing the Mini's stainless steel front sight against the light-colored target at that range.

During the test we burned a total of almost 1,500 rounds of ammunition, split evenly between the two rifles. Most of the shooting was done at less than 50 yards to simulate more realistic "real world" firing conditions. At times we shot so much, so fast that the barrels became too hot to touch.

To check the worst-case scenario, at one point we dropped about half a hand-

ful of loose dirt into the magazine well of each rifle and then shook each of them to distribute the dirt. After running a cleaning patch down the bore of each rifle to make sure the barrel was clean (no sense in being completely stupid and having a rifle blow up in your face) we attempted to fire a 20-round magazine rapidly through each. The Mini-14 ran without a malfunction. Much to my surprise, my usually malfunction-free AR burped on the third round, and did not go fully into battery.

During the test the only problem that I had with the Mini-14 was from one of the USA 30-round magazines. This magazine would feed one round, and fail to feed the second. This was repeated 15 times until the magazine was empty. I

"fixed" the questionable mag by placing it on a flat rock and stomping it flat. No more problems were experienced with it. I highly suggest doing this with any magazine that is not 100 percent reliable. The odds of it somehow getting mixed up with your good magazines is not a coincidence you want to chance with a defensive arm.

The Ruger factory, Ramline, and one of the USA magazines worked beautifully in the Mini-14. Incidentally, Ramline magazines work in both Mini-14's and AR-type guns with no modifications necessary—a bonus for those who own both type of rifles.

Overall, there is no clear "winner" in the Mini-14 versus AR-15 debate. Both have features I like and dislike. As far as person-



The Mini-14 safety is similar to the Garand, i.e. inside the trigger guard.



The AR's safety is a selector switch located on the left side of the frame and easily manipulated by a right-handed shooter's thumb. The author personally prefers this system.

al preference, I would take the AR, but then again I have a lot more trigger time behind that system and therefore more comfortable with it. A good friend of mine, who is a nationally known firearms instructor, told me he would take the Mini-14 over the AR any day of the week even if the Mini-14 was priced as high as the AR-15.

If you prefer the AR-15, fine. On the other hand, if you like the Mini-14 better, you need not apologize to anyone. Both are fine, reliable rifles. ●

SOURCES:

Sturm, Ruger & Company
 200 Ruger Road
 Prescott, AZ 86301
 (520) 778-6555

Olympic Arms, Inc.
 624 Old Pacific Highway S.E.
 Olympia, WA 98513
 (360) 459-7940

**Ashley Outdoors, Inc /
 AO Sight Systems**
 2401 Ludelle Street
 Fort Worth, TX 76105
 (888) 744-4880

Black Hills Ammunition
 P.O. Box 3090
 Rapid City, SD 57709-3090
 (605) 348-5150

The Robar Companies
 21438 N. 7th Ave., Ste. B
 Phoenix, AZ 85027
 (623) 581-2648

Rock River Arms, Inc.
 101 Noble Street
 Cleveland, IL 61241
 (309) 792-5780



The AR's front sight is enclosed and protected by "wings."



The Mini's front side is a simple ramp.

HARD FUN. Training with the best to beat the worst.

Tough drills, great instructors.






Hot? Dirty? Tired? Sleep fast. We go again tomorrow.

GUNSITE
 (520)636-4565 www.gunsite.com

CIRCLE #116 ON READER SERVICE CARD