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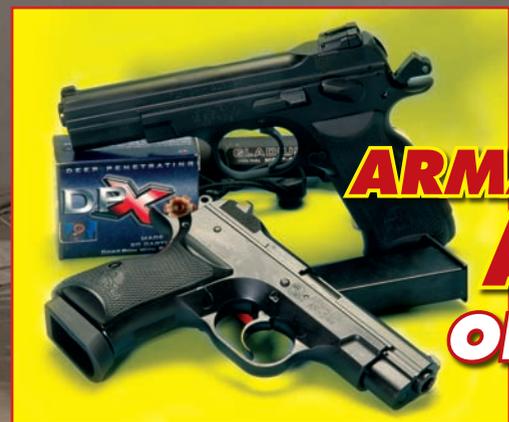
**HOLY GRAIL OF ARs
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The Sully Grail.
Photo by Jeff Randall.



HOLY GRAIL OF ARS

Quest Ends with Customized SLR15

» BY PATRICK A. ROGERS

The current market is close to being saturated with AR-type carbines/rifles.

The offerings run from high-end precision rifles to bottom of the barrel (no pun intended) guns that bear a superficial resemblance to a real gun, but without the quality.

The bent a particular company takes may be the result of multiple inputs, and these may run the full spectrum from ultra conservative to an echelon above reality. The cost may or may not be a reflection of the relative quality of the gun, but the proof is in the pudding: how it functions in real use.

A fact of life is that the average gun

owner shoots very little. That means that some makers can put a product on the market that may not be viable for hard use, but may be more than enough for the average guy who takes his carbine out about as often as Halley's Comet swings through our portion of the solar system.

There are some who see things in a different light. That lucidity comes from their particular frame of reference, which in turn comes from experience.

And experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.

Greg "Sully" Sullivan is well known in both the cop and shooting worlds. A SWAT cop in Minnesota, Sully was tired of seeing what he describes as "junk"—commercially built ARs that were lacking the quality necessary for gunfighting. This phenomenon is generally well known in the training world, where the theoretical service life of some of these guns is exceeded in a week of hard running.

Sully has been in the training and armoring end of the business since the mid 1990s and has strong feelings about

what constitutes a viable real-use gun. In 1997, he started to figure out what would constitute what he considered a good rifle using commercially available receivers. He made a number of custom rifles but was unsatisfied with what was then available. In 2003 he decided to go with his own label and to pay particular attention to what some describe as the “little things.” This is not unusual, as a great many custom gunsmiths often state that the devil is in the details.

Sully wanted (and still wants) these rifles to be sufficient for the task at hand, which is (primarily) fighting. He is not interested in selling a million rifles but he *does* want to make custom rifles that work out of the box—and keep working when put to the test in the real world.

His line of SLR15 rifles has been a success, but as with all who have a passion for their calling, Sully isn't satisfied with the status quo. When Rich Lucibella—the publisher of *S.W.A.T.* and a hard shooter and hunter in his own right—approached him with an idea for what

he wanted for his ideal carbine, Sully ran with it.

The Grail—the name suggested for this rifle by one of Sully's gunsmiths—shares significant commonality with all of the high-end SLR15 rifles. The upper and lower receivers are 7075 T6 forgings. The lower has a subtle magwell grip enhancement for those who use the magwell rather than the horizontal handguard or a vertical foregrip to grasp the rifle.

The magwell is also opened up an additional 0.003-inch to ensure that the tolerance stack between the various makers' magazines won't become a seating problem—a nice touch, and something that has long been needed. The pistol grip is an Ergo.

The lower has a proper enlarged trigger guard. As Sully lives in one of the Cold States, this is opened up more than others to make the use of gloves less problematic. While those who use carbines for real also use gloves to protect their paws from cuts and abrasions as

well as thermal injuries, Mr. Frost adds an additional layer of discomfort that rapidly turns to disability. The short-term result is you may not get the shot off where/when you want to at one end of the spectrum, with death/injury to you or a third party at the other end. This trigger guard also fills in that annoying gap in front of the pistol grip—a *very* good thing.

As with all of Sully's high-end guns, the bolt is magnetic particle inspected—a step required by the military for their guns and generally ignored by the aftermarket suppliers. The bolt has a forged, electrolysis nickel extractor. The extractor spring is an enhanced five-coil spring with a black insert and an “O” ring—all of the items required by Crane for the military M4 Carbines—and something else not commonly seen on aftermarket guns.

Sully states that the number one problem he sees in AR classes is the extractor (followed by magazines, poor maintenance and poor lubrication). He wanted



As part of “Two standing, two kneeling” drill, Rich Lucibella fires a pair from kneeling. A fired case is about to whack the photographer in the face—a common occurrence at any carbine class. Its length, weight and overall ergonomics make the Grail a very shooter-friendly package.

HOLY GRAIL OF ARs

to eliminate these issues up front, which would enhance reliability as well as user confidence. (What is interesting here is that, among a number of very switched-on armorers and instructors, all are in synch with this.)

Currently Sully uses a one-piece bolt ring, but states that there is no magic bolt ring, and if there is a difference between a one piece and three single bolt rings, he is unaware of it. He does recommend changing the bolt rings at approximately 3,500 rounds.

Sully uses a 16-inch, Wilson-made lightweight barrel (which is light under the handguards as well, not just forward of them). This weight thing flies in the face of the advertisements of many manufacturers who push heavy barrels, but Sully is adamant in his belief that the lighter barrel has better harmonics as well as being easier to handle.

The chamber is a 5.56. Sully makes it clear that reliability is more important than any theoretical accuracy increase by having a .223 chamber that chokes as soon as it heats up. The chamber and barrel are (of course) chrome lined.



MultiCam-finished Grail rifle set up with PVS-14 night vision and Aimpoint optics. Photo by Jeff Randall.

Rich specified that he wanted as light a rifle as possible, and while Sully likes to use the Yankee Hill Lightweight Rail, he used a PRI Quad Tube for the Grail. It is lightweight, has a heat shield and has vents across the top. He went for a rifle length rail for a variety of common-sense

reasons. First, it keeps the front sight way out near the muzzle—which Sully believes is the proper place for it. The increased sight radius is a major plus for those using iron sights, and Sully's extensive training experience leads him to believe that a longer sight radius gets

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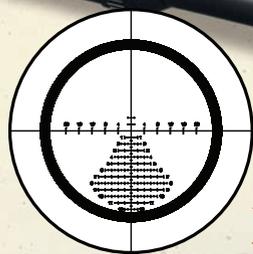
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better hits, especially at distance. The full-length free float tube also offers the advantage of covering the exposed portion of the barrel and protecting it. While this may not be in everyone's playbook, Sully believes it has advantages and goes back to his experience in High Power Rifle shooting to draw analogies.

The muzzle brake is SureFire, specifically the SureFire M4FA556 suppressor that Rich bought for his Grail. This turned out to be a more effective unit than planned.

The rear sight is a Troy with a same plane aperture—a very useful and practical modification—and the front is a stock sight. I strongly prefer to have a fixed front sight, and having it in the viewing of screen optics bothers most people not one bit. It is always there, requires no movement to get it into play, and is rugged.

Finally, the carbine and magazines were coated in a dry film MultiCam™ finish. I'll not hide the fact that I believe MultiCam to be an extremely effective camo pattern, and the result on this carbine was striking.

The gun was topped off with the excellent Aimpoint M3 in an equally excellent LaRue Mount and PVS-14 night vision optics.

When Sully received the work order for this gun, he liked it well enough to make a twin. After he finishes each gun, he puts 100 rounds through it to both zero the gun and to settle it in. Any tolerance issues will become apparent, and this goes a long way to ensuring that the gun is serviceable out of the box.

During this process, Sully noticed that the carbine does not move when it is shot. That is, there is little discernible muzzle rise. While shooting any gun is subjective, Sully had a helper fire it. When he commented on it as well, they figured that they were on to something.

Sully figures that they stumbled onto the correct recipe—a com-

bination of the Sully Stock, M16 bolt carrier, heavy buffer, front sight waaaaay out, full length PRI Rail and SureFire muzzle brake. Whatever it was, the balance and weight distribution worked, and it was replicated on the second gun.

Sully offers a great number of professionally administered courses, running from basics to advanced and covering most everything you need to know. His doctrine is simple: Provide a quality carbine, teach you how to maintain it (through his armoring courses) and teach you how to use it (through his shooting courses).

To that end, when you buy a carbine from Defensive Edge, you also get a free two-day Carbine Course. This is a *great* deal, and Sully gives kudos to James Yeager at Tactical Response for that idea. Realistically, the vast majority of gun owners have never received any training at all, and among those who have, the training was rudimentary—basic military, hunter safety and so forth. Very few have taken the time or spent the money to become proficient with the weapon they own, preferring instead to be the recipient of divine intervention when they have to use it for real. That is grossly negligent, and those people are not doing us actual firearms users any favors when they perform another dumb move that makes national headlines.

The Grail is a good piece of kit and made by a great company that will actually stand by its product. Sully states that his company is only as good as his products. "My name is on that gun, and I understand that lives depend on it. It must be 100%, and I treat every gun that goes out the door as if it were my own."

I personally haven't seen a whole lot of Sully guns in classes. He is a low-volume maker, and most of the students I teach are issued guns. From the small sampling of Sully guns that I have seen in action, all run like the proverbial freight train. I was impressed enough to get an

SLR15 Operator as a student rental gun for my classes, to include its use by Jim Zumbo at a Boone County, Indiana class last May. That Operator has seen hard use and is a solid running gun. Right now the round count is a tad over 6,200 rounds, but they have been 6,200 trouble-free rounds—something that I don't see from many manufacturers who cut corners and sacrifice quality for the bottom line.

I'll note that Sully, Hilton Yam, Stan Chen, Chuck Rogers and Ned Christiansen, among others, all have stated that attention to detail (especially in the assembly) is what separates the quality builders from the hammer mechanics and kitchen-table cobblers.

The combination of vision, ethics and experience is a strong indicator that what comes out of Sully's shop will be a true performer.

The price of the SLR15 Grail is not inexpensive at \$1,995.00, but then again no custom rifle is. If you have a need for the best and intend on going in harm's way, the Grail is a bargain. ☺

[Pat Rogers is a retired Chief Warrant

Officer of Marines and a retired NYPD Sergeant. Pat is the owner of E.A.G. Inc., which provides services to various governmental organizations. He can be reached at eag@10-8consulting.com]

SOURCES:

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