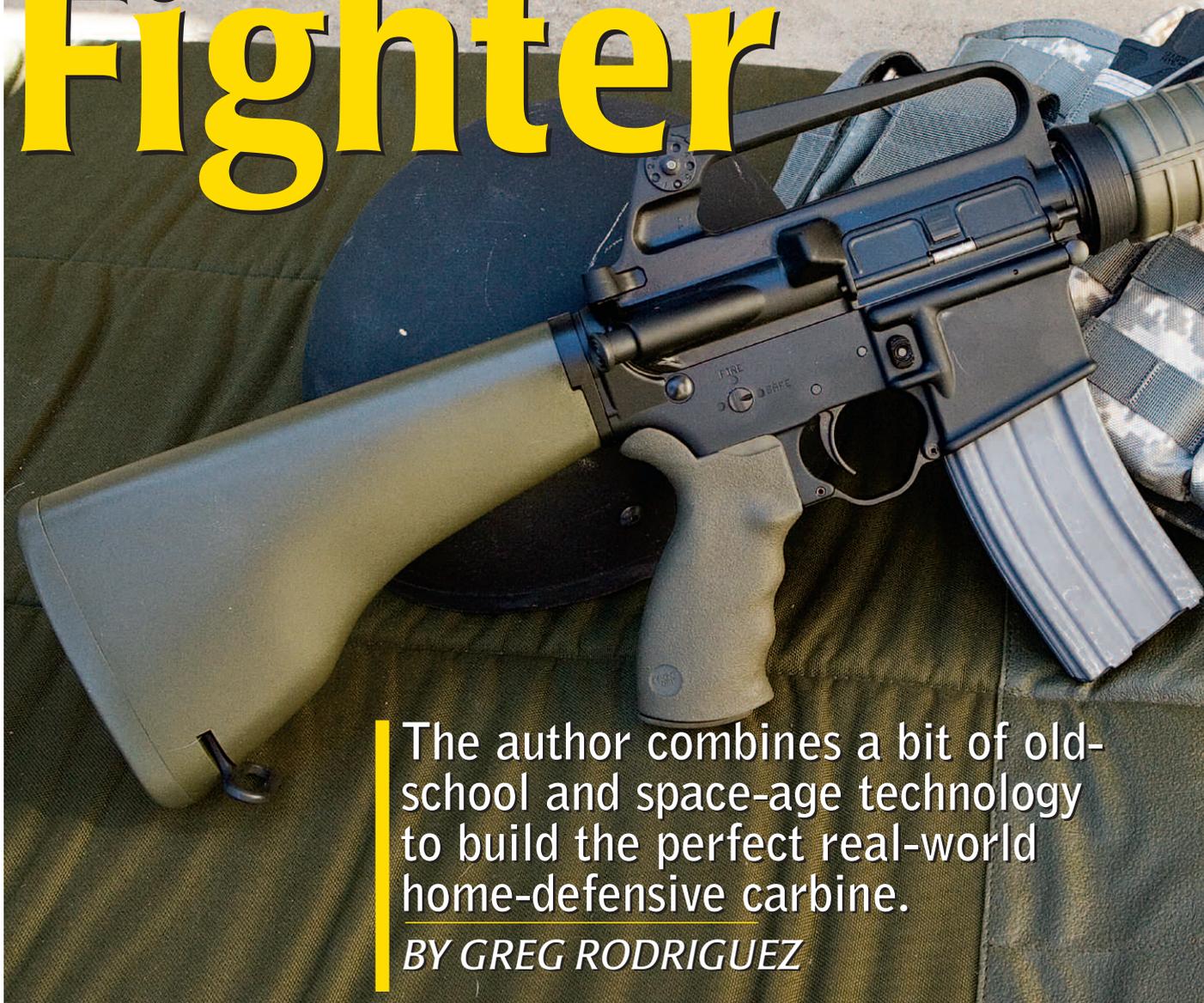


Light Fighter



The author combines a bit of old-school and space-age technology to build the perfect real-world home-defensive carbine.

BY GREG RODRIGUEZ

The proliferation of AR-15 accessory rails has prompted a big surge in the amount of stuff that can be bolted to a carbine. Soldiers and SWAT operators have to use their weapon for a variety of missions, from clearing buildings to engaging active shooters at long range, often during the same engagement. Versatility is essential, and good optics, backup iron sights and

powerful flashlights are a must.

Civilians, on the other hand, will use their carbines in a much more limited role. Optics, flip-up sights, vertical foregrips, lasers and flashlights might look cool, but only a bodybuilder or Navy SEAL could wield such a weighty piece for any length of time. Those accessories certainly have their place, but few civilians really need them.

A defensive carbine will most

likely be used indoors. For anyone short of a mansion-dwelling Wal-Mart heir, most shots are more likely to be measured in feet than yards. The same is true in rural settings, too. The range may increase for dispatching feral animals or coyotes in the back 40, but few true defensive situations will ever require a long shot. Statistically, a five-yard shot is far more likely than a 50-yard one.

“So,” you may ask, “why bother



The DETC SLR-15 is a simple, classic carbine. The chest rig is from Blackhawk.

with all the muzzle blast of a rifle-caliber carbine if odds are I won't ever have to shoot beyond 25 yards?" Well, recent studies have shown that a .223 round penetrates fewer interior walls than large-caliber handguns, buckshot or slugs. The high velocity and thin bullet jackets that promote rapid expansion and deliver devastating on-target performance combine to turn the little .223 pills into so much copper dust

when they crash into wallboard and wood.

Of course, your ears may not forgive you for touching one off indoors, but there is less chance of harming loved ones across the house with your .223 than if you were to launch a 12-gauge slug at the goblin across the boudoir. And when loaded with good bullets, the .223 hits much harder than any handgun round.

If you use a .223 for home

defense, odds are the AR-15 is your weapon of choice. You may be tempted to mount some of those sexy gadgets and gizmos on your carbine, but they are heavy and expensive and not really necessary on a rifle that will spend most of its life collecting dust in the corner of your bedroom. In fact, you can get by quite nicely with very little, provided your carbine is a reliable one with a crisp trigger, good sights and a light.

I have several AR-15s, all of which have rail systems with way too much stuff bolted to them. My tricked-out guns are fun to play with, but a recent carbine class that left me sorer than my regular workouts made me reevaluate my real needs, an act that forced me to purchase yet another carbine.

Reliability and light weight were my main criteria when selecting my defensive carbine. I shopped around, and while several makers offered quality carbines, few were willing to build a one-off gun. Fortunately, Greg Sullivan of Defensive Edge Training and Consulting (DETC), makers of the SLR-15 rifle (www.slr15.com), was not only willing to build a gun to my specs, he shared my beliefs in what makes the ideal carbine for home defense or patrol.

In addition to being one of the foremost AR-15 armorer and carbine instructors, Greg is an experienced SWAT officer. After working on and training with countless ARs, he's figured out which parts work and which don't, and he's learned how to make an AR sing. Over the years, his guns have earned a reputation for unmatched reliability in the special operations community.

DETC starts with forged receivers of hard-anodized 7075 T6 aluminum. The lower features an Ergo Grip, an oversize trigger-guard, a mil-spec trigger with overtravel adjustment and a grip enhancement on the front of the

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The SLR-15's oversize triggerguard and "CY6," or "Check Your Six," logo.

mag well. This enhancement consists of a small square with a skateboard-tape-like texture that serves as sort of a vertical fore-grip for those who grip their ARs thusly.

The upper receiver is a forged A-1 type with a fixed triangle front sight and carry handle. Because of the short distance involved in most defensive engagements and its light weight, the A-1-style upper is ideal for my purposes. I don't need an optic to shoot five yards, and I can shoot irons well enough to be pretty darn deadly with them out to 200 yards, too.

Although it is tougher to sight-in, I like the A-1 rear sight because once it's zeroed, it won't move. I had Sully install XS Sights' same-plane rear aperture so my point of impact wouldn't change, regardless of which aperture I select. I also went with an XS front sight with a tritium insert for faster sight acquisition and better low-light accuracy—an important issue considering the percentage of defensive shootings that occur in low light.

Although 1-in-7-twist barrels and heavy bullets are en vogue these days, I like 55- to 60-grain bullets for home defense because they are devastating on soft tissue but they won't pass through every wall in my house if I miss. A 1-in-9 twist will easily stabilize bullets in the 55- to 60-grain range, so that is the twist I specified. The fact that most inexpensive practice ammo is loaded with 55-grain ball is pure coincidence, but you can bet I'll make the most of it.

Because home-defense situations rarely call for extended firing sessions and I find light guns easier to handle, I went with carbine-length handguards and a 16-inch pencil barrel that measures .6 inch just short of the A2 flash hider. The thin barrel helped keep down the weight of the carbine and makes it easy to handle. And thanks to the chrome lining, I can bang away in my normal training sessions without worrying about harming my barrel.

I hope never to use my carbine, but I know that if I do it will

probably be indoors, so I wanted to keep it short. I couldn't go shorter than 16 inches on the barrel without a lot of paperwork, so I ordered my gun with a Sully stock. This fixed stock is designed to give a better cheekweld than a collapsible stock and is short for small-stature shooters like me or for those who use their carbines while wearing body armor. With the Sully stock in place, my carbine is two inches shorter than my 14-inch-barreled shotgun.

Other features include a PRI Gas Buster charging handle, heavy-duty springs, a forged nickel extractor and a one-piece gas ring. Most ARs use a three-piece ring with a gap. According to Sullivan, the solid one-piece design requires the gas pressure to work its way through five layers of rings, resulting in increased reliability.

The SLR-15 came in an OD discreet carry case with two magazines and a magazine clamp from Shellback Tactical. Few would bother to grab an extra magazine when investigating a strange

noise in the night. The magazine clamp allows the shooter to carry a reload on board. The extra rounds are nice, but I find the ability to change magazines in case of a malfunction to be a greater comfort.

My new SLR-15 turned out exactly as I hoped it would—short, light and handy. I was anxious to see if it was as reliable and accurate as I hoped, so after giving it a thorough going-over and making sure it was properly lubricated (most people don't use enough lubrication on their ARs), I headed out to American Shooting Centers in Houston (www.amshootcenters.com) to see if it shot as good as it looked.

I started by zeroing my new rifle at 25 yards. A 25-yard zero allows me to hold dead-on from point blank all the way to 200 yards, which is about as far as I feel comfortable shooting with irons these days. The first few shots I fired with my favorite defensive load—Hornady's 60-grain TAP round—were dead-on. In fact, the first magazine I fired fell into a fist-size cluster in the center of the chest. I got the same result with American Eagle's 62-grain FMJ load and Winchester's 55-grain white-box ammunition. I was pleased to see that those rounds hit the same point of aim, because they are my two favorite inexpensive practice loads.

I fired 250 rounds that day and, after a thorough cleaning, 300 more rounds a few days later. I shot fast, on the move and with less than perfect gun mounts. Through it all, the SLR-15 ran without a hitch and hit where I aimed. I didn't do any serious accuracy testing because I didn't purchase my SLR-15 as a precision rifle, but I had no trouble making center hits out to 100 yards with the iron sights.

I really like the Sully stock. However, as noted previously, I



XS Sights' tritium front sight is easy to pick up in any light.



The SLR-15's pencil barrel is a special contour made for DETC.



The Crimson Trace laser grip for A-1-type rifles is light and unobtrusive. It is also easy to mount.

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The author trains with his new defensive carbine. The chest rig is from Blackhawk.



SureFire's tiny Scout Light is a perfect match for the Light Fighter.



This Picatinny light mount is from Pentagon Light.

am short and stocky. Even so, the carry handle would tap me in the nose if I crawled the stock. My taller training partners opined that they would like it better with the included spacer attached.

The SLR-15's controls were very positive, although the bolt release and charging handle required a firm hand due to the heavier springs Sully employs. It also fed smoothly and ejected spent brass well clear of the weapon. All told, the SLR-15 digested more than 600 rounds without a bobble before I declared it fit for home defense.

Once I was confident that my new SLR-15 was reliable enough for home defense, I made a few final modifications to make it meet my needs. Since the majority of defensive situations occur in low light, a good weapon-mounted light is essential. It is hard to mount a light on a gun with standard plastic handguards, but there are a few ways to accomplish it without making the gun unnecessarily heavy.

I chose one of Pentagon Light's Picatinny mounts for my SLR-15. This handy mount attaches easily to the front sight with a single screw. Pentagon makes great lights. In fact, I have several, but I chose to mount one of SureFire's excellent Scout Lights on my carbine because it weighs next to nothing. More lumen output sounds sexy, but the Scout's 100-lumen output is more than enough to light up a room or hallway and temporarily blind an attacker at home-defense distances.

I used thread locker to attach the Pentagon Light mount and tightened the heck out of the SureFire's knurled knob. With the light firmly in place, I attached the pressure switch with Velcro and used a high-tech MK 1, MOD 0 "tactical" rubber band to hold down the excess cord on the

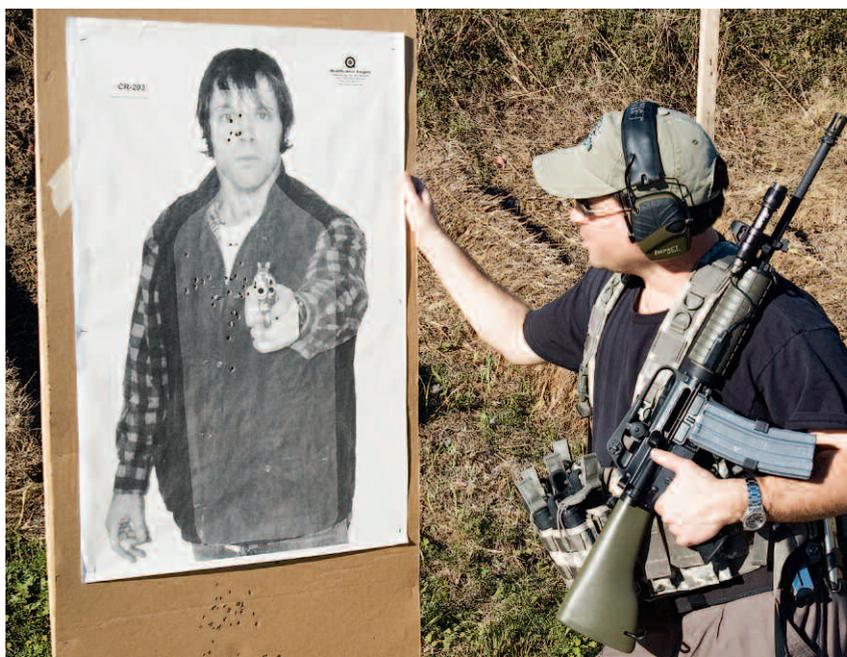
handguard. So mounted, the diminutive Scout Light doesn't seem to affect the SLR-15s balance in the least.

Again, since most defensive shootings occur in low light, I decided to mount a Crimson Trace laser grip on my carbine. It took me a long time to jump on board with lasers, but time and time again I've seen their benefits for engaging multiple targets quickly and accurately, shooting on the move and shooting from unconventional positions. Making hits from a weapon-retention position or any of the many awkward positions that are likely to arise during combat is a snap with a Crimson Trace grip. As long as you can grip and point your gun, you can make good hits.

Crimson Trace's lasers are also very rugged. In fact, I've never seen one lose its zero, even after suffering some rough airline baggage handling and a few hard drops on the range. I especially like the fact that you don't change anything but the grips with Crimson Trace; in the unlikely event that your laser breaks, it cannot affect the function of your gun.

My final addition was a Troy Industries single-point sling. Single-point slings are easier to use than the more complicated three-point slings, and they are easy to take on and off. Troy's version is one of the more comfortable single-point slings I've tried.

Fully equipped, my new carbine weighs in at seven pounds, 10 ounces. It is a joy to carry, easy to maneuver and handles like a dream. I have trained with it at home and in a live-fire shoot house. It handles well and is really fast to bring into action. My eyes pick up the tritium front sight very quickly, and when the ambient light permits it, the laser makes me faster and more accu-



The author had no trouble making hits from 15 to 100 yards with the XS Sight-equipped SLR-15.



Deputy Fernando Flores, a Texas SWAT officer, really liked the SLR-15.

rate than I've ever been with irons or glass. I was also happy to see that the little Scout Light had more than enough horsepower to clearly illuminate every room I've cleared with it.

Overall, I am very pleased with my new carbine. It's as light, handy and reliable as I hoped it would be, and it's a joy to shoot. In

fact, I shoot it much more than any of my other, fancier carbines. As a result, I've gotten pretty darn good with it. My Light Fighter may not look like a cast-off from the *Star Wars* set, but it has all the tools it needs to do what I'll ask of it. And because it's so fun to shoot, I know I'll be equally up to the task should the need arise. ©