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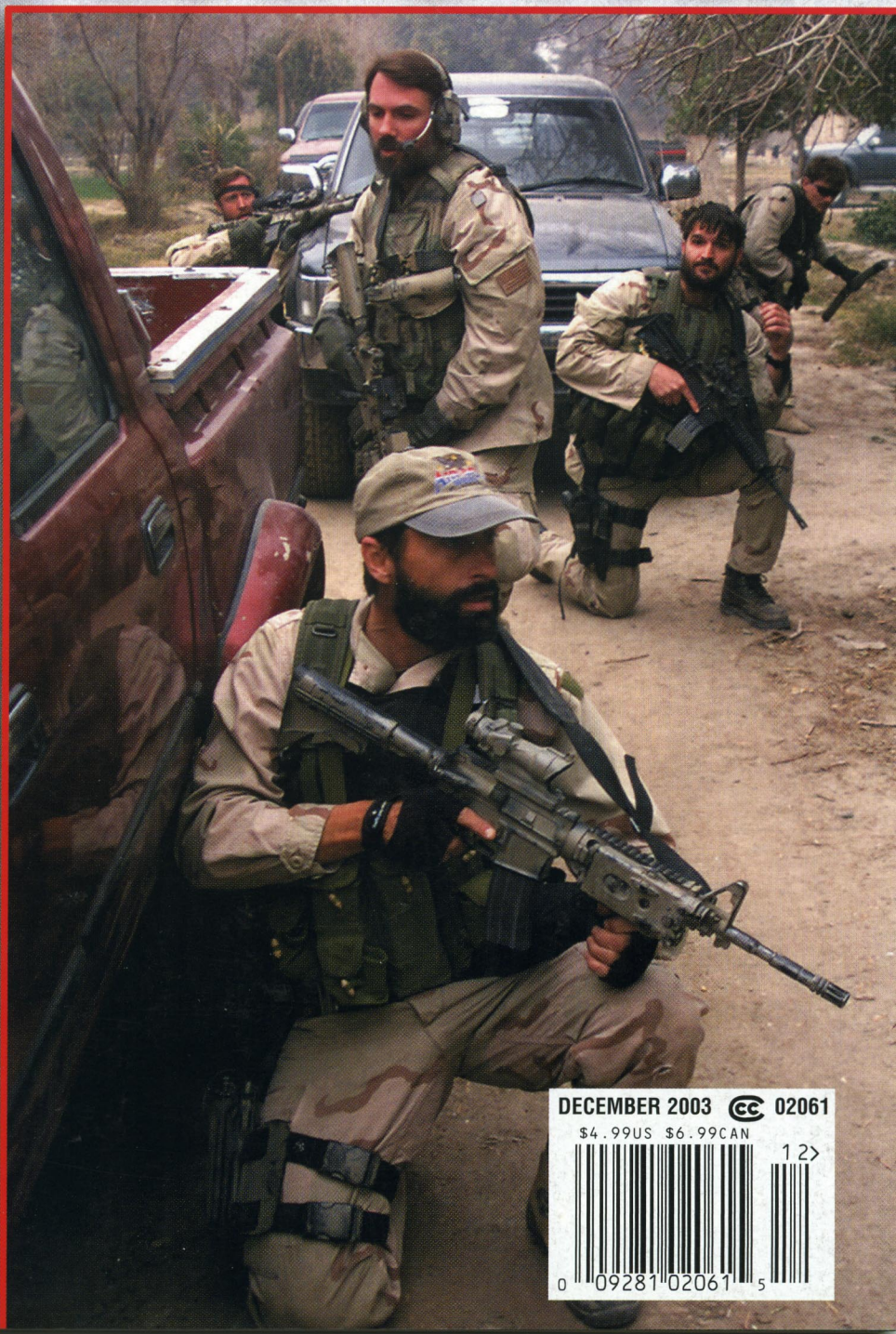
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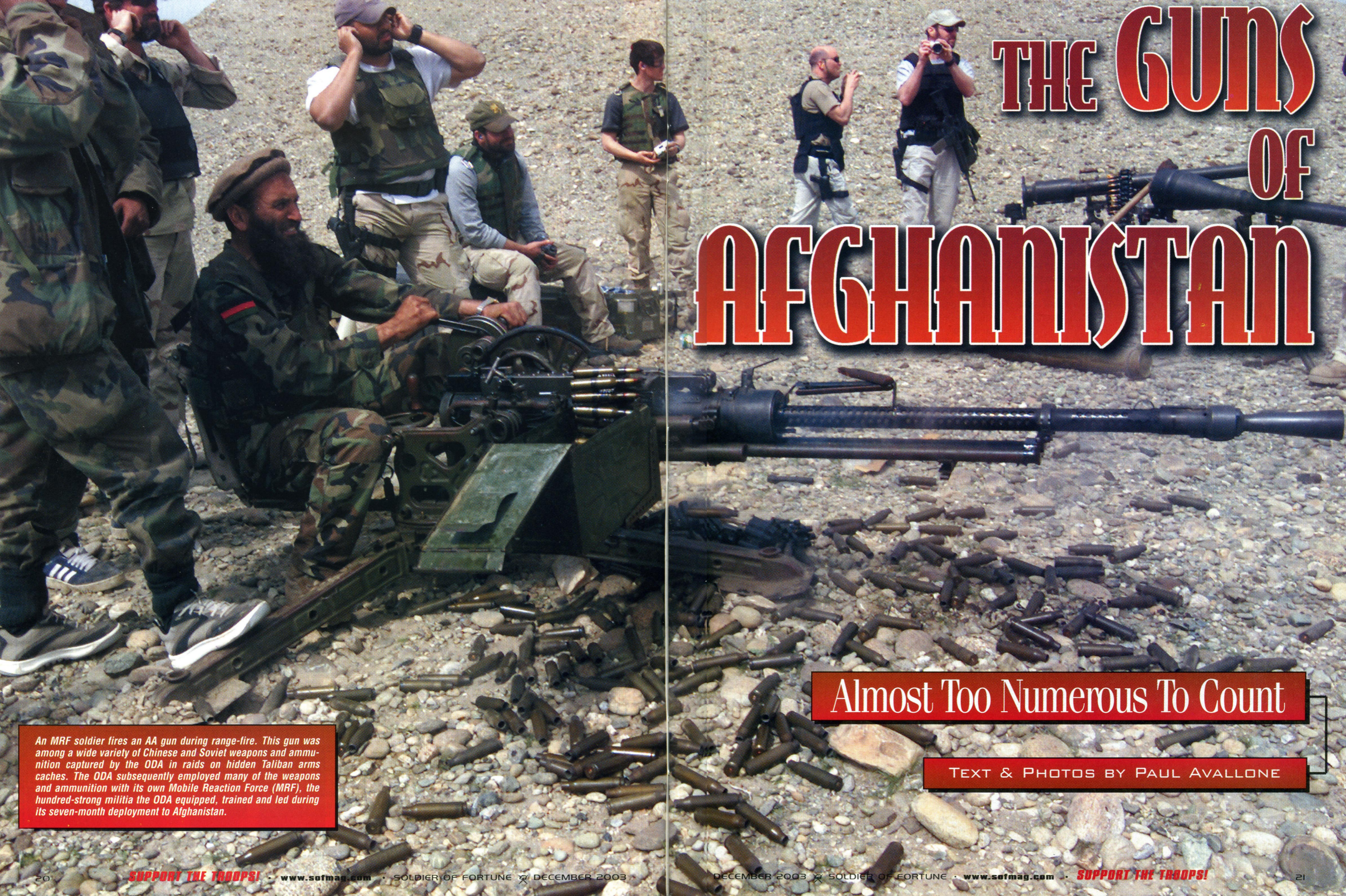
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THE GUNS OF AFGHANISTAN

Almost Too Numerous To Count

TEXT & PHOTOS BY PAUL AVALLONE

An MRF soldier fires an AA gun during range-fire. This gun was among a wide variety of Chinese and Soviet weapons and ammunition captured by the ODA in raids on hidden Taliban arms caches. The ODA subsequently employed many of the weapons and ammunition with its own Mobile Reaction Force (MRF), the hundred-strong militia the ODA equipped, trained and led during its seven-month deployment to Afghanistan.



ince returning Stateside from Afghanistan, I have shown photos to friends, and the question that often comes up is, "Just how many guns are there, there?" Actually, it's as much an exclamation as a question. "They're everywhere," I've answered, but a better response might be, "You know what they say about the stars in the sky and grains of sand on earth?"

Of course, it is not accurate to say there are as many guns in Afghanistan as there are grains of sand on earth, but this much is true: Just as one could never count all the stars in the

sky, the same could be said for guns in Afghanistan.

Even if you stripped every gun from every soldier, every militiaman, every bodyguard, small-time bandit, farmer, taxi

driver, and every single man and boy (down to the age of 8) and thought you had the country laid barren of anything that fired a projectile, there'd be some duty-bound Afghan patriot (if that's not an oxymoron) who would come to you and for a small reward, say a hundred or two hundred American dollars cash, tell you of a weapons cache somewhere.

That cache might be said to be in a cave in the remotest mountains or in a poppy farmer's rural compound, anywhere, and the odds are, if you can get there before the munitions are moved, you're going to hit upon a nice little stash — from the standard AKs and RPGs to Dashika machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, and maybe even an SA-7 surface-to-air rocket launcher or two. And on top of the weapons, throw in

tons of ammunition, from cases and cases of AK and Dashika ammo to mortar and recoilless-rocket rounds.

That's pretty much the way it was during the tenure of my Special Forces detachment in its seven months operating out of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. Part of our job was to take the arms and ammunition out of the hands of those who wished for a return of the Taliban, or at least were supporting the downfall of the newly U.S.-installed and -maintained central government, which is strong in Kabul, but tenuous at best in much of the rest of a country where tribal affiliation is many times stronger than any tie to the country.

After A While, We Stopped Being Surprised ...

We uncovered many caches, capturing hundreds of tons of ammunition and the weapons to go with them. Some of the weapons are shown on the photographs on these pages. After a while, we stopped being surprised at what we would find. The surprise, in fact, would be when a suspected cache would turn out to be a dry hole.

Recovered weapons we put to use with our own MRF militia army or turned over to higher HQ in Bagram for use by the newly formed Afghan Defense Forces. As for the captured ammunition, the same was true. And that ammunition that could not be used we destroyed. We seized so much ammunition that several times we had to call in Explosive Ordnance Detachments and their thousands of pounds of C-

A variety of guns line the walls of a local gunsmith. Gunsmithing is a valuable trade in Afghanistan because of the tradition of men bearing arms and because, with the poverty of the country, many men use antique weapons that the gunsmiths keep functional.



4 to destroy the materiel. (See "Blowing It Up" in next month's *SOF*.)

In the same sense, at one time we had accumulated so many neglected, non-functioning weapons, partially assembled weapons, and parts of weapons in boxes and crates that we invited a local gunsmith in to clean, fix and assemble as many as he could, promising him \$15 (U.S.) for each that he made functional. He worked for three weeks and managed to restore nearly 50 weapons — from British Brens to Chinese SGMs to

THE GUNS of AFGHANISTAN

PKs to Dashikas to mortars to AA guns. For his effort he earned in those three weeks about what the average Afghan makes in a year. And we had ourselves a store-room of working guns,

from what had been heaps of indistinguishable parts.

With so much weaponry to be had in Afghanistan, one could not be faulted for being tempted to sneak a couple of AKs or Makarov 9mms into a footlocker or kit bag and to bury them on a pallet to be shipped back to the States — except for the strict regulations the military has established on bringing arms into the United States. Sure, since when have regulations ever stopped SF before? That said, our command assured us that all pallets and gear would be broken-down and inspected by Customs before shipping and promised the threat of courts-martial for violators caught. More than a few of the guys expressed a longing for the good-old-talked-about days when our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers brought back war-trophy weaponry sou-

venirs from both world wars, Korea and even Viet Nam.

There is no restriction, though, on bringing into the United States pre-1898 firearms, and there are plenty of those antiques today in Afghanistan. Generally speaking, one would not find the old weapons in arms caches, as they don't have much worth for soldiers today when AKs are cheap and plentiful countrywide. But the more seasoned Afghan veterans still talk of originally using the old Enfield breechloaders to fight the Russians in the early 1980s. It was after the rebels captured Russian weapons that they put aside the antique British rifles that, in a sense of irony, their great-great-grandfathers had first captured from the British during those wars a hundred years earlier.

Early on, we put out the word through our MRF and terps (interpreters) that we would buy old rifles, pistols, swords, sabers and knives, and we gathered quite a collection locally in our rural province. Then we learned that those same types of antique weapons are better available and cheaper in Kabul, where a market has built up since the end of the war. There, right in the center of the city is Chicken Street, on which there are a number of shops that sell antique arms.

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A local gunsmith shows off a Czech ZB-30 machine gun that he put together and made functional for ODA 2025. This gun was among a variety of weapons that the ODA confiscated in a raid on the rural compound of a Taliban sympathizer. Most of the weapons were in parts, in boxes and crates. The ODA hired this local gunsmith to make as many weapons functional as possible.





THE GUNS OF AFGHANISTAN

(above) Some of the weapons stash confiscated from a rural warlord. The weapons were in disrepair, with some just boxes of parts. Our trusty local gunsmith succeeded in recovering nearly 40 weapons, @ \$15 (U.S.) each).

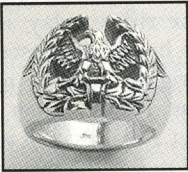
(below) Five Dashika machine guns (12.7mm) captured by ODA 2025 during a raid on a suspected Taliban arms cache: These guns, among many other weapons, were a jumble of parts in boxes and crates before our gunsmith rebuilt them.



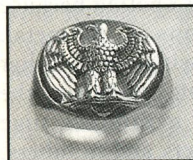
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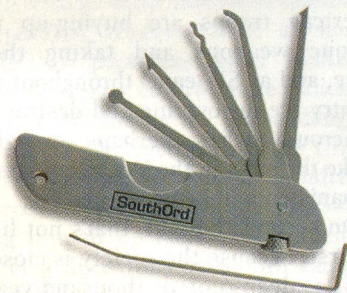
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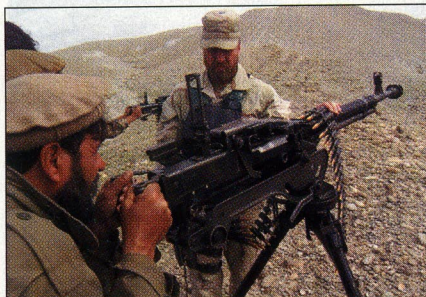
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Guns Of Afghanistan

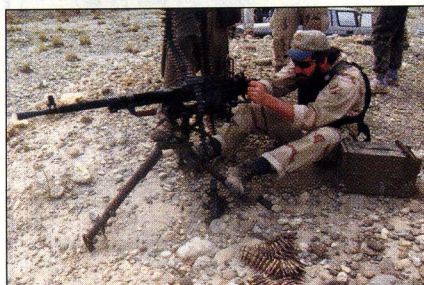
Continued from page 24

For one-hundred to two-hundred dollars one can buy an 1850s' percussion-cap British Enfield muzzleloader. Or BSA (British Small Arms Co.) or Tower. Or 1860s' and '70s' models Snider-conversion breechloaders, too. Martini rifles from the 1880s. Or older model flintlocks.

In the same shops one can find a variety of sabers and knives that are hundreds of years old. For pennies to the dollar for what they are worth in the United States. It's capitalism in its purest sense — supply and demand — as American GIs want antique weapons to bring home, and the Afghans want the GIs' money. In the natural order of things, of course, the prices of the weapons are going up, up and up. At the same time, with the Americans' demand for the antiques high, so, too, is the number of forgeries



Staff Sergeant Dean instructs a soldier of the ODA's militia force on the operation of a Chinese-made Dashika machine gun. The gun was among the many the ODA seized in raids on hidden Taliban arms caches, and subsequently employed with its own Mobile Reaction Force (MRF), the hundred-strong militia the ODA equipped, trained and led during its seven-month deployment to Afghanistan.



Master Sergeant Terry fires a Chinese-made SGM — called a "Gerrod" by the locals — during range-training with the ODA's MRF. A wide variety of Chinese and Soviet weapons and ammunition were captured by the ODA in raids on hidden Taliban arms caches.

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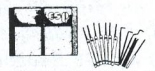
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make believe or fraud by genuine persons within the industry.

put up for sale as real.

Rifle forgery comes in two forms. The first is the blatant manufacture of the rifles today, making them appear to be old and used. The second is the original forgery of the rifles back in the 1800s, when the Afghans would get a real British rifle and make copies of it. For the most part, these hundred-years-old fakes can be spotted because of the incorrect stamps in the metal. Illiterate to begin with, or familiar only with the Arabic alphabet, the Afghan forgers had a difficult time with the English letters and numbers. The Enfield marking on a fake, for example, commonly has an "m" for the "n" in Enfield or has the "n" or "f" backwards. Often, also, the stamped date might be correctly written, but shown as the date on the Muslim calendar — not ours.

It's buyer-beware on Chicken Street, but one can't really go wrong, even with the fakes. An 1862 Enfield hung above the mantle at home in the U.S., whether it be real or fake, still looks the part and draws a conversation. As for the sabers, swords and knives, except for the World War I-era bayonets, there are no stamped dates on them, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to place each in a year, let alone a century. One has to just go by what looks good and suits one's tastes.

As American GIs with plenty of money and little to spend it on, (yep, no booze sold in the PX, or allowed) American troops are buying-up the antique weapons and taking them home, and as SF teams throughout the country are uncovering and destroying numerous caches, perhaps someday, unlike the stars in the sky, every gun in Afghanistan will be accounted for.

On second thought, that's not likely. First, because the society is closed, with a deep-rooted thousand-years' distrust for foreigners, and one is never going to be told everything or let in on every secret. Second, because Afghanistan is a warrior/warlord culture in which physical power is most valued, and that power can be most easily be obtained, maintained and wielded with weapons. Guns. So they shall always be in Afghanistan. Everywhere.

Next month: "Blowing It Up." ODA 2025 destroys hundreds of tons of munitions.

Since 1978, Paul Avallone has served with the 7th, 12th and 20th SFGA. ✕