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Happiness is a black gun
Terence Cullen
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Mark Melkoski makes on average 80,000 AR15 rifles every year. At 36, he is one of the youngest gun manufacturers in the world. He started Stag Arms at 24 just as the national assault weapon ban was set to expire a decade ago.

Melkowski has a boy's face. On the morning we sat in his office, he was wearing a blue striped shirt and black shoes. A display model AR15 sat on the floor a few feet away.

He wouldn't look at me. I had asked the question he didn't want to hear.

The AR15 is the best American gun on the market. I wanted to explore every inch of it from the technical aspects of the bullet to why it's one of the top-selling weapons in national history. Over the course of 50 years, more than 30 firearm manufacturers including Stag Arms have toiled to make the AR15 a top performing, terrifying piece of machinery.

This is the mass murder's gun. The AR15 is the rifle of Sandy Hook, the rifle of Aurora and countless other mass shootings. It is one of the lightest and most comfortable firearms on the civilian market. An AR15 can hold a magazine with 100 bullets. Even a novice shooter can pop off 50 rounds per minute. Psychopaths love to use it. The fact that the AR15 is typically completely black makes it scarier. Despite controversy over banning the rifle and other "assault weapons," the guns only make up two percent of all mass shootings in the country.

But the big, nasty shootings are what gives the AR15 street cred.

The AR15 is the groundwork for the rifle that men and women have used to defend our borders and freedom since Vietnam. When John F. Kennedy's head was blown off in Dallas, a Secret Service agent whipped out an AR15 and pointed it at windows looking down at Dealey Plaza.

Then it might seem odd that I, a pacifist New Yorker, enjoy shooting this weapon of war so much. Well, it's fun for starters. The rifle weighs next to nothing. I can hit targets without trying too hard. The blast from the barrel and gas from the bullet shells are the sweet joys of power. When I hold the AR15 in my arms, and I feel my finger on its trigger, I know I can do so much harm. Liberal-leaning friends will suddenly become interested when I tell them I've shot one. They'll ask what the AR15 was like. Then they'll ask if I recommend they try it. The answer is always yes.

But when I asked Melkowski my own question about the gun, I thought he would say "no." Aluminum was clanking in the background. Behind the wall of his office, the men and women of Stag were assembling the final two parts of the rifle. Stag

was the largest producer of AR15s in 2013. He didn't want me to see the assembly line. But I told him how important it was to this story that I see one get made. I wouldn't do him wrong.

In the two years after Sandy Hook, the media and politicians had used Melkowski to exploit criticism of the AR15. Negative stories about how the AR15 was made were partially based on visits to his factory floor. He had let Connecticut lawmakers visit the assembly line to debunk the misunderstandings they had about the killing machine. It *doesn't* shoot automatic, by the way.

So I let Melkowski vent for the half of our hour-long interview about how wrong the Connecticut and New York bans on the AR15 were. He doesn't think any law should be passed four hours after it was introduced, which happened in his home state. The gun Melkowski started producing before he could rent a car was officially illegal to sell in Connecticut after those four hours.

I asked him what he would say to the people who sent their kids to school one morning, only to get a call that someone took their life during the first class. How would he explain to them that these rifles should not be banned? Melkowski said he was sorry for them, but it was a mental health problem. Unfortunately mentally unstable people like Holmes and Lanza (who was autistic and had an eating disorder) get their hands on the AR15 and ruin it for the rest of us.

Melkowski had finally opened up when we were getting ready to leave. He was vulnerable. A month earlier, he had shot down a subordinate's promise to let me watch an AR15 get assembled and tested. But he agreed to an interview. So once that was done I explained again that I wanted to see the assembly line.

That's when Melkowski froze up. His eyes darted back and forth. Then he looked up.

That could work, he said, just not today. Government officials were back there right now supervising one of their orders. But if I emailed him in the next few days, we could set something up. Melkowski never returned a call or an email. So I started to Google when and where I could go shooting to blow off some steam.

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The AR-15 is a masterpiece.

In the course of 13 days in December of 2012, the AR15 did more damage than the Soviets did during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Jacob Tyler Roberts brought one into a Portland, Oregon mall and murdered a hospice nurse and a father of two. Three days later, Adam Lanza took his mother's Bushmaster after he shot her in her pajamas, and massacred a classroom full of first graders. On Christmas Eve, William Spengler lit his house on fire and waited inside to shoot and kill two firefighters in Webster, New York.

Gun owners will tell you it's one of the finest-crafted rifles ever made. At a conservative estimate of 3 million AR15s in the United States, it's one of the most popular guns in the world after the Russian-made Automatic Kalashnikov, better known as the AK47.

Before that, it was the Remington repeating rifle in the 1870s used by the Army cavalry to slaughter Native Americans. The German K98 in World War I was a favorite of a young Adolph Hitler. Then there was the Thompson submachine gun, which the Irish used to kill British in Dublin and Belfast, which the Italians used to kill Irish in Chicago and the Americans used to kill Germans in World War II. Historian William J. Helmer dubbed his book on the Thompson, "The Gun that made the Twenties Roar."

But none of them have the grisly numbers the AR15 can boast.

It's called the man's Barbie Doll, but instead of a sundress and miniscule plastic handbags and slingbacks, it's a laser, a scope, and a handle with a bottle opener on it, for the beer. Magazines can hold up to 100 bullets, like Holmes' did when he went into the theater playing "The Dark Knight Rises" and fired for 45 seconds before it jammed.

Americans love their guns. The weapon that was made to protect the freedom of America by way of jungle fighting in Southeast Asia, has become the civilian's hunting, target and rampage rifle.

People who love their AR15s are obsessed with who makes the best rifles, do-it-yourself repairs and a forum for sharing how someone has tricked the gun out. In Guns & Ammo's latest edition solely dedicated to the AR15, one writer took a Ruger AR15 and a Yamaha ATV out for a weekend of shooting to pair them the same way another critic might pair wine and cheese.

Shooters want a rifle that doesn't wobble when they sit for long periods waiting for a deer to stroll along or, perhaps a child running screaming down a hallway. Competitive shooters don't want a gun that might jam or break the barrel on the morning of a big competition.

The nerdy mass murderer might prefer the iPhone mount that lets you use it as a scope.

And since the massacre row of 2012 put the AR15 in the worst possible light, the sporty rifle has become the target of lawmakers and gun control advocates. New York passed the Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement Act just 32 days after Sandy Hook. The SAFE Act banned the sale of anything that had a thumbhole stock, an accessory rail and a magazine of more than 10 rounds in the state. The "Black Rifle" was blacklisted in the Empire State.

Connecticut soon followed suit with a nearly identical law. Maryland and California also have assault weapon bans.

Of course, American defenders of freedom have killed untold thousands with their M16s, the automatic rifle of Vietnam, Grenada, Desert Storm, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. The only difference between an M16 and an AR15 is a soldier can empty an entire magazine with one pull of the trigger.

Army Specialist Four Santiago Erevia picked up an M16 in each hand during a 1969 assault on Tam Ky. The Texan charged through four NVA bunkers with M16s blazing and guarded his wounded buddies until medevac could come. Erevia received the Congressional Medal of Honor in July 2014.

Rafael Peralta's M16 will also be the deciding factor on if he'll get the highest military award, too. Shot in Fallujah, the wounded Marine saved his comrades when he covered an enemy grenade with his body. There was nothing left of Peralta, so The Marine Corps museum in Quantico, Virginia, decided to display his M16.



RTSP Shooting has various open-range days for the public throughout a given month. The range is in an office park in the northern New Jersey suburbs with a tutoring center and a hair salon. Because the AR15 is very illegal in New York City, I ventured 62 miles from my Queens apartment to Randolph with a population just under 25,000 so I could shoot rent one.

Every wall of RTSP is lined with rifles, handgun and shooting accessories. The counters are filled with pistols for sale and to rent. They have Glock 9mms, a favorite of cops and the feds because they can shoot even with sand in them; Colt M1911s, the most popular handgun used to shoot Nazis at close range; and Smith & Wesson .38 Special revolvers, the kind Dirty Harry would use to blow a bad guy away. The Second Amendment is painted on one wall accented by an eagle and the Stars and Stripes. A massive American flag is nailed up on a buttress.

I stood in line with my disclosure agreement and driver's license clenched in my hand. The cashier called me next, and I forked them over. I had agreed that it was my responsibility if anyone was injured in the range, and would pay for any damages caused. I was never committed to a mental institution, nor had I ever been diagnosed with depression. I was never addicted to marijuana or any sort of narcotic.

There was an assortment of rifles behind the counter. My face lit up at the sight of three AR15s ready for shooting. There was one on a horizontal rack and two on a standing rack. Red tape was wrapped around the grips. I could shoot any one of them.

The cashier started punching my information into the computer.

“What were you hoping to shoot today?”

“Do you have the Stag?”

She turned her head to look. Then the cashier took a step back and displayed my options like Vannah White on “Wheel of Fortune.” Among the AR15s were an assortment of other rifles. There was an aftermarket version of the AK47, the pride of the Soviet Union and the most popular design in the world. There were short guns and long guns; wood ones and aluminum guns; rifles that shot bolt action and rifles that took multi-round magazines.

“We don’t. These are the closest you can get.”

The one in the standing rack to the left had a handle on the stock. The rifle to the right looked more like older versions of the gun when it was used in Vietnam.

“What’s that one to the left?”

“That’s the Bushmaster,” she said. It was the same make Lanza used at Sandy Hook. The Bushmaster is also one of the highest-selling, best AR15s on the market. Outdoors megastore Gander Mountain sells Bushmasters anywhere from \$800 to \$1,300.

“I’ll go with the Bushmaster.”

The cashier took the gun from the rack and laid it on the table. She took the magazine out and casually tossed it into a red bin.

“How much ammo did you want to shoot?”

I settled on a box of 20 bullets, which she tossed in with the magazine. Target options included traditional circles, the silhouette of a glass milk bottle and an array of human outlines with heat marks for major organs. Halloween was approaching, so I went with a green zombie.

“Have you ever shot before?”

“Nothing AR or .223.”

She picked up a walkie-talkie and radioed into the shooting range behind the wall. Someone was coming in for a lesson. The man behind the glass was wearing a red tactical vest that said “Range Safety Officer” on the back. If the Red Cross had an army, he would be a colonel. He picked up a receiver and told her to send me in.

“Eyes and ears before you go in.”

I took a pair of goggles from a basket on the counter and slid them on. She passed me a pair of earmuffs that canceled out mostly everything. The cashier handed me my red bin of ammo, rolled up target and then my rifle. The AR15 was lighter than I expected. I felt powerful as soon as it went in my hand. In a few minutes, I would be shooting. I could barely hear the cashier.

“You’re in lane two.”

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Eugene Stoner liked to tinker with guns in his California garage when he wasn’t building airplanes. So it made sense that he’d pocket some aluminum from work to build his prototype rifles. The metal is still used today and keeps it at an average six pounds. It’s famous and most traditional color is black. The pistol grip, butt and coating on the stock are made out of plastic and were revolutionary when the prototype came out in the late 1950s.

AR15s are made up on average of 100 parts. They take up to four hours to make from when the order is filed to testing to make sure it can shoot straight. An order can wind up in the hands of someone a week after it is put in.

Machinists are constantly forming the aluminum parts for the rifle at top-selling places like Stag Arms. They shape the main body of the gun and the barrel. The triggers are assembled and the inner mechanisms are the guns are pieced together.

Finally the gun becomes two pieces. The lower half has all the hallmarks of the gun: the pistol grip for comfort, the butt, and the receiver, which takes the magazine. The upper half is made up of the barrel, the hammer, the accessory rail, the bolt and the gas chamber. Gas from the bullet flows through this chamber to create pressure that pushes the next bullet up for shooting. The hammer is attached to the back portion of the body and smacks the back of the bullet to make it fire. The bolt locks the bullet into the chamber. When it isn’t locked in, there’s a three-inch opening on right side of the gun. The rifle is ready to shoot and there’s a live bullet in the chamber when that opening is closed.

At Stag, an AR15 will go through two rounds of testing before it’s put in for inspection. Technicians check to make sure the gun shoots as accurate as possible. Safety inspectors make sure there aren’t any defects. The process is so meticulous that speed cameras test to make sure the bullet comes out at a particular speed. They also double-check that the gun won’t jam, backfire and explode in someone’s face.

The .223-caliber bullet was designed specifically for the AR15. Stoner was trying to sell the gun to the military in the early 1960s to replace the nearly 12-pound M1 Garand, a favorite in World War II, and the nearly 11-pound M14. Pentagon officials wanted something that was small but packed a lot of power. The original AR15 took a .22-caliber bullet. The most it could do was kill possums and squirrels. When a human being is shot with a .22 it will usually rattle around in them until the bullet explodes or the person dies a slow, painful death. Stoner had to make something with more power.

So he made the casing a thousandth of an inch longer to fit more gun powder. The bullet could fly further. During a test of the rifle in Vietnam a .223 shot blew off an NVA soldier's wrist. The AR15 was sold to the Pentagon and then the rest of America.

You don't need a traditional gun shop for an AR15 in the Internet age, however. AR15 owners take pride in assembling one with their hands. There are plenty of online parts that let that happen. Amateur gunsmiths can find stocks, butts, pistol grips on eBay – despite firearm sales being illegal on the online auction site. Once all 100-plus parts are collected, all one need to do is get instructions from AR15.com. Assembling the gun can take just a matter of minutes. One YouTube user takes a little more than two minutes to put the five big pieces of the gun together. That's *with* stopping to explain the steps.

This gun also takes as many accessories as an iPhone takes apps.

On Wall Street, the Porsche 911 is a symbol that you've arrived. But in the gun world, it's a \$2,245 LaRue Tactical AR15 with a \$150 tactical flashlight, a \$300 laser and \$680 silencer. An owner in California tricked her AR15 out with a pink and white Hello Kitty design. Someone responded to her online post with a green and yellow John Deere motif. A Windham Weaponry AR 15 can come in desert camo, forest camo, nutmeg wood and muddy pink.

It's not just a fancy scope when it comes to the AR15. A sling can fasten the gun to the shooter's shoulder. Gun companies make repair kits that fit into the hollow pistol grip, a shooter's own Swiss Army Knife. The attachable shotgun is called the "masterkey" because it can clear a door before shooting up a room full of people.

It's that individual factor that makes gun owners particularly love the AR15. When I met with Melkowski, I asked what was the best part of owning the world's top AR15 company. It was going to the annual SHOT shooting convention and people would come up to him to describe how unique their AR15s were. They told him about the lasers they attached and the performance modifications they had made.

"Everybody has a story and everyone has a reason for what their favorite part is," he said. "[The AR15 is] something that they put together, or they configured, in a way

that suits their needs. They have some ownership to it. It's more than just an off-the-shelf type item. It's "This is mine and this is the way it looks."

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Paul greeted me as I came through the double doors into the shooting gallery. He was six feet tall, slender with salt-and-pepper hair.

He took the rifle out of my hand and laid it down on the counter in lane two. I put the red bin next to it. Paul turned the range light on and started clipping the paper zombie to the target.

Paul pressed a tiny arrow on the remote attached to the wall of the lane. The zombie started to speed down the clothesline away from us.

"We want 15," he said. "It can go as far as 20 if you want."

I double-checked that it was yards. He nodded. Paul picked up the rifle and rested the butt on the side of his waist. He turned the AR15 so the left side was facing up. There were tiny parts protruding from the matte black body. Paul pushed the little black button sticking out of the left side, then pulled the hammer of the gun back.

"Now the gun his hot," he said. If it was loaded and the safety was turned off, it was ready to do some damage.

The butt of the gun has to be half exposed above your shoulder. Your cheek needs to be flush against the butt. If you bend your neck down too far, you won't get an accurate shot.

He took the magazine and pushed two of the brass .223 bullets down. Then he shoved the clip into the gun until it clicked. A smart slap on the bottom of the magazine to make sure it was in.

Paul pointed to the safety. It is on the left side of the grip just above the trigger. Your thumb has to do little work to flick it on and off. He lifted the gun and passed it over to me.

"Give it a try."

The gun was really hot. I flipped the safety off. My goggles started to fog up and the target became harder to see with each breath. My muscles were tense and my body was shaking. I squeezed the trigger.

The blast was louder than in video games and the movies. At first the gas is overwhelming and stinks of fire and chemicals. But I didn't feel any kickback. A

Playstation controller shakes more than this rifle does. Not at least like when I shoot 12-gauge shotguns at clay pigeons. I squeezed again.

Paul didn't want me to waste the last 18 bullets teaching me, so it was my turn. The cartridges stack half on top of each other. One to the right, then one to the left, and so on. I first loaded 14 bullets into the magazine. The shots went off much easier than my first two.

Paul came over and told me I seemed to be a natural. There was just one thing I needed to remember: lean forward with most of my weight on my left leg. That is the stance you see soldiers make.

I did as Paul told me with the last four bullets I had. The stance felt right. I started to reel the target in. The zombie flew down the clothesline. My adrenaline was so high that I wanted to pick up the rifle and shoot as the target zipped toward me.

Twenty shots made twenty marks. The AR-15 was as accurate as everyone kept saying. With fogging goggles and an uneven stance, I was still able to hit every target. Paul came over.

"Nice grouping!" Paul said, waving his hand over the cluster of holes in the zombie's chest and head.

Paul said I could leave everything at the lane and buy more bullets. I darted outside. When I got back, I loaded another 14 rounds into the magazine. The blast was quieter now. That chemical gas smell started to get sweet in my nose. My finger had a feel for the trigger.

I was flat broke and couldn't buy a third box of bullets. These last six had to count. I slid them gracefully into the magazine so the tips weren't damaged. I wanted to see if I could go tactical. I lifted the butt of the rifle to my face.

The first shot was at the head. The second shot was at the chest. The third shot was at the abdomen. I moved up to the right arm then shot over at the left arm. My last shot was at a blood-color throat.

I was a pro by the time I set the rifle down. The magazine released with ease and plopped on the table of lane two. My thumb flicked the safety on and I took a step back. When the zombie came down the lane, the fluorescent lights made it obvious: someone with little gun training could make every shot with an AR-15. All I had to do was fork over my license, make a few promises and pay \$143. Anyone can shoot this rifle.

Paul came over and inspected the gun. He made sure the safety was off. Then he looked in the opening on the right side to make sure a live bullet wasn't in the chamber. My adrenaline was pumping. I looked to make sure there wasn't a bullet

left over. But I couldn't stop looking at the bullet-riddled zombie. Then Paul stood up and smiled at me.

"Well, did you have fun?"