

“Mentor” is a word often used in the Army — one of those green-fuzz terms with connotations opprobrious as well as approving. For me, Harold K. Johnson was a mentor-teacher who stood head and shoulders above all other senior officers. He was the Commandant at the Command and General Staff College when my class was graduated in 1962. And both of us were posted thence to the Army General Staff: he to become the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (DCSOPS), I to become the junior officer in his International Plans and Policy Directorate (IPPD). I was given the combination to a file cabinet with two drawers of papers, one relating to the Army’s role in space, and the other to Cuba. I don’t remember any action bearing on the former portfolio, but the latter burgeoned that summer and fall, and I was unexpectedly thrust into very heady business.

One early morning in October 1962, I toted a voluminous briefing book to a table at which I sat down opposite the DCSOPS with General Earl G. Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) sitting between us. My job was to prepare CSA for a meeting with the Secretary of Defense concerning the latest letter from Nikita Khrushchev to President Kennedy, a copy of which had reached the Office of the Chief of Staff the previous evening, and my desk in IPPD around ten o’clock. Called in from home, I had spent the night preparing a succinct “talker” for CSA, backed up by copies of predecessor correspondence and papers specifying their military implications.

General Johnson began with a few words, and then asked me to outline orally what was in the briefing book. When I had done so, Buzz Wheeler leaned back in his chair, pulled out a very long cigar, lit it, drew upon it several times, and finally spoke:

“Johnny, how do we train an Army officer to do this sort of work?”

The DCSOPS beamed at me, and remarked expansively on Leavenworth’s preparing officers to think about complex problems. CSA then turned to me, and asked what, if anything, I would add to the C&GSC curriculum. I replied without hesitation that I would put in a typing course, because over the previous weeks I had often been called into the Pentagon long after the secretarial help had gone home. I reckoned that, so trained, I could produce a briefing book 100% faster. Both Generals seemed amused.

I surmise that it may have been that incident that caused General Johnson to detail me as an ODCSOPS member of a General Staff study group convened around Thanksgiving to consider whether the Army should adopt the AR-15 rifle.

I recall accompanying five other members of the study group to a meeting in the office of the DCSOPS to get his guidance. General Johnson’s desk stood in the center of the room, framed by E-ring windows, and flanked by a stand for the monster dictionary to which he was wont to send any officer misspelling or misusing a word to read aloud what was correct. As we filed in to take seats along the walls, our eyes were drawn immediately to the General’s desk, for on it lay an M-14 rifle. When we were seated, the General held up the rifle.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “your task is think about why the Army has this weapon. What is this for? Tell me....”

He walked over to the nearest officer, handed him the rifle, and repeated the question, “What is this for?”

My colleague responded instantly, in pure FM 7-10ese, “To close with and to destroy the enemy.”

Johnson shook his head in disagreement, handed the rifle to the next officer, and asked his question again. This time there was hesitation, and a bit of query-inflection in the reply: “To kill or capture the enemy.”

Again dissent, and the weapon passed from man to man, each of us in turn failing to satisfy the General,

“To kill precisely at long range and to deliver a volume of lethal fire for defense against attackers at close range.”

“To enable discrimination in the application of lethal force.”

“To combine point-kill capability with area fires.”

“To deter any aggressor by threatening death, up close and personal.”

The General walked back to his desk. “No, gentleman. The Army does not exist to kill. This weapon, and any other in the Army, exists primarily to serve the higher purpose of controlling land and people. In 1863, during Abraham Lincoln’s administration, Secretary of War Stanton published Army General Order Number 100 to explicate to rank and file that the object of the Army was not the death of its adversaries, but the reestablishment of the U.S. government in territory in hostile hands. Why do we have machine guns? Cannons? This rifle? This rifle enables movement. It and all our other weapons exist so that the Army can move to regain what has been lost to an aggressor, or to nullify his ability to attack our land or our people.”

“Remember that,” he enjoined, “in the task you are about to undertake.”

Our task, it turned out, was to arrange briefings by experts and to summarize technical papers for a group of general officers, constituted as a board to advise CSA whether or not he ought to authorize production of a .22 calibre rifle then known as the AR-15, the piece that was later type-standardized as the M-16. We of the working group had no voice in the formal proceedings, but we each formed our own view, and, of course, held internal debates on the pros and cons.

I was an infantryman, qualified as an expert with the M-1 rifle and the BAR, and experienced as a platoon leader in Korea. I was attracted to the lighter weapon’s features:

more rounds per pound on person, higher muzzle velocity translating into less super-elevation and hence ease of training for accuracy, plus selective semi-automatic or automatic fire. While I understood concerns over vitiating NATO standardization, I had observed that the M-1 (the progenitor of the M-14) was unwieldy in the hands of Asian allies. Having had to depend on the combat power of Koreans on my flank, and having been shot through the palm by a Chinaman with a PPSH, I understood the value in combat of an automatic weapon intuitive to shoot and easy to wield.

Nor was mine a minority view among my peers; we never tried to reach consensus, but I suspect that most of us eventually favored the AR-15. We all learned early that we were dealing with a range of issues on which “Facts Bearing” were highly contentious. An O-5 with whom I had served briefly in Korea approached me with “the real story” on the way firing tests of the AR-15 has been “rigged” to gainsay the better “military punch” of the M-14’s heavier .30 calibre bullet by supporting the “fallacy” that the former’s higher velocity .22 bullet had superior wounding characteristics. And others of us had similar contacts from individuals purporting to know that M-14 test firings had been carefully staged to show that the heavier bullet achieved unrealistic accuracy and lethal penetration at improbable ranges. But as I recall it, most of us accepted at face value what we had learned in high school physics: momentum was the product of mass times the square of velocity, and most had read S.L.A. Marshall’s The Soldier’s Load and the Mobility of the Nation. I believe that had we been asked for a conclusion, we would have agreed that hitting power beyond battle range was less important than the size and weight of the weapon system the soldier would have to carry into battle, and his ability use it to influence outcomes within battle range.

No so the general officers. The majority of them clearly favored the larger, heavier rifle and bullet, and found compelling a battered German *Stahlhelm* penetrated through-and-through, reportedly by an M-14 at 800 meters.

I spent that Yuletide in the Pentagon — the first of many — growing increasingly dismayed at our inability to come up with a convincing argument for one weapon or the other. As I recall, the decision brief General Wheeler took place in January. We sat along one wall of a very large room, opposite a row of exhibits — rifles, targets, ammunition, together with charts and gruesome photographs of slain animals. The general officers occupied chairs around a long table down the room’s center, a copy of our “read-ahead” at each place. There were a number of the General Staff principals other than the DCSOPS in attendance, and while we waited for CSA and the DCSOPS to take their places at the head of the table, I sensed a certain tension among the attendees.

When the Chief was seated, General Johnson introduced our group leader, who moved with precision through our summary brief, a carefully balanced recitation of the advantages and disadvantages of each weapon as demonstrated in recent trials. CSA then went around the table, asking each member of the board for his views and a recommendation. Most chose to speak standing, and a few walked over to pick up one of the exhibits to emphasize a point. The usual statement was, as we had expected, some variant of the criticality of killing at long range.

One general (from the Ordnance School, as I recall) brandished the M-14, making jabbing motions, and saying that if he had to go into combat he wanted to carry a hefty weapon and a long bayonet, a real weapon that he knew could kill, not some plastic gimmick. Another portly officer held aloft the AR-15, and declared in a loud voice: "You can tell it's swell, it's by Mattel!" Altogether, most of the board members registered support for the M-14, and disdain for the little black rifle.

The last general to speak was Major General Creighton Abrams, who was General John's assistant and Director of Operations. "Abe" did not rise from his chair at the far end of the table to remark laconically that he had never seen a German killed by a rifle from beyond fifty yards. As far as he was concerned, getting infantry units forward where the volume of their fire counted was tactically more important than long-range, single-shot kills. It looked to him like the AR-15 was a better answer than the M-14.

CSA looked at General Johnson, who said that he agreed with "Abe." CSA nodded, and indicated that he did too. He then left, and the meeting broke up.

Subject:

Questions about the M-14 versus M-16 Controversy

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Fri, 27 Feb 2004 13:30:51 -0500

To:

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I appreciate your time. Here are my questions:

1. Analysts say that nearly all the champions of the AR-15 were civilians in OSD. The best evidence comes from September 1962, when Comptroller Charles Hitch sent Secretary McNamara a report that rated the AR-15 as clearly more effective than the M-14. The Army Staff quickly submitted a rebuttal calling the M-14 superior in delivering aimed long-range fire and effective under all environmental conditions. Is your recollection also that of a fairly clear military versus civilian split?
2. Do you recall that the Army Staff and senior officers gave any credence to claims that Ordnance personnel or the Infantry and Arctic Boards were rigging field tests in the M-14's favor by carefully choosing ammunition lots and expert shooters?
3. I interviewed Paul Ignatius, who said he believed that Gen. Abrams as Assistant DCSOPS and then as Vice CSA played an important role in pushing for the M-16. Do you have any recollection of that?
4. Was there a sense in the Army Staff that McNamara and Secretary of the Army Vance were pressing Gen. Wheeler to approve the start of M-16 production?
5. According to an article by James Davis, a Deputy ASD at the time, switching to M-16s had unforeseen "cultural" ramifications (e.g., changing the method of individual rifle inspection), leading field officers to resent the changeover. Do you recollect that there was such a feeling, prior to the jamming controversy of 1966 that put another dimension on the issue?

Thanks for your willingness to help.

Walter S. Poole

Ft. McNair

CMH,