

Understanding the Sig Sauer MCX Assault Rifle Used in the Orlando Mass Shooting



**Violence Policy Center
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The Sig Sauer MCX Assault Rifle

Early in the morning of June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen, age 29, opened fire with a Sig Sauer MCX assault rifle at Pulse, a gay dance club in Orlando, Florida. Mateen killed 49 people and wounded 53 others. In addition to the Sig Sauer assault rifle, Mateen was also carrying a Glock semiautomatic pistol. The two weapons had been legally purchased earlier in the month from the St. Lucie Shooting Center in Port St. Lucie, Florida. Mateen was killed in a shootout when law enforcement stormed the building around 5:00 AM that morning. The massacre is the worst mass shooting in U.S. history.^{1 2}

The MCX is a classic assault rifle and incorporates many of the characteristics that make this category of firearm so lethal and distinguish it from sporting rifles. The MCX uses detachable ammunition magazines and comes equipped with a 30-round magazine like those used in the Orlando mass shooting. The MCX is also designed with: a pistol grip; a folding, collapsible, or telescoping stock; and, a handguard. These characteristics enhance the gun's lethality by making it easier to shoot, reload, and maneuver in closed spaces such as a dark nightclub.

This backgrounder offers a brief overview of the Sig Sauer MCX assault rifle, key points about assault weapons, and a discussion about what makes assault weapons different from standard hunting and sporting firearms.

The Introduction of the MCX Assault Rifle

Sig Sauer, based in Newington, New Hampshire, produces a variety of assault rifles for civilian sale in the United States. According to a November 2015 *Gun Digest* article:

Formally introduced ahead of the 2015 SHOT Show in Las Vegas [the SHOT (Shooting, Hunting, Outdoor Trade) Show is the annual trade show for the firearms industry and is closed to the general public], the MCX was built to be a compact and lightweight, close-quarters battle (CQB) suppressed rifle optimized for the .300 AAC Blackout cartridge. Additional requirements for the platform included a modular design with a quick-change barrel system for easy interchangeability of calibers and barrel lengths, traditional AR-style controls for ease of use, the ability to utilize a folding stock, and a gas system that provided unparalleled reliability. In early 2015, SIG commercially released the MCX and made it available in three variations—a semi-auto rifle, a short-barreled rifle (SBR) and a pistol configuration.³

The semiautomatic Carbine and pistol version of the gun are available for general civilian sale with a retail price for the rifle of \$1,866.⁴

As is common with most assault weapon manufacturers, catalog copy for the MCX features military imagery and language. In its 2015 catalog, Sig Sauer boasts of the company's "battle-tested experience" and urges readers to "Experience the Evolution," stating:

Designed and built in New Hampshire. Ready to perform anywhere. SIG SAUER combines industry-leading innovation with battle-tested experience to engineer the world's toughest, most devastatingly accurate pistols and rifles. And now, we also deliver the most dependable, most precise silencers, optics, and ammunition—all in our mission to provide elite shooters with the complete weapon systems they need to prevail under any circumstance.



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Soon after, in an acknowledgment of the rifle's military pedigree, the National Rifle Association's *American Rifleman* magazine stated:

The modular SIG Sauer MCX line was designed in the U.S. after the Department of Defense asked for a compact, quiet rifle able to engage targets out to 300 meters.⁵

Sig Sauer is a corporate financial donor to the National Rifle Association and the sponsor of the NRA online series *Defending Our America*, described as:

a raw look into what it takes to truly protect the American people—giving a voice to those who defend our borders, our cities and our values. The media may not tell the

whole truth, but these patriots will. No scripts. No prompts. No retakes...just a raw dose of the reality in which we live.

Our tribute to all active-duty military, law enforcement and first responders: a specially discounted NRA membership with exclusive perks—like up to 45% off great gear from 20+ brands.⁶

In its 2016 catalog, the company promised that the assault rifle was:

Not just another AR, but an entirely new rifle platform and complete weapons system—fully configurable for any scenario or environment.

RIFLES

SIG While others may settle, SIG uses world-class engineering to elevate and redefine every aspect of rifle performance, delivering unmatched reliability and precision. Begin your search with size, caliber, and firing system. Narrow it using stock, handguard, and advanced features.

CARBINE
A long arm firearm with a 16" barrel or longer, but shorter than the 20+" barrels of standard full-length rifles.

SHORT BARREL
A firearm with a barrel length under 16" that is designed to be shouldered when fired.

PISTOL
A firearm with a barrel length under 12" with no stock for shouldering when firing.

No information is available on the number of MCX rifles that have been produced or sold in the United States since their introduction in 2015. The limited production data that is available from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is held for two years by the agency and even when released, offers no information on any given company’s product line beyond weapon type: rifle, shotgun, revolver, or pistol (broken out by caliber range). In 2014, Sig Sauer reported 43,141 rifles manufactured in the United States, including assault weapon models.

According to its 2016 catalog, Sig Sauer also offers “Armed Professional Purchase Programs” for “those who put their lives on the line for the safety and the freedom of others.” The program offers “special discounts on SIG SAUER firearms and accessories.” Among “those who qualify” are: active or retired law enforcement officers with official agency credentials; first responders;

active duty or retired military (any rank) with valid military ID; active or retired reservists and National Guard (any rank) with military ID; corrections officers, including parole and probation officers; state licensed armed security officers and licensed security companies; court justices, district attorneys, and deputy district attorneys; other state, county, and city officials with official agency credentials or official documentation whose job duties necessitate carrying a firearm; and, credentialed nuclear security officers.

The Orlando shooter is reported to have had a security officer license in Florida.⁷

The MCX is marketed as a next-generation AR-15 assault rifle. The MCX utilizes a gas piston operating system rather than the AR's direct impingement system. This design change lets the shooter use a silencer with no reduction in performance according to a *Tactical Life* reviewer who asks, "Could this be what a piston-driven AR was always meant to be?"⁸ In a 2015 press release announcing the rifle's introduction, Sig Sauer notes:

The lower receiver offers familiar AR-style controls, with ambidextrous selector and mag release as standard. The SIG MCX upper is compatible with mil-spec AR-15 lowers and, with the use of a SIG MCX Stock Kit, allows consumers to fully upgrade their legacy system.⁹

The *Tactical Life* review also describes how the MCX differs from, and is similar to, AR-type rifles:

The MCX has the familiar AR upper and lower receiver layout that we know, but some caveats have been added here. The upper receiver is hardened in select areas, and Sig has developed replaceable parts for those areas that wear the most. One such part is the metal cam-path insert on the side of the upper receiver. Other replaceable parts include a feed ramp insert and the ambidextrous charging handle latch. These items are all steel inserts or pins. The forward assist has an aluminum housing that can be replaced if it wears out. These features reveal that the MCX was meant for long-term use in harsh conditions. In essence, you won't have to scrap the upper receiver after hard use, only replace some parts. The lower receiver's controls require no retraining, as they are the same as an AR's, while the magazine release, bolt release and safety selector are all ambidextrous. Aftermarket drop-in triggers will be right at home, too.¹⁰

This view is echoed in a review of the rifle on the *Ammoland* website:

When gun guys get to talking and ask "AK or AR?," short of an actual fist fight there are two clearly divided camps with a smattering of shooters who proclaim to "*Get Both.*" It may not have the post-World War 2 look of a COMBLOC rifle, but the improved functionality of a true piston system without a buffer tube is there coupled with the superior ergonomics, modularity and accuracy of a next-gen AR style rifle.¹¹

In short, the introduction of the rifle builds on the demand for AR-type rifles, claiming innovations and improvements to aid the weapon's lethal function.

Key Points About Assault Weapons

- 1. Semiautomatic assault weapons like Sig Sauer's MCX are civilian versions of military assault weapons.** Even though the gun industry prefers to call semiautomatic assault weapons “modern sporting rifles,” there are no significant differences between them and military assault weapons.
- 2. Military assault weapons are “machine guns.”** That is, they are capable of fully automatic fire. A machine gun will continue to fire as long as the trigger is held down until the ammunition magazine is empty.
- 3. Civilian assault weapons are *not* machine guns.** They are semiautomatic weapons. (Since 1986 federal law has banned the sale to civilians of new machine guns.) The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon must be pulled separately for each round fired. It is a mistake to call civilian assault weapons “automatic weapons” or “machine guns.”
- 4. This is a distinction without a difference in terms of killing power.** Civilian semiautomatic assault weapons incorporate all of the functional design features that make assault weapons so deadly. They are arguably more deadly than military versions, because most experts agree that semiautomatic fire is more accurate than automatic fire.
- 5. The distinctive “look” of assault weapons is not cosmetic. It is the visual result of specific functional design decisions.** Military assault weapons were designed and developed for a specific military purpose—laying down a high volume of fire over a wide killing zone.
- 6. Civilian assault weapons keep the specific functional design features that make this anti-personnel function easy.** These functional features also distinguish assault weapons from traditional sporting guns.
- 7. The most significant assault weapon functional design features are: (1) ability to accept a detachable high-capacity ammunition magazine, (2) a rear pistol or thumb-hole grip, and, (3) a forward grip or barrel shroud.** Taken together, these are the design features that make possible the deadly and indiscriminate “spray-firing” for which assault weapons are designed. None of them are features of true hunting or sporting guns.
- 8. Although the gun lobby today argues that there is no such thing as civilian assault weapons, the industry, the National Rifle Association, and gun magazines enthusiastically described these civilian versions as “assault rifles,” “assault pistols,” and “military assault” weapons to boost civilian sales throughout the 1980s.** The industry and its allies only began to use the semantic argument that a “true” assault weapon is a machine gun after civilian assault weapons turned up in large numbers in the hands of drug traffickers, criminal gangs, mass murderers, and other dangerous criminals.

What Is a Semiautomatic Assault Weapon?

Semiautomatic assault weapons are civilian versions of automatic military assault rifles (like the M-16 and AK-47) and automatic military assault pistols (like the UZI).

These guns look the same because they are virtually identical, save for one feature: military assault rifles are machine guns. A machine gun fires continuously as long as its trigger is held back—until it runs out of ammunition. Civilian assault rifles are *semi*-automatic weapons. The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon must be pulled back separately for each round fired.

Because federal law has banned the sale of new machine guns to civilians since 1986,¹² and heavily regulates sales to civilians of older model machine guns, there is virtually no civilian market for military assault weapons. The gun industry introduced semiautomatic versions of military assault weapons in order to create and exploit new civilian markets for these deadly weapons.

What's So Bad About Semiautomatic Assault Weapons?

Assault weapons did not “just happen.” They were developed to meet specific combat needs. All assault weapons—military and civilian alike—incorporate specific features that were designed to provide a specific military combat function. That military function is *laying down a high volume of fire over a wide killing zone*. Civilian assault weapons keep the specific design features that make this deadly spray-firing easy. These features also distinguish assault weapons from traditional sporting firearms.

The distinctive “look” of assault weapons is not merely “cosmetic,” as the gun lobby often argues—the assault weapon’s appearance is the result of the design of the gun following its function. A brief summary of how assault weapons came into being makes clear the reason for, and the nature of, their distinctive design features.

The problem of trench warfare. The roots of military assault weapons lie in the trench fighting of the First World War. The standard infantry weapon of that conflict was the long-range battle rifle. “Infantrymen in most armies were equipped with high-powered rifles: long, unwieldy, but accurate to ranges of 1,000 m (3,280 ft) or more. But a long weapon was a definite handicap in the close-quarter fighting of the trenches, and long-range capability was wasted when combat usually took place at ranges of tens of metres or less.”¹³

Submachine guns—the intermediate step. When armies bogged down in the World War I trenches, weapons designers looked for ways to break the bloody stalemate. Among them was the submachine gun, designed to be a “compact, fast-firing, short-range weapon” for use in the trenches and by highly mobile storm troops in new tactical formations.¹⁴ According to the *Illustrated Book of Guns*, “A submachine gun (SMG) is a close-range, automatic weapon, firing pistol cartridges (e.g., 9mm Parabellum), and is compact, easy to carry, and light enough to be fired from either the shoulder or the hip.”¹⁵

The final step—the first assault rifle. The last step in the evolution of the military assault rifle came during the Second World War. It grew out of the German military’s pre-war interest in “obtaining a relatively high-power intermediate or mid-range cartridge *and corresponding weapon* for infantry application.”¹⁶ (Emphasis added). German military thinkers realized that, “Since most infantry action took place at ranges under 400 meters, the long-range potential of the standard cartridge and service rifle were actually wasted.”¹⁷ There were also logistical problems in supplying armies in the field with different kinds of rounds of ammunition: the larger rifle cartridges for the battle rifle and the smaller pistol cartridges for the submachine guns.¹⁸ As one expert noted, “During their Operation Barbarossa (Russian) campaign and elsewhere, the Germans were continually reminded of the ever-increasing need for a rapid fire arm that was small enough to be convenient to hand carry, but at the same time possessed sufficient range and power to be adequate out to about 200 meters.”¹⁹

The result of German research and development was the STG (*Sturmgewehr*) (“storm gun”) 44, the “father of all assault rifles....After the war it was examined and dissected by almost every major gunmaking nation and led, in one way and another, to the present-day 5.56mm assault rifles.”²⁰



STG-44 on top, Sig Sauer MCX on bottom

Deadly designs. One thing leaps out from the pictures above: the remarkable similarity of the first assault rifle to the Sig Sauer MCX and other assault rifles currently being marketed by gunmakers. This family resemblance is not a coincidence. From the STG-44 “storm gun” to the MCX “true mission-adaptable weapon system,” assault weapons have incorporated into their design *specific* features that enable shooters to spray a large number of bullets over a broad killing zone, without having to aim at each individual target. These features not only give assault weapons a distinctive appearance, they make it easy to simply point the gun while rapidly pulling

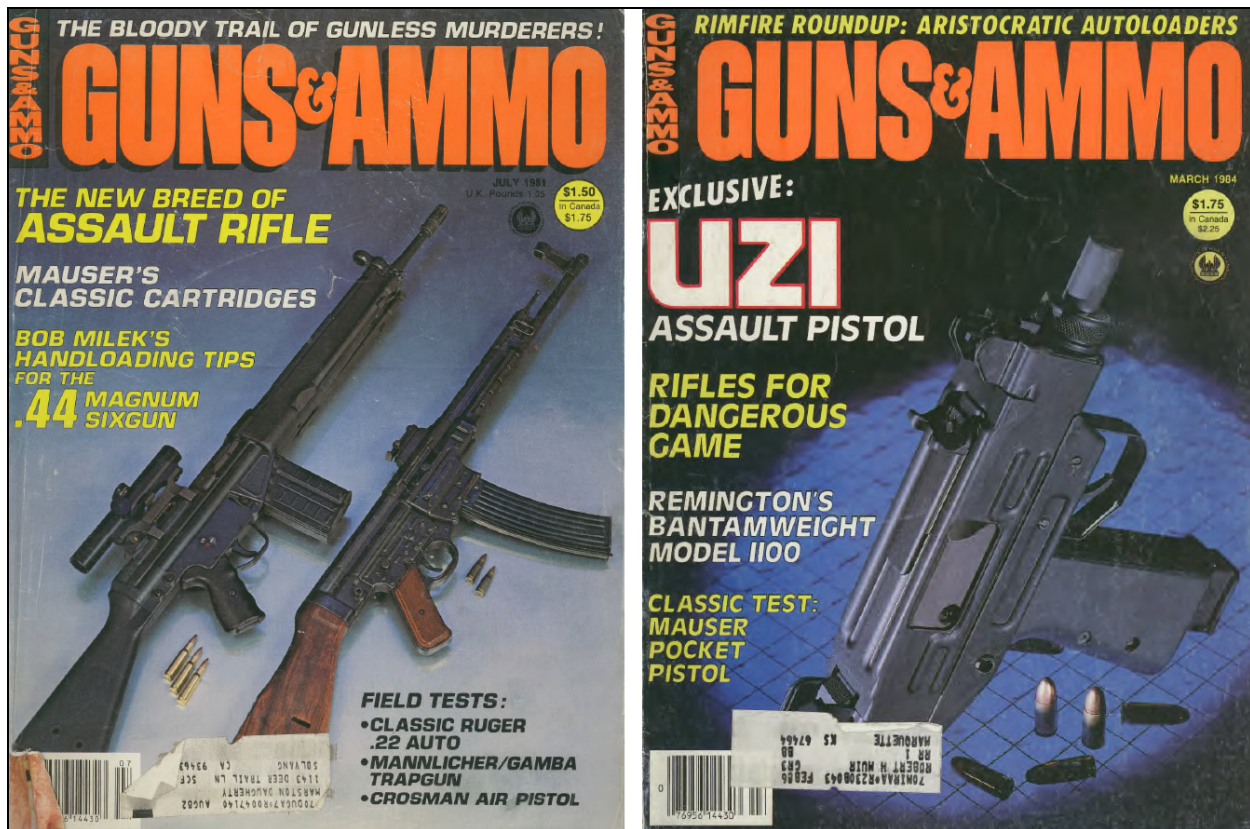
the trigger—including firing from the hip, a procedure seldom used in hunting anything but human beings. The most important of these design features are:

- **“High-capacity” detachable ammunition magazines** that hold as many as 100 rounds of ammunition. “This allows the high volume of fire critical to the ‘storm gun’ concept.”²¹
- **A rear pistol grip** (handle), including so-called “thumb-hole stocks” and magazines that function like pistol grips.
- **A forward grip or barrel shroud.** Forward grips (located under the barrel or the forward stock) “give a shooter greater control over a weapon during recoil.”²² Forward grips and barrel shrouds also make it possible to hold the gun with the non-trigger hand, even through the barrel gets extremely hot from firing multiple rounds.

These design features create the ability to quickly lay down a high volume of fire, making semiautomatic assault weapons a particularly dangerous addition to the civilian gun market. They explain why assault weapons are favored by terrorists, mass killers, and violent criminals, and they distinguish such weapons from true hunting and target guns.

Deliberate, aimed fire from the shoulder may be more accurate than the spray-firing for which assault weapons were designed. But mass murderers and other violent criminals drawn to assault weapons are not after marksmanship medals. They want to kill or maim as many people as possible in as short a time as possible—the exact job for which the semiautomatic assault weapon was designed.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation’s “Modern Sporting Rifle” Rebranding Campaign. The National Rifle Association, the gun industry, the gun press, and other pro-gun “experts” today claim that there is no such thing as a civilian “assault weapon.” They prefer to call them “tactical rifles” or “modern sporting rifles.” But before these types of guns came under fire, these same experts enthusiastically described exactly these civilian versions as “assault rifles,” “assault pistols,” and “military assault” weapons as seen, in just one stark example, from the magazine covers on the next page.



In November 2008, *The Shooting Wire* reported that the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF)—“due to gun owners’ concerns over President-elect Obama and possible legislation regulating the Second Amendment rights of Americans”—had placed on its website a “media resource...to help clear up much of the confusion and misinformation about so-called ‘assault weapons.’”²³

This was the opening salvo in the industry’s meretricious campaign to “rebrand” semiautomatic assault weapons as “modern sporting rifles.” The point of the campaign—inspired by the pummeling the industry gets for selling killing machines—is apparently that semiautomatic assault rifles are really just another sporting gun, no different from an older generation of bolt-action and low-capacity rifles.

But some within the gun industry’s own ranks continue to call semiautomatic assault rifles what they are—*assault* rifles—and even write lurid prose promoting the worst features of these guns.

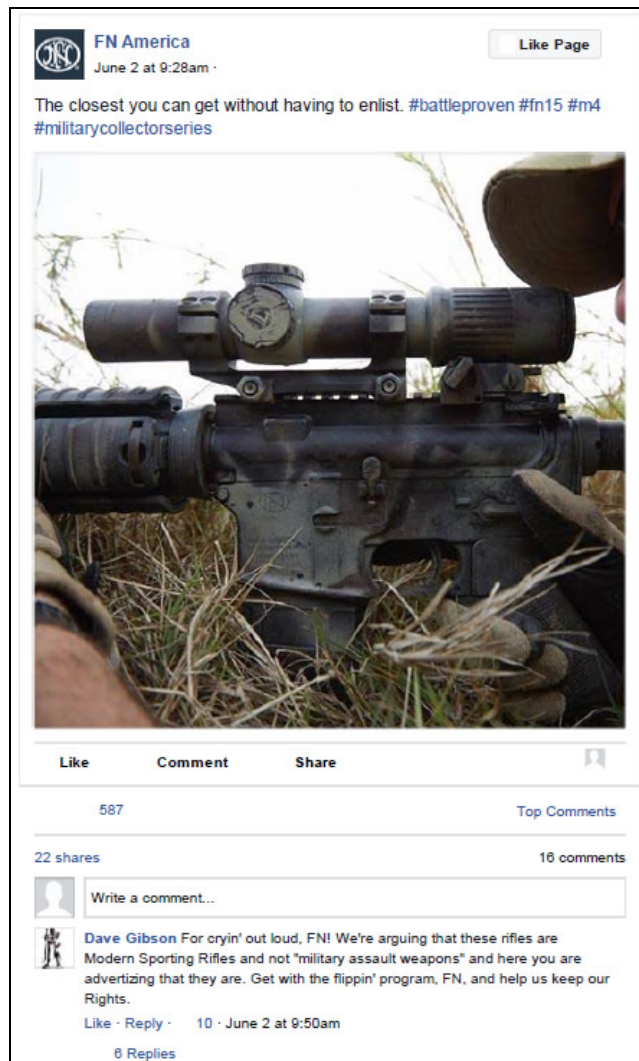
For example, the August 2010 edition of *Gun World* magazine heralded “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle” as “‘Combat Customized’ From the Factory.”²⁴ Among other outbursts of naked candor in the enthusiastic article were the following—

- “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle is a version of the well-established Mini-14 incorporating many of the assault rifle features that end users have being [sic] applying themselves for decades, this time straight from the factory.”

- “Being seen over the years as a sort of ‘poor man’s assault rifle’ the Mini-14 has spawned a huge array of after-market parts that may be applied to make it more ‘assault rifle-y.’ Recently Sturm, Ruger & Co. finally decided to get into the act themselves by producing their Mini-14 Tactical Rifles.”

More recently, in June 2016 on its Facebook page, assault weapon manufacturer FN America posted a picture of one of its assault rifles with the heading, “The closest you can get without having to enlist.” It was followed by the hash tags #battleproven, #fn15, #m4, and #militarycollectorseries. In reaction to the post, one commenter wrote:

For cryin’ out loud, FN! We’re arguing that these rifles are Modern Sporting Rifles and not “military assault weapons” and here you are advertizing [sic] that they are. Get with the flippin’ program, FN, and help us keep our Rights.



These spasms of candor are typical of the “wink and nod” game that the gun industry plays when it talks to itself and to its hard-core consumers.

But, call them what you will—“black rifles,” “tactical rifles,” or “modern sporting rifles”—military-style semiautomatic assault weapons are, plain and simply, killing machines.

Endnotes

¹ “Orlando Shooting: What We Know and Don’t Know,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2016 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-shooting-what-we-know-and-dont-know.html>).

² “Orlando Shooter Bought Weapons at Nearby Gun Shop,” *abcnews.go.com*, June 13, 2016 (<http://abcnews.go.com/US/orlando-shooter-bought-weapons-nearby-gun-shop/story?id=39817471>).

³ “Gun Test: SIG Sauer MCX,” *Daily Caller*, November 2, 2015 (<http://dailycaller.com/2015/11/02/gun-test-sig-sauer-mcx/#ixzz4BZufVtdw>).

⁴ “SIG SAUER Unveils the Next Evolution in Rifle Technology: The SIG MCX,” Sig Sauer press release, *Soldier Systems* (<http://soldiersystems.net/2015/01/12/sig-sauer-unveils-next-evolution-rifle-technology-sig-mcx/>).

⁵ “Video: SIG Sauer MCX,” *American Rifleman*, January 31, 2016 (<https://www.americanrifleman.org/articles/2016/1/31/video-sig-sauer-mcx/>).

⁶ See <https://www.nranews.com/series/defending-our-america>.

⁷ “Omar Mateen Probed for Terror Ties but Legally Purchased Weapons,” *nbcnews.com*, June 13, 2016 (<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/orlando-nightclub-massacre/omar-mateen-probed-terror-ties-legally-purchased-weapons-n590836>).

⁸ “Sig Sauer’s MCX Rifle: An Elite Modular Weapons System,” *Tactical-Life*, Jun 30, 2015 (<http://www.tactical-life.com/firearms/review-sig-sauer-mcx/#mcx-twa15-lead>).

⁹ “SIG SAUER Unveils the Next Evolution in Rifle Technology: The SIG MCX,” Sig Sauer press release, *Soldier Systems* (<http://soldiersystems.net/2015/01/12/sig-sauer-unveils-next-evolution-rifle-technology-sig-mcx/>).

¹⁰ “Sig Sauer’s MCX Rifle: An Elite Modular Weapons System,” *Tactical-Life*, Jun 30, 2015 (<http://www.tactical-life.com/firearms/review-sig-sauer-mcx/#mcx-twa15-lead>).

¹¹ “SIG SAUER MCX Rifle Review,” *Ammoland.com*, February 11, 2016 (<http://www.ammoland.com/2016/02/sig-sauer-mcx-rifle-review/#axzz4BefmgSgX>).

¹² See, 18 U.S. Code, Section 922(o).

¹³ Chris Bishop (ed.), *Guns in Combat* (Edison, N.J.: Chartwell Books, 1998): 37.

¹⁴ Ian V. Hogg, *Submachine Guns* (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001): 7.

¹⁵ David Miller (ed.), *The Illustrated Book of Guns* (London: Salamander Books Ltd., 2000): 232.

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- ¹⁶ Peter R. Senich, *The German Assault Rifle, 1935-1945* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1987): 1.
- ¹⁷ Peter R. Senich, *The German Assault Rifle, 1935-1945* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1987): 1.
- ¹⁸ Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1984): 2.
- ¹⁹ Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1984): 2.
- ²⁰ Ian Hogg, *Jane's Guns Recognition Guide* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000): 302.
- ²¹ Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1984): 5.
- ²² Duncan Long, *The Terrifying Three: Uzi, Ingram, and Intratec Weapons Families* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1989): 104.
- ²³ "NSSF Announces Media Resource on 'Assault Weapons,'" *Shooting Wire*, November 29, 2008 (www.shootingwire.com/archived/2008-11-24_sw.html).
- ²⁴ "Ruger's Mini-14 Tactical Rifle," *Gun World*, August 2010, p. 58.