

Case study: the story of one assault rifle

There are about 875 million small arms in the world. The International Action Network on Small Arms estimate that over 300,000 people are shot dead every year, and over 1 million injured by guns. These case studies illustrate the damage done by an assault rifle made in Singapore. It could however have been an Australian government rifle.

The SR88A assault rifle

The gun pictured here is an SR88A. It was made in 1988 in the Chartered Industries of Singapore factory.

It is a high velocity weapon. High-velocity bullets travel faster than the speed of sound. They create a permanent cavity, cause hemorrhaging, and produce a temporary cavity that expands and contracts three to four times after the bullet has passed through. This cavity can be 30 to 40 times larger than the bullet, damaging both tissue and structures far from the wound tract.

The Solomon Islands government bought this gun in 1992 along with several hundred others. It was stored in the police armoury at Rove Police Station until it was taken by the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) in 2000. The MEF had access to these weapons through their members who were in the police force.



Public domain image from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:SR-88A.jpg>

The Solomons conflict

Social and political tensions between Solomon Islanders erupted into armed conflict between 1998 and 2003, with rival militias — first the Isatabu Freedom Movement of Guadalcanal, and later the Malaita Eagle Force — taking up weapons.

The conflict arose over longstanding land and compensation claims, with many people from the main island of Guadalcanal resentful of migrants from other islands, especially Malaita, taking land near the capital Honiara. As conflict between armed militias erupted, an estimated 15 – 20,000 people fled from Guadalcanal for their home islands.

In June 2000, Malaitan militants and elements of the police force broke open police armouries and stole high-powered rifles, deposing the government.

In the Pacific, Australia has a high-profile role as a regional peace keeper. However Australia also supplied assault rifles to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the 1970s; thousands of weapons later went missing from PNG government arsenals.

Stanley

This SR88A ended up in the hands of a 21 year old MEF militant, Stanley Avua. He had no prior weapons training. He is a big fan of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies.

Two weeks before, Gual forces had captured two of Stanley's fellow MEF soldiers and killed them at Koro village.

Stanley joins a raiding party to attack Koro and avenge the deaths. The raiding party engages the Gual militants on the outskirts of Koro. Stanley is both terrified and excited, and he is nearly deafened by exploding ordinance.

He's not really sure what to do, so he simply fires from the hip, as he's seen Schwarzenegger do. This position makes the gun muzzle keep riding upward and he sprays uncontrolled arcs of fire from the SR88A at an astonishing 13 rounds per second.

One of his bullets hits 14 year old Koro boy Dominik, who dies that day.

Another bullet ricochets and hits Stanley's friend Francis who survives for a week. Stanley vows to avenge Francis's death, not realising his gunfire caused the fatal injury.



Two casualties of small arms

Dominik

Dominik, a 14 year old boy from Koro, was out collecting gnali nuts with friends when the fighting began. He hid in a bunker along with the Guadalcanal fighters, but the MEF made this bunker the focus of their attack so he and his friends decided to make a run for the village.

A single projectile from Stanley's gun hits Dominik in the lower leg from a range of 50 metres. His horrified friends carry him back home.

Dominik cannot go to hospital because all of the vehicles have been commandeered by militants. He also comes from an enemy village outside the MEF roadblock, and Honiara National Referral Hospital lies in MEF territory. Dominik is taken back to his home where his family try to stop the bleeding from his leg wound.

There are no medical personnel in the area, as fierce fighting has kept even the Red Cross out.

Dominik bleeds and dies within six hours of being wounded.

The three case studies in this fact sheet, and the village, are composites; but are based on real stories recorded by Dr Melanie Archer, who worked as a forensic scientist in the Solomon Islands.

Photo above right: Militia members during the Solomon Islands conflict, 1998-2003. Thanks to photographer Ben Bohane.



Francis

Another of Stanley's bullets ricochets and hits his fellow MEF militant, Francis, in the right lumbar region.

Francis is taken to the hospital in Honiara by his comrades in the back of a utility vehicle. He has a bumpy and extremely painful ride and they get bogged once due to the badly degraded roads.

The militants threaten hospital staff at gunpoint to give priority to Francis.

There is one general surgeon, but limited antibiotics and antiseptics. Francis gets immediate care and some basic treatment, at the expense of other patients.

Francis is stabilised by immediate treatment but eventually develops peritonitis (massive infection) from his gunshot wound and dies within a week.

There were inadequate antibiotics to save him.

Sources and key references

- *MAPW factsheet: The spread of arms in the asia pacific:* www.mapw.org.au/files/downloads/Factsheet2.pdf
- *MAPW factsheet: Small arms and conflicts:* www.mapw.org.au/files/downloads/Factsheet3.pdf
- *Phillip Alpers, re PNG criminals using Australian-supplied assault rifles:* www.globalcollab.org/Nautilus/australia/apsnet/policy-forum/2006/0626a-aspers.html
- *Small Arms, Explosives and Incendiaries: (Effects of high velocity weapons) Book chapter by Wendy Cukier and Antoine Chapdelaine available at:* www.ryerson.ca/SAFER-Net/issues/TerrJE03.pdf
- *Case studies summarised from notes for Small Arms in the Pacific workshop, prepared by Melanie Archer, Angela Wilson and Tamara Vu for AMSA Global Health Conference 2008*

