



Why the PLA Adopted the Type 95 Light Support Weapon

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpt details the PLA's experience with the Type 88 general-purpose machine gun, which has since been abandoned in favor of the Type 95 light support weapon (QBB-95), a variant of the Type 95 assault rifle. In laying out the key points of this evolution it highlights the current direction of PLA infantry tactics and development.



"Machine gun Type95," National War College.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Machine_gun_Type95.jpg, Public Domain

In the late 1970s, the PLA held a series of tests to determine the appropriate caliber for a planned set of infantry weapons, which concluded that a small caliber would best be suited for China's needs. The resulting 5.8x42mm cartridge is used by PLA rifles, designated marksman rifles and machine guns use a common, though a "heavy" variant with stronger casing and heavier grain bullet is used for some applications.

As the article highlights, at the time the global trend was toward the use of lighter-caliber machine guns for use with squads. The Type 88 was designed in the mid-90s to fill this role and was issued to units beginning in 1997.

A two-man crew operated the weapon, providing a rate of fire of 1,000 rounds per minute, with an effective range is 1,000 meters. The belt-fed machine gun used 100-round belts in the light machine gun configuration and 200 rounds when used with a tripod.

However, a sea change in views on the appropriate caliber for use in squads, in part due to the PLA's observations of US success in the first Gulf War and Somalia, led them to question the utility of the system. Heavier 12.7mm machine gun teams were integrated at the company and battalion level putting the Type 88 in an awkward position in which its requirement for two-man teams, the additional awkward weight of the tripod, which added an additional 4.2kg (9.25lbs), combined with Type 88's reliance on the heavier 5.8mm ammunition was a contributed to its abandonment in favor of the Type 95 light support weapon in 2016.

The Type 95 support weapon does not require additional crew and can provide effective or suppressing fires at 600 and 800 meters. Equipped with a longer and heavier barrel than the standard Type 95 assault rifle and a bipod for stability, it has a firing rate of upwards of 650 rounds per minute. While it uses 80-round drums instead of 100- or 200-round belts, Automatic Riflemen in the PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC), for example, carry at least four of the 80-round drums in chest pouches.

For now, the Type 95 assault rifle remains standard, though members of the People's Armed Police and coastal defense units are equipped with the Type 03 rifle. A new rifle, the QBZ191 rifle, was first displayed at the National Day parade in 2019, and a designated marksman variant appears to be in testing. However, it is unclear if all forces will eventually be equipped with it. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

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Continued: Why the PLA Adopted the Type 95 Light Support Weapon

Source: “中国造出世界最轻通用机枪为何又弃用 有两个缺陷 (Two flaws: Why the World’s lightest General-Purpose machine gun was abandoned by China),” Sina, 《出鞘》 Drawn Sword Blog, 7 May 2019. <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/jssd/2019-05-07/doc-ihvhiews0315150.shtml>

The Chinese Type 88 general-purpose machine gun (also referred to as the QJY88) 5.8-mm general-purpose machine gun first appeared in 1999. Known as the world’s lightest in that category, with a total weight under 7.6kg (16.8lbs), However, it was only in service for roughly ten years, and finally was discontinued in 2016, due to unclear advantages, insufficient power, and mediocre performance.

As a new general-purpose machine gun, the Type 88 general-purpose machine gun was not well received. Data indicates that while its design was finalized in 1996 and troops began receiving it in 1997, its total production rate over 20 years is very low, not surpassing 20,000 units. This might lead some to believe that it had “made a quick exit.” By contrast, the first-generation general-purpose machine gun developed by our army, the Type 67 machine gun, produced more than 30,000 in the 1970s alone. At present, the Type 88 general-purpose machine gun is still serving in the army, although it has not “quickly withdrawn from the stage of history.”

The Type 88 is designed to act as a light machine gun when using a tripod, and it becomes a medium machine gun when placed on a tripod. Compared with the Type 95 machine gun, it had a superior weight of fire and suppression effects, leading to optimism about its tactical utility.

Beginning in 2005, the PLA operational units began to implement a new infantry squad weapon system for mechanized infantry. The tripod for the Type 88 was replaced with a bipod and infantry squads were equipped with it in a two-man light machine gun configuration, giving squads firepower approaching that of U.S. military squads.

However, this optimism was short-lived. After the Gulf War, the U.S. military questioned the combat capability of the small caliber 5.56 mm M249 machine gun. In 1993, after heavy losses in Mogadishu it concluded that while the 5.56 mm light machine gun is both light and flexible, it offered inferior suppression capability compared to 7.62 mm general-purpose guns.

For the Type 88, even when using the heavier variant of 5.8mm, its power and range cannot be compared with medium-caliber general-purpose machine guns. While a key driver of the development of the Type 88’s development was the then-popular idea that medium-caliber machine guns were ‘useless,’ experience on the battlefield had definitively disproved that theory.

Given the new observations of battlefield performance, Chinese planners worried that if equipped at the company- or battalion- level, the Type 88 would clearly be deficient. Currently, fire support sections [火力排] in motorized companies in the PLA are equipped with two (Type 89) 12.7mm heavy machine gun squads, and a large number also equipped at the battalion level. The Type 88’s capabilities pale in comparison to the Type 89’s in terms of range, weight of fire and suppression.

This placed the Type 88 general-purpose machine gun in an awkward situation. On the surface it may seem suitable for deployment with squads, but in fact, it fails in a number of ways, such as its requirement for using the heavier variant of 5.8mm ammunition, which complicates logistics.

At the same time, due to its weight, it requires flotation devices when fording rivers or wading across a beach. It is not convenient to use and can slow down a combat team’s assault operations, limiting its roles. Given these reasons, it is not surprising that the Type 88 was eventually abandoned.

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