Building a better BAR – my four-year obsession

A recent post here went something like this, “Does anybody make a blank-firing BAR?” That got me to thinking. There are pretty much just two options out there for reenactors who want to hump 20+ pounds of steel and wood while wearing wool. You can either jump through the BATF hoops to become a Class 3 dealer and buy a sample or, you can try and get lucky and find an Ohio Ordnance Works (OOW) semi-auto BAR on Gun Broker or something similar. Either way, both are expansive and time consuming.

Considering most of us are not going to become a Class 3 dealer for just a single weapon, let's focus on the OOW BAR. I have heard that OOW is now concentrating on government contracts and has sold off its 1919 parts and tooling. Will their BAR be next? Good question, but I do know that their website shows them as “out of stock” for months at a time. So, if you want to hump a BAR, Gun Broker and the Internets are going to be your best friend. While you are scouring the darkest holes of the Inter-webs, let’s look at what an OOW BAR will get you out of the box.

The OOW BAR comes in two configurations, with the stock being the difference between the two. You can either get a wood stock and foregrip or the wood foregrip and plastic stock. The latter is the one you want to use as your base model since it saves you money in the long run. Why? Well, the WWII BAR never used the wood foregrip and the type of wood stock that OOW gives you. By the time the “post ’43” (my term), foregrip came around, the Bakelite (plastic) stock was being developed. So, it’s better to have the wood and plastic configuration as that gets you closer to a correct WWII BAR.

My BAR came with the plastic stock. I was curious and took it off only to find it was a 1943-dated Goodyear stock that had been painted black by OOW! That saved me about $100 or so. Make sure you check yours to see if you hit the BAR stock jackpot. Now that I had the correct foregrip and stock, I could begin to look at other parts of the OOW gun to see what needed to be changed to make it “World War Two correct.” I quickly found there were some glaring problems.

The biggest give away that the OOW BAR isn’t a WWII model is the giant gas regulator that was developed to make it easier on the gunner to dial in the right amount of gas easily. While developed during the last year of the war, there is, so far, no photographic evidence to support the use of it during the war. So, how do you change it to the correct style? It’s not as easy as you would think.

The gas tube for WWII BARs had three slots milled into their ends. The post-war gas regulator needed only one. So, that means that the gas tube and regulator that came with your very expensive paperweight are essentially junk. Luckily, the correct regulator is easy to find, and pretty inexpensive. The problem is the correct gas tube. They are somewhat hard to find, and can be expensive ($300) if the person selling them thinks they have a super RARE item! Fear not! There is help.

As I began to work on my BAR project, I reached out to Ravenna Armory. Chris Guska, the owner, is a gunsmith, reenactor, and an all ‘round nice guy. I bought the correct gas regulator from Numrich, sent it and my tube to him, and he traded me the correct tube for mine. He also cleaned up the regulator and drilled it out so that it would work to OOW specs. Once I got that done, I sat back and admired my “mostly correct” BAR. I knew there was more to do, but I was happy for now.

After a few months of living with it being “mostly correct,” I decided to tackle the biggest issue – the post-war trigger housing. Now, most people will not peg the trigger housing as post-war unless they are pretty up on BAR history, but I knew it was a Korean War era “Armasteel” group built by Royal

Typewriter. From a distance, it looked good, but the lure of the milled trigger group and the screwed on magazine guides called to me. I again got in touch with Chris at Ravenna, and he offered to take my BARs trigger group and switch them out for the correct kind. It took a bit of work, and I had to send him the receiver, but he got it done, and it fit pretty good. After a few tweaks from the local gunsmith, it worked even better. Now my BAR was beginning to look like a WWII one. But I still wanted more.

My unit portrays K Company of the 9th Infantry Division. That means we do some early war stuff. Well, my "post-1943" BAR would cut it. That meant I needed to bite the bullet and go full "modernized" M1918. Little did I know that some of the smaller parts would be the most difficult to find.

A "modernized" BAR is a WWI rifle that was, surprise!, modernized for use just before the war began. As the U.S. geared up for war, it became obvious that we needed more BARs, and fast! Luckily, the thousands of BARS built for the Great War were sitting in armories across the country. So, the Army began a project to make them into a more modern automatic rifle.

The rear sight was changed to the same site as the M1919 machine gun (but not ALL the time), the wooden foregrip was cut down in height and length (but not ALL the time), a new flash hider bipod support developed, and some internal changes made. There were other changes, but these were the biggies.

I decided to go big first – the stock. I looked around on the Internets again and found Dan Block. Known as the king of the wooden stock, I reached out to Dan to see if he could recreate the cut down 1918 fore grip and wooden stock I was after. After a month or so, my new stuff arrived, and it was amazing! After some "aging" it looked like it had been on the gun or a few years.

Now I set my sights on what turned out to be the most difficult piece to find, a modified Enfield butt plate. During modernization, some of the early "modernized" BARs were equipped with the buttplate from an Enfield M1917 rifle. Why? Dunno, but it was a search that took about three months to find one. After calling BMGParts.com, I convinced them to sell me their sample. It's a small detail, but I know its correct. What makes it so correct? The trapdoor in the buttplate that leads to nowhere! Can you see it when the shoulder support is down? Nope. Sheesh! What an obsession.

Now I was really proud of myself! A few pictures were posted on Facebook, and the reviews started to pour in. "Looks great!" "Nice job!" "Awesome!" "Your rear sight housing is wrong." Wait. What?! I gotta buy something else? Yup. It turns out the "modernized" BARs used a milled sight housing and not a stamped one like the one that came with the weapon. Crap! Back to the Inter-webs I went.

Luckily, there was one on Gun Broker. The trouble was it was $150! Are you effing kidding me?! For a chunk of steel? I hemmed and hawed for a month before the piece got the better of me, and I bought the damn thing. Then it was on to the other small items that had been brought up in my Facebook brag session. I needed a milled "change stop lever" – think safety – a non-slotted gas tube retaining pin, and a milled front swivel. Luckily, that was all less than $50. With those items installed, my BAR was finally finished! After four long years, I finally had something that looked nearly identical to a WWII "modernized" BAR. The trouble was, I was still not happy. I didn't have a correct bipod.

Sure, most GIs chucked the damn things, but I couldn't have a MOSTLY correct BAR at this point, could I?! So, back to the dark corners of the Dark Web I went. Well, maybe not the Dark Web, but you get the picture. After months of fruitless searching, I was coming up with nothing. BMGParts.com had them, but

by this point, even I wasn't willing to spend the $300-$400 they wanted for the bipod legs and head. That's when I got creative.

As I was looking at the post-war bipod that came with the gun, I realized that the designers had simply switched it around. The bottom of the legs were at the top, and the top was at the bottom. Out came the hacksaw, and I soon had eight pieces of steel and now way to get them back together! Luckily, I know a welder – a good one. I told him what I wanted to do, how it was to go back together. He told me he would braze it (like the original), and make it happen. He went even further, but milling an insert for the legs, so they had some real internal support. Once I got it back, it looked just like a WWII bipod; I just needed to have it parkerized. Not being keen on spending much more cash, and liking a challenge, I decided to use Brownell's Aluma-Hyde II epoxy spray paint. They make a Dark Parkerizing Grey, so I snagged a few cans of that.

Reading up on reviews, and looking at YouTube videos, I prepared myself to paint the legs. After a good cleaning, I gave the legs three coats of paint, and then let it all dry for three weeks. Once good and dry, I reassembled the bipod, and, honestly, had a hard time telling between paint and original parkerization. After a good buffing with steel wool, the difference became even less noticeable. I saved $300 and got my bipod. It looks cool as hell, but it does add a shit-ton of weight. I can see why the GIs ditched those things!

One last thing I need to buy is the correct bipod head. My gun came with a postwar head. It's driving me crazy, but I just can't get to the point to spend the $130 to buy one. We will see. I'm pretty anal about this kinda stuff, so I bet I end up with one at some point. ;)

So, there ya go. That's how I converted my OOW BAR into the gun I REALLY wanted. Below is the list of all I did, where I got it, and how much it cost me. Your mileage may vary, and some stuff is getting harder and harder to find, but it can be done.

Good luck, and ask me questions if you have any. I will help if I can or at least point you to much smarter people than I.

Pieces, prices, and URLs

OOW BAR - $3,400 (Gun Broker with 13 magazines)

Dan Block wood “Modernized” wood stock set - $370

Enfield “Trapdoor” butt plate - $150 (BMG Parts.com)

Gas tube and regulator $130 (Numrich.com and Ravenna Armory)

BFA - $75 (Atlantik Wall Blanks)

Sling - $75 (ATF)

BAR belt - $100 (ATF)

Magazines x 2 - $30 (Ohio Ordnance Works)

Trigger housing and install - $250 (Ravenna Armory)

Smooth gas tube retaining pin - $16 (BARMan.com)

Milled front sling swivel - $7.10 (BARMan.com)

Milled rear sight housing – $150 (Gun Broker)

Milled change lever - $15.95 (BARMan.com)

Change Lever install - $20 (local gunsmith)

Bipod head - $129 (BMGParts.com)