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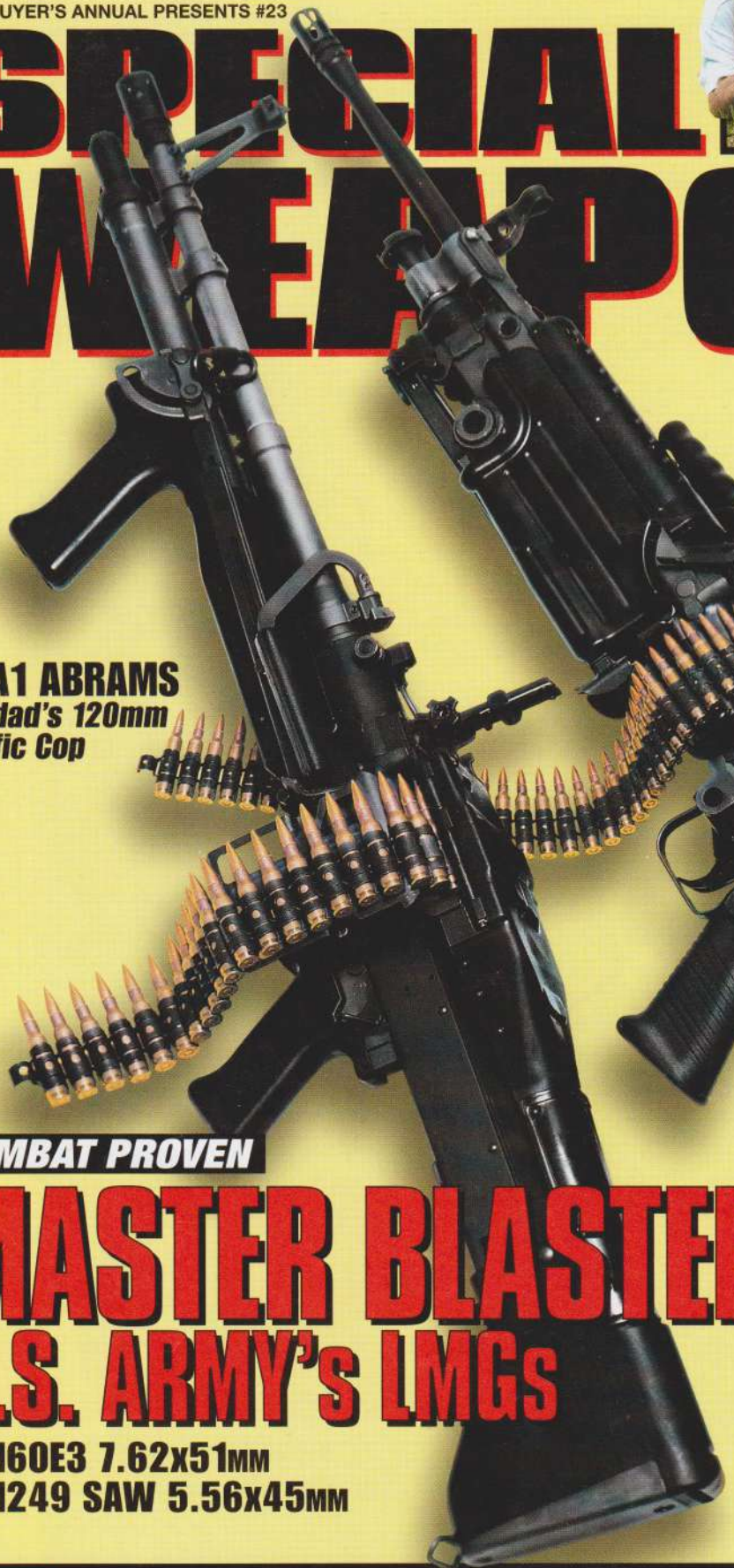
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IN PRAISE OF THE

BENELLI M3 12GA

Best of the dual-action shotguns—misunderstood but super versatile!

By Leroy Thompson

When training with foreign military and police special operations units, I've found that most of their weapons are similar to those used by the more sophisticated American SWAT teams and U.S. military special ops units. One weapon, however, has achieved far greater popularity with foreign units than with U.S. units: the dual-action or convertible shotgun. In military jargon, these shotguns are designated DFM (Dual Functioning Model) and the U.S. armed forces have tested various models under JSSAP specification.

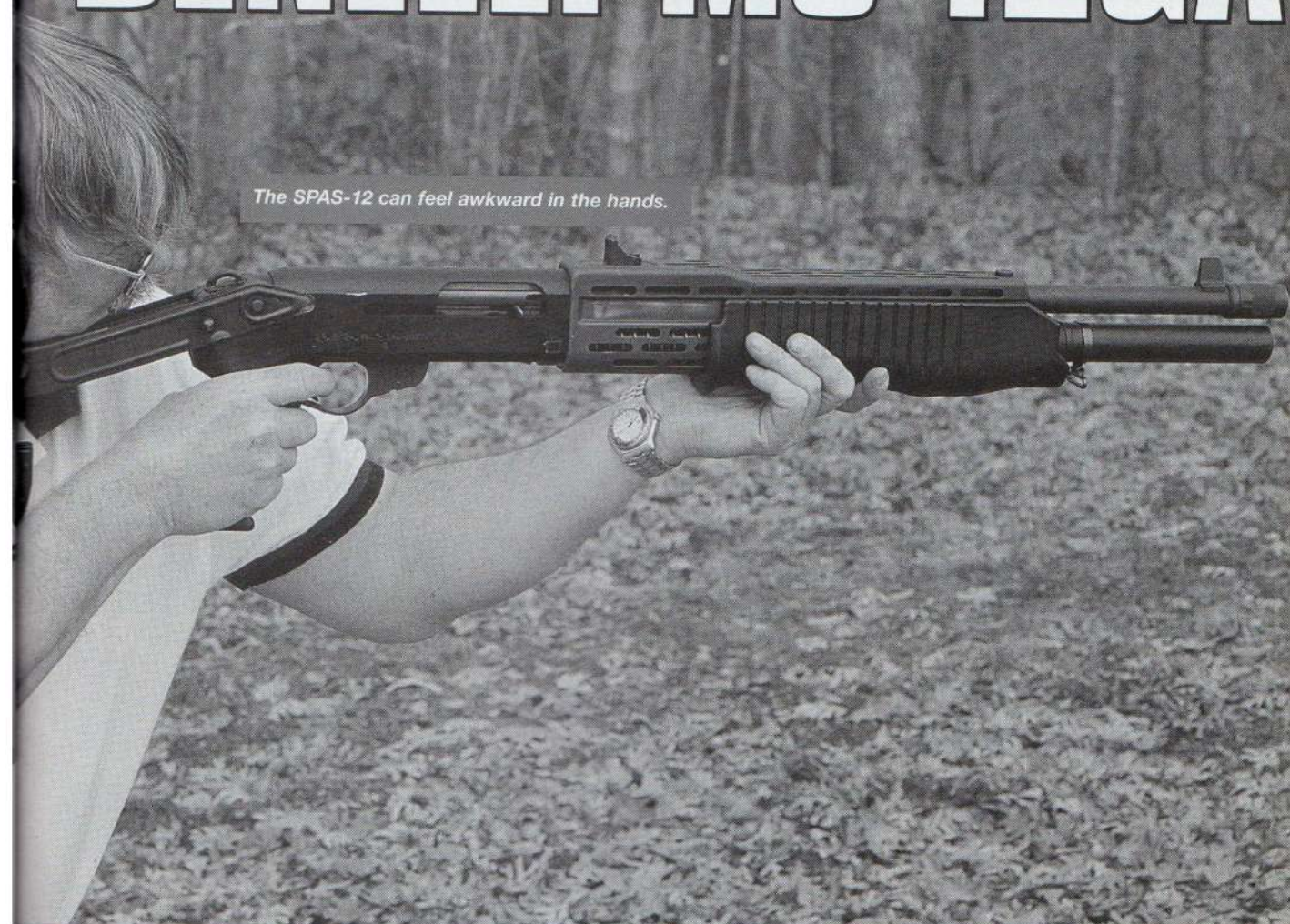
First, for those who may not be familiar with any of its designations, I should explain that the dual-action shotgun can function as either a semi-auto or pump-action, requiring a quick shift from one mode to the other. Moreover, the pump-action can be used to clear malfunctions when the shotgun has a problem in self-loading mode.

Dual-Action Advantages/Disadvantages

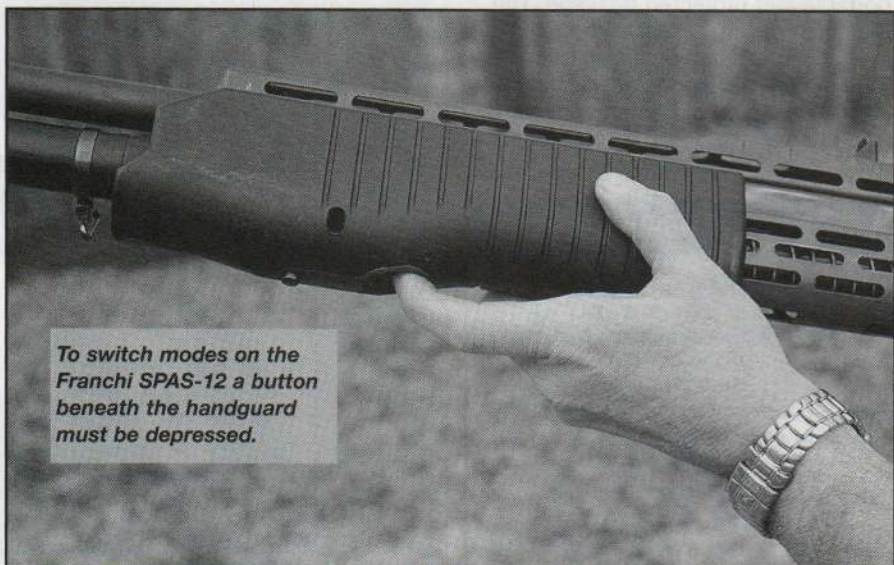
Special military and police units find the rapid fire capability of the self-loading shotgun appealing. That the self-loading shotgun can be used when one hand or arm is injured is a point in its favor. In addition, it can be operated from the prone position or in tight cover when the slide-action shotgun could not be effectively operated without shifting position. However, when it comes to firing special purpose munitions, including tear gas, there can be difficulty functioning a self-loading action, while it can be cycled manually through a pump-action. As a result, the dual-action shotgun offers added flexibility.



10-yard pattern on semi-auto with Federal 00 Tactical Buckshot.



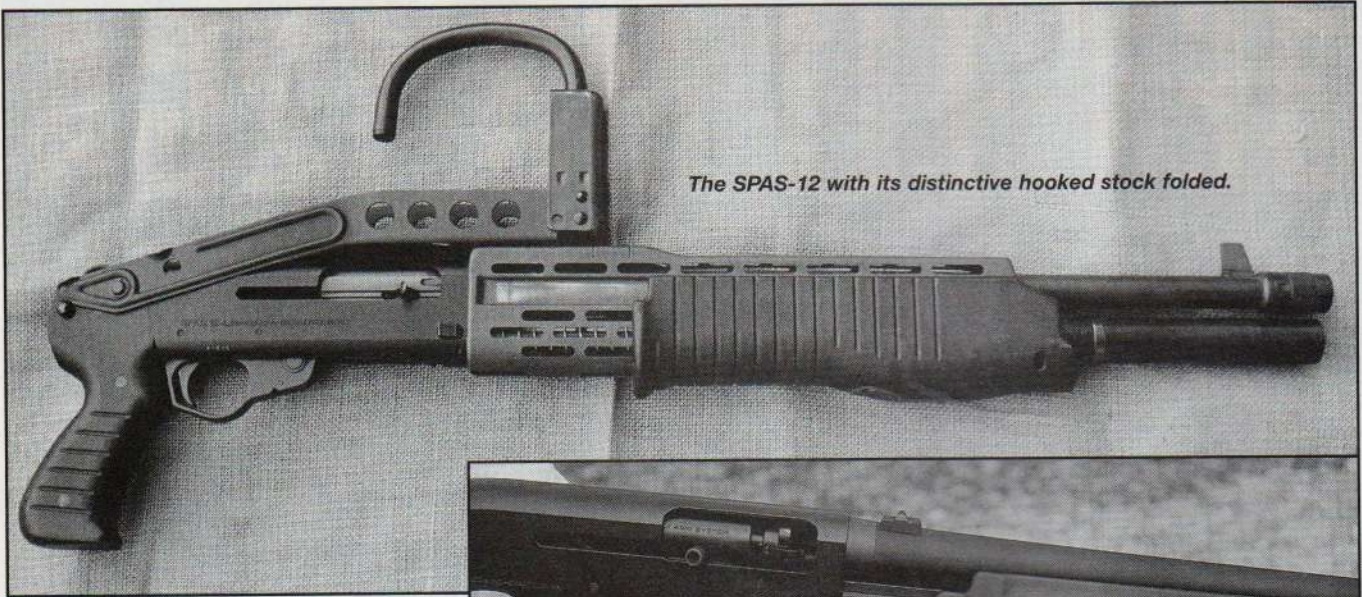
The SPAS-12 can feel awkward in the hands.



To switch modes on the Franchi SPAS-12 a button beneath the handguard must be depressed.



Note the SPAS-15's folding stock, AR-15 type carrying handle, and box magazine.



The SPAS-12 with its distinctive hooked stock folded.

On the downside, the dual-action shotgun is generally longer and heavier than pump or self-loaders. The dual-action is also more complicated, thus rendering it less "cop" or "soldier proof." That's one reason I consider the dual-action limited to special ops units. Another consideration, dual-actions are more expensive than their more conventional counterparts.

The latest generation of dual-action shotguns, including the Franchi SPAS-15 MIL model, Bernardelli B4, and the Beretta M3P, feature detachable box magazines, AR-15-type carry handle/sight, and folding stocks. The SPAS-15 incorporates a grip safety. Developed for the US JSSAP specifications, these are purpose-built combat shotguns as opposed to conventional police shotguns, which are really no more than shortened sporting shotguns with cylinder bore barrels. They also tend to be good-sized weapons, though an attempt has been made to make them less bulky and more "lively" in the hands for instinctive shooting. The Bernardelli B4, for example, is 37 inches long with the stock extended and weighs 7.6 pounds. For comparison, the Mossberg 590 is actually longer at 38.5 inches overall, but only weighs 6.8 pounds. Other than small numbers of the Franchi SPAS-15 and Beretta M3P, which were imported for civilian sales, these three models are most often limited to specialized government collections.

Franchi SPAS-12/SPAS-15

By far the best known dual-action shotgun is the Franchi SPAS-12, SPAS standing for "Special Purpose



Firing mode for the Benelli M3 is switched by turning the selector ring.

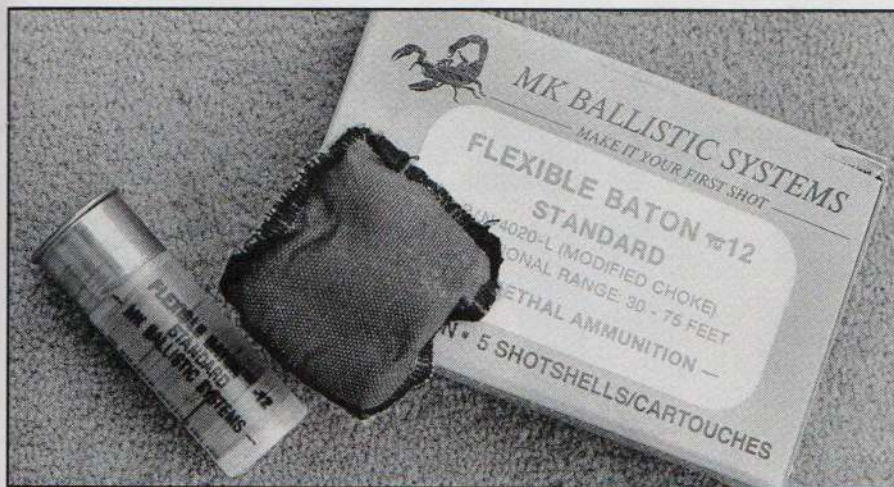


Box magazine for the SPAS-15. Note also the grip safety, a handy feature should the weapon be dropped.

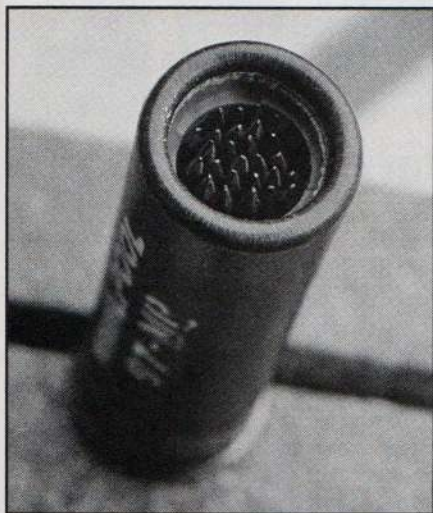
Automatic Shotgun." Beloved of filmmakers because of its futuristic appearance, the SPAS-12 serves with many European, Middle Eastern, and African special military and police units. One reason for its popularity, the SPAS-12 features a folding stock with a distinctive hook, theoretically designed for shooting with one hand.

As with many Italian shotguns, the

loading drill for the SPAS-12 requires substantial practice and involves multiple steps pushing buttons and pulling levers, not the simplicity one wants in a combat weapon. The transition from pump to semi-auto or back at first seems simple. Beneath the handguard is a button, which can be pressed while the handguard assembly is pushed or pulled into position to shift modes.



Less lethal loads such as this Flex Baton will not function with the actions of semi-auto shotguns, but the dual-action can fire them pump-action.



The dual-action shotgun is capable of firing a wide variety of ammunition, here a military flechette round.

When I transition the SPAS-12, I have to look at the indicator on top of the handguard to know when I have pushed or pulled far enough to engage the action. However, I will grant that a unit armed with the SPAS-12 would probably practice the maneuver enough that it would become second nature.

On the positive side, the SPAS-12 has sights, which can be quickly acquired and its tubular magazine holds 7 rounds. Note, by the way, that the SPAS-15 uses a 6-round box magazine, while an 8-round box magazine is available for the Bernardelli B4.

Benelli M3

Unlike the other dual-action shotguns, which were purposely designed for their multi-function role, the Benelli M3 appears to be an evolutionary development of the popular M1 Super

90 shotgun. In fact, if most shooters were shown a M3 they would think they were looking at a M1. Even if the two weapons are placed side-by-side, one has to look closely to tell the difference. The M3 is about 1-1/4 inches longer overall than the M1, due to its longer barrel. It is also about one-half pounds heavier. The longer barrel and, hence, the greater overall length, result from the incorporation of the dual-action. The M3 uses an inertia recoil system similar to the M1, but to leave room for the dual-action, the recoil spring is relocated to surround the magazine tube. Nevertheless, the M3 remains a very lively shotgun, which handles well and allows excellent instinctive shooting. As a result, the M3 may be used as a fast-handling, self-loading shotgun for most combat tasks, yet it retains the capability of firing special purpose ammunition in pump-action mode. The system for switching between pump and semi-auto mode is designed for ease of operation and speed, and may be readily mastered without removing the shotgun shooting position.

For slide-action operation, the M3's bolt rests in a brace assembly that uses twin action bars attached to a ring that compresses the recoil spring when the bolt is retracted. However, for semi-auto mode, the M3's inertia recoil system operates much as that of the M1. When the transition is made to slide-action mode, the forearm causes the bolt brace assembly to unlock, then push the bolt to the rear. This movement extracts the fired shell, cocks the hammer, and brings a fresh round onto the carrier. When the forearm is pushed forward, a round is chambered and the action is locked.

Continued on page 84

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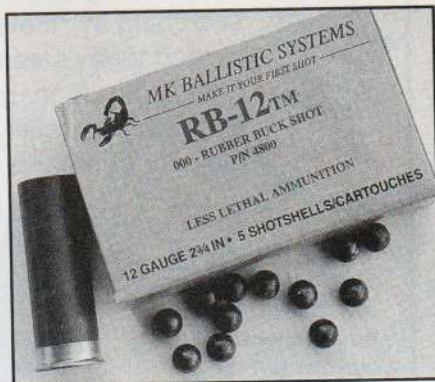
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To switch modes, the M3 incorporates a selector ring that is easily operated by the hand gripping the forearm. When this hand is pushed forward, the thumb and first finger are positioned on two ears, which protrude from the selector ring. A turn of the ring counterclockwise and a slight pull on the forearm rearward switches to pump-action mode. If a change back to semi-auto mode is desired, the selection ring is turned counterclockwise again and the forearm is pushed forward, where it's locked into place. This frees the bolt brace assembly to cycle towards the rear under recoil and brought back into battery by the recoil spring.

Other controls for the M3 are user friendly. The crossbolt safety at the rear of the triggerguard can be easily operated by the trigger finger. Also located on the triggerguard is a small metal indicator to show when the M3 is cocked. Beneath the ejection port is the bolt release button, which can be reached with either hand. One of the major pluses for the M3, its loading procedure is relatively straightforward compared to other dual-action shot-



By shifting to pump-action mode, the dual-action shotgun can fire light "less lethal" loads such as these rubber buckshot.

guns. With the M3, all that's necessary is to pull back the bolt, bringing a shell onto the carrier. Releasing the bolt chambers this round, and the shotgun is ready for action. I also like the M3's rubber pistol grip, which is quite secure even when the Benelli is held with just one hand. In semi-auto mode, this pistol grip also allows the M3 to be fired effectively with one hand. The M3 was originally imported with a folding stock,

and I assume that for law enforcement or military sales, this option is still available. One of the greatest advantages of the M3 is that it is the only dual-action combat shotgun readily available in the USA as I write this.

Shooting Impressions

I have done a substantial amount of shooting with the SPAS-12 and Benelli M3. I have examined the Franchi SPAS-15 and Beretta M3P but have not shot them. I have only seen photos of the Bernardelli B4.

When I first encountered the dual-action shotgun, I thought it to be an interesting curiosity but not a weapon of real combat value. However, I have since revised that opinion to some extent. A good portion of this reevaluation is the result of the Benelli M3. Because special police or military units have diverse missions, some requiring special munitions, it's desirable to have the capability of firing such munitions. However, for such units a quick-handling semi-auto shotgun may also be desirable. The dual-action shotgun

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Specifications: Benelli M3

Gauge: 12 (2-3/4" and 3" chamber)
Barrel: 19.75 inches
OA Length: 41 inches
Length of Pull: 14.4 inches
Drop at Heel: 2.25 inches
Drop at Comb: 1.4 inches
Weight: 7.2-7.4 pounds
Stocks: Standard or Pistol grip
Sights: Ghost ring or open rifle
Features: Convertible pump auto shotgun
Capacity: 5 + 1

offers both capabilities in the same unit. For a military shotgun, especially, the box magazine-fed Franchi SPAS-15, Beretta M3P, and Bernardelli M4 offer the advantage of fast reload and ease of carrying different types of loads already pre-loaded in magazines. However, for law enforcement personnel, I think the Benelli M3 is about as good as it gets in this type of weapon. Any unit that might find the Benelli M1 useful should find the M3 even more useful because of its versatility.

Final Notes

However, it must be borne in mind that dual-action shotguns require more training than standard pump-action or semi-auto shotguns and are definitely less cop or soldier-proof. The dual-action shotgun remains a specialized weapon, which can be useful for specialized units. ■

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