

This Is How The Air Force Gets Its New Survival Rifle To Fit Under An Ejection Seat

The Air Force has fielded 2,700 of the guns, which give fighter jet and bomber pilots extra firepower if they have to bail out over hostile territory.



The GAU-5/A, four magazines and other items packed into the survival kit.

The U.S. Air Force has offered the first good look at how its new-ish GAU-5/A carbines squeeze in with other items inside a survival kit that the service's pilots are now flying with under their ejection seats. The guns are converted standard M4 carbines with various new features, most notably a special locking system that allows users to break it down into two halves in 30 seconds or less and reassemble when necessary just as fast.

The Air Force Life Cycle Management Center released the picture of the carbine broken down inside its kit, along with four tan-colored 30-round magazines and other items, along with additional images of the gun assembled and disassembled

on Feb. 14, 2020. Air Force gunsmiths at the Air Force Security Forces Center, situated at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas, assembled 2,700 of these GAU-5/As, also known as Aircrew Self Defense Weapons (ASDW), to units across the service between February 2018 and January 2020, when it reportedly completed all of the planned deliveries. It's interesting to note that this is 600 more guns than the Air Force expected to produce as of June 2018.

"We were asked to design a stand-off weapon that was capable of hitting a man-size target at 200 meters," Richard Shelton, Chief of the Gunsmith Shop, [said in a statement](#) for the Air Force Life Cycle Management Center's Feb. 2020 story on the GAU-5/A. "It disconnects at the upper receiver, is located inside the seat kit [of ACES II ejection seats], and can be put together within 30 seconds if needed."



The GAU-5/A assembled



The GAU-5/A broken down for storage in the survival kit.

[Cry Havoc Tactical](#) supplied the unique locking system that is at the heart of the converted carbines. They also feature a pistol grip that folds backwards to make them even more compact when stored inside the survival kit.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LD0m_i8VnQ

The space limitations under the ACES II seat to mean that the survival kit isn't big enough to accommodate a carbine with an optical sight mounted on it, meaning that pilots would only have the gun's iron sights to aim with in an emergency situation. The gun otherwise handles almost identically to a standard M4 carbine.

The fact that the GAU-5/A, which should not be confused with the [Vietnam War-era AR-15/M16 variant](#) with the same designation, is so very similar to [the M4](#) and uses the same ammunition helps reduce training and logistics requirements. This appears to be one of the core factors in Air Force's decision to go with this gun over a more purpose-built [personal defense weapon](#) or survival rifle, which might have additional capabilities within the limitations of the space available. This is something *The War Zone* [has discussed in-depth](#) regarding this carbine in the past.

Regardless, the Air Force had a clear requirement to give pilots additional firepower in the event that they got shot down after Jordanian Air Force pilot Moaz Al Kasasbeh bailed out over a then-ISIS-controlled area of Syria in December 2014. The terrorists captured and murdered Kasasbeh, which prompted the service to begin squeezing Vietnam-era GAU-5/As [into certain survival kits](#). Before then, pilots only had their standard M9 pistols to rely on if they had to bail out over hostile territory. Other members of the international coalition fighting ISIS followed suit, with the Dutch Air Force notably issuing [a 9mm machine pistol](#) to its pilots.

The Air Force says that it spent approximately \$2.6 million to both craft the complete conversion and field the guns. While we don't know what the base unit price per gun was without the development costs factored in, this works out to just under \$963 each. It's not clear whether or not the service purchased entirely new guns to convert or used existing M4s, but the latter course of action seems much more likely and cost effective.

[Cry Havoc's website](#) says the price of a basic conversion kit to add the takedown locking system to any AR-15/M16 type gun, which offers for

sale the public, as well, is \$349. The full cost of the complete GAU-5/A "weapon system" may factor in the four magazines and other items that go along with them into the survival kit, too.

We also don't know all of the units that have received GAU-5/As and what aircraft they are flying now with the new survival kits. United Technologies Aerospace Systems' [ACES II seat](#) is used in the F-15C/D Eagle, F-15E Strike Eagle, F-16 Viper, and F-22 Raptor Combat jets, as well as the A-10 Warthog ground-attack aircraft and the B-1B Bone and B-2 Spirit bombers.

In May 2019, the 366th Fighter Wing, which is based Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho and flies F-15E Strike Eagles, [announced](#) that it had begun flying with the new survival kits containing GAU-5/As. We also know that F-22 pilots from the 3rd Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska began [training with the guns](#) last year.

In addition, we know that 2,700 of these guns are now in service across the Air Force, tucked away inside compact survival kits under pilots' ejection seats.