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**MARINES QUIET ABOUT BRUTAL NEW WEAPON**

War is hell. But it's worse when the Marines bring out their new urban combat weapon, the [SMAW-NE](#). Which may be why they're not talking about it, much.

This is a version of the standard USMC [Shoulder Mounted Assault Weapon](#) but with a new warhead. Described as NE - "Novel Explosive"- it is a [thermobaric](#) mixture which ignites the air, producing a shockwave of unparalleled destructive power, especially against buildings.

A post-action report from Iraq describes the effect of the new weapon: "One unit [disintegrated a large one-storey masonry type building with one round](#) from 100 meters. They were extremely impressed." Elsewhere it is described by one Marine as "an awesome piece of ordnance."



It proved highly effective in the battle for Fallujah. This from the [Marine Corps Gazette](#), July edition: "SMAW gunners became expert at determining which wall to shoot to cause the roof to collapse and crush the insurgents fortified inside interior rooms."

The NE round is supposed to be capable of going through a brick wall, but in practice gunners had to fire through a window or make a hole with an anti-tank rocket. Again, from the [Marine Corps Gazette](#):

*"Due to the lack of penetrating power of the NE round, we found that our assaultmen had to first fire a dual-purpose rocket in order to create a hole in the wall or building. This blast was immediately followed by an NE round that would incinerate the target or literally level the structure."*

The rationale for this approach was straightforward:

*"Marines could employ blast weapons prior to entering houses that had become pillboxes, not homes. The economic cost of house replacement is not comparable to American lives...all battalions adopted blast techniques appropriate to entering a bunker, assuming you did not know if the bunker was manned."*

The manufacturers, Talley, make bold use of its track record, with a brochure headlined Thermobaric Urban Destruction."

The SMAW-NE has only been procured by the USMC, though there are reports that some were 'borrowed' by other units. However, there are also proposals on the table that thousands of obsolete [M-72 LAWs](#) could be [retrofitted with thermobaric warheads](#), making them into effective urban combat tools.

But in an era of precision bombs, where collateral damage is expected to be kept to a minimum, such massively brutal weapons have become highly controversial. These days, every civilian casualty means a few more "hearts and minds" are lost. [Thermobaric weapons](#) almost invariably lead to civilian deaths. The Soviet Union was heavily criticized for using thermobaric weapons in Afghanistan because they were held to constitute "disproportionate force," and similar criticisms were made when thermobarics were used in the Chechen conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, thermobaric weapons "[kill and injure in a particularly brutal manner over a wide area](#)". In urban settings it is very difficult to limit the effect of this weapon to combatants, and the nature of FAE explosions makes it virtually impossible for civilians to take shelter from their destructive effect."

So it's understandable that the Marines have made so little noise about the use of the SMAW-NE in Fallujah. But keeping quiet about controversial weapons is a lousy strategy, no matter how effective those arms are. In the short term, it may save some bad press. In the long term, it's a recipe for a scandal. Military leaders should debate human right advocates and the like *first*, and then publicly decide "we do/do not to use X". Otherwise when the media find out – as they always do -- not only do you get a level of hysteria but there is also the charge of "covering up."

I'm undecided about thermobarics myself, but I think they should let the legal people sort out all these issues and clear things up. Otherwise you get claims of "chemical weapons" and "violating the Geneva Protocol." Which doesn't really help anyone. The warfighter is left in doubt, and it hands propaganda to the bad guys. Just look at what happened it last week's [screaming](#) over [white phosphorous rounds](#).

-- [David Hambling](#)

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**Comments**

"Military leaders should debate human right advocates and the like first, and then publicly decide "we do/do not to use X".

Good grief.

Posted by: [W. Zimmerman](#) at November 14, 2005 11:34 AM

There's a thermobaric warhead (either Russian or Bulgarian) for the RPG7 that is apparently equivalent to a 122mm artillery round.

Posted by: [Alex](#) at November 14, 2005 12:37 PM