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# AR-15

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STAG 3T  
5.56

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# 3TIMES

## THE VALUE

STAG'S 3T IS MORE THAN  
A PRETTY FACE.

BY TOM BECKSTRAND  
PHOTOS BY MARK FINGAR





Stag produces rifles and AR parts for private sale and manufacturers. Few AR manufacturers can claim the volume and quality of Stag.

THIS IS THE TIME TO SHOP FOR AN AR-15. THERE HAVE never been more options, and prices are still hovering around record lows. We have the politically fueled panics that occurred with frightening regularity from 2008 to 2013 to thank for the number and variety of ARs that exist.

However, the AR world can be a confusing place for any shooter that isn't devoted to Eugene Stoner's classic design. Sizes and shapes change a little from one manufacturer to the next, while price tags vary significantly. With all the makes and models available, it's difficult to know what is a "good deal" and what isn't. Stag's 3T is the textbook example of a good deal for any AR shopper.

**JUST WHEN WE THOUGHT THEY WERE OUT...**

Stag pulled us back in. Stag had a kerfuffle with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) awhile back, and it looked like they might be in trouble, but cooler heads prevailed. They are back to bidness with a vengeance. The latest rifle to come out of the factory is the Model 3T.

The name "Stag Arms" doesn't convey the legacy of the more iconic rifle manufacturers, nor does it have the boutique panache of other smaller, unproven but still fashionable AR companies. However, it is one of the most established and prolific AR builders in the world. Many don't realize that Stag makes tons of parts (both large and small) that more recognized manufacturers use in their ARs.

If we think about the business model, Stag leaps to the top in terms of value. If they make money by selling parts to their competitors who also make money selling the guns to customers, the customer could get more and spend less by purchasing directly from Stag.

Stag also benefits from the comprehensive and redundant quality control processes that come with selling parts to competitors. Stag must ensure their parts are good enough to sell. The manufacturer that purchases those parts also checks them.



With experience comes the ability to do the simple things well, like magwells that allow quality magazines to drop free.



This double-check on Stag parts occurs every time they sell to another manufacturer. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that about a quarter of the industry is running quality control on Stag parts, and they're passing.

Using components that are so good your competitors buy them is a good indicator that Stag serves up solid products for the money. After all, anything that can be sold twice — and both manufacturers turn a profit — has to be good. Buying from Stag cuts out the middleman.

Looking at the features of the 3T, we see many components that shooters usually purchase and install aftermarket. A quality, no-frills AR will usually have an MSRP of \$900, with a street price around \$800. Cheaper ARs are out there, but they use parts of dubious quality or alternative manufacturing techniques that deviate from more proven methods.

The 3T retails at \$999 (which will cost around \$850 in the gun shop), which is a bit more than the cheapest viable AR. The true value of the 3T doesn't become apparent until we look at what it offers.

# NEW DIRECTION

Stag Arms is under new leadership and, in the words of the new president, Anthony Ash, "Stag is [still] here, and we're here to stay." Stag currently produces and sells a broad line of quality AR-pattern rifles, but they regularly get calls about the status of the company after legal troubles occurred late last year. Stag has worked through their problems and is as strong as they've ever been.

Stag is under new ownership and it comes in the form of White Wolf Capital and Stag's new president Ash. Ash is a veteran of both the military and law enforcement (LE) communities. He spent nine years in the U.S. Army as military policeman and arrived in Iraq shortly after the 2003 invasion. Following his military career, Ash became a law enforcement officer for seven years in a major metropolitan area. He left the LE sector to begin working as the general manager of Stag Arms. Serving in this position gave Ash a working knowledge of the company and familiarity with the products.

Ash stepping forward as president is a sign of good things to come. I like to see gun companies run by people who have carried and/or used them professionally. It helps keep the company focused on relevant product development for other professional end users. Companies that produce guns capable of professional use also make great guns for private use. The opposite isn't always true. Companies without such leadership can fall prey to cost-cutting measures, making cheap guns instead of good guns and destroying any chance at credibility and long-term market presence.

With Stag's new leadership at the wheel, I asked about products in the design queue. Ash mentioned that a lot of their customers have been asking for a Stag .308. I wouldn't be surprised to see it introduced in the near future.

## 3TIMES THE VALUE



Stag's forend is simple to remove and replace. The barrel nut has two grooves to prevent the forend from coming off should the screws loosen and reduce the clamping force. The design has some redundancy.

### THE DEEP DIVE

The 16-inch barrel is chrome lined with a manganese phosphate finish, the way AR barrels have been finished for almost 60 years. It has a 1:9-inch twist rate and a carbine-length gas system. That short list of features is the most popular combination offered in an AR. The phosphate finish has been around for so long because it resists wear and rust. The chrome lining was one of the improvements made to the AR early in its lifetime and one we still like to see. Chrome lining provides a measure of rust resistance that a chrome moly barrel doesn't have.

The 1:9-inch twist rate means that this carbine prefers bullets weighing 69 grains or less, a general rule we confirmed by testing some 85-grain bullets at the range. The rifle liked all the ammunition we shot except for the 85 grain, which it would not group any better than 3 inches at 100 yards. We tested 52- and 69-grain loads, and both grouped extremely well.

Some will argue that 77-grain bullets don't do well in a 1:9 barrel, but that depends on the barrel and where you're shooting it. Just because a barrel

has 1:9 on the side doesn't mean it's really 1:9. It's just close to 1:9. The other factor is the environment where those 77-grain bullets are fired. Higher elevations and warmer temperatures allow a 77-grain bullet to stabilize in a 1:9-twist barrel. Altitude and temperature combine to form a metric called density altitude (DA). High DA numbers mean the air is very thin, so 77-grain bullets stabilize just fine in a 1:9. Low DA numbers mean the opposite.

The 3T sports a low-profile gas block that is held in place by two screws. At this price point, we're accustomed to seeing refurbished Mil-Spec front sight posts that had the top of the post chopped off and the edges ground down to fit under a handguard. That method works, but it's ugly. Stag's low-profile gas block is an original design that minimizes the profile and looks more finished than a chopped front sight post. The two screws that hold it in place also make removal and attachment easier.

The streamlined gas block makes it possible to mount an extended forend to the rifle, which is exactly what Stag did. The longer forend serves two purposes: It free floats the barrel and gives plenty

of real estate for our supporting hand mountable accessories.

The handguard on the 3T is a 13½-inch Diamondhead VRS-T. This handguard has an almost triangular shape with a wide and flat bottom that narrows toward the rail along the top. The flat bottom means the rifle will stabilize better when laid across any type of field support, sandbag or post. While the bottom is flat, the edges have been rounded off and the entire handguard is contoured to fit comfortably in the support hand.

Free floating a quality AR barrel is the single biggest improvement we can make to the rifle and will often yield 1.3 MOA accuracy for five shots, on average, using quality ammunition. Cheaper ARs have the plastic handguards attached directly to the barrel and usually sit right around 2 MOA in the accuracy department. If accuracy is important, get a free floating handguard like the one found on the 3T. Coming from the factory with a quality free floating handguard offers tremendous value to the customer because the cost to add it aftermarket is about \$200.

Another advantage of the longer handguard is the ability to use field rests to support the front of the rifle. Short handguards crowd anything we rest the rifle on, and the magazine gets in the way. Longer handguards are preferred. The 3T comes with a 13½-inch model that is the ideal length for the 16-inch barrel.

The trigger is Mil-Spec, so it's not perfect, but better than many Mil-Spec triggers we've tested.

### STAG ARMS MODEL 3T

<b>Type</b>	Direct impingement, semiautomatic
<b>Cartridge</b>	5.56 NATO
<b>Barrel</b>	16 in., 1:9-in. twist
<b>Overall Length</b>	33–36 in.
<b>Weight</b>	7 lbs., 7 oz.
<b>Handguard</b>	13.5 in. Diamondhead VRS-T
<b>Stock</b>	Stag
<b>Grip</b>	A2
<b>Finish</b>	Cerakote
<b>Trigger</b>	Standard
<b>Magazine</b>	20, 30 rds.
<b>Muzzle Device</b>	A2 flash hider
<b>Sights</b>	Diamondhead
<b>MSRP</b>	\$999
<b>Manufacturer</b>	Stag Arms stagarms.com

# 3TIMES THE VALUE



The 3T, like most Stag rifles, is available in Cerakote. This color is Burnished Bronze.



## THE TEST DRIVE

Hanging out with the 3T at the range, it was hard not to notice the Burnished Bronze Cerakote finish on the test rifle. Cerakote is a \$75 option on this Stag rifle — an absolute steal. Cerakote puts a hard ceramic finish over the entire rifle and offers a couple of performance gains that are hard to overlook.

Many shooters look at color options as a type of fashion statement. While it has that effect, I consider the lighter colors highly desirable and try to have my ARs done this way as often as possible. For me, Cerakote has nothing to do with fashion and everything to do with keeping the rifle cool in sunlight. A black rifle left in bright sunlight becomes uncomfortably hot to touch and painful to press against the face while using the sights. The light tans and grays that Stag offers are fantastic options.

Cerakote is also much more durable than anodizing. It scratches less and handles wear better. Many

## PERFORMANCE

Black Hills 52-gr. Match	Federal 69-gr. GMM	Barnes 85-gr. Match
<b>Velocity (fps)</b>		
2,858	2,644	2,418
<b>Standard Deviation</b>		
38	22	8
<b>Extreme Spread</b>		
85	57	22
<b>Average Group (in.)</b>		
1.08	1.16	4
<b>Best Group (in.)</b>		
.78	.81	3.2

Accuracy results are the average of three five-shot groups. Velocity figures are derived from a string of 5 rounds measured by a chronograph 12 feet from the muzzle.

of the quick-detach (QD) mounts that we love can rub the anodizing off the underside of rails, leaving the softer aluminum exposed to wear and deformation. Cerakote will not wear off like anodizing, and it better protects the aluminum.

Finally, a light-colored rifle is easier to camouflage than a dark rifle. Dark rifles require a lot of light-colored paint to break up the rifle's outline. A light-colored rifle takes only a small amount of dark paint to achieve the same effect. Since the Stag rifles are Cerakoted, paint will wipe off with a little bit of paint thinner. Should you hunt with an AR or just take camouflage seriously, getting your rifle Cerakoted in a light color for \$75 is worthwhile. 🦌

