

AR500 Armor Review [2018]: Levels, Cuts, Coatings, Curves

September 22, 2017 8 Comments

Confused about what body armor plates to get?

Should you get Level 3..how about a curved plate.. and should you add extra coating?

Don't worry!

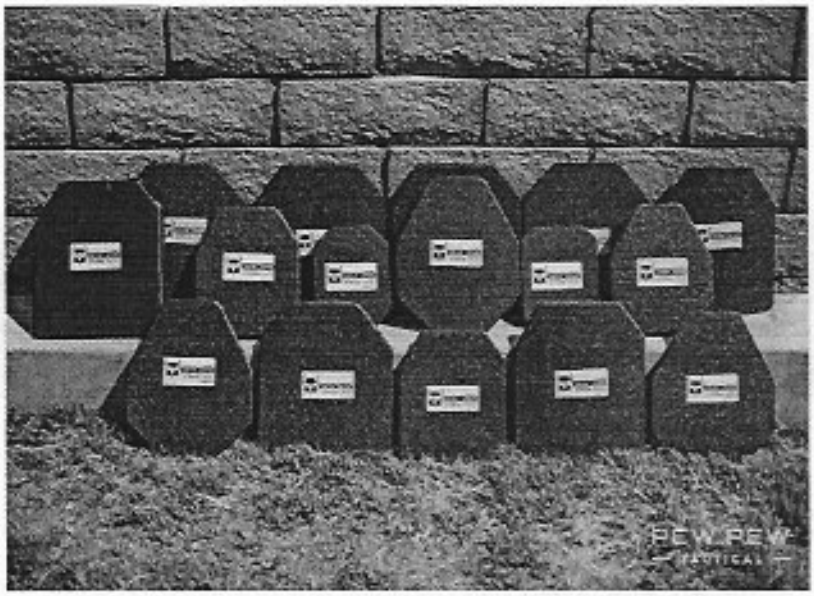
We've done the legwork of getting most of the body armor varieties out there.

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AR500 Body Armor Group

So sit back while we cover all the important body armor basics. By the end..you'll have a **firm grasp** of exactly what you need for your specific situation. We'll also throw in some carriers and personal recommendations.

AR500 Armor

I received a bunch of armor from **AR500 Armor** (probably the most popular company in body armor) so I could write this unbiased review and test them out in the desert (**done**, but haven't written it yet)! Spoiler..they work as intended.

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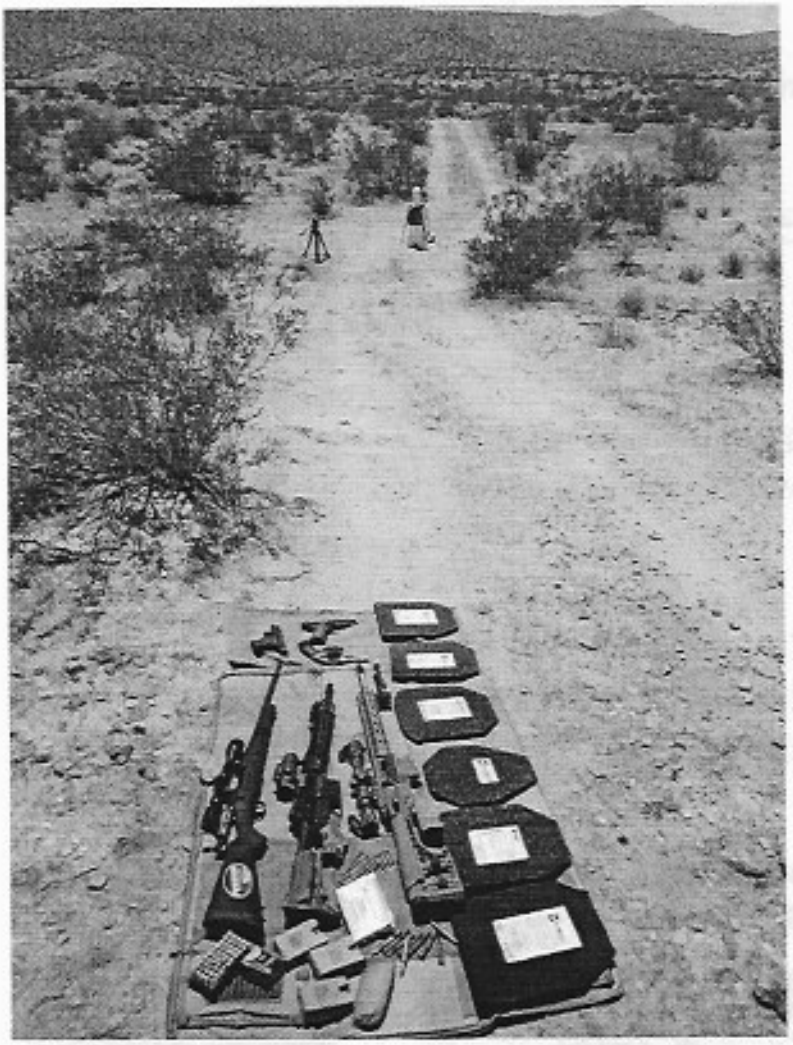


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AR500 Desert Testing

I've also created a video that goes through everything if you're more into audiovisual learning:



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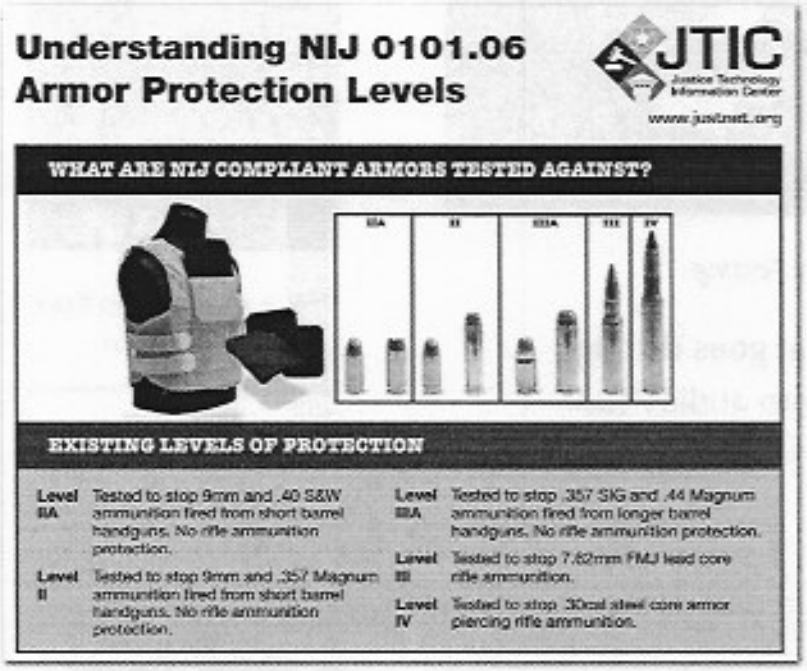
Like to read? Let's get on with it!

Body Armor Levels

NIJ Background

Levels are an easy way to figure out what armor to get based on the possible threats you're likely to encounter.

The go-to source is the NIJ (National Institute of Justice) and they have a nifty standard called **NIJ 0101.06** for ballistic resistance.



NIJ Armor Protection Levels, Justnet.org

The rough guidelines in ascending protection. Not sure of the different calibers? Check out our **Caliber Guide**.

- **Level IIA:** Tested for common pistol calibers such as 9mm & .40 S&W, no rifle protection

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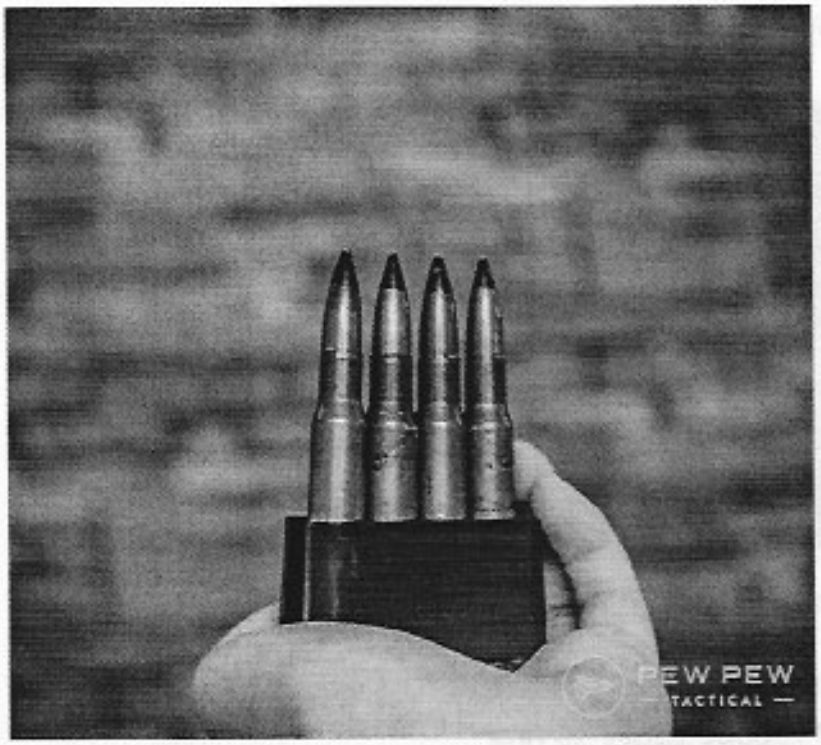
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Tactical Defense Pen with

- **Level IIIA:** Tested for even more powerful handgun ammo coming out of longer barrel handguns (more velocity), no rifle protection
- **Level III:** Rifle protection up to 7.62 (.308) FMJ lead core
- **Level IV:** Rifle protection up to .30 caliber steel core armor piercing ammo, like **30.06 M2 AP**



30.06 M2 AP in Garand Clip

Just match up your threat levels above and get the armor. Easy peasy..right?

If only it were that **simple**..

First..it's a voluntary system so not all manufacturers do it. Either for cost (lots of testing at labs) or they know they won't pass.

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Another thing is that manufacturers can make up their own determination of Levels. It only counts when they say it reaches NIJ 0101.06 standards.

Still with me?

Level IIA/II/IIIA

For these levels, you'll likely see soft armor.



AR500 Soft Armor Flexing

Heard of Kevlar..right? They are made of that and other proprietary fibers. Basically super strong string interwoven so that when a bullet impacts the vest, its energy is spread out quickly and doesn't penetrate.

I wouldn't recommend Level IIA unless price is a **HUGE** factor since **Level II** ($65) is very affordable and can stop up to .357 Magnum.

Level IIIA ($75-150) can handle up to .44 Magnum and longer barrels..but is more expensive. You also get the option of sticking

with soft armor which is light (~1lb) and flexible.. or moving up to AR500 steel (the material), which is cheaper but heavier (~5 lbs).

Level III/III+

Once you reach **Level III** onwards..you'll be seeing hard plates. Either coated steel (type of steel is called AR500, heavier but thinner) or polymer (UHMWPE, lighter but thicker).



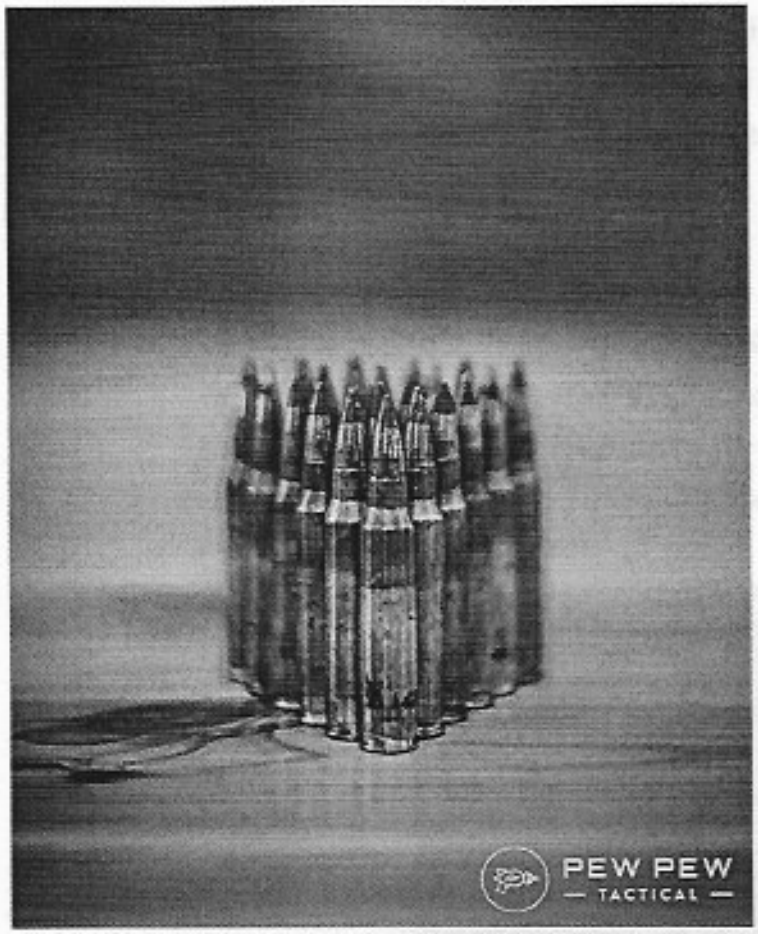
Soft vs Hard Armor

This is where most body armor plates fall since you're looking at rifle threats. III is rated up to 7.62 (.308) FMJ rounds.

So it has to protect against the smaller 5.56 (.223) AR-15 rounds right?

Not exactly..it all has to do with **velocity**!

If you think you'll be up against AR-15s sporting NATO ammunition like M855 (green tip) or M193.. you better pay attention.

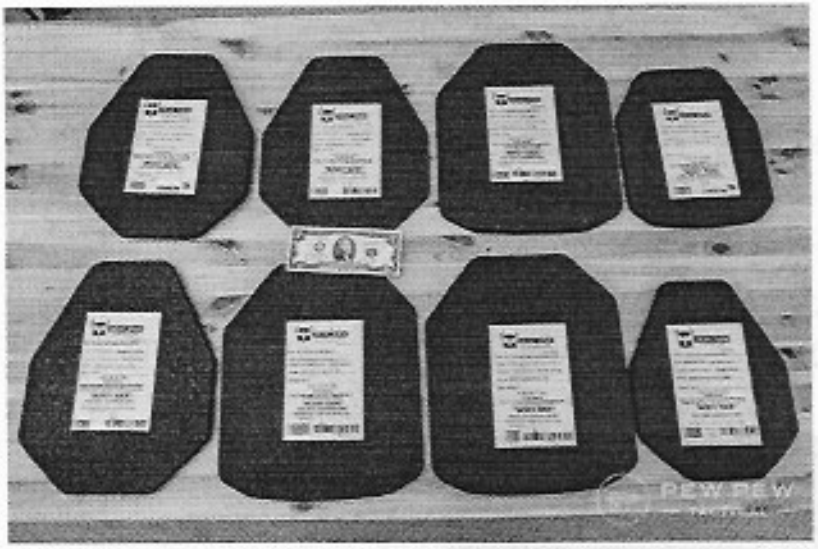


Green Tip M855

Make sure wherever you buy that it specifically states that it will stop M855 and M193 since those will cut through regular III plates like a hot knife through butter. **M855 vs M193** for more info.

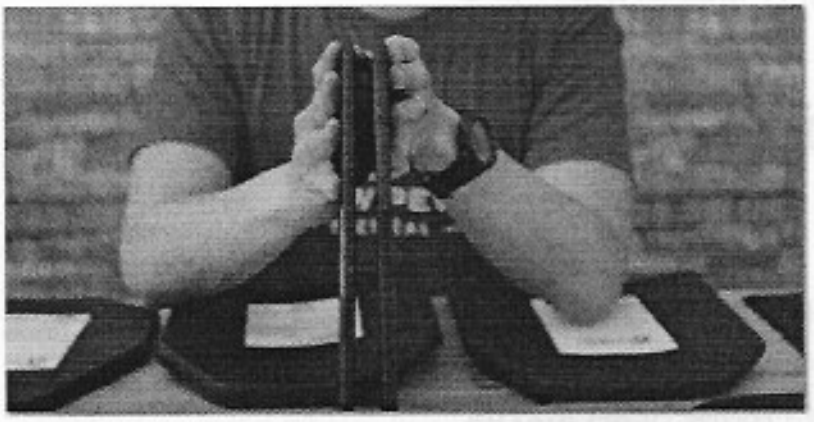
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For AR500 Armor..their **Level III** ($65) will stop M855 (green tip) while their upgraded **Level III+** ($90) will stop M193 along with armor piercing Black Tip .308 (but not 30.06).



Level III and Level III+ Plates

Also unique to AR500 Armor is their **Level III+ Lightweight** ($110) which sheds weight (10×12 SAPI is 6.5 pounds vs 8 pounds) but loses the protection of .308 armor piercing rounds. My favorite choice and worth the slight price increase.



Lightweight III+ vs Regular III+

After desert testing..what I found is that if you're close to the threat (I tested at ~25 feet with a 16" barrel)..meaning the velocity is still quite high..the M855 and M193 bullets still have a chance to go through.

Level IV

That's where ceramic plate **Level IV** ($155) comes in..it can stop the Black Tip 30.06 M2AP rounds. And the lesser threats like a closer proximity M855 or M193. A little thicker but lighter when compared to coated AR500 steel.

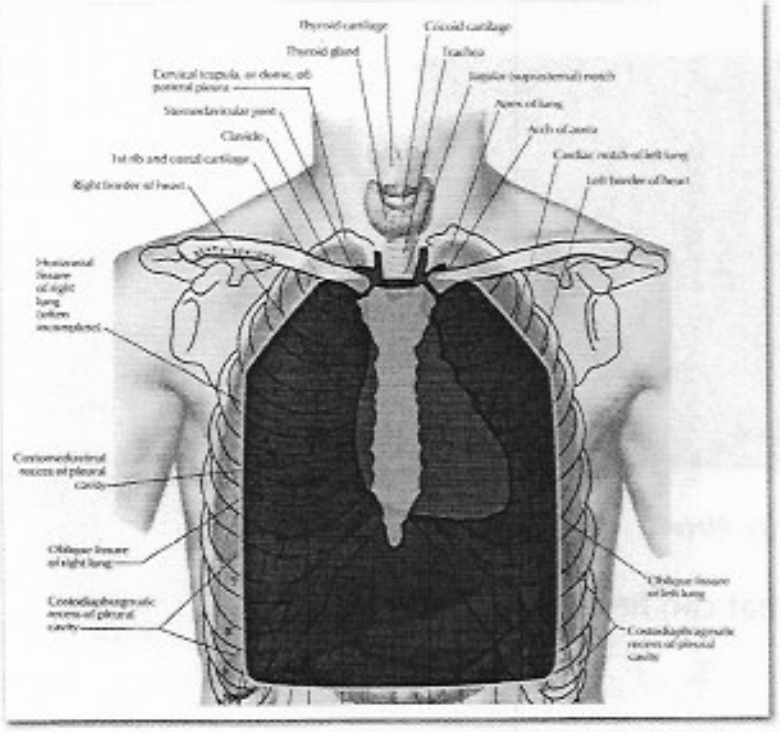


AR500 Armor, Level IV Ceramic

Phew! We're done with levels..now moving onto..

Body Armor Size, Fit, & Cut

Body armor is meant to protect the most important parts of your anatomy so you can stay in the fight. That boils down to the heart and its blood vessels..plus the diaphragm.



Body Armor Anatomy, sixty-six.org

The rough guideline is to choose a plate that will cover your **nipples** so the heart is protected.

And to have it high enough so that the top is at your jugular notch. To find the notch, trace your sternum up until you reach a soft spot. Pressing down on it will make you choke.



Position of Body Armor Plates, SAPI Cut



8×10 Body Armor Plate

And also **side plates** (6×8) that can fit on the sides of your plate carriers.



Side Plates

Now let's move onto the different cuts of the armor.

SAPI Cut

When you choose your plates..a lot of it will be balancing mobility and protection. You'll see that the armor is cut at the top so you can move your arms easier.

The SAPI Cut is when the cuts are **even**. It offers

good protection and decent mobility.

Advanced Shooters Cut, Left or Right Handed

We start moving into the proprietary names of each company. For AR500 Armor, they have the Advanced Shooters Cut in either Left or Right Handed options. It gives a little more movement to the designated strong hand.

In the below example, look at the right-most plate which is cut more for a left-handed person.



Different Cuts of Armor (L to R, Advanced LW Shooters Cut, SAPI, Advanced Shooters Cut Left)

Advanced Shooters Lightweight Cut

When the cut is much more pronounced, **AR500 Armor** calls it the Advanced Shooters Lightweight Cut. Other places will call it the Shooter's Cut or Swimmer's Cut. Only available for some protection levels.



Advanced Shooters LW Cut

It leaves a bit more unprotected but will give great mobility and cut down on the weight.

Body Armor Curve

You'll also see the add-on options of adding a curve (or multi-curve) to your plate. Otherwise it will come flat.

I **HIGHLY** recommend getting it curved..at least for your front plate. If not both plates.

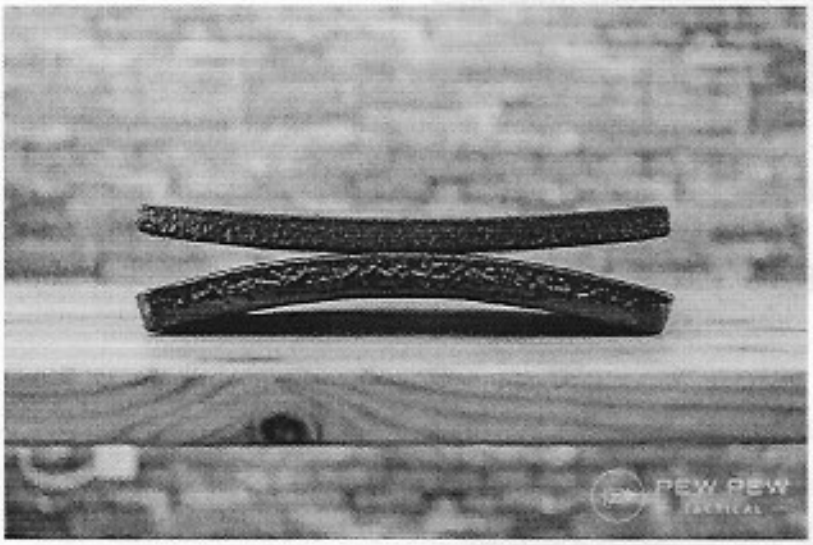


Plate Armor Curve (Top is Level III+, Bottom is Level IV)

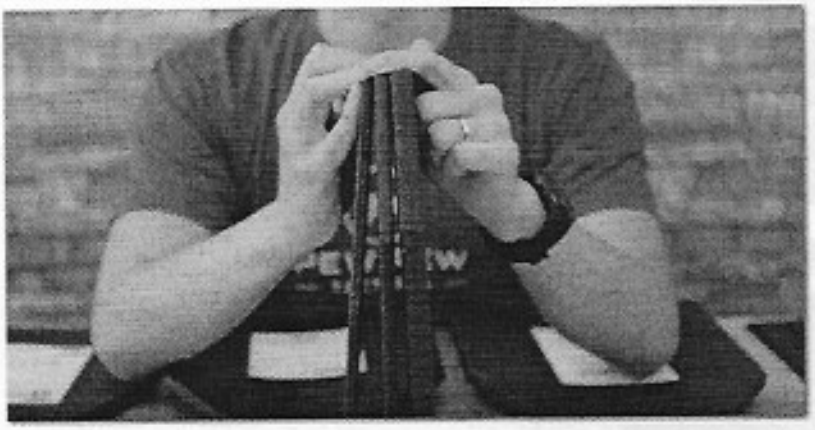
It's worth the extra investment of $25.

Body Armor Coating

There's different coatings out there, but for AR500 Armor they use **Paxcon**. It's the same stuff that you can spray onto the bed of your truck to make it super durable.

But for armor it adds the benefit of reducing "spalling," which is the metal splatter when the bullet hits the AR500 steel.

It would suck to be protected from a hit only to have an artery cut from fragments.



Coatings (L to R, Lightweight III+ Regular, III+ Regular, III+ Build Up)

When I tested it..the bullet passes through the Paxcon, hits the metal, and is contained. The built-up coating definitely helped more.

I would recommend getting it at least on the front plate since the front is where your arms and neck would be prone to spalling.

Trauma Pads

You'll also see **Trauma Pads** ($30), which look and feel like thin soft armor..but are **NOT** ballistic protection.

> **New to guns?** Check out our online Beginner Handgun Course that teaches all the important stuff you need to know.

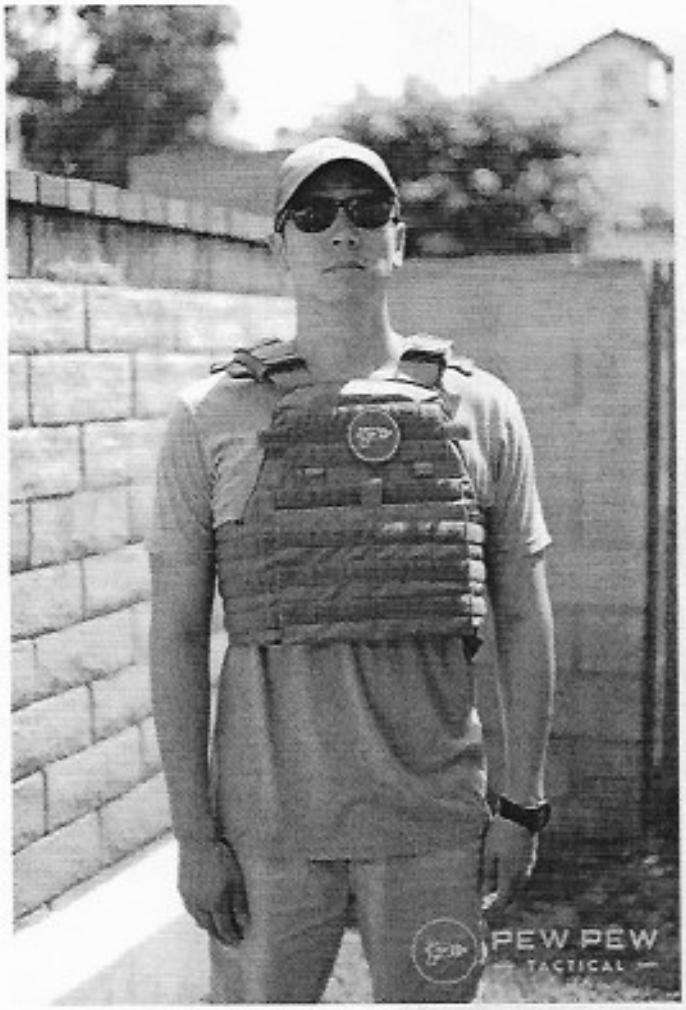
They go behind armor to spread out the force when you do get hit. That way you don't end up with a crazy bruise or broken bones. Also makes the plate armor comfier against your body.



Trauma Pad

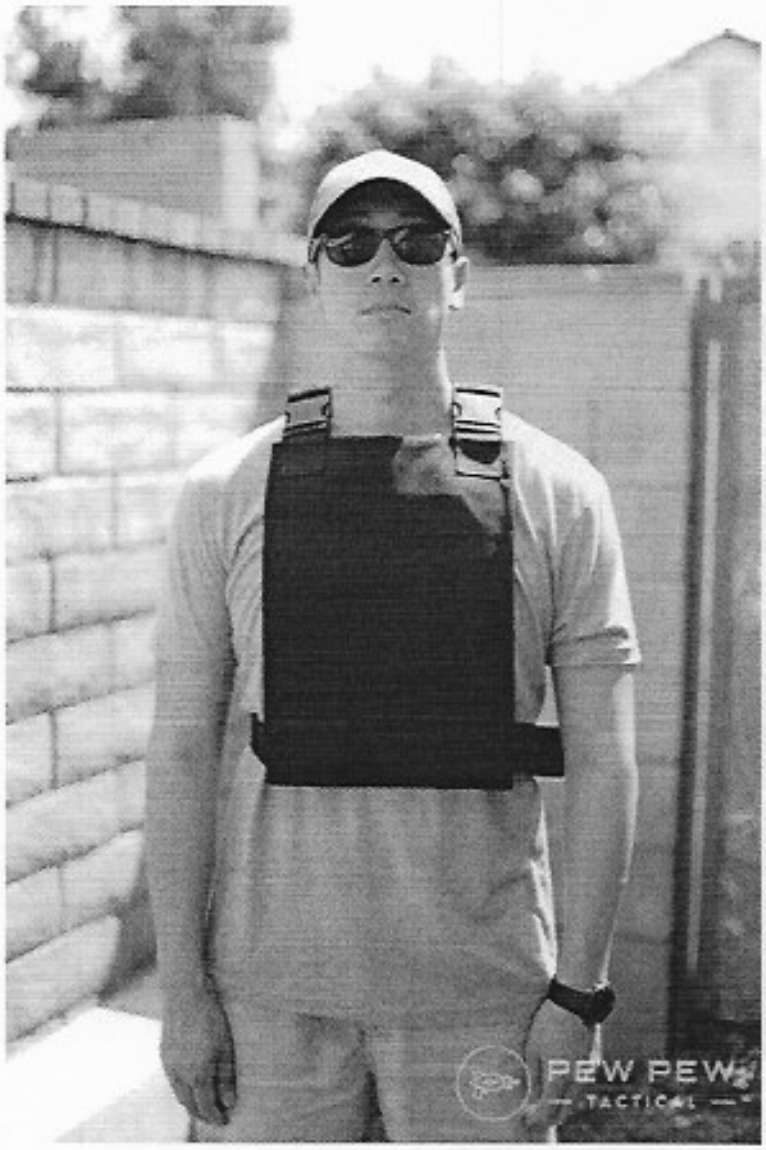
Plate Carriers

AR500 Armor has some pretty decent plate carriers.



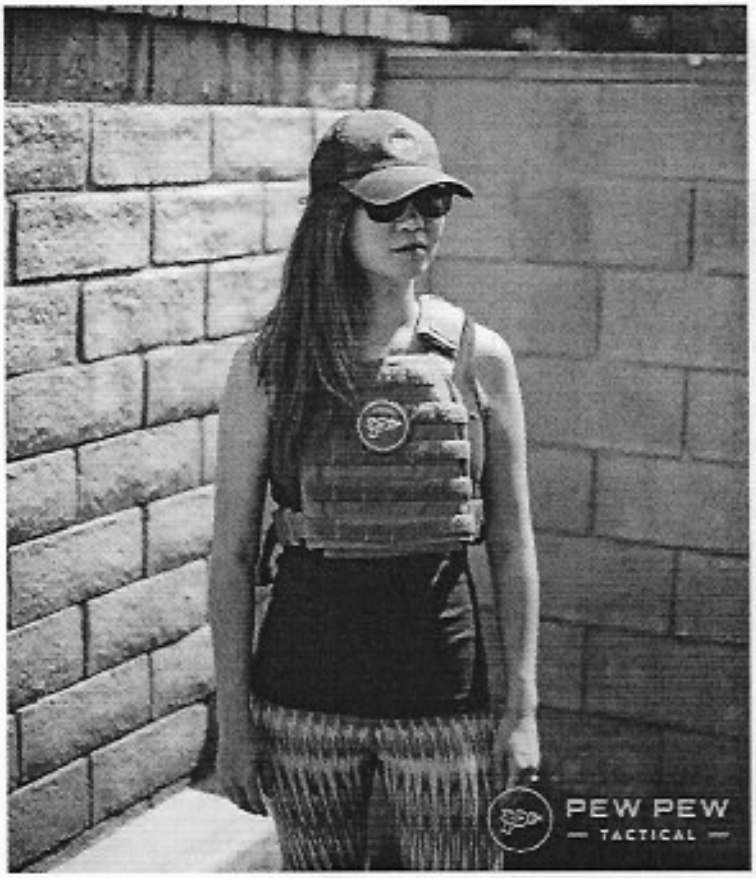
Testudo Plate Carrier

The **Emergency Personal Carrier (EPC)** ($49) was really different and a cool concept. It can hold a plate..or more likely a soft armor panel. And you can keep it in your office or car to discretely have some protection.



Emergency Personal Carrier

And the **Micro Carrier** ($109) was perfect for the 8×10 plates. It's straight front/back business with no side cumberbund.



Micro Plate Carrier

Recommendations

AR500 Armor has some sweet **Carrier + Plates** combinations. I'll do my best to give my recommendations for specific scenarios.

Pistol Threats, Concealment, and Comfort

Go with the **Level II** ($65) or **Level IIIA** ($110) soft armor based on your budget. And pair it up with the **Concealment Carrier combo** ($260).



Concealment Carrier

Emergency

This one is easy..go with the **Level II** ($65) or **Level IIIA** ($110) soft armor based on your budget. And pair it up with the **Emergency Personal Carrier** ($109) combo.



EPC Combo

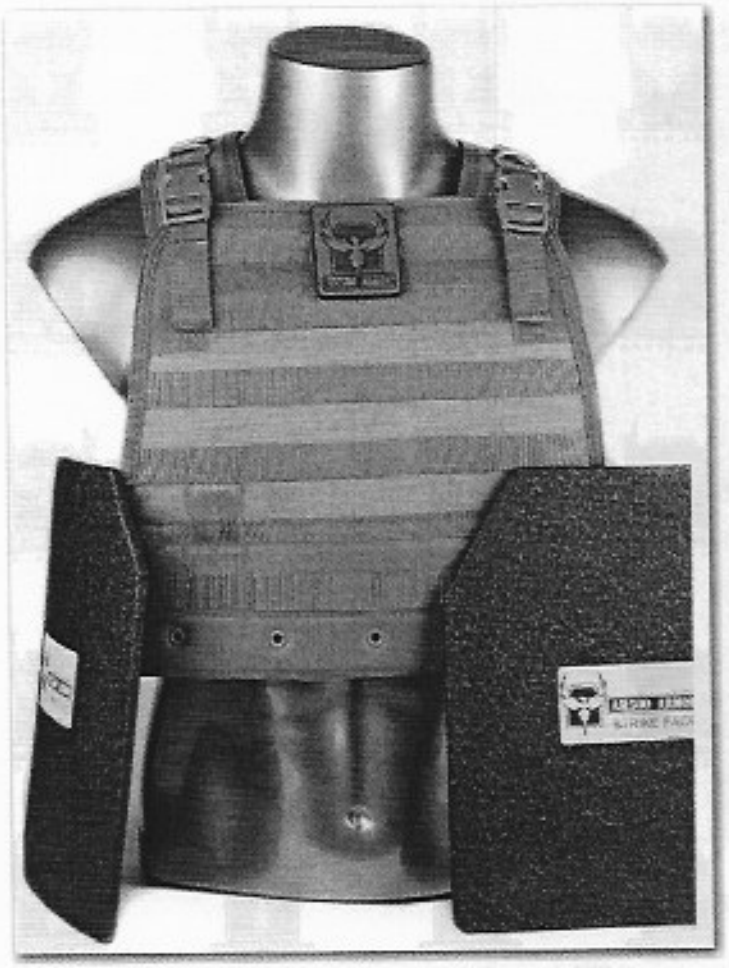
Rifle Threats, Non-Armor Piercing, Price Conscious

Start with at least **Level III** ($65) plate armor.

If it's an emergency or "what if" situation you're planning for..you can skimp on the multi-curve and Paxcon build-up to save money.

Otherwise I highly recommend getting at least the multi-curve for added comfort. Since armor won't protect you if it's so uncomfortable you never wear it.

The **Urban Go Plate Combo** ($199) is perfect since it provides a curved Level III for your front and a flat rear plate. Other colors available.



Urban Go Plate Combo

Looking for something with pouches already? I like the **Sentry Plate Combo** ($235).



Sentry Plate Combo

I personally don't like the loadouts with a pistol going side to side on your armor. It's hard to draw, you're usually pointing it at someone, and if you have to ditch your armor..you're out of your sidearm.

Rifle Threats, Non-Armor Piercing

What if you've got a little more to spend?

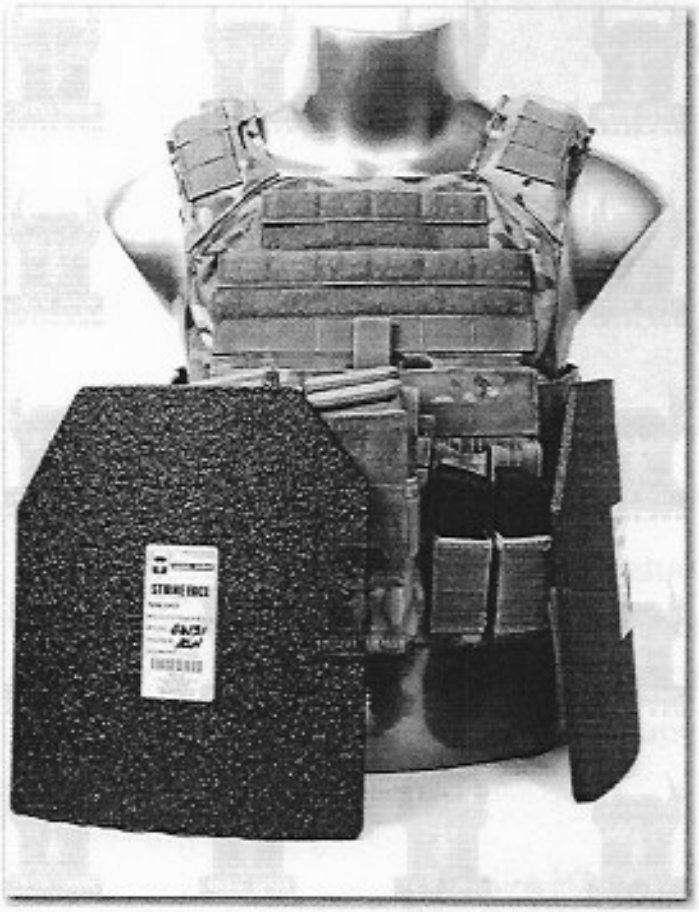
I'd recommend upgrading to **Level III+** ($90) or even **Level III+ Lightweight** ($110). Remember.. ounces equals pounds and pounds equals pain!

And be sure to go with multi-curve and even build-up Paxcon.

The carriers and loadouts open up for you too.

If you're looking to add your own loadout..I like the feel of the **Testudo**..but not its **combos** since they all have the mounted pistols.

I'd opt for the **Banshee Combo** ($385) for its loadout and side cumberbund where you can put additional pouches.



Banshee Plate Combo

I'm a sucker for Multi-Cam, but there's other options like Black, Tan, and Olive Drab for most of the carriers.

Rifle Threats, Armor Piercing

Opt for the ceramic **Level IV Plates** ($250). They only come in curved SAPI so that makes your decision a little easier.

You can add them to almost any of the **Carrier Plate Combos**.

Conclusion

That's it!



AR500 Armor, Testudo and Micro Carriers

By now you should have a firm grasp of the different types of body armor, and the specs you'll likely need for your specific purpose.

Remember..it comes down to choosing between protection, mobility, weight, and even price.

Did you end up getting your armor? Or did we miss anything you'd like to see covered? Let us know in the comments!



Written By Eric Hung

Hi, I'm Eric Hung and I got into guns when I was around 25 and started with YouTube videos, scouring forums, and eventually taking a bunch of classes. I soaked up as much information as I could online, at competitions, and from tinkering in my workshop. I became my group's "gun guy" and everyone who had questions came to me. And now I hope to answer some of yours! Learn more at About Us.

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