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The Pistol in British Military Service during the Great War



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Introduction

The British military services made considerable use of pistols during the Great War but it is evident that there is widespread ignorance and poor literary coverage of the weapons and their use. It is proposed to examine the pistol in British military service in the Great War, covering issue and use, technique and training, and procurement.

Approximately half a million pistols were procured during the war, making it one of the numerically most widely issued weapons. A number of Corps, including the Machine Gun Corps, Tank Corps, and Royal Flying Corps were issued pistols as personal weapons, as well as extensive distribution in other arms. It is known that pistol use was widespread in trench warfare and critical on occasions. Decorations, including several Victoria Crosses, are recorded as being won by men using them aggressively. References to their use are exceptionally cursory, however, and the techniques adopted and taught even more so. It is possible to gain a reasonably full insight into almost any Great War weapon system, finding the numbers produced, by whom they were used, the training given, how they were used or the tactics followed, and to what effect. Research has shown that this is not possible with the pistol. For a weapon so widely distributed, this is surprising and rectification of this situation is overdue.

Current Literature Review

British literature on firearms was limited until the late 1960s. More recently there has been rapid expansion. Unfortunately, some of what has been produced is of poor quality. This is particularly the case with the pistol. Initial data, good enough to redress the early ignorance, has not been updated to reflect subsequent research. Too little has been academically inspired, and much remains unreferenced and without bibliographies. One or two well known authors have only altered illustrations and a little word processing to update their work. Fables, ignorance, wholesale gaps and some complete misinformation have gone unchallenged in consequence.

Much of the difficulty of the literature is that it gives excessive coverage on technical data of pistols that saw limited service as officers private purchase weapons, at the expense of types purchased in large quantities by the government. Little hard information on the quantities purchased has been available. Anecdotal and limited information on issue and use is repeated without question. The subjects of technique and training have been largely ignored.

Two secondary sources proved highly useful. The first, *Revolvers of the British Services*,¹ was among the earliest of the more specialised works examined. Its coverage of revolvers is almost exemplary. The question it raised almost immediately was why the British stuck so firmly to the revolver, as opposed to the semi automatic. The book states quite clearly that it deals with government purchase of revolvers and that it has no coverage of private purchase. However, developments in government orders are detailed, technical information is provided and official records are referred to, for all steps taken. The endnotes are thorough and are almost entirely primary sources. The bibliography is extensive and the references made this an essential secondary source and a means of finding primary research material, together with other sources. The references to quality marque histories were particularly valuable.

¹ A.W.F.Taylor & W. H. J. Chamberlain, *Revolvers of the British Services* (Bloomfield Canada: Museum Restoration Service, 1988), *passim*

Primary sources indicated include the *List of Changes*,² *Small Arms Committee Minutes*³ and the *National Archives Ministry of Munitions Files*.⁴ An edited version of *List of Changes* has been produced in recent years, by Ian Skennerton. It records the dates of introduction of edged weapons, firearms and associated ammunition and accoutrements into British Military Service. Although not absolutely complete, it gives ready modern day access to an otherwise difficult to obtain primary source and to important information.

The *National Archives Ministry of Munitions Files* have proved slightly frustrating and incomplete. Gaps exist where documents have been removed, weeded or lost and any researcher must be prepared to use them as part of a jigsaw, integrating them with other available data. Although much information was discovered, often conclusive material on interesting topics was missing. The *Official History of the Ministry of Munitions*⁵ gave an overview of some aspects of procurement where the files were vague, and previously unappreciated material on ammunition production and supply.

The second general work that proved valuable was *From Howdah to High Power* by Robert Maze.⁶ This is a well written, illustrated book with relatively detailed information covering British military pistol development in parallel government issue and private purchase streams, explaining the latter thoroughly. Coverage of the Great War era is good, with quality illustrations, although more data on procurement quantities and issue would have been useful. There is nothing of consequence on technique or use. The bibliography is thorough, but with fewer primary sources than could be wished. Overall, these two secondary works, and importantly, the primary sources to which they led, enabled thorough research of pistol procurement.

As well as the primary sources outlined, much useful information came from three books on Canadian aspects, with many links to British issues. *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985* is the best single volume work, highly referenced, that has been found on a nation's service pistols.⁷ Allied to *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps 1914-1918*⁸ and *A Rifleman went to War*,⁹ these three works almost provided the literary coverage of a Great War weapon system mentioned as being sought, above, albeit for Canada.

A magazine article by David Penn, written in 1980, proved to be a useful indicator of primary sources on pistol technique,¹⁰ all of which were obtained, themselves leading to other primary material. These included *Musketry Regulations*, and privately produced shooting manuals, together with primary and secondary research data from the Historical Breechloading Smallarms Association. Overall, this proved to be a fruitful and rewarding area to research.

The issue of pistols to personnel has proved to be a challenging subject to investigate with relatively little collated information. *Field Service Manuals* contain figures, but the pamphlets are difficult to find. Contacts with various museums proved variable in value, but the Tank Museum was particularly helpful. Official Great War pamphlets, such as *Scouting and Patrolling* and *Tactical Employment of Lewis Guns*,

² I. Skennerton, *List of Changes in British War Material* (Margate Australia: Skennerton, 1980), *passim*

³ *Small Arms Committee Minutes*, *passim*

⁴ The National Archives [TNA]: *Ministry of Munitions Files*

⁵ HMSO, *Official History of the Ministry of Munitions* (London: Imperial War Museum Reprint), *passim*

⁶ R. Maze, *Howdah to High Power* (Tucson, USA: Excalibur Publications, 2002), *passim*

⁷ C. Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985* (Bloomfield, Ontario: Museum Restoration Service, 1994), *passim*

⁸ B. Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps 1914-19*, *passim*

⁸ General Staff War Office SS195, *Scouting and Patrolling 1917* (France: Army Print 18 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1992), *passim*

⁹ H.W. McBride, *A Rifleman went to War* (Washington: Small Arms Technical Publishing Co, 1935), *passim*

¹⁰ D. Penn, 'Practical Pistol Shooting-Legacy of Empire', *Handgunner*, 1(1) (May 1980), *passim*

were trawled with some success for occasional mentions.¹¹ As regards use, several campaign histories have provided useful references, contrary to previous belief, but often pistols are not mentioned in indexes, where other weapon systems are. Fortunately, a secondary source on Great War Pistol VCs was discovered.

Questions to be Addressed

The dissertation will first examine the reasons for the procurement of so many pistols. This will be done attempting to match the characteristics of the weapon with the requirements of the troops issued with them and the tasks they undertook, including the emerging arms and services. The dissertation will then attempt to indicate to whom these pistols were issued by arm, unit, post, establishment or pool and will examine the combat use of the pistol. This examination will try to cover, from an available sample, how the pistol was actually used in a variety of situations and with what effect. It is intended to deal with both positive and negative aspects.

The dissertation will research the pistol shooting techniques taught pre war, and how they developed and were improved during the War. An assessment will be attempted of the effectiveness of the methods ultimately taught and the training undertaken. If possible, an identification will be made of the influential people involved. As part of this aspect of the study, a brief examination will be made of pistol carriage and accessories. Ammunition supply will also be discussed in this section.

The dissertation will research procurement of pistols, in an attempt to ascertain how many were purchased and from where, including foreign purchases. A brief historical survey will be necessary to establish the starting point at commencement of the War. Government purchases and an idea of their success or failure, will be assessed. Although a complete overview is now impossible because of the incomplete commercial records, an indication will be attempted of procurement through private purchase. An assessment will be given of the relative importance of the different types procured through both systems.

The study will contain three chapters. The first will deal with Use and Issue. The second will deal with Technique and Training. The third will deal with Procurement. It is hoped to produce a base document on British Service pistols and their use, currently lacking for the Great War.

¹¹ General Staff War Office *SS195, Scouting and Patrolling 1917* (France: Army Printing and Stationery Service, 1917) and General Staff War Office *SS192, Tactical Employment of Lewis Guns 1918* (France: Army Printing and Stationery Service, 1918), *passim*

Chapter One

Use and Issue

The British military services purchased approximately half a million pistols during the Great War. It is worthwhile examining the characteristics of the weapon to explain why it was used on such a scale and what made it a suitable weapon for warfare of the time. It should be borne in mind that the vast majority of pistols issued were six shot .455 calibre double action revolvers and the characteristics examined refer specifically to that type. It should be noted that all revolvers are pistols, but not all pistols are revolvers; some are semi automatics, but in British service the official nomenclature for both was “pistol”. However, care has to be taken in that some accounts speak of revolvers when actually referring to semi automatics.

Firstly, pistols at the time of the Great War were regarded as principally one handed weapons, not two handed as is current. The one handed usability was particularly beneficial if carrying a load or other piece of equipment. They were relatively small, light and readily portable, either in the hand or holster. The latter could be particularly useful when crossing wire and other obstacles. Pistols were easily pointed at short range and usable with either hand. The pistol had much greater suitability than the rifle for shooting round corners and in confined spaces in a trench system. Contrary to popular belief, the pistol had high intrinsic accuracy within its effective range, commonly accepted as 50 yards. It was safer in use at close quarters than grenades, particularly at night. It had a high rate of fire, good stopping power and was reliable and easy to maintain.

Revolvers in particular could be kept well protected from the elements, but at the same time fully loaded, with no safety catch, ready for rapid use. The pistol was probably the perfect weapon for use on horseback, provided it was used with moderate care. It was certainly better than the lance! Although it had questionable safety and utility in untrained hands, it was highly effective in the hands of a trained man. This was to present a training problem that would have to be, and was, grasped and is mentioned officially on several occasions. Above all, it was a weapon of opportunity and certainly much more useful than a club.¹²

These characteristics made the pistol the ideal for those who needed a weapon for self defence but whose primary role did not normally involve using a weapon, such as senior officers, staff officers, and military police. There was also a need to arm many personnel for whom a rifle was an unnecessary encumbrance, allied to the shortage of rifles with which to arm them. These included those who worked on, or carried, crew served weapons.

Such personnel as tank crews, machine gunners, aircraft crews etc, all needed personal defence weapons, particularly for occasions when separated from their main weapon. The pistol was also highly suitable for a number of offensive purposes in warfare, such as raids, fighting in trench systems, house clearing, patrols, and tunnelling. It also had more mundane uses such as controlling prisoners and putting down wounded animals. The great expansion of the Army and the increase in personnel in the Machine Gun Corps, Tank Corps and Royal Flying Corps meant that large numbers of pistols were required.¹³ Unlike the Second World War, there was a lack of alternative in that the sub machine gun had not appeared as a weapon. There are some unsubstantiated accounts of damaged rifles being shortened for officers or of officers carrying more convenient sporting rifles, but these are limited.

¹² These characteristics have been pooled from C.D.Tracy, *The Service Revolver and How to use It* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1918) and J. Noel, *How to Shoot with a Revolver* (London: Foster and Groom, 1917)

¹³ TNA: MUN 4/2441

Examining issue in the infantry, the *1914 Field Service Manual Infantry Battalion (Expeditionary Force)* lists 29 officers' pistols, one for the Medical Officer, one for the Depot party officer and 5 for Range Takers.¹⁴ Pistols were almost a badge of office and rank for all officers in the Army, as had been the sword prior to the twentieth century. Infantry scales appear to have risen during the War, for example with the No1 and No2 of Lewis guns being issued pistols. There is a note that they require special training.¹⁵ There would appear to have been pools at brigade/battalion level for trench raids from 1916, but quality references are hard to find. Interestingly, despite claims of pistols being used as "Persuader" for officers to make soldiers to do things they did not wish, there is limited evidence of this.

Accounts of use by infantry personnel are many. Lieutenant Baines of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry notes a stirring account of the use of his revolver at Nonne Boschen, First Ypres in late 1914. He fired 52 rounds of the 54 he carried, burnt his hand whilst reloading and brought down several Germans.¹⁶ On the other hand, Captain Chaka won his VC at Gallipoli, but in a later action at Bullecourt, in France, was making a two-man reconnaissance patrol when he came across a German officer and soldier. His pistol misfired but he struck the officer with it and took the pair prisoner.

There are several recorded Canadian experiences. 14th Battalion, 3 Brigade, came under heavy fire at Vimy from four machine guns in a major German trench. No artillery fire was available, so Lewis Gunners advanced firing from the hip, forcing the German machine gunners under cover. Two positions were destroyed. The third was captured by Lieutenant B.F. Davidson, who shot the crew with his revolver. At Passchendaele in an attack against pillboxes, the raw courage of Lieutenant H. Kennedy, 31st Battalion, was noted as he charged through the barrage and captured a pillbox with his revolver, taking 37 prisoners.¹⁷

In trench warfare the Canadian Corps experience was that soldiers often preferred pistols as weapons for trench raids. Describing these in 1917, an authoritative source notes:

Few men carried rifles, since they were allowed to bring their weapons of choice, bombs were the most popular, revolvers almost as favoured, and some men brought clubs.

A 1918 comment talks of the raid leader carrying a revolver and 25 rounds amongst his equipment. Each bomber was also meant to carry a revolver and 25 rounds, in addition to his grenades.¹⁸ *SS195 Scouting and Patrolling* notes the convenience of pistols for trench raids, but also makes the point that those so armed should be expert in their use.¹⁹

Herbert McBride was an American who joined the Canadian Army as a volunteer machine gunner, was subsequently commissioned, and served temporarily in the British Army. He was an acknowledged expert shooting enthusiast who wrote two detailed books about his Great War experiences, both of which are highly regarded, particularly in the USA, for their practical small arms and field craft information.

¹⁴ General Staff War Office, *Field Service Manual Infantry Battalion Expeditionary Force 1914* (London: HMSO, 1914), p.51

¹⁵ General Staff War Office, *SS192, Tactical Employment of Lewis Guns 1918*, (France: Army Printing and Stationery Service, 1918) p.8

¹⁶ IWM: Department of Documents, ref: P146 Baines, Lieutenant-Colonel C.S., DSO Ts account (13pp) of the First Battle of Ypres, 31 October 1914, written some years afterwards by a Lieutenant in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

¹⁷ Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, pp. 123 and 163

¹⁸ Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, pp. 102 and 172

¹⁹ General Staff War Office, *SS195, Scouting and Patrolling 1917* (France: Army Printing and Stationery Service, 1917) p.

One book has a major chapter on the subject of pistols, plus smaller references.²⁰ McBride recounts Canadian experiences of the Colt .45 Government Model semi automatic pistol, the use of pistols during raids and methods of carriage therein, as well as the other rank attitude towards pistols. Particularly with Canadian machine gunners, this seemed to be one of “soonest acquisition the better”. McBride notes that pistols were seldom left fallen on the battlefield, or with wounded or dead men, but were quickly picked up. Battlefield archaeologists report finding few pistols, considering the number issued, supporting this view.²¹

Tunnellers were issued pistols and made good use of them, after reputedly trying cut-down rifles as alternative weapons, unsuccessfully. Lieutenant Brisco of 172 Tunnelling Company had underground close quarter fights involving pistols and explosive charges in the period November 1915 to January 1916, at The Bluff/St Eloi, Ypres. Lieutenant Westacott of the 2nd Canadian Tunnelling Company led pistol-armed parties underground in sustained encounters with German tunnellers at Hooze/Hill 60 in June and July 1916. The accounts make graphic reading and demonstrate the characteristics and capabilities of the service revolver remarkably well.²²

In the cavalry, all ranks from sergeant and above were issued pistols, noted as Webleys, probably because the hinge frame made it easier to load on horseback.²³ The cavalry on the western Front saw only limited use, but during the retreat from Mons in August and September 1914, it is noted that they made good use of revolvers generally and the individual successes of at least one officer.²⁴ Tracy, see below, quotes a group of British officers during the retreat, causing casualties amongst a troop of Uhlans at approximately 250 yards, by using their revolvers.²⁵

In Palestine there are many accounts of pistol use by mounted troops in the cavalry campaign history. During the charge at Beersheba, a number of incidents are recorded. Major Hyman shot several Turks in a redoubt with his revolver. Major Featherstonaugh had his horse shot under him; put it down with his revolver, before emptying the weapon into several Turks. Risaldar Singh at El Hinu, outpaced his troop, galloped into an enemy cavalry force, shot two with his revolver, and clubbed three before his troop caught up with him.²⁶

All ranks of both foot and mounted Military Police were issued pistols and they were almost a badge of office. However, there is at least one note of careless use of a pistol by a policeman. At Etaples in September 1917, following the arrest and release of a soldier, a crowd gathered and a policeman (not RMP) maladroitly fired his revolver, killing an innocent by-standing NCO and injuring a Frenchwoman. This was a factor in the start of the so-called Etaples Mutiny.²⁷

The Royal Flying Corps appear to have had high scales of issue of pistols. A 1915 squadron mobilisation table shows 175 Webley revolvers, in addition to rifles, plus a dozen semi automatic pistols

²⁰ McBride, *A Rifleman went to War*, pp. 167-187

²¹ Conversation Thomas-Robertshaw March 2010

²² A. Barrie, *War Underground* (London: Frederick Muller, 1962), pp. 126-129 and 227-240

²³ A. Rawson, *Handbook of the British Army 1914-1918* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), p.103

²⁴ R. Holmes, “The Last Hurragh: British Cavalry on the Western Front, August-September 1914”, in H. Cecil & P. Liddle, ed., *Facing Armageddon* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), pp. 278-296

²⁵ Tracy, *Service Revolver*, p. 74

²⁶ Marquess of Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919 Volume 5 1914-1919* (London: Leo Cooper 1997), pp. 157, 239

²⁷ R. Holmes, *Tommy* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), pp 347-348

for pilots. The use of pistols as early aircraft armament, until more widespread use of machine guns in 1915, is recorded in the RFC Communiqués.²⁸

Artillery batteries had varying scales, but little data remains save for odd incomplete references. Royal Horse Artillery batteries appear to have had 70 revolvers per battery,²⁹ but other types of battery considerably fewer. Pistols became the principal secondary small arm in the Machine Gun Corps from the spring of 1916, when rifles were removed from Vickers detachments. The issue is noted as being accompanied by much target practice.³⁰

Pistols were also the principal small arm in the Tank Corps. The report of the Tank Corps Revolver School on the use of pistols from tanks and the general success of pistols states:

*From active service experience it has been found that the revolver, properly understood and handled, can be a most useful and deadly weapon in the field. Its simplicity and reliability rendered it extremely suitable for use from the tank.*³¹

For horse and mule slaughtering, .455 Mk 2 and .310 Horse Slaughtering were the only authorised cartridges.³² Total British horse and mule mortality, died, killed and destroyed was in excess of 484,000 animals.³³ Many animals were shot during actions and there are accounts of the use of pistols for this purpose.³⁴

The Royal Navy issued pistols to warships for boarding and boat parties, shore parties and for close quarter fighting. Initially scales were highly variable but from April 1915, following a degree of rationalisation, they were less generous. Battleships and battle cruisers were all issued with 40 pistols. Cruisers and light cruisers had between 20 and 40, depending on the specific class. All destroyers held 25 pistols. Torpedo boats and gunboats were issued between 12 and 24.³⁵ Unfortunately, few accounts of their use appear to have survived.

Twenty-two VCs were won, seven of them by officers, for promptness and marksmanship in the use of the pistol, rather than just carrying one in the hand.³⁶ The classic example is Captain Gee VC, who in the village of Les Rues Vertes at Cambrai in November 1917, charged a machine gun position with two revolvers, killing eight Germans and capturing the post.³⁷ Another less known is Lieutenant Moor VC of the Hampshire Regiment. At Krithia in Gallipoli he stopped a precipitate retreat of elements of 29th Division with his revolver, by shooting the leading four soldiers.³⁸

Lieutenant Leach of the Middlesex Regiment, assisted by Sergeant Hogan, both won the VC at Festubert in late 1914 whilst recapturing a trench system. So as not to expose himself, Leach used his revolver ambidextrously to fire round corners of the system, whilst Sgt Hogan covered the parapet. They shot eight Germans, wounded two and drove several others before them, eventually capturing sixteen more.

²⁸ C. Cole, ed., *Royal Flying Corps Communiques 1915-1916* (London: Tom Donovan, 1990), pp. 46,56,60 and 104

²⁹ Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985*, p. 39

³⁰ G. Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* (London: Cassell, 1980), p.78

³¹ HQ Tank Corps, *Report of Tank Corps Revolver School 1919*

³² P. Labbett, *British Small Arms Ammunition 1864-1938* (London: Labbett, 1993), p. 280

³³ Sir L.J. Benkinsop & J.W. Rainey, *Veterinary History of the War* (London: HMSO, 1925), p.510

³⁴ B. Hammond, *Cambrai* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008), pp. 383

³⁵ TNA: ADM186/865 and 866

³⁶ A.D. Harvey, 'Revolver VCs', *Guns Review*, November 1992 and A.D. Harvey, 'The Pistol on the Battlefield', *RUSI Journal*, 151/1 (2006)

³⁷ Hammond, *Cambrai*, pp. 364-366

³⁸ L. Carlyon, *Gallipoli* (London: Doubleday, 2001), p.308

Sergeant Downie, Royal Dublin Fusiliers, won the VC at Les Bouefs in October 1916 by using the fire of his Lewis Gun section to enable him to outflank an enemy machine gun position. He killed all four men manning it with his revolver. Sergeant Cooper of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, under the covering fire of four of his riflemen, crawled through wire and approached a blockhouse at Langemark in August 1917. He silenced the machine guns within by firing his revolver through the slit, capturing several machine guns and the pillbox garrison when they surrendered. He was awarded the VC for his actions.³⁹ These last three actions were used by Captain Noel in a post-war summary to highlight some of the lessons of pistol use during the War in the referenced article in the *Cavalry Journal*.

Pistols were issued to a wide variety of personnel, ranks and posts. They were used both defensively and offensively with many positive outcomes. The best results would appear to have been achieved by those trained in their use and using them as weapons of opportunity.

³⁹ J. Noel, 'Training in the Revolver', *Cavalry Journal*, (January 1921)

Chapter Two

Technique and Training

Somewhat surprisingly, the subject of military pistols and their use had been aired at a relatively high level in the United Kingdom before the War. Major H.E.C. Kitchener, then an instructor at Sandhurst, had delivered a lecture at the Royal United Services Institute in July 1886. It is an early, but remarkably rounded and well worked through appreciation of the realities of military revolver use.⁴⁰ Subsequently, in 1896, Lieutenant-Colonel G.V. Fosbery, reprised the subject at the same location and covered recent developments, with a spirited after lecture discussion.⁴¹

During the Boer War pistols had a poor reputation as weapons, largely due to a number of safety related incidents and do not appear to have been used often. This was not a pistol war, with relatively few close quarter engagements being fought. Probably as a result, little interest was taken in improving training.⁴²

Pre-war military pistol shooting had a strong target shooting influence. Competitive pistol shooting had commenced at National Rifle Association Meetings at Wimbledon in 1885, moving to Bisley in 1890. Initially slow fire, it became more practical involving rapid fire, moving, and short exposure targets, under the influence of Walter Winans. He was a noted target shot, benefactor of the National Rifle Association and Olympic medallist. He had written a number of books on target pistol shooting before the War, but with much practical or combat advice.⁴³ It is notable that almost all the war time authors of privately published manuals, see below, acknowledge his assistance or advice.

However, despite these various influences and although many soldiers competed at Bisley, the Army did not adjust its own training. Arthur Woodhouse produced a police training manual in 1907 for India, which had some advanced practical techniques. However, the extreme rarity of copies of this book in the United Kingdom brings into question whether any military authorities or instructors were aware of it.⁴⁴

Pistol training and tests are included in Musketry Regulations for various years, including those for 1909, reprinted in 1914. The Regulations are thorough and give descriptions of the pistol mechanism, operation, and cleaning. The differences between cocking action, or single practice (nowadays known as single action) and trigger action, or continuous practice (nowadays double action) are explained.

Details as to how pistol practice is to be conducted, on 30-yard ranges, are given, including all the targets, orders and precise drill movements. Firing is to be by cocking and trigger action, with both right and left hands. The shooting tests and practices are, however, pedestrian target shooting at a bulls eye target, using deliberate shooting with the sights, with no time limits. The training can be summarised as far from suitable for war situations and failing to produce a competent combat shot.⁴⁵

Soon after the start of the War, an ever-increasing number of soldiers were equipped with pistols. Casualties were caused through careless and uninstructed handling of pistols, emphasising the need for correct training. Allied to this was a realisation of the need for better techniques in pistol fighting and

⁴⁰ H.E.C. Kitchener, 'Revolvers and their use', RUSI Lecture, 14 July 1886

⁴¹ G.V. Fosbery, 'On Pistols', RUSI Lecture, 13 May 1896

⁴² *Extracts from Reports by Officers Commanding Units in South Africa during 1899-1901* (London:HMSO, 1901), pp.21-43

⁴³ W Winans, *The Art of Revolver Shooting* (New York & London: Putnam, 1901 and 1911), *passim*

⁴⁴ A. Woodhouse, *New Revolver Manual for Police aand Infantry Forces* (India: 1907) *passim*

⁴⁵ General Staff War Office, *Musketry Regulations, Part 1 1909(Reprint 1914)* (London: HMSO, 1914), pp. 25-30 and 113-115

for close combat, quick shooting, often in trenches. Significantly higher standards of safety and shooting were required than pre-war.⁴⁶ Fortuitously, the British Army had recruited a key figure.

Charles Tracy had lived and worked for some years in America, where he became interested in pistol shooting. There is a family anecdotal link to his having associated and shot with Buffalo Bill Cody. Tracy was commissioned in January 1915 into the King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment and subsequently promoted Captain. Although too old for front line service, he was quickly employed as an instructor at the School of Musketry at Bisley. He later worked at Wareham at the Southern Command Revolver School before returning to Bisley. Wareham and Bisley appear to have been the principal revolver schools.⁴⁷

The influence of Tracy is as the bringer of pistol fighting technique. In 1915 he wrote a simple instructional handbook for more advanced training, drawing attention to his skills and knowledge.⁴⁸ He advocated the use of instinctive shooting at close ranges and using the sights for longer distances. Tracy's stated "War Shot" standard was the ability of a man to hit a 12" by 16" rectangle, with one pistol shot at ten yards, in one second. He is acknowledged as the writer of the 1916 Addendum to Musketry Regulations, which improved pistol training enormously.⁴⁹ According to his family history, he made a visit to the Western Front in April 1917 to see the trench fighting problem and to incorporate lessons into shooting instruction.

In the same year he toured all the ANZAC units, giving instruction, as well as demonstrating at the Senior Officers School and lecturing at the Royal Military College Sandhurst. In early 1918 he undertook a ten-week tour of all the Officer Cadet Battalions. Wider and later knowledge of him comes from his definitive pistol manual produced in 1918.⁵⁰ Tracy was demobilised in 1919, and was awarded the OBE (Military Division) for his war service, in 1920.⁵¹

The advent of the December 1916 Addendum No3 to Musketry Regulations was the major move to produce a practical course of instruction and fire. Issued with Army Orders as a separate 15 page close-typed document, it was intended to be enclosed with Musketry Regulations. It included a much more advanced and demanding set of practices and tests than before the war.

These cover grouping, rapid and snap shooting, at a variety of ranges, and engaging targets whilst advancing on foot. Shooting is to be conducted with both right and left hand, single and double action, to tight timings. One practice involves firing at targets whilst moving down a trench. There are mounted practices for those for whom they were appropriate.

Shooting was to be carried out at the more realistic Figure 3 Kneeling Target, with vertical rectangular scoring marks. Notes on pistol training are included, with safety instructions, suggested preliminary training off range, and advice on running live firing.⁵² Whilst many pamphlets can remain unread it is interesting to note that a copy of Addendum No 3 was found recently, bound into a notebook. It was kept by an officer, one 2nd Lieutenant W.N. Libby, Monmouthshire Regiment, who attended a revolver

⁴⁶ Tracy, *Service Revolver*, p. 9

⁴⁷ S. Tallack & J. Moore, 'Charles Dunlop Tracy', *Historical Breechloading Smallarms Association Journal*, 2 (9) (1996)

⁴⁸ C.D. Tracy, *Revolver Shooting in War* (London: Sifton Praed, 1915), *passim*

⁴⁹ General Staff War Office, Addendum No3, December 1916, to Musketry Regulations 1909 (London: HMSO, 1916)

⁵⁰ Tracy, *Service Revolver*, *passim*

⁵¹ Tallack & Moore, 'Charles Dunlop Tracy', *passim*

⁵² General Staff War Office, Addendum No3, December 1916, to Musketry Regulations 1909 (London: HMSO, 1916)

course at Bisley at the end of the war. The officer's added notes reflect the more advanced ideas that Tracy's later work incorporated.⁵³

Although the main schools have been noted, there were others. The Tank Corps, for example, ran a separate Revolver School at Wareham that trained instructors. The School opened in late 1916. A total of 403 Officers and 544 SNCO instructors were trained in wartime courses lasting a week. From early 1917 instruction was conducted in shooting from a tank at a target advancing from a trench. A total of approximately 6,900 soldiers fired Battle Practices at the School, under these trained instructors.⁵⁴

To aid the training specialised revolver ranges were needed as well as the numerous standard 30 yard ranges. Evidence exists of Tracy designed tactical ranges with trench systems, simulated buildings made of canvas, moving and three dimensional targets made from papier mache, together with blanks, flares and booby traps which were triggered by the firer walking down the range. Descriptions and photographs appear in Noel's book. Post war, the 1924 manual on Range Construction produced a formalised and approved set of drawings, for this and also the Revolver Battle Practice Range.⁵⁵

As well as the Schools already mentioned, an example of the latter has been identified at Strensall at what was then the Northern Command Musketry School. The Machine Gun Corps Training Centre at Grantham also had a number of revolver ranges and targets, although no as yet identified revolver battle range.⁵⁶ Informal training took place in the trenches. The Machine Gun Corps shot at rifle rounds embedded in a sandbag, for practice, with satisfying target effects for a bulls eye.⁵⁷

Like many other subjects, including map reading and musketry, various help yourself manuals were produced throughout the war, some reflecting official training, and they seem to have been widely circulated. It is obviously almost impossible to assess their effect at this stage, save as an indication of contemporary technique and influence. Lieutenant H. Douglas was a noted target rifle shot who produced a booklet entitled *Automatic pistols and revolvers* early in the War.⁵⁸ It contains principally the pre War *Musketry Regulations* on pistols and their shooting and as such is no advance on those instructions. There is, however, discussion of the relative merits of revolvers and semi automatics and a thorough survey of the different types on the market.

Captain J. Noel produced a pocket book entitled *How to Shoot with a Revolver*.⁵⁹ His approach was to identify the characteristics of the revolver and to develop skills to capitalise on them. There is much stress on strengthening exercises and developing what would now be termed muscle memory. Vertical raise, instinctive aim, whole hand squeeze, short range, and quick shooting are all stressed, but there is a lack of tactical information. The book was, however, a step forward. Noel produced a more substantial book, *The Automatic Pistol*, in 1919, which has even been reprinted recently.⁶⁰ He became Head of Revolver Training in the Machine Gun Corps and post War, Head of Revolver Training at the Small Arms School.

⁵³ C.L. Bryant, 'Revolver Shooting', *Historical Breechloading Smallarms Association Journal*, 2 (10)

⁵⁴ HQ Tank Corps, *Report on Tank Corps Revolver School 1919*

⁵⁵ J. Noel, *The Automatic Pistol* (London: Foster & Groom, 1919), pp. 94-95 and *Small Arms Training Volume III Small Arms Range Regulations* (1924), pp. 112-119

⁵⁶ D. Harding *A Study of United Kingdom Ranges* (Privately produced)

⁵⁷ Coppard *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, p.84

⁵⁸ H. Douglas, *Automatic Pistols and Revolvers* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1915?)

⁵⁹ Noel, *How to Shoot with a Revolver*, *passim*

⁶⁰ Noel, *The Automatic Pistol*, *passim*

Hugh Pollard was a well-known firearms authority in the early half of the twentieth century who wrote a comprehensive book on the pistol, *The Book of the Pistol and Revolver*,⁶¹ published in early 1917. Pollard's work is an overall study of the subject, covering history, survey of types, target use, how to shoot, etc but has an additional chapter on training military shots. Although short, this contains much good advice and recites maxims of the time including a rapid raise of the pistol, the whole hand squeeze, as well as training with both right and left hand. Pollard is keen to encourage double action shooting. Other aspects include engaging targets whilst advancing down range and re-loading whilst on the run! Pollard mentions, indicating that he was aware of Addendum No 3,⁶² "a better course of military training is now insisted upon". Overall, the work reflects a more adventurous and practical attitude towards training pistol shots and expectations of higher standards.

Tracy had written his first manual in 1915 and updated and enlarged it in editions of 1916 and 1917.⁶³ A completely new work was published in 1918.⁶⁴ This is a highly structured, comprehensive, well illustrated manual taking the reader from basics to advanced skills, including tactical uses, and mirrors the syllabus of the revolver schools. The book covers almost every possible aspect of pistol fighting technique. Its influence can be seen in many subsequent police and military manuals.⁶⁵

Techniques covered include the correct loading order of the cylinder with loose cartridges, to ensure the pistol is ready to fire as soon as it is closed with a partial load, clearing a cartridge stuck under the extractor, or using a pistol at extreme range. The book does reflect the contemporary attitude of the revolver being more reliable than the semi automatic pistol.

From a somewhat simple and unsuitable procedure at the start of the War, British pistol technique developed along parallel but complimentary official and private lines, to a sophisticated level. Safe use, allied to skilled tactical methods produced first class combat shots. Anyone passing out from a revolver instructional course in the latter half of the War would have been better trained with a pistol than all but special forces personnel in the modern army.

Accessories

Sub calibre training pistols in .22 calibre are mentioned in Addendum No 3 and privately produced manuals, as useful for training. Target pistols existed in that calibre in the United Kingdom, but most were unsuitable single shots. Commercial adaptors had been in existence for a number of years, mostly of the Morris Tube type, chambered for .22 or proprietary sub calibre cartridges. Versions existed with a barrel insert converting a revolver into a single shot pistol, and with both a barrel insert and a reduced calibre cylinder, preserving the revolver capability. The Webley factory records, however, only indicate the sale of one Morris Tube during the war.⁶⁶

The Royal Navy made considerable use of Morris Tube adaptors in gunnery training and possessed revolver adaptors, but again, there is little evidence of their use. A small number of Webley WS .22 target revolvers, in the low tens, were sold before the war to a number of training establishments, including Sandhurst, but there is little to indicate that sub calibre training was widespread.⁶⁷

⁶¹ H.B.C. Pollard. *The Book of the Pistol and Revolver* (London: McBride, Nast & Co, 1917), pp.185-192

⁶² Pollard., *The Book of the Pistol and Revolver*, p. 73

⁶³ Tracy, *Revolver Shooting in War*, *passim*

⁶⁴ Tracy, *The Service revolver and How to Use It* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1918), *passim*

⁶⁵ Penn, 'Practical Pistol Shooting-Legacy of Empire', *Handgunner*, 1(1) (May 1980), pp. 26-31

⁶⁶ M. Milner, *Webley Commercial Production* (Privately produced)

⁶⁷ Milner, *Webley Commercial Production* (Privately produced)

Speed or rapid loaders, for inserting six rounds at once into revolvers, had been in existence for a number of years, including during the Boer War, without great success. The Prideaux second pattern magazine loaders, which were more compact and simpler than earlier designs, were available on private purchase from 1914. They were approved by the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 and became Government issue in LoC 21527 of September 1918, to govern supply as needed, following successful use. They could be used on .455 chambered Webley, Colt and S&W revolvers and are so marked on surviving commercial examples.

The Prideaux loader presents cartridges to the rear of a revolver cylinder in a metal clip held in a circular holder, which falls away as the cartridges fill the cylinder (Appendix: Image 17). The loader relies only on pressure for operation, not gravity. A small metal ring was intended to hold it on a string attached to the firer, so that it was not dropped or lost. Prideaux loaders were made by Austin Motors,⁶⁸ and are still probably the best revolver speed loader ever used and certainly one of the fastest. Tracy recommended their use. The speed loader not only gave more rapid re-loading of the revolver, arguably reducing considerably one of the major advantages of the semi automatic, but also more sure re-loading at night..

The lanyard was intended to prevent dropping the pistol, but could give problems as noted by Tracy. His advice was that it should be worn attached to the belt in the centre of the body. He recommended the use of the lanyard at night, when dropping the pistol could lead to losing it. However, he did not in daylight, when he noted that the lanyard might catch in trench paraphernalia, outweighing its advantages.⁶⁹

W.W. Greener, the Birmingham gun maker, produced a small number of modified French Gras bayonets, to the design of Captain Arthur Pritchard. The so-called Greener-Pritchard, could be fitted on to the hinge joint under the barrel of the Webley Mark VI revolver. When fitted, the revolver becomes clumsy, but maintains a mild degree of lethality when empty. The bayonet is featured misleadingly in every modern mention of wartime pistols, but saw limited use, was unsuccessful commercially and was never adopted officially.⁷⁰

Another myth that has grown in recent years has been that Webley revolvers were fitted with the shoulder stock from the Webley 1½ inch Very pistol, to produce a form of revolver carbine. Although this can be done, there is no evidence that it ever was. There are no contemporary illustrations or accounts and the idea is not mentioned by Tracy. One rumour is that it was first produced by a respected museum curator, as a joke that has been swallowed by American collectors. A more charitable view is that it was possibly an Indian Army innovation.

As a means of carriage, officers used the Sam Browne leather belt as part of service dress before the war. Pistols were carried in a leather-flapped holsters worn on the belt on the right hip, with a slight muzzle rear rake, although different regiments had variations on this carriage. Some holsters have a small leather flap and stud to hold it tight against the Sam Browne cross strap. . Examples also exist of an open top holster designed and promoted by Tracy, meant to be worn in a low slung manner.

Officers also used 1908 pattern webbing, with issue open top leather holsters, later in the war, particularly when there was growing pressure for officers to be less obvious in their dress. There are even private purchase leather holsters covered with a canvas outer case. The Canadians purchased

⁶⁸ T. Mullin, *Colt New Service Revolver* (Coburg, Canada: Collector Grade Publications, 2009), pp.74-76

⁶⁹ Tracy, *The service revolver and how to use it*, pp. 117-118

⁷⁰ Maze, *Howdah to High Power*, p.49

webbing equipment and holsters from America from the Mills Woven Cartridge Belt Company. For British other ranks, only open top leather holsters were issued.⁷¹

There is less evidence of holsters for pocket pistols, see below, although some elegant specimens exist. As the name suggests, these pistols were probably carried in officers' pockets. This mode of carry would be more sensible if an officer were trying to carry a pistol whilst looking outwardly like a soldier.

There are also a number of photographs showing pistols being carried slung across the holder's chest, held by the lanyard round the neck. The part open jacket would possibly indicate that the pistol could be thrust inside for protection from the elements. Photographs show Lewis gunners using this mode of carry. McBride, see above, makes the point of appropriate methods of carriage when crawling. The holster should be worn on the belt in middle of the back, or strapped in between the shoulder blades, to keep it out of the mud.⁷²

Cleaning of pistols was by use of brass pistol cleaning rod with eyelet end and ring handle, using flannelette and oil, with emphasis on maintaining the polish in the bore. The cleaning rod was often carried on the reverse of the holster in a slot. There is also evidence of the use of brass bristle brushes to remove heavy fouling.

Ammunition

The scale of revolver ammunition issue was initially 12 rounds on the man, 12 rounds in unit transport and 12 rounds in the Brigade Ammunition Column.⁷³ Ammunition packaging was in packets of sixes. Rounds were carried in pouches containing twelve rounds. Additional ammunition seems to have been carried when considered necessary.

Only two types of pistol cartridge were made under contract, although a small batch of .450 ammunition was made up for obsolete revolvers at the beginning of the War. The principal round was the .455 Mark 2 revolver cartridge. It had a round nosed, hollow based bullet of 265 grains, of lead and antimony, loaded into a two flash hole Berdan primed brass case. Propellant was between 5.5 and 6.5 grains of chopped Cordite Mark 1, giving a muzzle velocity of 600 fps. The 455 Mk 2 was the first British pistol cartridge designed with a cordite load, introduced in 1894, and noteworthy for its short case for more efficient use of the cordite.

The longer case for the Mark 1 cartridge initially had gunpowder propellant, later replaced with cordite. The Mark 2 was succeeded by the Marks 3, 4 and 5 with various so-called flat or hollow nosed "man stopper" bullets. However, it was returned to and reissued after the Mark 5, because of fears of non compliance with the Hague Convention, forbidding expanding bullets. Earlier Marks of cartridge were used up in training.⁷⁴

When the Ministry of Munitions took over the provision of pistol ammunition in 1915 there were orders for 5 million rounds extant. The pistol ammunition manufacturers were initially the Ordnance Factory, Eley, and Kynoch. The rate of supply was 850,000 rounds per month. However, the War Office said that expenditure was lower than expected and a stock had been built. Supply was first reduced, then temporarily stopped, then restarted three months later, rapidly rising to the former rate figure again in

⁷¹ Maze, *Howdah to High Power*, pp. 52-54, 85

⁷² McBride, *A Rifleman Went to War*, pp. 177-178

⁷³ General Staff War Office, *Field Service Pocketbook 1914* (London: HMSO, Reprinted with Amendments, 1916), p.162

⁷⁴ Labbett, *British Small Arms Ammunition 1864-1938*, pp. 161-173

early 1917. Birmingham Metal and Munitions was given a contract for 100,000 per month in April 1917 when the other manufacturers could not meet this reinstated requirement.⁷⁵

There were a few thousand short of 3 million rounds of .455 Mark 2 on the Western Front at the end of the War in November 1918. In excess of 83 million cartridges were produced during the War.⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that the Ministry of Munitions history states that there were never any problems with supply of pistol ammunition.

The other cartridge produced for the Government was the .455 Webley self-loading. This had a semi rimmed brass cartridge case with a 224 grain jacketed bullet, a 7 grains cordite propellant load and a muzzle velocity of 700 fps. It was made by the same factories as the revolver round. Ammunition was packed in sevens to match pistol magazine capacity. It became necessary to label the packaging of these cartridges as "NOT FOR REVOLVERS" to prevent their incorrect use in revolvers, into which they could be made to fit. The pressure of the semi auto cartridge was higher than the revolver was designed to take.⁷⁷ Just over 2.6 million rounds were acquired during the War.⁷⁸

Problems were noted with .455 semi auto ammunition causing some stoppages with Webley semi automatic pistols, but not Colt, and this became the subject of a reliability trial towards the end of the war. The residue from the cordite propellant was suspected to be the problem, but was not proven. A somewhat inconclusive trial with different propellants did not finish until after the war.⁷⁹ Otherwise there do not appear to have been any reliability problems.

The *Official History of the Ministry of Munitions* records procurement of small quantities of 38 Automatic Colt Pistol (ACP), (30,000 rounds), 380 ACP (10,000 rounds) and 32 ACP (22,500 rounds) ammunition in September 1917. Subsequent monthly quantities of 10,000 rounds, 3,250 rounds and 7,500 rounds, respectively, were then requested.⁸⁰ It is believed that this was this to cope with the fact that private purchase pistols of those calibres were at the front in officers' hands. It is presumed that ammunition types, such as these, were procured either from the UK trade, or from American commercial sources.⁸¹ Recent research would indicate manufacture by Remington in the USA.⁸² The recognised authority on British military ammunition manufacture does not record British pistol ammunition being made in other than those calibres previously listed.

The Ministry of Munitions also purchased over half a million rounds of .45ACP semi automatic pistol ammunition in August 1917, when there were only a small number of Colt pistols in that calibre in British naval service. The replenishment rate was set at 100,000 rounds per month.⁸³ The question is raised whether they were for the Canadians who had purchased 2 million rounds initially from Colt, but do not seem to have replenished them later? Alternatively, there were a large number of officers' private purchase Colt GM pistols in that calibre, see below, and as with the cartridges above, perhaps ammunition was provided for them, or possibly for all three reasons. The ammunition seems to have been purchased from Winchester, according to examples of the packaging.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11* (London: Imperial War Museum Reprint), Chapter VI, p. 50

⁷⁶ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11*, Chapter VI, pp.26, 103, 104

⁷⁷ Labbett, *British Small Arms Ammunition 1864-1938*, pp. 187-191

⁷⁸ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11*, Chapter VI, pp. 27 and 104

⁷⁹ Small Arms Committee Minutes 1917-1918, Nos 25 and 176

⁸⁰ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11* (London: Imperial War Museum Reprint), Chapter VI, p.27

⁸¹ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11* (London: Imperial War Museum Reprint), Chapter VI, p. 27

⁸² A.O. Edwards, *British Secondary Smallarms Parts 4* (Canterbury: Solo Publications, 2005), p.51

⁸³ HMSO, *Official History of Ministry of Munitions Volume 11* (London: Imperial War Museum Reprint), Chapter VI, p.27

⁸⁴ A.O. Edwards, *British Secondary Smallarms Parts 2* (Canterbury: Solo Publications, 2005). p. 61

Chapter Three

Procurement

History

The British Armed forces had issued cartridge revolvers since 1872 and had Webley as their sole supplier of interchangeable revolvers from 1890. Initial issue was made to the Royal Navy who held large pistol stocks. The original Pistol Webley Mark I (Appendix: Image 1) was followed by the Mark II (Appendix: Image 2) in 1894 and the Mark III (Appendix: Image 3) in 1897. Small in service upgrades to the Mark I to bring it to Mark II standard raised it to Mark I* status. The Mk III was a major change of cylinder mounting, but only a small production run. Prior to the Boer War the British armed forces had procured approximately 62,000 Pistols Webley.⁸⁵

During the Boer War the Army took delivery of approximately 37,000 mainly Mark IV revolvers, (Appendix: Image 4) a minor improvement on the Mark III, of which some were in the total, starting in 1899. All issue revolvers up to the Mark IV, were six shot, had 4" barrels with integral foresight, round butt birds head grips and were chambered for the .455 cartridge.⁸⁶ No significant orders were made between the end of the Boer War and 1913.

Following the Boer War, the War Office and the Admiralty had observed the growing acceptance of semi automatic pistols in various armies and navies, including Germany, Switzerland and the United States of America. A number of British officers had carried Mauser C96 pistols during the South African conflict and the type had experienced some commercial sales in the United Kingdom. The War Office and the Admiralty therefore held a series of pistol trials at Enfield, Hythe and HMS Excellent.

A specification was proposed and a relatively large number of different types, including some later developed successfully, were tested. It is, however, worth noting that no official requirement for semi automatic pistols was ever issued in this period and that almost none of the pistols tried met the proposed specification. The British Mars pistol received its only serious military trial and demonstrated its unsuitable complexity and heavy recoil.

A number of concerns persisted through the trials. These can be summarised as suspicions over the reliability of semi automatic pistols, together with worries over the perceived lack of stopping power and robustness of safety. The last was an issue as a result of a naval accident of some years before, when a dropped Enfield revolver discharged, killing its owner. Amongst the many tests conducted at the trials the tested pistols were dropped in a cocked condition from a variety of heights onto different surfaces and if the hammer or striker moved, the pistol was regarded as unsafe. Throughout the trials comparisons were obviously made with the Webley Mark IV revolver, which was regarded as a good man stopper, simple, accurate, reliable, safe and robust. It only showed less well when rapid-fire accuracy and sustained fire were compared with semi automatics.

Few of the tested semi automatic pistols had excited much interest, save for a 1905 .45 ACP Colt design and a .455 Webley, the latter eventually prevailing. As a result, the Royal Navy ordered a number of Webley .455 Mark I N semi automatic pistols (Appendix: Image 5), commencing in 1912. They were intended as an alternative issue to its revolvers, but not to supplant them, for service on vessels likely to have close range engagements. The Army had decided on a larger scale trial of a similar pistol, fitted with a long range 200 yard back sight, a manual safety lever, and an optional shoulder stock, for potential arming of Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) batteries, instead of rifles (Appendix: Image 6). Just

⁸⁵ G. Bruce & C Reinhart, *Webley Revolvers* (Zurich: Verlag-Stocker Schmidt, 1988), p.188

⁸⁶ Bruce & Reinhart, *Webley Revolvers*, pp.177-203

under 500 of these pistols were produced, but the RHA decided against adopting them. Overall, through the trials the British Armed Services had kept themselves aware of new weapons developments, tested the latest designs, but had seen no major reason to change their issue pistol.⁸⁷

In an attempt to simplify a somewhat complicated story, Army procurement, Naval procurement and private purchase during the War, will be examined in that order.

Army Procurement

On the outbreak of War the Army had various marks of Webley revolver on issue, but the Boer War Mark IV predominated. Webley had bought back a number of Mark I and II pistols from the Army just prior to the War. These were subject to a range of refurbishment as necessary and sold on to the trade. Many dealers had then taken advantage of the outbreak of war to inflate prices, causing embarrassment to Webley.⁸⁸ It seems highly likely that the Army had made earlier Marks than the III obsolescent before the outbreak of the War. The Army had relatively few of these earlier Marks in comparison with the Navy. There was a much higher degree of interchangeability between the Mark III and IV than with earlier Marks, and this action would have made good logistic sense.

The Webley Mark V had been introduced in 1913 and was very similar to the Mark IV, but with a slightly enlarged cylinder to cater for Nitro Proof. The space in the body and top strap were obviously enlarged to give the room required. A contract for 22,000 was let, of which the last approximately 2,000 had the 6" barrel of the Mark VI, with which production overlapped (Appendix: Image 7). The remainder had 4" barrels like the previous Marks. These pistols were priced at fifty nine shillings each, but two shillings and sixpence extra was charged for the 6" barrel versions.⁸⁹ Deliveries were in hand at start of the War.

At the outbreak of war, munitions procurement was under the control of the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener. As the scale of the war, never before experienced by British forces, was realised, along with the size of the armed forces envisaged by Kitchener, the equipment shortfall became apparent. From May 1915 munitions procurement came under the Ministry of Munitions, set up under Lloyd George, as a result of the shell shortage highlighted by the battle of Neuve Chapelle. Previous contracts were taken over.

The Webley Mark VI was accepted into service in List of Changes (LoC) 17319 of 24 May 1915 although production had started at the end of April on an order dated 10 January. Its significant features were a square butt, reinforcements on the barrel catch, a removable fore sight and a 6" barrel (Appendix: Image 8). In many ways it can be regarded as a less well-finished version of the Company's commercial WS Army model. Its specification was altered during the War to reflect changes in British steel standards. Following an initial issue with standard grips, small, medium (standard) and large grips were issued late in the war.⁹⁰

The introduction of the Mark VI raises questions over its origins. Was it done, as one author has pondered, to use machinery with little wear from production of commercial WS and Wilkinson models, which had many similarities to the Mark VI, noted above, as opposed to Mark I-V making machinery,

⁸⁷ P. Labbett, 'British Semi Automatic Pistol Trials 1900-1914', *Guns Review* (Aug, Sep, Oct 1964); E. Ezell *Handguns of the World: Military Pistols and Revolvers -1870 -1945* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1981), pp. 487-504; and S. Cuthbertson, *World Wide Webley* (Gabriola Island, Canada: Ballista Publishing, 1999), pp. 22-77

⁸⁸ G. Bruce, *Webley Semi Automatic Pistols* (Zurich: Verlag-Stockert Schmidt, 1992), pp. 245 and 248

⁸⁹ HMSO, *Firms and Factories List. Orders for Machine Guns, Small Arms and Small Arms Ammunition* (London, 1917)

⁹⁰ A. W. F. Taylerson & W. H. J. Chamberlain, *Revolvers of the British Services 1854-1954* (Bloomfield Canada: Museum Restoration Service, 1989), p. 29

with much wear?⁹¹ Other authorities deny this, pointing out that the company was in a constant process of replacing machinery, as required.

Webley's overall Great War production of Mark V and VI was approximately 300,000 revolvers. The revolver-making workforce expanded from 43 in 1914 to 74 in 1918. Weekly production rose from approximately 500 to 1900 in the same period.⁹² Webley, however, had initial problems with the scale of manufacture required. The firm complained that it had lost many skilled workers to the armed forces and this handicapped their manufacturing capacity. The firm also had a shortage of machinery, as new equipment was on order, but had not materialised. They had turned all their available plant over to revolver manufacture. Difficulties began to show in 1914, but in 1915 they were incapable of meeting the demands from the government. However, despite these difficulties, from late 1916 onwards the Webley Mark VI predominated as the issue Army pistol.

The shortages led to the Ministry of Munitions making purchases of .455 revolvers from Colt and Smith & Wesson in America, and also from Spain. Colt had experience of selling its New Service Revolver pre war in .455 calibre to the British market, often as target revolvers.⁹³ The Canadian Government had purchased 943 Colt New Service revolvers in .45 Colt calibre during the Boer War, to arm some of their cavalry. Even the British Government had purchased 150 in .455 calibre at the commencement of that conflict, from Colt's London agency. This was to cover a temporary shortage of pistols from Webley, much to that firm's chagrin. The Royal North West Mounted Police were issued with a mix, by Police District, of either .45 or .455 New Service revolvers.

The type was therefore at least partially familiar to Empire forces. The model known to modern collectors as the Improved New Service variant, manufactured from 1909, was sold during the Great War. It was introduced into service in LoC 17463 dated 15 July 1915, as the Pistol Colt .455 inch with 5 ½ inch barrel (Appendix: Image 9). It is difficult to ascertain total numbers of Colt revolvers purchased, although there are records of specific contracts, including three for 10,000, 6550, and 12,000 pistols in late 1916,⁹⁴ but not the full range. Known contracts total over 43,500 but the best production estimate from the most authoritative source is 55,000, in contracts which were completed by October 1917.⁹⁵ Figures are possibly clouded by numbers sold as private purchase pistols, including from Army & Navy, see below.

Smith & Wesson were given an initial contract for 5,000 of the so-called .44 Triple Lock Model revolver, re chambered and re-barrelled for the .455 Mark 2 cartridge. These were known as .455 Hand Ejector First Model to Smith & Wesson, and in British service as the Pistol Smith & Wesson .455 with 6½ inch barrel Mark 1, or Old Model (Appendix: Image 10). The third cylinder lock of this model, operating in the revolver yoke, and readily identified by the lug encasing the ejector rod, was disliked by the British authorities. The reason given is that the third lock was susceptible to blocking with mud or debris, preventing the cylinder closing. The subsequent order did not have this feature, nor the obvious ejector rod lug housing, together with some other minor manufacturing changes, probably brought in to simplify construction. They were known to Smith & Wesson as .455 Hand Ejector Second Model and

⁹¹ Taylerson & W. Chamberlain, *Revolvers of the British Services 1854-1954* (Bloomfield Canada: Museum Restoration Service, 1989), p. 29

⁹² Milner, *Webley Commercial Production*

⁹³ B. Murphy, *Colt New Service Revolvers* (Aledo, USA: World Wide Gun Report, 1985), pp. 6-16

⁹⁴ HMSO, *Firms and Factories List. Orders for Machine Guns, Small Arms and Small Arms Ammunition* (London, 1917)

⁹⁵ B. Murphy, *Colt New Service Revolvers* (Aledo, USA: World Wide Gun Report, 1985), p. 17

to the British as the Mark2 or New Model (Appendix: Image 11).⁹⁶ These were introduced in LoC 17463 dated 5 July 1915, along with the Colt mentioned above.

The Canadians had made a major purchase of five thousand .45 ACP Colt Government Model (GM) semi automatic pistols, through Colt, at the start of war. However, the Canadians seem to have neglected to buy spare magazines for these pistols. An emergency purchase was made in January 1915 for 2,000 from the London Armoury Company, for Canadian forces in England, whilst supplies were bought from Colt in America.⁹⁷ However, they also made major purchases of Smith & Wesson revolvers, amounting to 14,500 of the produced total, predominantly the Mark II. This was a result of British Government advice that revolvers were more reliable than semi automatic pistols in the muddy conditions of the Western Front.⁹⁸

Smith & Wesson factory production concluded on 14 September 1916,⁹⁹ by which time the firm had manufactured 74,755 Hand Ejectors of which 69,755 were reputedly Second Model.¹⁰⁰ British purchases totalled some 59,000. All were shipped from the factory to the New York offices of Remington Union Metallic Cartridge Company, who were the British Government purchasing agents, funded through J P Morgan. Pistols were then shipped to either UK or Canada. Canada transferred some 7,000 S&W revolvers and 1,500 Webley of various Marks to the United Kingdom in 1917 and 1918.¹⁰¹

Pistols OP were purchased on contract from Spain, through the Eibar gun makers, Orbea Hermanos. There is some discussion over whether Pistol OP stands for Pistols Old Pattern, Ordnance Pattern, or Orbea Pattern?¹⁰² Two principal makes have been identified, Garate Anitua as Pistols OP Mark I and Tracaola y Aranzabal as Pistols OP Mark II, respectively (Appendix: Image 12). The differences between the two Marks are relatively insignificant and principally in the grips. There are suspicions that other makers produced some under contract. This is supported by the purchase of five hundred “.455 Calibre Heavy Blued London Proof (Smith & Wesson Pattern) revolvers” from Rexach and Urgiotti in August 1916.¹⁰³ The OP pistols were Spanish copies of an 1881 Smith and Wesson .44 hinge frame design and were noted as non-interchangeable. Pistols OP were introduced in LoC 17555 of 8 November 1915

Many Pistols OP failed inspection on receipt at Enfield. Orbea were informed on 19 May 1916 that no deliveries would be accepted after 31 July 1916. The design had a major fault in the lack of a cylinder locking bolt. This can permit the weight of a half fired cylinder to make it fall to the bottom of its arc, meaning an empty chamber could come under the hammer when the trigger is next pulled.¹⁰⁴ Quality control and dimensional tolerances seem to have been poor and deliveries were slow. Surface finish was not up to the high standards of the American revolvers. It is understood that 29,558 were delivered.

The withdrawal of Colt, Smith & Wesson and Webley pistols from units in UK was ordered in late 1916, to be replaced by Pistols OP and the withdrawn pistols to go to France. However, the Canadians declined, saying that they had bought the Smith & Wesson pistols they were using for themselves.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁶ R. J. Neal & R. G. Jinks, *Smith & Wesson 1857-1945 A Handbook for Collector s* (New York: R & R Books, 1996), pp. 214-216

⁹⁷ Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985*, pp. 34-37

⁹⁸ Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985*, pp.37-39

⁹⁹ Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985*, pp. 37-39

¹⁰⁰ R.G. Jinks, *History of Smith & Wesson* (North Hollywood: Beinfeld , 1977), pp.201-203

¹⁰¹ TNA: MUN 4/2441

¹⁰² Maze, *From Howdah to High Power*, pp.93-94

¹⁰³ HMSO, *Firms and Factories List. Orders for Machine Guns, Small Arms and Small Arms Ammunition* (London, 1917)

¹⁰⁴ T. Mullin, *The Worlds 100 Greatest Combat Pistols* (Boulder, Colorado:Paladin Press, 1994), pp. 97-100

¹⁰⁵ Law, *Canadian Military Handguns 1855-1985*(Bloomfield, Ontario: Museum Restoration Service, 1994), p. 39

What happened to the Pistols OP? Some appear to have been sold off to the gun trade. There is evidence that others went to Ireland and a number to Australia. The Ministry of Munitions files in early 1916 discuss the potential sale of 6,000 failed inspection pistols to an ally, possibly Italy, by Messrs Orbea. These would have been sold along with 3 million rounds of ammunition to be made by Kynoch.¹⁰⁶ The Italians had a separate contract for nearly identical pistols from Orbea Hermanos in their own 10.35mm calibre.¹⁰⁷ The files are incomplete, but there are indications that the Ally was less concerned over the niceties of quality control and sale was perhaps approved.

The Ministry of Munitions conducted a survey in December 1915 of revolver supply as part of a potential plan for one million pistols by early 1917. This involved a large new factory for Webley, but the expense, requirement for skilled labour, jigs and tools seem to have ruled this out. Quotes were obtained from Colt and Smith & Wesson as well as, with much scepticism, the Orbea concern. Tenders were sought from Harrison & Richardson and Iver Johnson, in America, for .38 calibre revolvers. However, the low price, between \$3-28 and \$4-60, in comparison with Smith & Wesson and Colt, between \$12 and \$14, caused concerns over possible low quality. The offer was never taken up.¹⁰⁸

Early in the War the RFC were issued small quantities of the Webley .455 RHA semi automatic pistol model, see above, which had not been adopted by the RHA, who took Webley revolvers instead. The Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) were issued Webley Mark I (N) semi automatics purchased by the Navy. The Royal Flying Corps (RFC), later Royal Air Force, purchased Colt GM in .455 semi auto (Appendix: Image 13), after problems obtaining additional Webley semi automatics. These, and all Colt GM procured in the UK were commercial products, with a better quality finish, as opposed to military issue pistols, as supplied to the United States government.

Two small deliveries of .455 Colt GM were made to London Armoury Company, Colts UK agents, in July 1915 and January 1916. These were for a total of 600 pistols and are presumed to have been for commercial sale, although the Ministry of Munitions bought 23 from The Army & Navy Co-operative Society in March 1917.¹⁰⁹ Thereafter, from July 1916, regular small Government orders, totalling 2,200 pistols, were made until late 1917 through the London Armoury Company.

Colt then attempted to cease provision, because of its US Government commitments and only British Government pressure restored the supply. At this stage the Government set up a direct contract with Colt, instead of through the London Armoury Company. Another 5,000 pistols were supplied before the Armistice and a further 5,000 afterwards, before the contract was cancelled in mid 1919.¹¹⁰ All are said to have been for the "Air Service". There do not appear to have been any additional commercial or private purchase sales. Total Colt production of GM in .455 is declared by the factory as 13,510¹¹¹.

There were never enough pistols for the Army. It is interesting to note correspondence between the War Office and the Ministry of Munitions in the late summer of 1918. This complains of a shortage of at least 20,000 revolvers, despite cutting requirements to a minimum. The consequences are listed, amongst others, as the inability to equip units both abroad and at home, and the damaging effects on training. Part of the reason given is the need to equip new tank, machine gun and air force units. The

¹⁰⁶ TNA: MUN 4/2582

¹⁰⁷ R. Muller, *Gesichte und technik der Europaischer Militarrevolver* (Journal Verlag Schwend GmbH), pp. 500-501 and 533-534

¹⁰⁸ TNA: MUN 4/2765

¹⁰⁹ HMSO, *Firms and Factories List. Orders for Machine Guns, Small Arms and Small Arms Ammunition* (London, 1917)

¹¹⁰ C.W. Clawson, *Colt.45" Government Models (Commercial Series)* (Fort Wayne, USA: Clawson, 1996), pp.112-118

¹¹¹ D. Bady, *Colt Automatic Pistols* (Alhambra, California: Borden Publishing, 1973), pp. 213-215

correspondence refers to a similar exchange of letters of July 1917 and of improvements to Webley production since then.¹¹²

Royal Navy Procurement

It would appear that the Royal Navy had earlier models of Webley revolvers, Marks I, I* and II at the beginning of the War. These were subsequently upgraded, on repair, to Mark I** and II ** using Mark IV barrels and Mark V cylinders, authorised in LoC 17262 of 27 April 1915. They were authorised subsequently to the same Mark I** and II **, but annotated “6 inch barrels” when modified with Mark VI components, in LoC 17371 of 5 June 1915 (Appendix: Image 14). It should be noted that the Navy does not appear to have received any Mark III, or V pistols. However, they do appear to have had some Mark IV revolvers.¹¹³

The Royal Navy had, as noted above, purchased Webley semi autos pre war, but had suffered delivery problems when the War commenced.¹¹⁴ An Australian purchase of some five hundred and twenty in 1913, initial deliveries of which had been made to HMAS *Australia* and *Sydney* in Portsmouth, had been completed.¹¹⁵

Semi automatics had not been delivered after the summer of 1915 and Webley had outstanding orders for 8,500 in January 1916.¹¹⁶ The Royal Navy also did not receive Smith & Wesson and Colt revolvers as these were for land service only, in LoC 17463.

The Ministry of Munitions was well aware of the naval need for pistols, despite the early 1915 rationalisation, noted above. There is correspondence in their files in January 1916 of attempts to persuade the Royal Navy to accept a number of Smith & Wesson .38 revolvers from America, in lieu of Webley semi-automatics. These revolvers were reputedly available within three weeks of ordering.¹¹⁷ The lack of contracts, or any evidence of their being in service, would indicate that this never came to pass. The Admiralty Technical Index and History makes no mention of them. It can be assumed confidently that the Navy took delivery, belatedly, of Webley semi automatic pistols and made up the shortfall with Webley revolvers instead. Deliveries of semi autos are indeed recorded in the Ministry of Munitions files but appear to have ceased in late 1917.¹¹⁸

The Royal Navy accepted into service small numbers of other different pistols. These included a total of 66 Webley Fosbery .455 semi automatic revolvers, purchased from the trade in June and December 1915, for the RNAS.(Appendix: Image 15) Similarly, two batches of 100 and 57 respectively, of .45 ACP Colt GM semi automatics, in March and August 1916, were bought with special 20 round magazines supplied by Beesley, the London gunmaker, also for the RNAS. These would appear to be the only British official purchases of Colt GM in .45 ACP calibre.¹¹⁹

Other pistols were taken into service as part of the equipment of a number of foreign naval ships under construction in British yards at commencement of the war that were commandeered into British service. The pistols taken with them included ninety Smith and Wesson .38 revolvers from three Brazilian river

¹¹² TNA: MUN 4/2441

¹¹³ *The Admiralty Rifle and Field Exercises for HM Fleet 1913* (London: HMSO, 1913),p. 219

¹¹⁴ Admiralty Technical History Section *Admiralty History and Technical Index 1921*

¹¹⁵ *Bruce Webley Semi Automatic Pistols*, p.243

¹¹⁶ TNA: MUN 4/2767

¹¹⁷ TNA: MUN 4/2767

¹¹⁸ TNA: MUN 4/2767 and *Bruce Webley Semi Automatic Pistols*, p.243

¹¹⁹ Admiralty Technical History Section *Admiralty History and Technical Index 1921*.

monitors and fifty Browning 9mm Long calibre semi automatic pistols from a Turkish battleship. Both sets of pistols included the ammunition provided by the trade for them.¹²⁰

Private Purchase

Prior to the War, officers had been expected to either purchase their revolver from a gunsmith, a military outfitter, or from the Government. Purchase from the former two methods was known as private purchase. The only stipulation was that the pistol should take the Government issue .455 revolver cartridge, although this was ignored by some. The most common pistols under this scheme were Webley commercial WG and WS models, Webley-Wilkinsons, and a small number of Webley Fosbery, including one for Rudyard Kipling's son, plus Colt revolvers and semi autos. If all the officers of the BEF had their own pistols at commencement of the War, this would have meant in excess of 25,000 officers' pistols.¹²¹

The Webley commercial revolver products were often of a higher quality, particularly in terms of external finish, than the service issue. Unlike the service issue pistols, many, if not most, private purchase pistols were sold with 6" barrels as opposed to 4". The Government issue Mark I to V could also be purchased from Webley, with a different finish, including nickel plate, and with an optional longer 6" barrel for the Marks III, IV and V.¹²² Longer 7½ "barrels indicate specialised target revolvers, of which probably only a handful went to war.

During the war, Webley records indicate that they only sold another 5,300 revolvers to private purchasers. Approximately half of this quantity were Mark V, with some hundreds each of Mark I, Mark IV and Mark VI, plus smaller quantities of other commercial WS and Wilkinson types. The Mark I revolvers were undoubtedly the refurbished ex military stock, as mentioned above. The Mark IV and commercial types were probably already in stock.¹²³ Collectors report that pistols within the serial number range do not follow strict Mark configuration, indicating the problems of 1915 production.

There are strong suspicions that many of the later private purchase revolvers were pistols that had failed Government inspection, normally for minor gauging infringements and been diverted to commercial sales. Webley records state that some 1,500 "Privates", Mark VI, were however produced in 1916. It has been suggested that this might have occurred when Webley were ahead on delivery of their Government orders,¹²⁴ but more probably this was a book keeping exercise to record the ultimate fate of failed inspection pistols. Webley sold private purchase Mark VI revolvers for sixty-six shillings each.

The supply of Colt pistols was through the London Armoury Company, purveying to trade retailers such as the Army & Navy Cooperative Society, who were major sellers to military and naval personnel, principally to officers. It has been estimated that Army & Navy sold at least a quarter of private purchase pistols. Although the London Armoury Company records have been destroyed, those of Army & Navy survive and can be viewed. Army & Navy sold approximately 1,000 Colt New Service revolvers between 1914 and 1917.¹²⁵

At least 4,200 .45 ACP Colt GM semi automatics were supplied to UK between 1912 and April 1919 for commercial sales. Many of these were purchased by officers, including Winston Churchill.¹²⁶ Colt had

¹²⁰ A.O. Edwards, *British Secondary Smallarms Parts 4* (London: 2009), p. 41-43

¹²¹ Maze, *From Howdah to High Power*, pp. 65-78

¹²² Bruce & Reinhart, *Webley Revolvers*, pp. 177-205

¹²³ Milner *Webley Commercial Production* (Privately produced)

¹²⁴ Milner *Webley Commercial Production* (Privately produced)

¹²⁵ Mullin, *Colt New Service Revolver*, pp. 73-74

¹²⁶ Clawson, *Colt.45" Government Models*, p.111

also shipped several hundred of their 1900 and 1902 Model .38ACP semi automatic pistols before and during the war, but exact numbers are uncertain. Many were intended for other than British markets but undoubtedly several had been purchased by Army officers.¹²⁷ Interestingly, Webley had also sold a small number of semi automatics in this calibre, including one to Field Marshal Haig.

A small quantity, approximately 100, of Smith and Wesson .455 Mark 1 revolvers were sold through the London gun trade in 1914, imported through the Wilkinson Sword Company and sold by them.¹²⁸ As noted above, some of the failed inspection Pistols OP also found their way into the trade and were sold as private purchase.

As the War progressed the purchase of pocket semi automatic pistols in .320 and .380 became popular. These have always been assumed to be of Colt, Savage and Browning manufacture as they had been the principal brands before the War. The sales of Browning would have been small however, because there were none in production after August 1914 when the Germans captured Liege. Siegfried Sassoon bought a Colt from the Army and Navy in the spring of 1916 that “*wasn't warranted to stop a man, but could be slipped into a pocket*”.¹²⁹ T.E. Lawrence notes his requirement for both Colt and Savage pistols in a “shopping list” he produced in Arabia in July 1917 (Appendix: Image 18).¹³⁰

The *Sporting Goods Review* notes:

*It is quite usual now for an officer to arm himself not only with the Webley .455 service revolver but also with an automatic pistol of about .32 calibre. The latter weapon, owing to its compactness and comparative lightness, is found to be very handy for carrying in the pocket during night patrolling. With a couple of spare magazines the officer can provide himself with practically all the ammunition he is likely to require during his spell of duty.*¹³¹

The main attraction of these pistols is that they would fit more easily into a pocket than a service revolver. A semi automatic pistol is also easier to load in the dark with a magazine, than a revolver with loose cartridges.

According to the recognised authority, Colt pocket pistols (Appendix: Image 16), which seem to have been in the vast majority, were mainly in .32 and supplies were in thousands to London Armoury Company.¹³² However, Army & Navy sold slightly more .380 than .32 pistols, over 400 pistols in each case.¹³³ Various sources quote “problems of reliability with semi automatic pistols”, but some hint that lack of stopping power with small calibre (.32 or .380) pistols is more likely.¹³⁴ There is no evidence of wartime official orders of .38 ACP, .380 and .32 Colt semi auto pistols, only post war for the pocket pistols during the Irish problems, but wartime ammunition purchases were made for all three calibres, see above.

Restrictions were imposed on private purchase from the trade later in the War. Pistol sales of service calibre weapons to officers were initially licensed. From March 1917 dealers holding stocks of .450/.455 Webley, Colt and Smith & Wesson pistols had to inform the Ministry of Munitions of them,

¹²⁷ Sheldon, *Colts .38 Automatic Pistols* (Willernie, Minnesota, USA: Sheldon, 1987), pp. 62,118 and 152

¹²⁸ Neal & Jinks, *Smith and Wesson 1857-1945 A Handbook for Collectors*, p. 203

¹²⁹ S. Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1931), pp. 38-39

¹³⁰ M. Brown, *Lawrence of Arabia ,the Life ,the Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson and Imperial War Museum, 2005), p 74.

¹³¹ *Sporting Goods Review*, 15 June 1916

¹³² J. W. Brunner, *The Colt Pocket Hammerless Automatic Pistols* (Williamstown, New Jersey: Phillips Publications, 1996), p. 98, plus private correspondence Thomas/Brunner

¹³³ Army & Navy Cooperative Society *Extracts of Gun Sale Ledgers*

¹³⁴ Tracy, *Service Revolver*, pp. 11-14

with a view to sale to that organisation. Disposals of pistols from officers invalided from the Army had to be made to the same Ministry.

From May 1917 all commercial sales of such pistols were prohibited and other calibre pistols only permitted for sale by licence.¹³⁵ Effectively from May 1917, officers appear to have purchased their service pistols, on prepayment, from the Government and private purchase of them ceased. This was largely because the Government, short of pistols, as noted above, could not afford any to be diverted from its highest priority needs.

Overall Numbers

The approximate scales of use of the various pistols, including private purchase, to the nearest thousand is:

Webley Mark VI	280,000	
Webley MarkI-IV	60,000?	Estimate including pre war stock.
Smith and Wesson	66,000	
Colt NS	55,000	
Pistols OP	30,000	
Webley Mark V	22,000	
Colt GM Semi Auto	18,000	
Webley Semi Auto	8,000	
Webley Commercial revolvers	5,000	
Colt Semi Auto other than GM	5,000	Estimate
Total	549,000	

Webley revolvers, particularly the Mark VI, made up the majority, approximately two thirds, of pistols. Smith & Wesson were the next largest supplier. As regards Government purchase of semi automatic pistols, Colt are in the majority, with Webley in second place. An estimate of private purchase is that these amounted to less than 10% of the total and not a significant proportion of the total. Amongst these Webley revolvers predominate with Colt pistols and revolvers in second place.

Conclusions

The British military services made considerable use of the pistol during the Great War and on a far greater scale than is normally appreciated. The pistol was often utilised as a secondary defensive arm, for which its characteristics made it highly suitable. It was issued particularly to arm the Machine Gun Corps, the Royal Flying Corps and the Tank Corps in this role. On available evidence, it appears to have been regarded favourably for that task. Pistols were used successfully by a variety of personnel, both offensively for such activities as trench raids, and defensively, on a number of recorded occasions, often as the weapon of choice.

High standards of training and technique would appear to have been critical for success and this was realised by those in authority. Following a low standard at start of the war, much improved safety, shooting and tactical skills were taught, through a practical programme, which developed good combat shots. Captain Charles Tracy would appear to be the instigator of this effort.

Despite insufficient pistol stocks at commencement of the war, with the odd minor exception, quality standards were maintained during subsequent procurement. However, numbers were never entirely

¹³⁵ *Sporting Goods Review*, 17 March and 17 May 1917

sufficient. Towards the end of the war only the Webley Mark VI revolver, for the vast majority, and the Colt GM semi automatic pistol, for minor Royal Air Force use, were supplied to troops. Both were well regarded types.. The less efficient system of private purchase for officers had been stopped. Unlike some other weapon systems, there was never a problem with ammunition supply.

By the end of the war the use, issue, technique, training and procurement of the pistol had expanded and improved considerably from limited beginnings, accelerating particularly in the latter half of the war. As such, they mirrored successfully many other aspects of the British armed forces in their capability leap between 1914 and 1918, often so ill perceived.

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Appendix



Image 1 Webley Mark I



Image 2 Webley Mark II



Image 3 Webley Mark III



Image 4 Webley Mark IV



Image 5 Webley Mark I (N)



Image 6 Webley RHA



Image 7 Webley Mark V (6" barrel)



Image 8 Webley Mark VI



Image 9 Colt New Service



Image 10 S&W Mark I



Image 11 S & W Mark 2



Image 12 Pistol OP



Image 13 Colt GM .455



Image 14 Webley Mark II**



Image 15 Webley Fosbery



Image 16 Colt 1903 Pocket pistol

Image 17 Prideaux Loader

English Patent
1892 & 1914

PRIDEAUX'S
IMPROVED PATENT

Patent in U.S.A.
France and Belgium.
Other Patents pending.

Magazine Loader

Instantly Loads any Service Revolver.



LOADING FROM
POUCH or POCKET
*Less of Time and Life
plus Waste of Car-
tridges.*

BY MAGAZINE
*Instant Service, no Spill
Ammunition, Economy,
Speed and Safety.*



*The old way—
Loading singly from Pouch.*

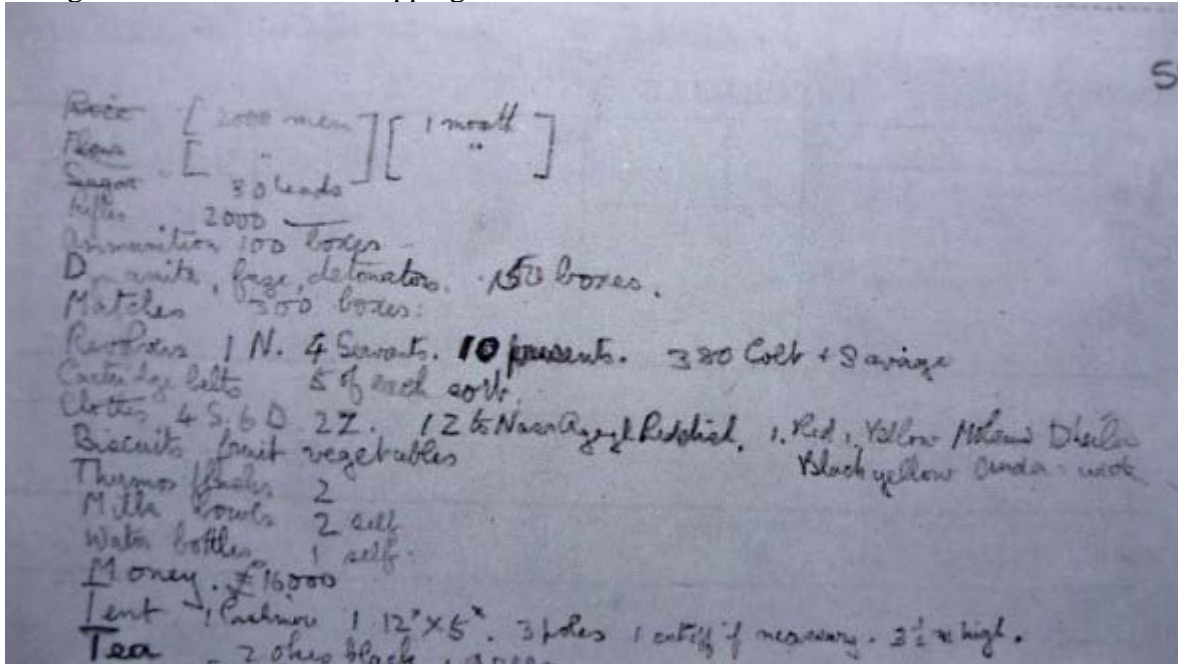


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Image 18 T.E. Lawrence Shopping List



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