



# THE COLT 1911 PISTOL

LEROY THOMPSON





# **THE COLT 1911 PISTOL**



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Series Editor Martin Pegler

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# INTRODUCTION

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As this book is published, the Colt 1911, also frequently known as the Government Model, celebrates its centennial. After serving as the primary US military handgun for almost 80 years, from 1985 it was replaced by the Beretta M9. But that certainly did not mark the demise of the 1911. Certain US military units, especially the US Marine Corps (USMC), continued to use versions of the Government Model. And in fact experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted some military personnel to argue that the 1911 should be readopted.

The Government Model remains popular with a wide array of US shooters. Some law-enforcement agencies in the USA issue 1911 pistols while others allow officers to carry the 1911 as an off-duty or personally owned weapon. Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, especially, favor the 1911 because of its accuracy and stopping power. With respect to civilian shooters, the Government Model remains popular among competitors in combat shooting events and those who legally carry a concealed weapon every day.

Part of the Colt 1911's appeal is its historical status, along with the Colt Single Action Army, as an iconic American handgun. In addition to being employed by US military heroes, the 1911 has been carried by famous lawmen, including FBI agents and Texas Rangers, as well as by many of the famous gangsters of the 1930s. One well-known lawman of the Depression era, Joaquin Jackson, was asked why he carried a .45 automatic. His reply was, "Because they don't make a Colt .46 automatic!"

In fiction and film the carrying of a Government Model by a character has come to indicate that he or she is a tough professional armed with a serious weapon. The classic war films *The Wild Bunch* and *Saving Private Ryan* both feature 1911 pistols, and on the big screen Steven Seagal and Robert De Niro have often portrayed tough guys armed with a 1911. Humphrey Bogart used a 1911 in various films – and apparently in reality



too: while he was in the Navy he reportedly shot and killed a fleeing prisoner with a 1911. In fiction, Mickey Spillane's hard-boiled private eye Mike Hammer favors a Government Model, as do pulp-fiction characters such as The Shadow. An entire book could be written about literary and cinematic characters armed with the Government Model.

The appeal of the 1911 has not been limited to the USA. The iconic British warrior and adventurer T. E. Lawrence carried one or more Colt 1911s, reportedly presented to him by the explorer Gertrude Bell. Winston Churchill also liked the Colt Government Model and during World War II loaned his to his Scotland Yard bodyguard, Walter H. Thompson. The Government Model .45 auto was the favored pistol of the World War II Commandos as well. In the days when British officers purchased their own service handguns, the Colt 1911 was quite popular and was used all over the Empire. The author owns one that formerly belonged to a Gurkha officer who engraved on it his service dates, 1914–24 (see page 18).

In the USA many men who served in World War I, World War II, the Korean War or the Vietnam War used the Colt Government Model and felt comfortable with it. As a result, this was the pistol they wanted to own in civilian life. For many years a civilian could buy a former military 1911 or 1911A1 pistol through the Civilian Marksmanship Program, and many did.

A lot of the appeal of the Colt 1911 can be summed up in two words: stopping power. The 1911 fires a 230-grain bullet which delivers a lot of

Marines of the 31st MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) practice transition drills from their M4 carbines to their MEUSOC 1911 pistols. Now replaced in general US service by the 9mm Beretta M9, the big .45 auto is still the pistol of choice for many Army and Marine special-forces units. (USMC)



punch. The saying among those who carried Government Model .45 autos was: “They all fall to hardball.” “Hardball” refers to the fully jacketed 230-grain .45 ACP (Automatic Colt Pistol) load. To put the 230-grain bullet of the standard .45 ACP military load in perspective, through much of its military history, enemy handguns were in 9x19mm Parabellum and fired a 115-grain bullet – half the weight of the .45.

Along with the 1911’s stopping power goes the cachet of being man enough to carry and use a powerful pistol – a pistol proven in battle in the trenches of World War I and on other battlefields around the world. Although the 1911 has sometimes had a bad reputation among former US soldiers for inaccuracy, in fact the pistol is actually quite accurate. Many of the charges of inaccuracy can be traced to soldiers who had never fired a handgun before and were intimidated by the .45, or by military pistols that were very worn. Certainly, Government Model pistols that have been worked over to tighten them up for accuracy are among the most precise in the world. US Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps armorers became quite adept at working over Government Models for competitive shooters – and for some special-operations units that wanted very accurate 1911s.

Today, the 1911-type pistol is still manufactured by numerous companies. Some offer modifications designed to “enhance” the pistol’s effectiveness while others offer the basic 1911 or 1911A1 style of pistol. The 1911’s .45 ACP cartridge is even more popular. Virtually every major handgun manufacturer – Glock, HK, SIG Sauer, Smith & Wesson, et al. – offers one or more .45 ACP pistols.

There are many reasons why the 1911 has remained so popular with those who carry a weapon in harm’s way. Among US military special operators the stopping power of the .45 with full metal jacket bullets is considered superior to the 9mm Beretta M9 with full metal jacket bullets. Among “elite” US law-enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) and SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics), the Los Angeles Police Department SWAT and Special Investigations Section (SIS), and others which are not limited to using full metal jacket bullets, the stopping power of the .45 ACP round is still considered a desirable attribute. For those who may have to take a critical shot in Afghanistan or on the streets of Los Angeles, the reliability and the accuracy of the 1911 make it the choice of professionals. When the 1911 is carried by a trained shooter, its “cocked-and-locked” carry allows it to be drawn and fired with the precision of a single-action trigger pull, far better than the double-action autos widely used today. The author has carried a Kimber TLE/RLII or a Springfield Operator, both versions of the 1911, for years. His home is St Louis, Missouri – generally ranked one of the five most dangerous cities in the USA. He feels a loaded 1911 on his hip makes it substantially less dangerous!



# DEVELOPMENT

## A heavy-caliber automatic

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### LESSONS FROM THE PHILIPPINES

In 1872 the US Army adopted a new sidearm, the Colt Single Action Army revolver in .45 Colt caliber, and it entered service in 1873. This was the legendary “Peacemaker,” the gun that won the West and saw service in a number of the US Army’s late 19th and early 20th century expeditions. Powerful and accurate, the big Colt attracted many devotees, famously including Gen George S. Patton, who carried an ivory-handled Single Action Army up until his death in 1945. However by 1892, the Army and Navy, viewing the handgun more as a symbol of the officer’s status than a necessary, manstopping close-combat weapon, had become interested in revolvers with swing-out cylinders and had adopted a series of Colts in .38 Colt caliber. Army versions began with the 1892 and ended with the 1905, with various slightly “improved” versions in between.

These revolvers appear to have served acceptably until the US Army’s involvement in the 1899–1902 Philippine Insurrection. The United States, having defeated Spain during the Spanish–American War, had annexed the Philippines, but then found itself facing insurrection. The rebels, unable to defeat the Americans in a conventional war, resorted to a bitter guerrilla struggle. It was while fighting the Moro tribesmen in the southern Philippine islands that the usefulness of large-caliber sidearms became apparent.

The Moro *Juramentados* (“Oathtakers” in Spanish) were fanatical warriors who reportedly took drugs before battle and wrapped their limbs tightly, so that should they be wounded blood loss would be slowed, allowing them to keep fighting. Wielding wavy-bladed *kris* daggers, Moro warriors would reportedly absorb a cylinder-full of Colt 150-grain bullets and keep coming, often killing or wounding their US opponents despite suffering multiple wounds themselves. The Krag rifle and the Winchester

1897 trench shotgun seemed to work fine on the Moros, but the .38 Colt revolver did not. Certainly, officers and others armed with revolvers lost confidence in the .38 Colt revolver and its cartridge. Some 1873 Single Action Army revolvers were quickly taken out of storage and sent to the Philippines, where the 255-grain bullet put the Moros down much more reliably. The Army also acquired a number of 1878 Colt .45 Colt-caliber revolvers and sent them to the Philippines as well. These were, however, stopgap measures, as was the adoption in 1909 of a version of the swing-out cylinder Colt New Service revolver in .45 Colt caliber.

These events provided added urgency to the demands for a new service pistol. However, the lack of stopping power of the .38 Colt round also led to the 1904 Thompson-LaGarde tests aimed at determining the effectiveness of pistol rounds. After Col John T. Thompson, an ordnance specialist, and Maj Louis LaGarde, an army surgeon, had interviewed troops about the performance of the .38- and .45-caliber revolvers in the Philippines, tests were carried out on live cattle at the Chicago stockyards and later on cadavers. After the completion of the tests, Col Thompson – who is best known for his later invention, the Thompson submachine gun – stated that the new service-pistol round should not be of less than .45 caliber.

The success of automatic-pistol designs such as the Mauser 1896 and Luger 1900, adopted by the Swiss, had shown that military autoloading pistols were viable; however, these were small-caliber designs. In 1908 the German Army adopted the P08 Luger in 9mm Parabellum caliber, giving the self-loading design even more validity. From 1900 onward US Army Ordnance officers had been testing semiautomatic pistols for possible future adoption, but in 1902 – as a result of complaints from officers serving in the Philippines – the Army's Chief of Ordnance, BrigGen William Crozier, authorized the testing of a proposed new service pistol. Winning this contract would give the successful manufacturer substantial financial benefits as well as a cachet that would help the company sell the winning design to other countries and on the US civilian market. There

was great pressure on US gunmakers in general to develop a winning domestic product – and on Colt in particular, as the firm was the traditional source of US military handguns.

Two instructors at the Armored Force School at Fort Knox, KY, who held ten national records between them, pose with a target revolver (left) and a Colt pistol (right). (NARA 111-SC-131436)







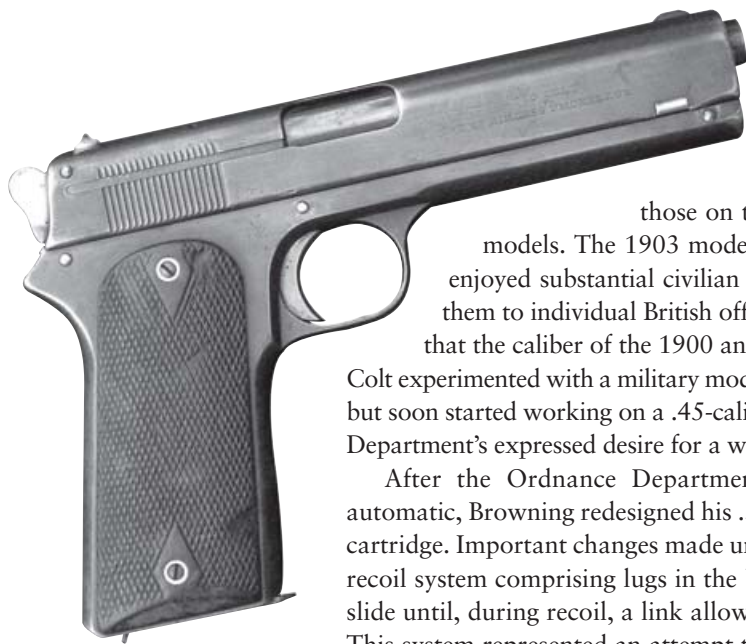
These two pistols – the Colt 1902 Military (top) and the 1903 Pocket Hammer Model (bottom) – were forerunners of the 1911. Both pistols illustrated were sold in the UK and are retailer-marked.



The markings of the retailer, top London gunmaker William Evans can be seen on this 1903 Pocket Hammer Model.

## THE MILITARY AUTOMATIC COMES OF AGE

At this time, firearms inventor John Browning had already designed some successful autoloading pistols which, in .38 Colt Auto caliber, had been tested by the US armed forces. The US Navy had ordered 250 of the Colt Model 1900 .38 auto and the Ordnance Department had ordered 500 in three batches – 100, 200, and 200, with various improvements to each successive batch – for more extensive testing. An interesting feature of these early Colt autos was a rear-sight safety catch that could be flipped down to block the hammer. Browning incorporated various improvements into the Military Model of 1902 .38 auto, including doing away with the sight safety catch and making the pistol easier to disassemble. However, officers who tested the Model 1902 recommended that it not be adopted, for four reasons: the caliber was too small, the weapon was muzzle-heavy, it took two hands to get off the first shot, and losing the magazine turned the pistol into a single-shot weapon. After additional testing, two other important disadvantages were noted: the possibility of accidental discharge and a tendency to malfunction.



The Model 1905 was the first .45 automatic from Colt. (T. J. Mullin)

Colt dealt with the issue of muzzle-heaviness rather easily by introducing the “Model of 1903 Pocket Hammer,” which had a barrel and slide 1½in shorter than those on the Model 1902 military or sporting models. The 1903 model actually became quite popular and enjoyed substantial civilian and non-US military sales – some of them to individual British officers. In a bid to address the criticism that the caliber of the 1900 and 1902 .38 Colt autos was too small, Colt experimented with a military model chambering a .41-caliber cartridge, but soon started working on a .45-caliber auto in response to the Ordnance Department’s expressed desire for a weapon in that caliber.

After the Ordnance Department’s decision to test a .45-caliber automatic, Browning redesigned his .38-caliber pistol to take a .45-caliber cartridge. Important changes made under Browning’s direction included a recoil system comprising lugs in the barrel which locked into slots in the slide until, during recoil, a link allowed the barrel to drop out of battery. This system represented an attempt to strengthen the action to deal with the .45-caliber cartridge. Colt and Browning engineers had also determined that the cartridge initially tested for the new pistol needed a lighter bullet and a shorter case.

The introduction of the 1905 Colt Automatic Pistol, Military Model in .45 Automatic Colt caliber not only allowed Colt quickly to recoup some of the costs of developing the .45 auto from the civilian market, but also gave the company a .45-caliber pistol which it could show to the Ordnance Board. The first advertisement for the .45 Military Model appeared in the April 1906 issue of *Shooting and Fishing Magazine*, indicating Colt’s intent to pursue the civilian market at the same time as the military one.

Examples were also sent for tests to the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield in the United Kingdom, where HM Government was considering the adoption of a .45-caliber automatic pistol. May 1907 saw 50 Colt Military Models, Caliber .45, with lanyard rings sent to the UK; however, it seems these were for individual officer or civilian purchase, as at least one example with Wilkinson retailer markings survives.

Initially, Frankford Arsenal in Pennsylvania as well as civilian ammunition makers were asked to develop a .45 autoloading cartridge. With the assistance of Colt and John Browning, Winchester Repeating Arms developed the .45 AC (Auto Colt) round, which fired a 200-grain round-nose bullet at 900 feet per second (fps), along with the .45 Colt Military Model pistol. Winchester began production of the cartridge for the civilian market – and also so that ammunition would be available for military trials.

Development work continued on the .45 auto cartridge, with the involvement of Frankford Arsenal as well as Union Metallic Cartridge Company (UMC). Over the next couple of years the design was tweaked – especially in terms of the length of the case and with the addition of a larger extraction area on the “rimless” case. Eventually, UMC was given a contract to produce the cartridge that would form the basis for the

eventual service pistol round. With additional modifications – primarily eliminating a cannellure – this cartridge, designated the UMC M1909 round, would become the “Cal. .45 Automatic Pistol Ball Cartridge, Model of 1911.” The 230-grain, .45 ACP round at 850fps as used for the last century is basically the same cartridge.

## A SHOOTOUT TO ARM THE US ARMY AND NAVY

On January 31, 1906, BrigGen Crozier sent a letter to various firearms manufacturers or their representatives inviting them to submit revolvers or automatic pistols “for use in a competitive test to be held for determining that type of calibre .45 arm best suited for adoption for use principally by the cavalry and light artillery of the United States Army.” Any weapons submitted had to chamber either the .45 revolver cartridge or .45 automatic cartridge developed for the trials. More than 20 possible suppliers had been contacted but only 18 indicated that they would submit pistols. For the actual trials only eight submitted handguns.

By the trial date, January 15, 1907, Colt had submitted the “Automatic Colt Pistol, Military Model, Cal. 45” and a revolver; firearms inventor William B. Knoble had submitted two pistols; Smith & Wesson had submitted a revolver; Webley & Scott had submitted the Webley Fosbery automatic revolver; Savage had submitted an automatic pistol; DWM had submitted a Luger pistol; Bergmann had submitted a pistol; and White-Merrill had submitted a pistol.



This official photo from the World War I era shows the 1911's component parts. (US Army)

# THE COLT 1911A1 EXPOSED

## Key

- |                      |                          |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Barrel bushing    | 17. Housing pin retainer |
| 2. Slide             | 18. Main spring housing  |
| 3. Barrel            | 19. Housing pin          |
| 4. Locking ribs      | 20. Stock screw bushings |
| 5. Chamber           | 21. Magazine spring      |
| 6. Firing pin spring | 22. Magazine follower    |
| 7. Firing pin        | 23. Magazine             |
| 8. Hammer            | 24. Receiver             |
| 9. Firing pin stop   | 25. Magazine catch       |
| 10. Disconnecter     | 26. Trigger              |
| 11. Sear             | 27. Link                 |
| 12. Grip safety      | 28. Recoil spring guide  |
| 13. Hammer strut     | 29. Link pin             |
| 14. Sear spring      | 30. Recoil spring        |
| 15. Main spring cap  | 31. Plug                 |
| 16. Main spring      |                          |



## Glossary

**barrel bushing:** retains the plug and, hence, the recoil spring.

Its removal also allows pistol takedown

**disconnecter:** prevents the pistol from firing more than one shot with each pull of the trigger

**grip safety:** a safety catch in the grip of the 1911 that must be depressed by the palm to allow the pistol to fire

**hammer strut:** when acted upon by the mainspring, releases the hammer to strike the firing pin

**link & link pin:** drops the barrel to unlock it from the slide and allow the spent case to be ejected and a new round loaded

**magazine follower:** the plate over the spring in a pistol magazine that positions the cartridges for feeding

**main spring:** provides the force to send the hammer forward

**plug:** designed to retain the recoil spring, and itself is retained by the barrel bushing

**receiver:** the lower portion of the pistol, containing the trigger group and the magazine well

**sear:** the moving part that translates movement from the trigger to the hammer to discharge the pistol

**slide:** the portion of the pistol that moves backward to eject a spent case and forward to chamber a fresh round

**thumb safety:** a safety catch which may be applied to lock the trigger and/or hammer on a pistol

**trigger:** portion of the pistol's action that the shooter's finger operates to release the firing pin or sear



Although six firearms manufacturers submitted automatic pistols for the trials, only those from DWM, Savage, and Colt were deemed worthy of continued testing. The board affirmed that “the advantages of the automatic pistol ... are deemed by the board of such importance that it desires to state its conviction the principle of the automatic hand firearm should be adopted for the military service, and that the adoption of a specific arm should be contingent only upon the question of whether it is mechanically satisfactory to the service.” DWM decided it was not cost-effective to produce more than the two .45-caliber Lugers that had been handbuilt for the trials, so only Colt and Savage received orders for 200 further pistols for field testing. A list of improvements the board felt were desirable was provided for both Colt and Savage, and it was emphasized that reliability was paramount. (An aside on the .45 Luger is that the sole surviving example has been valued as high as US\$1 million – although given the tougher economic climate, it sold recently for about half that.)

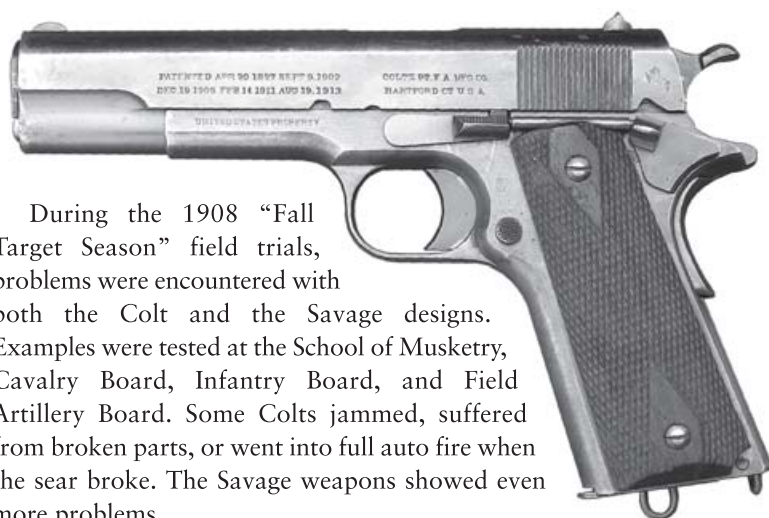
The .45 Colt Automatic Pistol, Military Model, sometimes referred to as the “Trials Contract Type,” incorporated a grip safety, loaded-chamber indicator, and vertical ejection as requested by the Ordnance Board. Colt had delivered all the pistols along with spare parts by June 1908. Colt sent the Ordnance Department 199 examples of the .45 Colt Automatic Pistol, Military Model in 1908; these were sent on to a number of cavalry units, including one serving in the Philippines, as well as to the School of Musketry, the Cavalry Board, the Infantry Board, and the Field Artillery Board. Savage did not deliver its 200 pistols until 11 months after Colt. Once the Savage .45 autos arrived they were also sent to units for evaluation; users were quite disconcerted by the tendency for the magazine to fall out when the pistol was fired. Colt quoted a price of \$25 each for the models incorporating the required improvements, whereas Savage quoted \$65 each.



This Colt 1911 pistol has been disassembled – “field-stripped” – for cleaning.



This good view of a Colt 1911 military pistol shows the "UNITED STATES PROPERTY" markings. (Jan Jett)

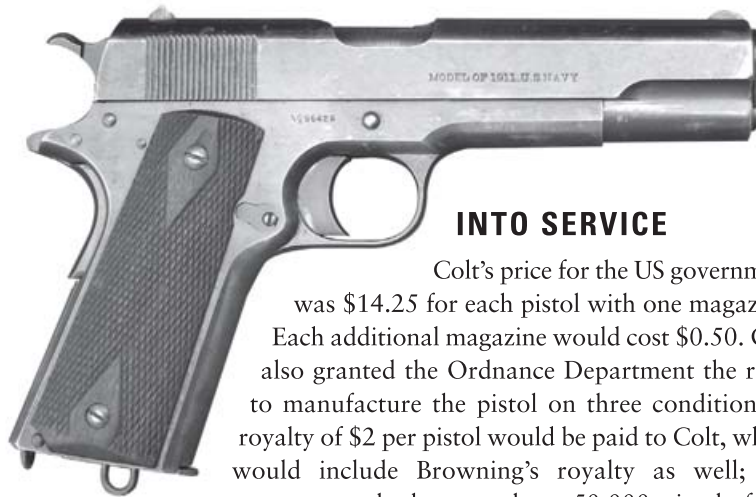


During the 1908 "Fall Target Season" field trials, problems were encountered with both the Colt and the Savage designs. Examples were tested at the School of Musketry, Cavalry Board, Infantry Board, and Field Artillery Board. Some Colts jammed, suffered from broken parts, or went into full auto fire when the sear broke. The Savage weapons showed even more problems.

Under Col Thompson's supervision, a new round of tests took place in which the Colt performed quite well. In an attempt to move the selection process along, Thompson called for a repeat of trials to select an automatic pistol. For these tests, Colt supplied 22 examples of the improved version of the 1905 – often referred to as the "Model 1909" – for tests at Springfield Armory in March 1910. One of the Colts fired 1,000 rounds without a malfunction or breakage. Some of the 22 pistols were sent to various Army units for evaluation.

A new series of tests were scheduled for November 1910; Colt and Savage submitted the latest versions of their pistols. The "Colt Automatic Pistol, Calibre .45, Special Army Model Model 1910" incorporated a thumb safety and a half-cock notch on the hammer as well as a slanted grip frame. Additionally, the grip angle to frame on the 1910 model was increased from 84 degrees to 74 degrees, thus making the 1910 Model better for instinctive pointing. In most respects this model resembled the Model 1911 as eventually adopted. It is likely that Colt incorporated the additional safety features in response to tests conducted in March 1910 both by the Infantry Board – which felt the Colt design was less safe than the revolver – and the Cavalry Board, which required a safe way of carrying the pistol with a round chambered when mounted. Six thousand rounds each were fired from the Colt and the Savage. The Savage broke 13 parts and showed excessive recoil during testing. The Colt broke only four parts, but these breakages included two split barrels and two cracked frames. Neither pistol was deemed ready for adoption at this point, so new tests were scheduled for March 15, 1911.

During these new tests another 6,000 rounds were fired from the Colt and the Savage. The Colt showed good accuracy and did not break any parts this time, while the Savage showed 37 breakages or malfunctions. Additionally, the Colt was totally reliable throughout firing the 6,000 rounds. The Colt was the clear winner and was adopted as the Model 1911 Pistol. The USA now had a service pistol that would be used with only minor changes throughout four major wars, and Colt became the US Army's pistol supplier for a second century.



Early-production Colt 1911s went to the US Navy, as with this example, as well as to the US Army. (Jan Jett)

## INTO SERVICE

Colt's price for the US government was \$14.25 for each pistol with one magazine. Each additional magazine would cost \$0.50. Colt also granted the Ordnance Department the right to manufacture the pistol on three conditions: a royalty of \$2 per pistol would be paid to Colt, which would include Browning's royalty as well; the government had to purchase 50,000 pistols from

Colt before production could begin at a US arsenal; and Colt would produce two-thirds of any pistols ordered, with the Ordnance Department not allowed to manufacture more than one-third of any pistols needed. About 6,000 .45 Colt Automatic Military Models had been produced prior to the final military trials. Later, once the Model 1911 had gone into production, the commercial version of what had been the Military Model was designated the Model 1905.

On April 21, 1911, Colt received its first government order for 1911 pistols, spare parts, screwdrivers, and arms chests, totaling \$459,988.77. This was based on 31,344 pistols with two spare magazines for each, as well as spare parts and other accouterments. In placing the order the War Department did request a few minor changes to the final design. These included widening the hammer spur, changing the shape of the trigger slightly, removing threads from the recoil spring plug, crimping the ends of



US Marines undergo first-aid training in 1913; the Marine at left wears his holstered Colt 1911. (NARA 127-G-516612)

The US cavalry was especially interested in adopting the Colt 1911, as shooting from the saddle was often done one-handed. This 1911 is shown with a cavalry drop holster designed for use on horseback. (Jan Jett)



the recoil spring to hold it in the plug, modifying the ejector to improve its functioning, enlarging the thumbpiece on the slide stop, and cutting the diamonds in the stock panels larger so as to enhance grip. The contract included a penalty clause in which Colt agreed to forfeit \$1.50 for each pistol delivered later than called for in the delivery schedule.

Prior to 1908, a few hundred Colt Automatic Military Models had been produced with attachment points machined for shoulder-stock holsters. This type of stock had proven popular on the M1896 “broomhandle” Mauser, and Colt may have felt the ability to turn the pistol into a “carbine” enhanced its appeal for military sales. However, the Ordnance Board was not interested in stocked pistols, and it appears 1908 was probably the last year in which pistols designed to take the stock were offered for commercial sale. Some of the stocked pistols were sold commercially at a price of \$40 with the stock as opposed to \$22 for the pistol alone. Although no versions of the 1911 with a stock were seriously considered, Colt did submit a 1911A1 with stock and extended barrel for the “short-rifle” trials that led to the adoption of the M1 carbine.

The War Department was anxious to receive from Colt the 50,000 pistols specified in the agreement so that production could start at the government-owned Springfield Armory. Accordingly, initial Army and Navy orders reached the 50,000 total by November 1911. During early production the Ordnance Department asked for a few more minor changes, which were incorporated in future production. The first Colt M1911 pistols were delivered to the Army in January 1912. By the end of 1912 Colt had delivered 9,950 pistols to the Army, 7,000 to the Navy, and 300 to the Marine Corps (the latter had placed an order early in 1912). A second



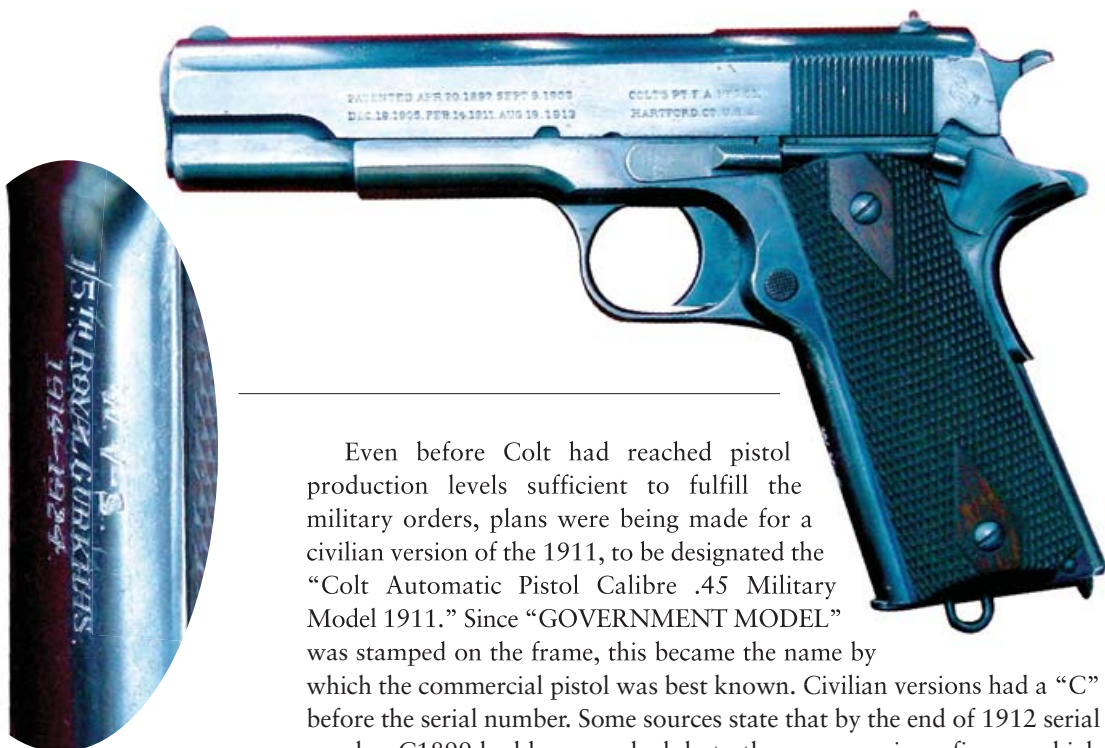
USMC order was placed in April 1913, for 1,250 pistols, 2,700 spare magazines, and 300,000 rounds of ammunition as well as tools for the pistols. In 1913 Colt delivered 43,150 pistols to the US armed forces.

Springfield Armory estimated that it could produce 1911 pistols for \$10.20 each, including the \$2 royalty. On December 27, 1912, the Armory was given an initial order for 11,285 pistols. Colt did not have a set of drawings containing all current specifications, so Springfield generated its own set of drawings based on 20 Colt 1911 pistols. From these drawings the necessary tools, fixtures, and gauges were manufactured. Although it took until September 1914 for all drawings to be completed, production of parts based on completed drawings began in February 1914. Thirty examples were produced by hand to allow checking of the accuracy of the tools, fixtures, and gauges. Interchangeability tests were carried out using these and Colt-built pistols. Once production began, Springfield Armory found that its costs per pistol were actually \$13.26 (with royalty), a saving of less than \$1 on Colt's price of \$14.25. This made it clear that Colt's price was very competitive.

Between 1914 and 1917, Springfield Armory produced 25,767 Model 1911 pistols. The 1903 Springfield rifle was produced at the same facility and on many of the same machines; the latter weapon was always given priority because the military demand for this rifle was considerably greater than that for the Colt 1911. Between 1914 and 1917, Springfield Armory produced about 62,500 M1903 Springfield rifles, while deliveries from the Armory and Colt totaled 47,196 pistols. Production began to slacken off in 1915, with 25,590 examples delivered from both manufacturers. Colt completed its last contract for the Army with a delivery of 4,214 Model 1911s in 1916; by the end of that year Colt had produced around 80,000 .45 autos for the US government. From that point onward, Colt switched to commercial production and Springfield Armory concentrated on producing rifles.

US troops fire their 1911 pistols on a range. (NARA)





This 1911 was privately purchased by an officer of the 15th Royal Gurkha Rifles. It is marked with the officer's initials, the details of his Gurkha regiment, and his years of service.

Even before Colt had reached pistol production levels sufficient to fulfill the military orders, plans were being made for a civilian version of the 1911, to be designated the “Colt Automatic Pistol Calibre .45 Military Model 1911.” Since “GOVERNMENT MODEL” was stamped on the frame, this became the name by which the commercial pistol was best known. Civilian versions had a “C” before the serial number. Some sources state that by the end of 1912 serial number C1899 had been reached, but other sources give a figure as high as 3,000 for commercial production during that year.

A substantial number of early Colt 1911 pistols went to the United Kingdom. In 1912 the .455 Webley & Scott self-loading pistol had been adopted by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. However, when World War I began, Webley & Scott concentrated on producing the Mark VI revolver for the British Army. Colt, spotting a potential market among British officers who purchased their own handguns and appreciated stopping power and firepower based on experiences in colonial conflicts, experimented with chambering the 1911 pistol for the .455 automatic cartridge, so the British armed forces’ existing stocks of .455 Webley Auto ammunition could be used for the Colt 1911.

To begin with, Colt 1911 pistols in .45 ACP chambering were sold within the UK in substantial numbers to private buyers – both civilians and individual military officers. By 1915, more than 2,200 commercial 1911s had been shipped to Colt’s British distributor, the London Armoury Company. Some of these commercial 1911s will be encountered with the names of retailers such as Westley Richards and W. R. Pape engraved on them. As individual officers furnished their own weapons at this time, others that were purchased by individual officers, often through the Army & Navy Store, will be seen with the former owner’s name and regiment engraved on them.

The first Admiralty order for 1,500 Colt 1911s in .455 caliber was fulfilled in 1915; these pistols were numbered in the Colt commercial series, with numbers running in the C29001 to C30500 range. The right side of the slide of pistols in this batch was marked “Calibre .455.” A second British order for .455-caliber 1911s was placed in 1915. These pistols had





#### **LEFT**

This picture shows a British contract Colt 1911 in .455 caliber; note the W-prefix serial number.

#### **BELOW LEFT**

Magazines were different for the .455-caliber 1911s and were marked accordingly.

#### **BELOW RIGHT**

Both these cartridges – a .45 ACP cartridge (left) and a .455 Auto cartridge (right) – were manufactured by Kynoch.



a special serial number range starting with W100001 and reaching W110692 by the time the final deliveries against this government order were made in early 1918. By that time the USA was in the war and Colt was producing 1911 pistols for the US Army. Once Colt regained extra capacity after fulfilling US government orders, the British government placed another order for .455-caliber 1911 pistols, with deliveries to begin in fall 1918. About 1,300 additional .455 pistols were delivered on this order before it was canceled. The total number of Colt 1911 pistols produced in .455 Auto caliber under British wartime contracts was 12,009. In 1923, existing British stocks of the .455 Colt 1911 were transferred to the Royal Air Force, where it became the standard sidearm.

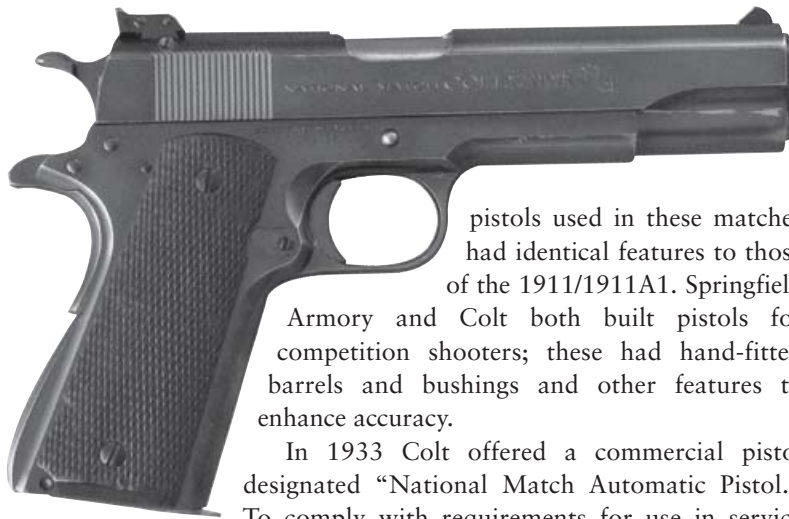
## LESSONS FROM WORLD WAR I: THE 1911A1

The 1911 saw extensive combat use during World War I, and an evaluation of its performance led to some relatively minor changes based on field reports to the Ordnance Department. These included shortening the trigger, adding a cutout to the frame behind the trigger, replacing the flat mainspring housing with an arched one, lengthening the grip safety spur, widening the front sight, shortening the hammer spur, and eliminating the double diamonds on the grips to make checkering easier. The change most welcomed by the military was probably the lengthening of the grip safety spur, since the existing one on the 1911 allowed the hand to ride high enough that when the slide recoiled and cocked the hammer it would often “bite” the shooter’s hand. The curved mainspring housing on the improved “A1” model helped keep the hand from riding up on the grip during recoil. Other minor changes included reducing the receiver rail width by .001in to improve the fit, and lengthening the recoil spring housing by .031in to eliminate the possibility of a gap between the receiver and housing when the slide was mounted. Slight changes were made in the barrel’s rifling as well. These changes were made by 1924, resulting in the new designation of 1911A1 for pistols incorporating the changes. Pistols with serial numbers in the range 700001 to 710000 were the first to incorporate the changes.

At about the same time as changes were made to the military 1911A1, they were also made to Colt’s Commercial Government Model pistol, taking effect on models with serial numbers around the C135000–C139000 mark. One popular use of the Government Model was by target shooters in “service pistol matches.” Competition requirements meant the



This 1911A1 pistol is pictured with a World War II-era holster, pistol belt, and magazine pouch.



This adjustable-sight version of the Colt National Match pistol was designed for use in shooting competitions. (Bryan Carlin)

pistols used in these matches had identical features to those of the 1911/1911A1. Springfield

Armory and Colt both built pistols for competition shooters; these had hand-fitted barrels and bushings and other features to enhance accuracy.

In 1933 Colt offered a commercial pistol designated “National Match Automatic Pistol.”

To comply with requirements for use in service matches it retained the fixed sight of the military pistols. However, for target shooters competing in other types of match, Colt in 1935 began offering the National Match pistol with an adjustable rear sight. In addition to the Colt commercial National Match pistols, at various times Springfield Armory would build accurized 1911-type pistols for military competitive shooters. Collectors consider the National Match pistols manufactured between 1933 and 1941 to be among the finest Government Model weapons ever produced.

Although production of National Match pistols was discontinued during World War II due to the need to prioritize output for the military, Colt resumed production of versions of the 1911A1 designed for competitive shooters in the postwar years. Beginning in 1957, the Colt Gold Cup National Match pistol was offered in .45 ACP. These postwar National Match pistols came with adjustable sights as standard and were renowned for their accuracy. Then, in 1960, a version of the Gold Cup National Match was offered that was designed to be used with the .38 AMU (Army Marksmanship Unit) semi-rimmed load, which was made using .38 Special revolver cases. Although originally designed for Army competitors in centerfire matches, the AMU round was also used by some civilian shooters.

## **THE 1911 vs GANGSTERS: LAW-ENFORCEMENT PISTOLS**

In 1929, prior to introducing the National Match, Colt had begun producing another very interesting commercial Government Model in .38 Super Automatic caliber. The .38 Super fired a 130-grain full-jacket bullet at 1,280fps. Marketing was aimed at US law enforcement, offering police and federal agents a caliber that could penetrate car bodies and the “bulletproof” vests worn by some gangsters during this era. Another fertile market for Colt .38 Super pistols was Mexico, where civilians were



banned from owning pistols in .45 ACP chambering. Although slight modifications had to be made to the basic 1911A1 design for the .38 Super model, only an expert could detect anything other than the smaller bore and the larger-capacity (nine-round) magazine. Colt also offered a .38 Super Match pistol that had many of the features of the National Match pistols, such as hand-honed action and match-grade barrels.

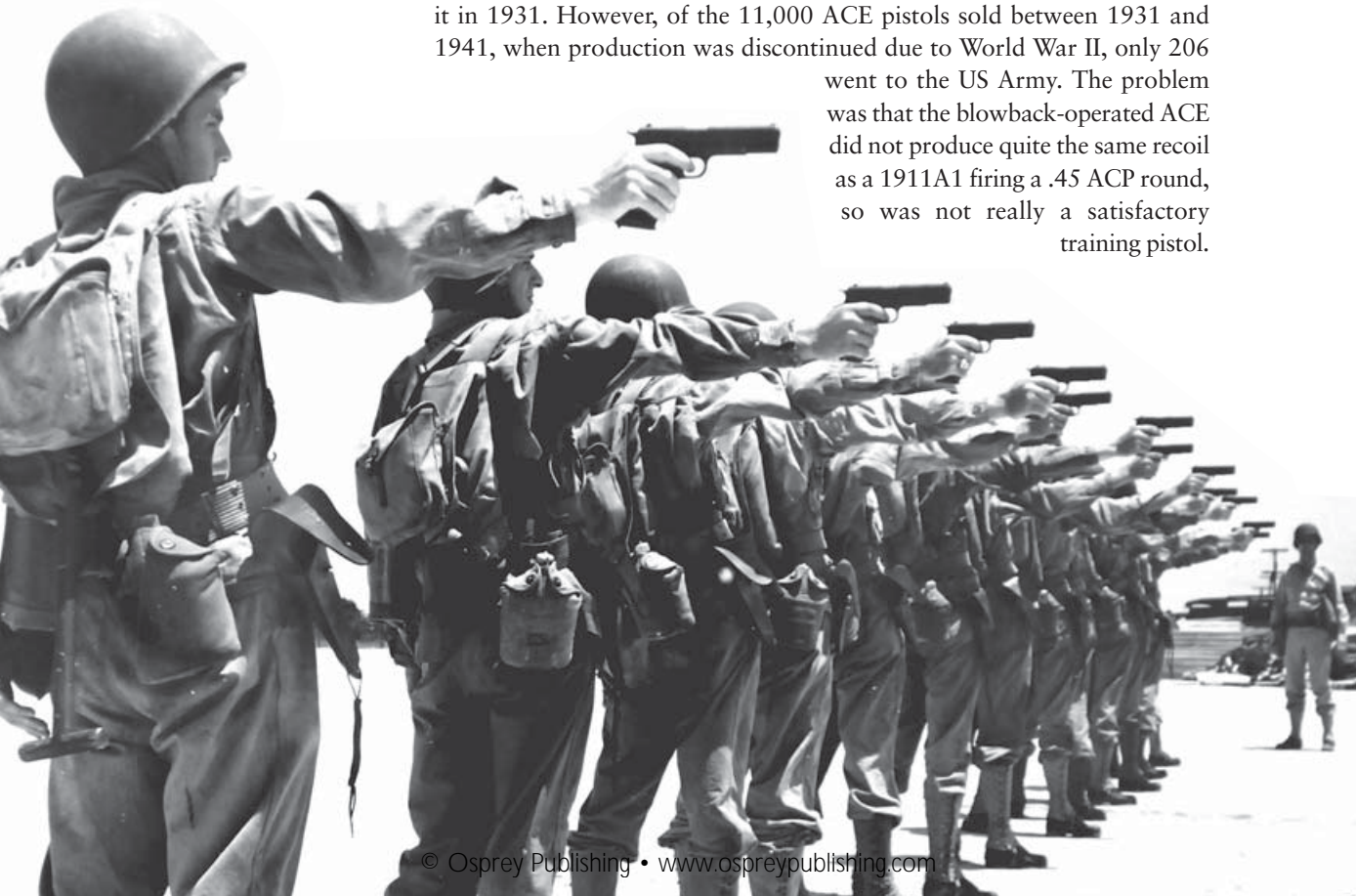
From October 1937 the company offered .38 Super and .45 ACP pistols with the Swartz firing-pin safety catch. This measure aimed to counter the problem of a Government Model pistol going off accidentally if the weapon dropped with the hammer carried down on the firing pin or on half-cock. With the Swartz safety the firing pin was locked unless the grip safety was depressed. The safety worked well but was discontinued when Colt switched to military production for World War II and was not reintroduced after the war.

## PISTOLS FOR PRACTICE AND TRAINING

Both the US armed forces and civilian shooters had shown interest in a 1911-type pistol chambered for the .22 Long Rifle cartridge. This was because a rimfire pistol with the same feel as a Government Model would allow inexpensive practice on indoor and outdoor ranges. As early as 1913, Springfield Armory had converted a small number of 1911 pistols to .22 caliber. Interest grew during the 1920s and in a bid to satisfy this market, Colt developed the Colt ACE .22 Long Rifle pistol and marketed it in 1931. However, of the 11,000 ACE pistols sold between 1931 and 1941, when production was discontinued due to World War II, only 206

went to the US Army. The problem was that the blowback-operated ACE did not produce quite the same recoil as a 1911A1 firing a .45 ACP round, so was not really a satisfactory training pistol.

World War II-era troops are pictured on the firing line with their .45 autos. (NARA)





## 1911 VARIANTS

**1.** This military Colt 1911A1 was produced in 1940; unlike wartime Colts, which were Parkerized to speed production, this one has a blued finish. (Bryan Carlin)



**2.** The Colt .38 Super version of the 1911 was developed to give greater penetration against vehicles and "bulletproof" vests. (Jan Jett)

**3.** The Colt Service Model ACE was used for training with inexpensive .22-caliber ammunition; its floating chamber helped duplicate the recoil of a full-power .45 auto. (Bryan Carlin)

**4.** The Colt Commander, featuring a shorter barrel and alloy frame, was developed in the late 1940s, partly in the hope that it would be adopted by the US government. Although it was not officially adopted, it proved popular both with individual military officers and non-military law-enforcement personnel. (T. J. Mullin)





Colt responded by developing the Service Model ACE, which incorporated a special chamber that magnified the recoil and muzzle flip of the .22 pistol to approximate the behavior of a .45. The chamber was developed by David “Carbine” Williams – best known for designing the US M1 carbine. Between 1937, when the Service Model ACE first appeared in the Colt catalog, and 1944, when production ceased, Colt produced more than 13,000 examples of this model, mostly for the US armed forces. Before World War II Colt offered a .22 conversion kit for the Government Model, then after World War II a conversion kit with the floating chamber that allowed conversion of .45 pistols to .22.

## **THE COMMANDER AND THE OFFICER’S MODEL**

In 1947, the US Army developed bid specs for a new, more compact and lighter .45 pistol. They called for a pistol no more than 7in long overall and weighing less than 25oz (about two-thirds the weight of the 39oz 1911A1). The resulting pistol employed an alloy frame, and was chambered in 9mm, .38 Super, and .45 ACP and designated the “Commander.” Although the US armed forces did not officially adopt the Commander, since its introduction in 1950 this easily carried yet powerful combat pistol has proven very popular with law-enforcement officers and civilians alike. During the Korean War a substantial number of officers carried personally owned Colt Commanders; some did so during the Vietnam conflict too. In later years, Colt produced the Commander with a steel frame, but the LW (Lightweight) version has remained popular. A more recent version of the Colt Commander with alloy frame and stainless-steel barrel and slide has proved quite popular because it combines ease of carry with durability. In addition to .45 ACP, the Commander was also produced in .38 Super and 9x19mm, the latter caliber reportedly in anticipation of a possible military contract if the 9x19mm cartridge were adopted for US troops assigned to NATO or as a general replacement for the .45 ACP round. Though a military contract for the Commander did not materialize, the 9mm version did prove popular with shooters in countries where the 9x19mm round was standard, and at least a few US military advisors in countries that used the 9x19mm round took along a Commander in that caliber.

For those who liked the Commander but wanted an even more compact pistol, Colt in 1985 introduced the Officer’s Model. This had a 3.5in barrel; the Commander had a 4.5in and the Government Model a 5in barrel. The standard Officer’s Model used a steel frame, which was rather heavy at 34oz, but the Officer’s Model Lightweight, which only weighed 24oz, proved popular with plain-clothes police officers.

The Colt 1911 has continued to develop, although the initial design was so good that changes have tended to be small. In fact, so little has the basic design changed between 1911 and 2011 that a soldier trained on the 1911 prior to World War I could pick up a current Colt Government Model and use it without hesitation.



# USE

## The 1911 goes to war

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The first combat use of the 1911 is not recorded. It is possible that a British officer used a personally purchased 1911 on India's North-West Frontier or elsewhere in the Empire. The 1911 also saw action with US forces fighting in the Philippines during June 1913, toward the end of hostilities with the Moros. Since the 1911 was developed at least partially in response to the .38 revolver's inadequacies in use against the Moros, it is only fitting that it was issued to US military personnel before fighting ended in the Philippines. US Marines sent to Haiti in 1915 or who served in landing parties elsewhere might well have employed 1911s. Certainly, some Army troops who took part in the 1916–17 Punitive Expedition into Mexico were armed with the 1911. However, the first major use of the Colt 1911 came during World War I.

## WORLD WAR I

By the beginning of 1917 a total of 68,533 examples of the 1911 pistol had been delivered to the US armed forces; between them, Colt and Springfield Armory were contracted to provide an additional 141,970. The USA's entry into World War I on April 6, 1917, prompted a massive expansion in the US Army, greatly increasing the demand for small arms. Availability of handguns was considered extremely important in increasing the survivability of US troops engaged in trench warfare.

Raiding and defending trenches meant combat took place at very close range – often at such short ranges and in such confined spaces that a rifle could not be used. Trench clubs and trench knives offered one solution, and both were used by US troops. However, in the trenches two weapons for which US troops had a traditional affinity proved invaluable. These were the



Soldiers on the US Punitive Expedition into Mexico carry their 1911 pistols slung on their hips. (NARA)

combat shotgun and the handgun. Although the French had issued .32 ACP-caliber pistols relatively widely and these had been used in the trenches, it was the US 1911 pistol and the 1917 revolvers in the same .45 ACP caliber that proved themselves again and again as fight-stoppers. Although US trench shotguns such as the M1897 or the M1912 Winchester proved even more effective, these required two hands and some space to operate effectively. The 1911 could be used in one hand while fighting off a German trench raider using the other hand. Initially, the primary recipients of the 1911 during the first combat seen by US troops were machine-gun crews, artillerymen, cavalrymen, signal corpsmen, and officers; but soon every infantryman wanted a .45 at his side, whether asleep or awake.

An Ordnance Department study of January 1918 indicated that by the end of the year the USA would need almost 2.5 million pistols. As has been noted, during 1917 Springfield Armory stopped producing 1911 pistols so as to concentrate on manufacturing 1903 Springfield rifles, leaving Colt the sole contractor and the recipient of a contract in June 1917 for 500,000 more 1911 pistols.

Colt and Smith & Wesson were given orders, as a supplement to the 1911, for variants of their large-frame revolvers that had been altered to accept the .45 ACP cartridge using “half-moon” clips. About 315,000 of these revolvers, designated Model 1917s, were produced. The Ordnance Department also sought other manufacturers to produce the 1911. Consequently, in December 1917 Remington Arms-UMC was issued a contract for 150,000 of the 1911 pistols. Remington geared up for production, and in March 1918 the Ordnance Department upped the order to 500,000 pistols. However, after only about four months of Remington production, the war ended. By February 1919 Remington production had ceased, with 21,677 weapons having been delivered.

The Ordnance Department had also placed orders with Winchester Repeating Arms, North American Arms Company in Canada, Caron Brothers Manufacturing also in Canada, Burroughs Adding Machine Company, Lanston Monotype Machine Company, A. J. Savage Arms Company, Savage Arms Company, and National Cash Register Company. None of these firms ever really got into production, although A. J. Savage did produce some parts and North American Arms did produce about 50 pistols that were never delivered to the Ordnance Department (but are today highly sought-after by collectors).

Total wartime procurement of 1911 pistols was approximately 446,000. Of the total produced up to the end of World War I, a staggering 169,164 were reported lost, destroyed, or missing. A good portion of those were lost or went missing in the duffel bags of returning soldiers and Marines!

During World War I the main supplier of .45 ACP cartridges for the 1911 pistol and the 1917 revolvers was Frankford Arsenal, but cartridges also came from Union Metallic Cartridge Company (which at this time became part of Remington Arms Company to become Remington-UMC); and from United States Cartridge Company, Peters Cartridge Company, and Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Total production among these manufacturers of .45 ACP ammo during the war amounted to almost 335 million rounds.

In addition to the .455-caliber 1911s supplied to the UK early in World War I, Colt also supplied 5,000 examples of the 1911 to the Canadian armed forces in 1914. Notable Canadians who used the Colt 1911 in World War I include flying aces and Victoria Cross recipients Billy Bishop and William Barker. Between November 1915 and February 1916, a total of 5,000 Colt 1911s were supplied to the French, reportedly to arm their newly formed tank units. Another 500 pistols were obtained by the French in December 1917. However, the largest export contract for Colt 1911s was for Russia, which from February 19, 1916, to January 18, 1917, purchased 51,000 examples of the M1911 .45 ACP pistol. Reportedly, some of these 1911 pistols, along with M1896 Mausers, were used to execute the Tsar and his family on July 17, 1918. The only difference between the Russian M1911s and standard Colt commercial pistols was the marking "English Order" in Russian (in Cyrillic script) on the left side of the receiver. Between 1914 and 1919, the Argentine Navy purchased 1,721 Colt M1911s marked "MARINA ARGENTINA." Other countries purchased smaller numbers of commercial 1911s during World War I, including Norway with 700 and the Netherlands with 50.



This World War I US Marine Corps recruiting poster illustrates the Marines' trust in their 1911 pistols. (LOC LC-USZC4-3180)

## IN COMBAT ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Although the 1911 was used in myriad encounters during trench raids or when going "over the top," certain instances of its use in combat are especially noteworthy. Perhaps the best-known involves Cpl Alvin York. On October 8, 1918, York was one of 17 members of the US 82nd Division sent to flank a German machine-gun position. Although York's patrol had taken a group of German prisoners, enemy machine-gun fire killed nine of the Americans just as they were preparing to march their prisoners back to US lines. The sergeant in charge of the patrol had been killed, so York took command and ordered the remainder of the patrol to cover the prisoners while he dealt with the soldiers who were firing at them. Armed with an Enfield 1917 rifle, York utilized the marksmanship skills he had acquired





Sgt Alvin York revisits the hill in the Argonne Forest at which the action took place that earned him the Medal of Honor, in a US Army photo taken three months after the end of World War I. (US Army)

hunting in the Tennessee hills, and killed a German machine-gunner with each shot. Another group of Germans had counted York's shots; when they knew he had to be reloading, they charged him. However, he eliminated them all using his Colt 1911. By the end of the encounter York had killed 25 Germans and captured 132 all on his own, for which he was promoted to sergeant and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Another World War I hero died with his 1911 in his hand. This man, 2Lt Frank Luke, Jr, was a member of the US Army's 27th Aero Squadron. He had earned himself the nickname "Balloon Buster" because of the number of German observation balloons he had shot down. On September 29, 1918, Luke destroyed three German balloons, giving him 18 kills in 18 days. However, Luke was wounded and his SPAD aircraft was damaged, so he had to crash-land. Rather than surrender to the Germans who quickly surrounded the aircraft, Luke pulled out his 1911 and began firing at the Germans, reportedly wounding some at 50m before they returned fire, killing him. He was awarded a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor.

On the very same day, September 29, 1918, Lt William B. Turner of the US 27th Division rushed a German machine-gun team that was firing at his men and killed the entire crew using his 1911. Pistol in hand, he continued leading his troops in the assault and killing Germans until he ran out of .45 ammo, at which point he picked up an abandoned rifle and bayoneted more Germans. He was killed leading a counterattack and was later awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Yet again on the same day, 2Lt Patrick Regan of the US 29th Division captured 30 Germans who had been manning four machine guns – using his empty 1911. All this may say something about the respect accorded by the enemy to the big .45 autoloader.

2Lt Frank Luke shot down 15 heavily defended observation balloons to become the talk of the United States Air Service. On September 29, 1918, after destroying a further three, he was shot down and was killed in a shootout, defending himself with his service 1911. (Jon Guttman)





## RECOLLECTING THE COLT 1911

Some of the most insightful comments about using the 1911, especially in trench raids, come from Herbert McBride in his classic *A Rifleman Went to War*. McBride, an American, enlisted in the Canadian Army so as to be able to fight in World War I, and since he had had experience with the 1911 before enlisting he often helped to instruct in its use. Initially many of the Canadians preferred the revolver, but according to McBride:

Even the most conservative of the oldtimers soon recognized the advantages of the later type weapon [the 1911]. I staged several realistic demonstrations; including fast reloading in the dark and such stunts, and that converted most of them. As to reliability – dependability in an emergency – there was little choice between the revolver and the automatic.

Although McBride himself had used revolvers for years, he states:

In spite of all this, I unhesitatingly choose the automatic for actual use in war. To my mind, the great advantage of the automatic lies in the ease and rapidity with which it can be reloaded – especially in the dark. Any one who doubts this can easily satisfy himself by trying to hurriedly load a revolver *in the dark*, with a crowd of roughnecks milling all around and trying to hit some one with clubs, knives, and fists...

There is one little trick the user of the automatic should train himself to keep in mind – and do – reload while there is still a cartridge in the chamber; do not shoot until the gun is entirely empty. Even though you have fired but four or five shots, better drop out that old magazine and slip in a full one.

McBride lauded the Colt 1911 and argued that every machine-gunner should be armed with a pistol for use when the enemy attempted to rush such gunners from the flanks. He cited cases where machine-gunners had been unable to get to rifles fast enough to defend themselves from a bayonet charge, but could have quickly drawn a pistol. An interesting method of carrying the 1911 mentioned by McBride was holstering it in the small of the back; this allowed quicker access while crawling across no-man's land and kept the weapon out of the mud.

McBride offers another example of the value of the pistol, recounting a case in which his machine-gun crew captured a German who, as they were escorting him from the trench, grabbed a grenade; the German was only stopped by a member of the party who quickly drew his pistol and shot the man twice. In summing up his views on the pistol during World War I, McBride states: "As to the various types of pistols used, both by the Allies and the Germans, after all these years during which to think it over, I still believe that the Colt .45 Automatic is King of Them All." He explains his rationale for favoring the 1911 as follows: "That old .45 slug has more authority than any of the others, not excepting the 9mm Luger, and as for accuracy, there never was a Luger or Mauser made to







even come within hailing distance of our Service Colt.” He also concluded that the 1911 had proven utterly reliable in combat, especially amidst the mud of the trenches, and most of all it was “a ‘he-man’ gun with a *wallop*.”

## IN BRITISH USE, IN AND ABOVE THE TRENCHES

One interesting usage of the Colt 1911 was by Royal Flying Corps airmen early in the war, before machine guns were successfully mounted on aircraft. Flyers would fire their 1911 pistols at German aircraft, using an extended 20-round magazine made by Beesley of London and a cage-like brass catcher.

It is likely that the most famous British user of the 1911 in World War I was T. E. Lawrence. In September 1914 Lawrence received two Colt 1911 pistols, reportedly a gift from Gertrude Bell. He was quite fond of the weapons and carried them throughout his service with the Arabs. Lawrence’s brother Frank also carried a 1911 until he was killed in France during 1915.

Winston Churchill was a great fan of the Colt .45 auto and purchased one (S/N C15566) from the London Armoury Company in 1915. He used the pistol in France while serving first as a major with the 2nd Grenadier Guards and later as a lieutenant-colonel with the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers.

### Dueling above the Western Front (previous pages)

During the first months of World War I, a British Avro 504A encounters a German Aviatik B.I. At this stage of the war neither aircraft is equipped with a machine gun so the German observer is firing at the British aircraft with a Mauser rifle, while the British observer returns fire with a Colt 1911 – equipped with an extended magazine and the special cartridge cage, designed to keep cartridge cases from getting into the engine.



T. E. Lawrence (right) reloads what appears to be one of his two Colt 1911 pistols, gifts from the explorer Gertrude Bell. (IWM Q 60099)



At some point he had the words “WINSTON SPENCER CHURCHILL” engraved on the right side of the slide. During World War II he loaned the weapon to his bodyguard, Walter H. Thompson, whom he felt was undergunned with the Scotland Yard-issue Webley .32 auto. Reportedly, when Churchill found Thompson was not actually carrying the more powerful Colt 1911, the Prime Minister took it back and started tucking it into his own waistband as protection against any Germans sent to assassinate him.

## **PROHIBITION AMERICA: ON BOTH SIDES OF THE LAW**

During the “gangster era” of the 1920s and 1930s in the USA the Colt 1911 and later the 1911A1 were very popular with those on both sides of the law. The gangster John Dillinger was known to use a Colt Government Model .45 and sometimes slept with it under his pillow. Although there is some controversy over who actually fired the shot that killed Dillinger, many believe it was FBI agent C. B. Winstead, who fired two shots from his Colt Government Model .45, who delivered the fatal round. Legendary FBI agent Walter Walsh was known to have used a Colt Government Model in pursuit of gangsters, but his best-known feat with the 1911 occurred while serving with the US Marines in World War II and will be recounted later.

Another well-known gangster of the era, George Kelly Barnes – known as “Machine Gun” Kelly – had a Colt .45 auto in his hand when Memphis Police and FBI agents burst in on him at dawn on September 26, 1933. Infamously, a Colt .45 auto was lying in Bonnie Parker’s lap when she and Clyde Barrow were ambushed by lawmen led by former Texas Ranger Frank Hamer. Reportedly, this weapon had “Barrow” scratched onto it, but whether this was done by Barrow himself or later by one of the lawmen who captured it is not clear. Although Hamer had favored big-bore Colt or Smith & Wesson revolvers for much of his career, while hunting Bonnie and Clyde he reportedly carried a Colt .38 Super Government Model so he could punch through the steel bodies of the V8 Ford automobiles favored by Bonnie and Clyde. Another gangster who died while carrying the Colt .45 auto was Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd, who had two .45 autos tucked into his waistband when he was shot by police officer Chester Smith.

The gangster who liked the Colt 1911 the most, however, was probably Lester Gillis, better known as “Baby-Face Nelson.” Gillis was known to use custom Colt .38 Super or .45 autos built by gunsmith Hyman S. Lehman. These were converted to full auto fire and had a Thompson submachine gun’s Cutts compensator and vertical foregrip added. Extended magazines holding 18 rounds of .45 ACP or 22 rounds of .38 Super were used with these converted pistols. Gillis influenced other gangsters, convincing them of the usefulness of the powerful .38 Super version of the Government Model. In fact, Gillis presented Dillinger with a Colt .38 Super to celebrate one of the latter’s jailbreaks.

The Texas Rangers were among the most famous lawmen to use the Colt 1911 and 1911A1. One of the best-known Rangers to carry a Colt Government Model .45 was Charlie Miller, about whom many stories are told, including some involving the .45 auto. The most famous one involves Miller going in for firearms qualification late in his career with his Government Model on his hip in “cocked-and-locked” mode. The young firearms instructor from the Texas Department of Public Safety reportedly asked Miller if he realized that carrying the pistol in that manner was dangerous. Miller’s reply was reportedly, “Son, if the damned thing wasn’t dangerous, I wouldn’t be carrying it!”

The other Miller story involving his Government Model .45 reportedly took place at a café along the Rio Grande, where the Rangers were disliked. Miller supposedly went in and asked for a cup of coffee but was ignored. When he asked again politely he was still ignored. At this point he picked up a cup, shot a .45-caliber hole in the coffee urn and filled his cup as the coffee flowed out. One of Miller’s Colt 1911A1 pistols featured fancy engraving and an ivory or pearl stock with Miller’s initials inset in gold. Miller placed a twisted rubber band around the stock, an old trick aimed at creating friction when the pistol was tucked into the waistband so it would not slip down the leg.

A famous pair of Colt .45 autos belonged to Texas Ranger Manny “Lone Wolf” Gonzauillas (often also spelt “Gonzalaz”). These two “Fitz” pistols had cutaway trigger-guards, which let the finger go quickly to the trigger upon the draw. They were named after J. Henry “Fitz” Fitzgerald, a Colt employee between the wars who was known for his ability to tune a 1911 or 1911A1. In fact, the Colt National Match .45 is often considered a descendant of weapons Fitz worked on at the Camp Perry National Matches from 1920 onward, at which he would install new barrels on .45 autos and lighten the trigger pull. Fitz was also himself a well-known shooter and trainer of law-enforcement officers. His “Fitz Special” revolvers and auto pistols were carried by many famous lawmen of the period. Although not all fighting handguns worked on under Fitz’s supervision had the cutaway trigger-guard, this was associated with pistols he personally worked on and test-fired.

The Lone Wolf Fitz 1911s are very well known because Gonzauillas was such a famed mankiller, with estimates of the number of criminals he killed during his time as a lawman running as high as 75. A further set of Fitz 1911A1 pistols is also very famous. James Eric “Bill” Decker was chief deputy of Dallas County when he became involved in the Bonnie and Clyde chase. However, he is even better known for being the Dallas sheriff at the time John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and during the subsequent investigation. Decker owned a matching pair of Colt M1911A1 National Match Pistols, which were factory-engraved and gold-inlaid. Decker, a friend of Lone Wolf Gonzauillas, also had Fitz cutaway trigger-guards on this distinctive set of .45 automatic pistols. The value of this set of pistols today is estimated to be as high as \$250,000.

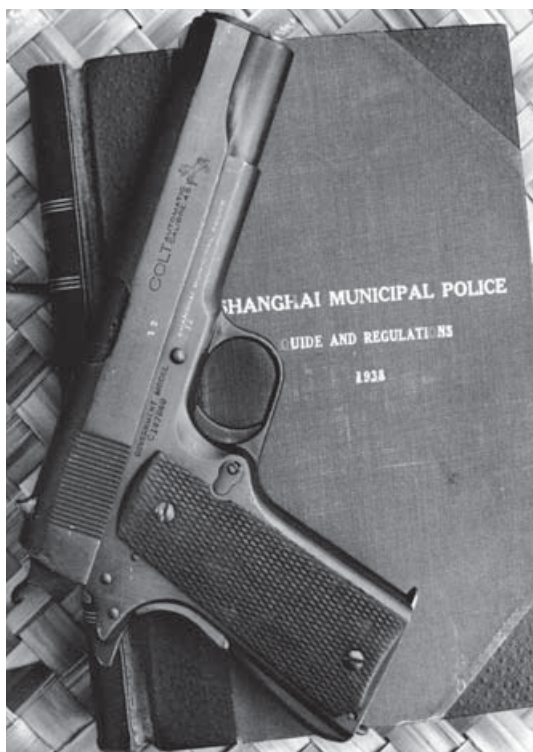


These finely engraved Colt National Match Pistols with "Fitz" cutaway trigger-guards were formerly the property of Sheriff James "Bill" Decker. (T. J. Mullin)

## THE GOVERNMENT MODEL TAMES SHANGHAI

One legendary law-enforcement agency that used the Colt Government Model .45 was the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) – the police force of the Shanghai Municipal Council which governed the Shanghai International Settlement between 1854 and 1943. Starting in 1926, batches of Colt 1911A1 pistols rollmarked "Shanghai Municipal Police" and with matching numbered barrels, slides, and frames were ordered from Colt by the SMP. Many were shipped to E. A. Sykes, Colt's representative in Shanghai. However, at least some Colt Government Model pistols had previously been acquired between 1919 and 1922, which would indicate that they were M1911s. The author has seen Model 1911 pistols with "S.M.P." markings and issue numbers which appear to have been added in the SMP armory; these may have been the earliest Colt .45 autos ordered, with the Colt-marked 1911A1s coming later in far greater numbers.

After his appointment as sergeant-major and drill instructor for the Shanghai Municipal Police in 1917, W. E. Fairbairn studied all shooting incidents involving SMP members. One of his conclusions was that for Western (i.e. non-Chinese) members the best choice of sidearm was the Colt .45 auto. For the more slightly built Chinese officers he chose the Colt Pocket .380 pistol. Although as initially ordered the SMP Colt pistols were standard, Fairbairn had some alterations made to them in the SMP armory. His study of shooting incidents indicated that under stress, some officers were likely to forget to remove the thumb safety on an automatic pistol. As a result, a hole was drilled into the frame of SMP Colt 1911s and 1911A1s and a pin was driven in to block the safety in the off position. At least some SMP Government Models also show that the serrations on the slide have been lengthened to allow the latter to be gripped more securely.



#### ABOVE

This Colt 1911A1 was used by the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) in the days of W. E. Fairbairn; note the rollmarking and number "12" on slide and frame.

#### ABOVE RIGHT

SMP pistols had their safety catches blocked by a pin that fitted into the hole visible through the safety and into the frame.



Fairbairn had attended various small-arms training courses and had even done an exchange with the NYPD. The firearms training program for the use of the Colt pistols by the SMP was, however, his own creation. Since Fairbairn did not allow SMP officers to use the thumb safeties, they were trained to carry their Colts with a loaded magazine but without a round chambered (Condition 3, see page 68). When they had to engage an assailant they would draw from the crossdraw holster they wore, grasp the slide with their non-shooting hand, and thrust the pistol forward against the recoil spring with their shooting hand. When the slide was fully back, they would release it, thus chambering a round as they brought the pistol into action. SMP officers were trained in instinctive close-range shooting from a crouch as the pistol came on target.

As each foreign officer came on duty his pistol would be issued, and he would draw two loaded magazines. Magazines were loaded with only six

#### Training the Commandos, Shanghai-style (opposite)

During World War II, W. E. Fairbairn trains Commandos in instinctive point-shooting with the Colt 1911 on one of his special shooting ranges, which he termed "Mystery Houses" or "Houses of Horrors." This was a fast and realistic firearms-training technique that Fairbairn had devised two decades earlier for his Shanghai Municipal Police officers. The "Houses of Horrors" required the tyro Commando or Shanghai policeman to pass through the house, shooting fast as targets were presented.





ON YOUR TOES!!  
**HAUNTED**  
THIS HOUSE  
MAY BE FULL OF  
**HUNS!!**



W. E. Fairbairn arranged for specially marked .45 ACP ammunition to be issued to the SMP so it could be determined from used bullets and cases whether shots had been fired by the police. (Woodin Labs)

rounds each. Later SMP magazines are easily identified as they have inspection holes in the back to allow immediate determination that six loaded rounds are in each one when issued and when taken in unused at the end of a shift. This made officers accountable for each round of ammunition. Because Fairbairn wanted to be able to prove whether an SMP officer had fired the shot which killed or wounded a criminal or a bystander, SMP ammo was specially marked. Early loads from Kynoch had “SMP” cast into the base of the bullets, while later Remington loads were marked with “SMP” on both the case and the bullet.

SMP firearms training was very realistic. Fairbairn did not incorporate a large number of rounds into a typical course of fire; instead he used moving or bobbing targets, or required officers to run over simulated rooftops and under clotheslines and then shoot when they were winded, to simulate a real chase through the streets of Shanghai. Other courses of fire were set up in a bunker at the SMP range and simulated conditions in a darkened warehouse or opium den. Many of the tenets Fairbairn developed in Shanghai would later be incorporated into training he gave members of the Commandos, SOE, and OSS during World War II. His precepts were incorporated into the manual he wrote for the SMP in 1924: *Shanghai Municipal Police Instructions and Conditions of Practice for the .45 “Colt” Automatic Pistol*.

In addition to urging the adoption of the Colt .45 auto to give European officers a pistol capable of stopping an armed opponent quickly, Fairbairn was also instrumental in getting “bulletproof” vests for the SMP’s Reserve Unit – the equivalent of a modern SWAT team – which he commanded for some years, and for other SMP members. On one occasion, when a member of the Reserve Unit questioned Fairbairn on whether a new, improved vest the men had just been issued with would really stop a powerful bullet, Fairbairn drew his Colt .45 auto and fired into the questioner’s vest at close range. Fairbairn respected the power of the .45 ACP round and used it to prove his point!

## THE BIG COLT IN LATIN AMERICA

While many US Marines spent World War I fighting in Europe, contingents remained on “banana war” duty in the Dominican Republic (1916–24) and Haiti (1915–34). The Colt 1911 was popular with Marines serving during these counterinsurgency campaigns, as was also true of the Thompson submachine gun during the 1920s and 1930s. In Haiti, Charlemagne Peralte led the Caco Rebellion against the US-backed Haitian government. The US Marines had been tracking Peralte, though he proved quite elusive. However, in the fall of 1919 Marine Sergeant Herman Hanneken (who would later rise to the rank of brigadier-general) suggested a technique that would prove effective in other counterinsurgency operations later in the century: he proposed using members of the Haitian Gendarmerie, in which Hanneken also held the rank of captain, to form a pseudo-Caco band as a way of getting close to Peralte.



Hanneken and Cpl William Button USMC, who held a lieutenant's commission in the Gendarmerie, led a band of Gendarmes dressed in rags and posing as Cacos to meet Peralte. Once they were close, Button opened up on the Cacos with a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) while Hanneken put two 230-grain .45 ACP bullets from his 1911 into Peralte. After holding off Caco attacks, the pseudo-group led by Hanneken and Button returned with Peralte's body, proving that he had in fact been killed. Both Marines were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor; Hanneken received a field commission to second lieutenant, starting him on the road to his general's star.

Between the world wars the Colt .45 auto became increasingly popular in Latin America. Argentina remained the largest purchaser, procuring 21,616 pistols between 1914 and 1941. These orders included 11,420 for the Army, 2,290 for the Navy, 6,183 for the Federal Police, and 1,723 for others. A small group of US Navy pistols ended up in Argentine Navy service in the early years after World War II after two US cruisers, USS *Phoenix* and USS *Boise*, were sold to Argentina with all small arms aboard. The pistols were later re-marked with the Argentine crest and the words "ARMADA NACIONAL." The *Phoenix*, renamed *General Belgrano*, was sunk by a British submarine on May 2, 1982, during the Falklands War.

Another major Latin American user of the Colt .45 auto was Brazil, which purchased 16,880 pistols between the wars; most were ordered between 1937 and 1941. Of these weapons, 15,500 were for the Army, 1,200 for the Navy, and 180 for Rio de Janeiro's police. Pistols were marked with the Brazilian crest and the words "EXERCITO BRASILEIRO." Some were used in combat during World War II by the Brazilian Expeditionary Force in Italy.

Mexico also took substantial numbers of Colt .45 auto weapons. Between 1922 and 1941, a total of 5,400 M1911 and M1911A1 pistols went to Mexico. They were marked either "EJERCITO MEXICANO" or "EJERCITO NACIONAL."

Led by their sergeant with his .45 auto in hand, a .30cal machine-gun team crosses a bridge during maneuvers in August 1941. (NARA 111-SC-127925)



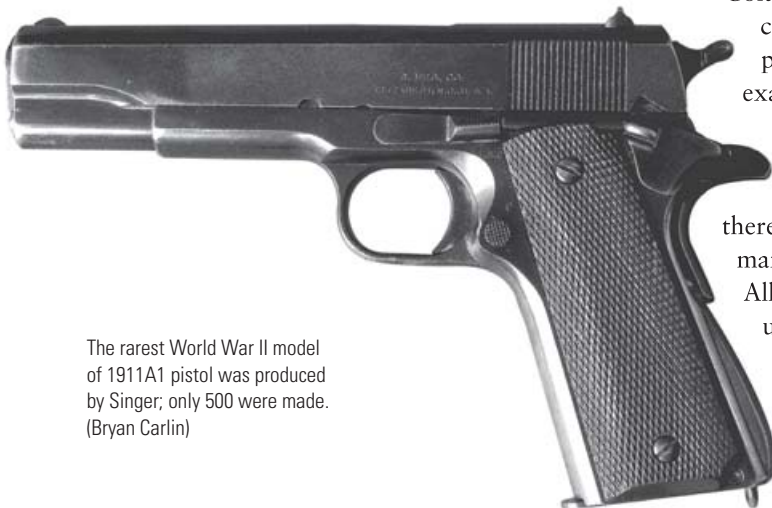
## TOWARD WORLD WAR II: ARMING THE GIs

With massive reductions in troop numbers after 1918, US Army strength was less than 150,000 for much of the interwar period; the Navy and Marine Corps had also scaled back personnel numbers. Consequently, stocks of 1911 pistols left over from World War I were sufficient, although many had gone in for refurbishment. At the end of World War I a substantial number of parts from Colt and Remington-UMC, as well as the government-owned machinery used by Remington-UMC, had been returned to Springfield Armory. These surplus parts, along with barrels and parts manufactured at the Armory, were used to refurbish 1911 pistols during the postwar years; some new pistols were also assembled using surplus parts.

However, by 1940 it was appearing likely that the US would be drawn into World War II. The USA instituted its first peacetime draft in September. As in 1917, the subsequent vast growth of the US Army necessitated the acquisition of arms. Although not yet at war, the US Army had observed combat in Europe and in China and was training for combat via a series of maneuvers – such as the large-scale Louisiana Maneuvers of 1940–41 – so as to integrate new tactics and equipment.

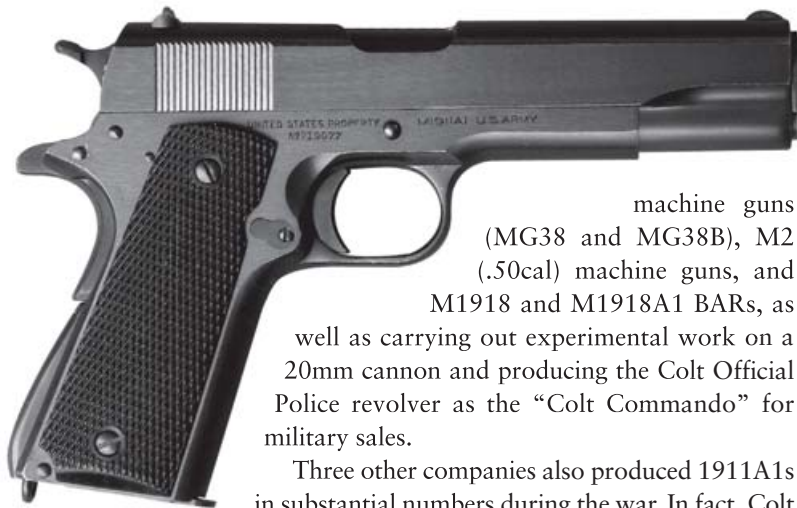
By December 1941, Colt was producing 5,000 military 1911A1 pistols a month. In addition, other manufacturers were given “educational orders” which allowed them to prepare for wartime production. Colt had used the Educational Orders Act to begin military production, while two other manufacturers had used the Act to allow studies on the feasibility of producing 1911A1 pistols. The Singer Manufacturing Company, best known for sewing machines, produced a demonstration lot of 500 pistols, which were sent to the US Army Air Force. Although these weapons met government standards and Singer was offered a contract to produce 15,000 more pistols, the company felt its abilities with precision engineering might be better employed in the area of artillery fire-control directors. For collectors a Singer 1911A1 is a sought-after rarity, with high-quality examples fetching up to \$50,000. The Harrington & Richardson Arms Company also received an educational order for 1911A1 pistols, but the few examples produced were not found acceptable by the Ordnance Department, and this company never really went into production.

Colt massively increased production capability and from 1941 to 1945 produced a staggering total of 629,000 examples of the M1911A1. Unlike the 1911 pistols produced during World War I, the 1911A1s had a flat Parkerized finish and plastic stocks; there were also changes to the sights, mainspring housing, hammer, and trigger. All these changes were aimed at speeding up production. What makes Colt’s production level so impressive is that the company was simultaneously producing M1917 water-cooled



The rarest World War II model of 1911A1 pistol was produced by Singer; only 500 were made. (Bryan Carlin)





This photograph of a World War II-era 1911A1 manufactured by Union Switch & Signal shows the pistol's distinctive Du-Lite finish. (Bryan Carlin)

machine guns (MG38 and MG38B), M2 (.50cal) machine guns, and M1918 and M1918A1 BARs, as well as carrying out experimental work on a 20mm cannon and producing the Colt Official Police revolver as the “Colt Commando” for military sales.

Three other companies also produced 1911A1s in substantial numbers during the war. In fact, Colt was not the largest producer of 1911A1 pistols during World War II: rather, Remington Rand, a prewar typewriter manufacturer, has that distinction. It delivered 877,751 pistols. Although Remington Rand produced most of the parts for its pistols, it did rely on High Standard – a firearms company known for producing accurate .22 pistols prior to World War II – for barrels. Efficiency of operations meant Remington Rand pistols were being delivered at the end of the war at a lower price than those from Colt.

Another supplier of 1911A1 pistols was the Ithaca Gun Company, Inc. – a maker of shotguns prior to the war. Initially, Ithaca experienced some delays in getting into production and purchased some of its early receivers from Springfield Armory and Colt. Ithaca would deliver 335,466 Model 1911A1 pistols between 1942 and 1945.

The fourth major producer of 1911A1 pistols during World War II was Union Switch & Signal, normally a producer of railway switches and other equipment. US&S began production in January 1943. The Ordnance Department only contracted for 55,000 US&S pistols, as the company was given another contract to produce parts for the M1 carbine. As with Remington Rand, US&S purchased barrels from High Standard. US&S pistols were of high quality and are noteworthy for their Du-Lite black-oxide finish.

## THE 1911 IN WORLD WAR II

There are many stories about the Colt .45 auto in use during World War II; one of the most impressive relates to former FBI agent Walter Walsh – already mentioned during his tenure tracking down Depression-era gangsters. Walsh, a reserve officer in the US Marine Corps, became active, and ran the USMC Scout Sniper School at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. However Col Walsh was keen to see combat, and he took part in the 1945 invasion of Okinawa. Stories of Walsh’s ability with the Colt .45 auto have become legendary, but the one most often repeated alludes to the time on Okinawa when a Japanese



Training with the 1911 pistol at the US Naval Academy during 1943. (LOC LC-USW3-034949-D)

sniper firing from a bunker had a group of Marines pinned down. Using his .45 auto, Walsh killed the sniper with a single shot through the slit of the bunker at a distance of 75 to 100yd. Walsh was such a good shot that he represented the USA in the 1948 Olympics in the 50m free pistol event and served as a coach on the US Olympic shooting team until 2000, when he was 93 years old.

As impressive as Walsh's shot was, it may have been matched on March 31, 1943, by 2Lt Owen Baggett of the US 7th Bomber Group over Burma. Baggett was copilot of a B-24 that had been severely damaged and set on fire in an attack by Japanese Mitsubishi Zero fighter aircraft. Baggett flew the plane until everyone had baled out, then jumped himself. The Japanese pilots began to strafe the aircrew hanging in their parachutes. Baggett, hit in the arm, decided to play dead in the hope that the Japanese would decide not to waste ammunition. However, one of the Zero pilots circled and approached very close to Baggett to make sure he was dead.

Baggett raised his M1911 pistol and fired four shots into the cockpit, hitting the pilot; the Zero stalled and crashed. Later reports from a Japanese officer indicated that the Zero pilot had died from a single bullet wound to the head. Since Baggett was taken prisoner upon landing it was impossible to check the story, but all indications are that 2Lt Baggett did indeed shoot down a Zero using a .45.



In September 1943, Lt Nels Lofgren, the copilot of a B-24 Liberator based in Alaska, shows how he fired his 1911 pistol at Japanese Zeros. (NARA 111-SC-337879)



Prior to jumping on the far side of the Rhine in March 1945, US paratroopers of the 17th Airborne Division show various methods of carrying the 1911 pistol. The kneeling soldier on the left has his pistol in a hip holster while the two standing officers in the center carry theirs in shoulder holsters. (NARA SC205688)

The M1911 played a key role in a number of engagements leading to awards of the Congressional Medal of Honor. In one case, Cpl Henry Warner of the Antitank Company, 2nd Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, US Army, used his .45 to drive off a tank. On December 20–21, 1944, near Butgenbach, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge, Warner helped stop an attack by German panzers, knocking out two with his 57mm antitank gun. When the latter gun jammed a German tank came to within 5yd of Warner's position, at which point the corporal drew his .45 auto and exchanged fire with the tank commander, driving the tank off. Warner was killed the next day after knocking out another German tank. He was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Another Medal of Honor winner, LtCol William O'Brien of the 1st Battalion, 105th Infantry, 27th Infantry Division, climbed aboard a US tank under fire to direct its assault on Japanese defenders who had his troops pinned down on Saipan. During the period June 20–July 7, 1944, O'Brien constantly exposed himself to danger by leading from the front, often amid heavy sniper fire. On July 7 O'Brien's battalion and another US Army battalion were attacked by between 3,000 and 5,000 Japanese. To keep the morale of his troops up, O'Brien moved up and down the line, a .45 pistol in each hand, engaging the Japanese and shouting encouragement. Though seriously wounded and out of .45 ammunition, O'Brien continued to fight by manning a .50cal jeep-mounted machine gun. O'Brien was eventually overrun and killed, but by this time enemy bodies were heaped around him.

In 1943, a Signal Corps photographer checks huts on Makin Atoll with his .45 auto drawn in case any Japanese remain in the area. (US Army)





## COMBAT INSIGHTS FROM WORLD WAR II

Mark Goodwin's book *US Infantry Weapons in Combat* offers valuable insights from troops who used the M1911 or M1911A1 pistol during World War II. Marion Throne had enlisted in the US Army in 1936 and was assigned to a horse cavalry unit under the command of Col George Patton. The Colt 1911 had been developed initially with the cavalry as a prime user, so Throne's description of cavalry training with the pistol c.1936 is interesting:

We qualified with the .45 while riding a horse. We had a course where you'd shoot two shots to the right and two shots to the left and then one overhead. Five shots was all we ever carried in a clip, we never carried seven. Then we would reload with the horse at a gallop and then fire another five rounds. It wasn't hard to learn to shoot from a horse.

Elsewhere in Godwin's book, Ralph Carmichael, who was with the US 1st Infantry Division, offers a good example of why many GIs who were not authorized to carry a .45 pistol in the Table of Organization and Equipment often picked up an unauthorized pistol to use:

### BELOW

This 1911A1 is depicted with a World War II-era shoulder holster. (Bryan Carlin)

### BELOW RIGHT

MajGen Clarence Huebner stands amid "dragon's teeth" antitank defenses during the advance into Germany in 1945. He carries his 1911 in a shoulder holster. (NARA 111-C-2309)

I also had a .45 that I had picked up after the Normandy landing. I had to use my .45 twice in combat. One time in Normandy, we were working from one hedgerow to the next. I can't remember why but I had the pistol out. The sergeant told me to check around the corner of a hedgerow. When I walked around the corner, there was a German soldier with his gun between his legs. He surprised me and I surprised him. He was sitting there with his gun and it was pointing right at me. I didn't know if he was waiting to ambush us, but I didn't wait to see. I shot him with my pistol and that was all she wrote. The .45 was a very effective round.





## Notes for cavalry armed with the M1911

The US War Department's *Basic Field Manual: Automatic Pistol Caliber .45 M1911 and M1911A1* (first published in 1940 and updated in 1942) includes interesting notes on training horses not to shy from pistol shots:

"Horses should be accustomed to the sight of barriers and targets and to the sound of firing. The training of horses is started by firing blanks in the vicinity of stables and corrals after horses have been worked or while they are feeding.

The first shots, a few in number, should be fired some distance from the corral or stable. Each day the firing is brought closer and closer to the animals until shots are finally fired in the air directly in the midst of the horses. Horses stand for this firing better in groups than they do singly.

"After the horses have become thoroughly accustomed to the firing under these conditions, they are taken out with a rider and an individual on the ground, both armed with a pistol. The rider points the pistol in various directions and snaps the trigger while the man on the ground fires blanks. At first the dismounted man places himself a short distance from the horse, gradually moving closer as he fires, until the horse no longer pays any attention to the movement of the gun, the click of the trigger, or the firing of the shot.

"Firing is then started from the animal. For the first few periods very few shots are fired and these always to the rear.

Firing these first shots to the rear is essential to good training since the average horse objects to the firing only because of the noise and muzzle blast in his ears. Therefore he must be accustomed to the noise by gradually changing the direction of fire from rear to front.

"Finally, in firing to the front care must be taken to place the pistol well in advance of the horse's ears, thereby preventing the noise from going directly into the ears and annoying the horse."

The mounted manual of arms is quite interesting as well. To avoid pointing the pistol at the horse during manipulations, the muzzle is rotated to the right with muzzle upward and left and the bridle hand used to grasp the slide to chamber a round. Magazine changes are carried out by lowering the pistol still pointed upward and left, while the right forefinger operates the magazine release button and the palm of the right hand catches the magazine. The right hand may then be used to remove a fresh magazine from the belt and insert it. Once the pistol has been initially loaded or a reload has taken place, the slide is grasped by the bridle hand with the muzzle still left and up while the right hand grasps the stock of the pistol and thrusts upward, the slide being released when it is in the full rear position. Once the round has been chambered the safety is engaged.

**BELOW** US cavalrymen charge with their 1911s drawn during maneuvers in August 1941. (NARA)



On a website devoted to the 1911 pistol ([www.sightm1911.com](http://www.sightm1911.com)), the son of World War II naval aviator Lt Walt Hagan offers another example of the .45's striking power. In describing his father's experience, the son relates:

As to the .45 incident, he was spending the night at a hastily-built airstrip in the jungle on one of the Philippine islands. He was in a GP Medium tent with a half-dozen other aviators when some headhunters came in through the perimeter. One of them ripped aside the tent flap and marched in waving the local equivalent of a machete. One aviator came up with an M-1 carbine and popped two rounds into the native, both in the chest, one above each nipple. The headhunter didn't even flinch, just kept coming and grabbed one of the aviators, raising his machete. My father had his 1911A1 .45 out by this time, and capped the headhunter once in the forehead. He was aiming for between the eyes, but his round impacted a little above the right eye. He flinched at that one – down and out like shutting off a light switch. The guy with the M-1 carbine swapped it out for a .45 the next morning.

It is interesting to note that more than three decades after the 1911 had been developed in response to the Moro challenge in the Philippines, it was again called upon to deliver stopping power against warriors in the same location.

Members of Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Detachment 101 operating behind Japanese lines with the Kachins in Burma found their 1911A1 pistols were constant companions. However, Richard Dunlop, in his book *Behind Japanese Lines with the OSS in Burma*, mentions a couple of instances where the pistols were not used as intended. For example, he describes the method used by Carl Eifler, the commander of Detachment 101, for motivating troops during runs at the plantation where they prepared for insertion behind Japanese lines:



In Sicily during 1943, a US soldier uses his .45 to shoot the lock off the door of a suspected sniper hide. (NARA 111-SC-177895)



At least once a day they ran an obstacle course in the nearby jungle. Carl Eifler added an inimitable touch of realism to their exercise by firing his .45 a few inches ahead of their chests, keeping a clinical eye on each recruit to see how he reacted.

The equipment of a member of the US 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment is laid out for inspection, Australia, February 1943. Note the Colt 1911A1 with a trench knife carried behind it in the holster. (NARA 111-SC-185273)

It also proved necessary to warn Detachment 101 members that even though a .45 auto hit hard, it was not designed for tiger hunting:

A sign was put up at 101 headquarters advising personnel not to shoot at tigers with their .45s. When word of the fate of the tea planter's companion got around, 101 men understood that if they did hit a tiger with a .45 slug, it would only serve to make him angry. As it was, even without such provocation, tigers just came naturally with a good bump of built-in anger.

## COLTS AND TOMMYS: IN BRITISH SERVICE

Although most M1911A1 pistols produced during World War II were for US forces, some were shipped to allies under the Lend-Lease Act. The largest number of .45 ACP-caliber Model 1911 and 1911A1 pistols – 39,592 examples – went to the UK, while Free French forces received 19,325 and the Soviet Union 12,977. Smaller numbers went to Canada, Nationalist China, and various South American countries. Early in the



W. E. Fairbairn prepares to load a magazine into a .45 auto prior to sending a trainee through one of his tactical scenarios. (Dorothea Fairbairn)



war, when the UK was desperate for weapons, the British Purchasing Commission had acquired a substantial number of Colt Government Models in both .45 ACP and .38 Super calibers.

W. E. Fairbairn and E. A. Sykes brought their respect for the Colt 1911 as a manstopper with them from Shanghai to training schools for the Commandos and the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Both men demonstrated and taught the one-handed rapid-engagement techniques perfected in Shanghai. Commando training with the .45 auto was practical and designed to give the Commando the skills to draw quickly and kill a German before the German could kill him. Fairbairn's "haunted houses" were forerunners of the "killing houses" used by today's special-forces units; these taught trainees to make decisions under stress and engage targets effectively in realistic scenarios. As he had in Shanghai, Fairbairn helped his trainees develop practical combat skills, but he also helped give them the mindset to fight and win.

Numerous examples of both the M1911 and the M1911A1 were used by the British Commandos in World War II. In Niall Cherry's *Striking Back*, Harry Pexton recalls an incident during training in November 1940. A group of early Commandos were to conduct a parachute demonstration in which they would jump onto Salisbury Plain and infiltrate the village of Shrewton, which would be defended by troops ordered to stop the "airborne invaders." Pexton's account shows that even at this early stage of the war the .45 auto was already an important weapon for the British:

We travelled down from Ringway by bus to RAF Old Sarum and the next day we flew in Whitleys and jumped onto the plain. I had never seen such a reception committee. We gathered together and ran between an avenue of brass hats. It seemed like all of the top brass in England were there and were all applauding as we ran between them. Naturally, with such a gathering of senior officers, there was a good selection of vehicles and as part of our training, taking a vehicle was quite easy. Trouble was they

were all pointing the wrong way except one rather large estate type car, complete with driver. Our CO put a .45 automatic in the driver's neck and calmly told him to drive us away. He was only too willing to do so. We all piled in or on the car and drove away. Eventually we stopped and pushed the car into a ditch. We then stopped a lorry with a trailer and we all laid on the floor of the truck and trailer ordering the driver toward Shrewton. The defending troops never even stopped and searched the truck and we were inside the village. We got the driver to stop near the church and soon our flag was flying from the top of the flagpole.

The .45 pistol was at its best in very close combat, when it generally put an enemy down with one shot. In *Commandos in Exile*, Nick van der Bijl relates an incident during the breakout from Normandy involving French- and German-speaking members of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando, who were attached to the British 1st Special Service Brigade to provide linguistic assistance. German-speakers often crawled beyond British lines to try to locate German positions by calling out. On August 20, 1944, French Commandos were leading an advance across the Dives River and laying white tape to guide the troops following them. Lt Alex Lofi was leading a patrol of No. 6 Troop (French) when the men came under fire from a German machine-gun emplacement. Lofi and SgtMaj Paul Chausse quickly organized a counterattack by No. 5 Troop as No. 6 Troop withdrew:

With bayonets fixed and supported by covering fire, the twelve Commandos of 5 Troop, in extended line, hurled themselves at the enemy, so often practised at Achnacarry, and, in spite of their fatigue, fought through the valley, knocking out one enemy trench after another in hand-to-hand fighting. Almost nose-to-nose with a young lieutenant already wounded in the leg, Chausse shot him in the stomach with his .45 Colt, and did not stop until he reached a small orchard where the Troop regrouped.



A member of 30 Commando advances in Albania with .45 auto in hand. Note the lanyard fixed to the pistol. (IWM NA 17403)



This Commando Bren-gunner at Anzio in 1944 has his 1911 pistol tucked into his belt. (IWM NA 12471)

Legendary SAS officer Blair “Paddy” Mayne was a great fan of the Colt .45 auto and often went into combat armed only with his pistol. Mayne was known to be a very good shot with his .45. In *SAS: The History of the Special Raiding Squadron*, “Paddy’s Men” Stewart McClean describes one example of Mayne’s skill with his .45 auto:

Sergeant-Major Rose was another who had good reason to be thankful for the alertness of his commanding officer as two well placed rounds from Mayne’s Colt .45 killed an Italian soldier who had been just about to shoot the warrant officer in the back. There was no admonition in his voice. “Be careful Mister Rose” was the only comment heard from Mayne.

Another type of British special-forces unit that found the M1911A1 useful was the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPPs), which carried out clandestine beach reconnaissance prior to landings. In *Stealthily by Night*, Ian Trenowden states:

Naval beach reconnaissance officers did not swim unencumbered: they carried arms – a .38 pistol and ammunition, which might or might not fire after immersion – and a fighting knife. Later, Major L. Scott-Bowden would prove that the best operational handgun for COPP operatives was the 0.45 Colt Automatic: it had superior stopping power and would fire after immersion, provided it was stripped-down after every sortie.

## POSTWAR SERVICE: KOREA AND ONWARD

Once the World War II production of 1911A1 pistols was complete, the USA had stockpiles of the pistol that would last until it was replaced by the Beretta M9 pistol, starting in 1985. As had been the case after World War I, many pistols returned home in the duffel bags of troops. Many others were eventually sold to American shooters through the Civilian Marksmanship Program. Some unused commercial Colt Government Model pistols and military 1911 and 1911A1 pistols supplied to Allies during World War II came back into the USA and these too were sold to civilians.

During the 40 years in which the M1911 and M1911A1 remained in service after the war, military arsenals periodically refurbished pistols as needed, and the weapons continued to see combat wherever US troops were engaged. In Korea, US troops had virtually the same weapons as in World War II.





LtGen Robert L. Eichelberger inspects an honor guard of the 1st Cavalry Division in Japan in 1947. The NCO in the right foreground has his 1911 pistol with slide locked back for inspection. (NARA 111-SC-296511)

In Mark Goodwin's book *US Infantry Weapons in Combat*, Jack Valentine recalls his use of the .45 auto while serving in Korea with the 25th Infantry Division:

I carried a .45 pistol for most of the time I was over there. A lot of guys had Tokarev pistols they had picked up, but I figured if I was going to carry a pistol, it would be a Colt .45. I picked one up not long after I got to Korea. There were guns all over the place and it wasn't hard to get ammo for it. I used to sleep with it in my hand. I would keep a round in the chamber with the hammer in the half cock position, solely because it was easy to reach, cock, and use at a moment's notice. That way I only had to finish cocking it to shoot. I only had to use the .45 once.

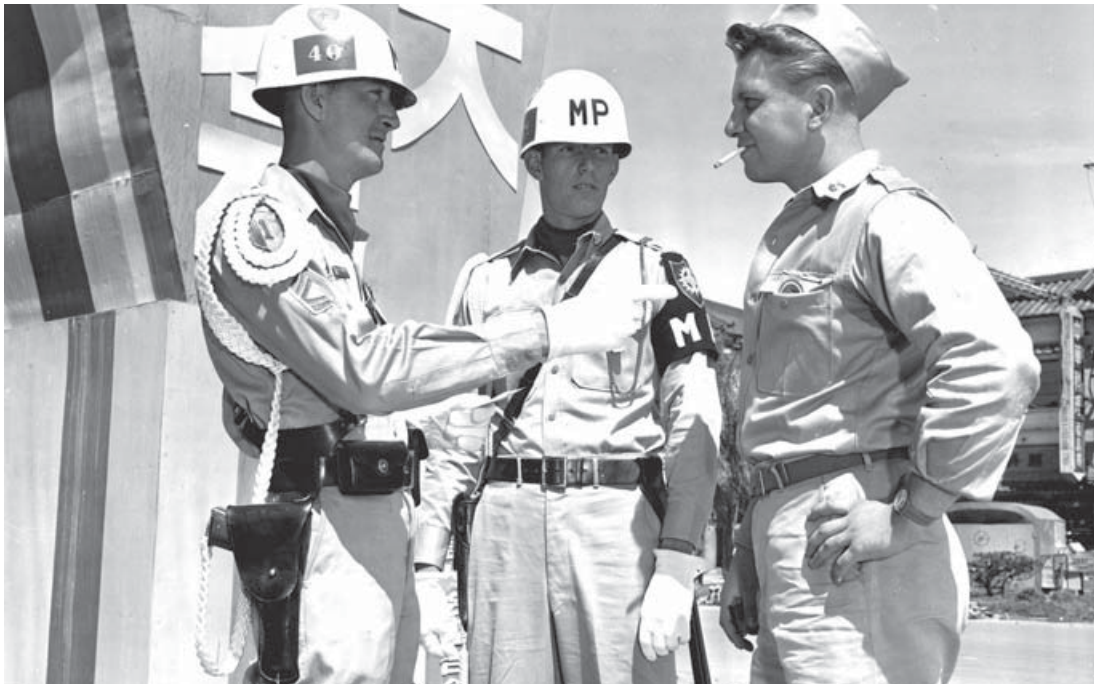
This member of the 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, rides a captured North Korean horse in August 1955. He wears his 1911 pistol. (NARA 111-SC-346733)



It was around the end of November 1950, we were about 40 miles south of the Yalu River at the time. The battalion was in reserve, so we weren't on the front line. It was cold and we had a few bonfires going. We had some roving guards pulling security for us. During the night, one of our sergeants got up to piss. He didn't want to walk all the way to the latrine, so he was pissing close to where we were sleeping. He spotted a group of short horses and men passing through our area. He knew that wasn't right and he jumped up on our mess truck which had a ring-mounted .50 on it. He opened up on the group of Chinese and the horses. After he started shooting it was utter chaos. I was asleep in my sleeping bag; but when I heard the first shot I opened my eyes. Standing directly over the top of me was a Chinese soldier with a Russian submachinegun. He was kicking my rifle away from my side. I cocked the pistol and fired at him through the sleeping bag three or four times. After the first shot I couldn't see because feathers were flying everywhere. I only hit him one time, in the head, I'm not sure if it was the first shot or the second, third or fourth. The round knocked him over. My sleeping bag was ruined, it had a big 15-inch gash in it. The next day I discovered that the slide of the pistol had left marks on my chest. It's amazing that the pistol functioned in the bag like that.

During 1953, MPs of the US XVI Corps wearing holstered 1911 pistols correct a uniform violation on a soldier. (NARA 111-SC-428475)

In the years after the Korean War the M1911 continued to serve the pistol needs of the US Army and Marine Corps, though in 1960 the US Air Force, due to the preference of General Curtis LeMay for the adjustable-sight Model 15 revolver, adopted a Smith & Wesson .38 Special revolver to replace the .45 auto.



The pistol also remained in service with the forces of other nations across the world. The author was told an interesting story about post-World War II use of the Colt Lightweight Commander Pistol by a female member of British military intelligence (MI6). According to this source, a retired British intelligence officer, the female agent had carried the Commander in Kenya during the Mau Mau Rebellion of 1952–60 and had accounted for multiple Mau Mau with it during one attempted ambush of her vehicle.

## TUNNEL RATS: THE .45 IN VIETNAM

The next major conflict in which the forces of the USA and its allies would use the M1911 in action was Vietnam. Allies were often issued US-made weapons such as the M1911, M1 or M2 carbine, and M1 Garand. The small stature of the South Vietnamese made it somewhat difficult for them to use the 1911. As a result, officers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) often tried to obtain Smith & Wesson .38 Special revolvers. On the other hand, Filipino troops serving in Vietnam liked the M1911, and copies have been produced in the Philippines, where it is still a popular weapon. South Korean troops who were issued the M1911 seemed satisfied with it.



In January 1967, a "tunnel rat" of the 25th Infantry Division prepares to check a Viet Cong tunnel. He has his 1911 pistol and a flashlight. (NARA CC-38112)



Among US users of the .45 auto were the “tunnel rats,” who entered and searched Viet Cong tunnel complexes. Often with just a flashlight and pistol, and sometimes a fighting knife, the tunnel rats would crawl through these dark confined spaces on the alert for booby traps, snakes, or Viet Cong. Often the Viet Cong would construct booby traps that used snakes; the latter would be dropped on the unsuspecting soldier when he stumbled upon a release. Tunnel rats would therefore often load their pistols with .45 shot cartridges to increase their chances of killing a snake quickly at close quarters. Because the .45 auto was so loud in these confined spaces, some tunnel rats constructed improvised suppressors for their pistols.

The tunnel rats were not the only ones to use .45 autos against snakes. After stories circulated about snakes being found in outhouses (field latrines), and of Viet Cong assassins who would hide beneath them and shoot unsuspecting soldiers while they were seated, many troops made a point of taking an M1911 with them to the latrine.

A particularly notable use of the .45 auto in Vietnam occurred in 1969, when two Navy helicopter gunships were scouting near the Cambodian border. One of the gunships was hit and crashed, killing or injuring the entire crew. Petty Officer R. J. Thomas, a SEAL who was along as an observer, was badly injured, yet helped pull as many other crew members as possible from the downed aircraft. As North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers approached the wreck, Thomas grabbed the only weapon available – a 1911A1 pistol – and began engaging the enemy at 100yd. Over the next 30 minutes Thomas kept the enemy at bay with well-aimed fire from his .45. Just as the enemy forces were starting to close in, other SEALs arrived to give covering fire and a US Army gunship landed to extract the survivors. With his .45 down to its last few rounds, Thomas killed a Viet Cong at a few yards just before being pulled onto the helicopter as it lifted off from the very hot landing zone.

Reports of the number of Viet Cong killed by Thomas ranged from ten to 37. Reports also vary on the M1911A1 he used. Some claim that Thomas, a Navy competitive marksman, had his own match-tuned .45 auto, while other reports claim the pistol had been carried by a member of the helicopter flight crew. Whichever is the case, Thomas certainly demonstrated that in the hands of a skillful user the .45 auto remained a deadly combat weapon, even at ranges beyond what most considered to be pistol range.

Another impressive story of the 1911's use in Vietnam comes from the [sightm1911.com](http://sightm1911.com) website, related by John E. Holbrook:

On July 13, 1967, while on one of these missions, we were attacked by a force of approximately 50 Viet Cong. As the attack developed my M16A1 jammed, which left me unarmed. I came across a wounded Marine officer, Captain Eldon M. Martin lying in a rice paddy. Captain Martin, although severely wounded, was alert and indicated that he was lying on an M14, which was under water and that he had a fully loaded .45 pistol in his holster.

As I removed the Colt 1911A1 automatic (serial # 23002XX) from the Captain, I observed three VC armed with AK-47s moving toward me in a crouched position through the thick grass which was about 2 meters high. I waited until they were about 4 meters from me. I rose to a kneeling position using the grass as a shield. I put the front sight of the Colt on the man on the left and pulled the trigger. The man in the middle went down. I had jerked the trigger and was very lucky to have gotten a hit. I then moved back to the man on the left, held my breath and fired again. This round hit the man on the left in the chest and he went down. The last man realized what was happening and began firing his AK in my direction. I could see the bullets hitting the water in front of me as he brought the AK up. I fired my third round which hit the magazine of the AK, then glanced down striking him in the right leg. As he spun around from the impact of the 230 grain bullet, I fired two more rounds one of which hit him in the temple just above the left eye. The gunfight was over.

This action lasted not more than 4 seconds and I got four hits with five rounds of GI 230 grain hardball from a pistol that had mud and water in it. All of these hits were one shot stops against three men armed with automatic weapons. God bless the .45 ACP.

## **TOWARD A NEW CENTURY: SPECIAL FORCES 1911s**

After Vietnam the M1911 served for another decade before being replaced by the Beretta M9. During that period some of the M1911 and M1911A1 pistols remaining in military arsenals received special work. For example, between 1972 and 1982 a total of 1,004 M15 General Officer .45 autos (intended for high-ranking officers to use) were fabricated at Rock Island Arsenal from existing stocks of M1911A1 pistols. This model had a shorter barrel – at 4.25in the same length as that on the Colt Commander – and improved sights. The pistol was hand-fitted and nicely finished, and incorporated a brass plate on the left grip with the recipient general's name inscribed on it. Military arsenals continued to build accurized match pistols for military competitors based on M1911A1s in stock.

An interesting group of accurized M1911A1 pistols was built by Army Marksmanship gunsmiths for the Delta Force special unit when it was formed in late 1977. The 1911 was in the military inventory and offered stopping power and reliability. Once worked over by Army gunsmiths the 1911 gave operators a pistol capable of the precision shot-placement needed in hostage-rescue operations.

Another pistol built for a special-operations unit using existing World War II equipment was the MEUSOC (Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Operations Capable) pistol. These were issued to Marine Recon personnel and others trained for special operations and assigned to expeditionary units – Marine quick-reaction forces deployed afloat. The first examples of the MEUSOC pistol were built in 1985, and continued to be built for many years thereafter, by the Quantico-based Marine Corps Precision











This photograph of two Special General Officer 1911A1 pistols shows both sides of the weapon and the holster and belt for them. (Bryan Carlin)

Weapons Section using World War II 1911A1 frames, but with other parts ordered from civilian contractors who specialized in upgrading 1911-type pistols. Each pistol was custom-built, so parts were not interchangeable. Since highly trained operators normally maintain their pistols individually rather than doing “gang cleaning,” this has not proved to be a major issue. Nevertheless, the last four digits of each MEUSOC pistol’s serial number were stamped on each major component. More recent MEUSOC and MARSOC (Marine Corps Special Operations Command) pistols have been obtained from US commercial sources; these will be discussed later.

## THE .45 AUTO IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

The 1911-type auto has remained a serious law-enforcement pistol for SWAT teams and some other US law-enforcement bodies. During the first couple of decades after World War II, Colt .38 Super autos were issued to officers of St Louis Police Department – homicide detectives and others who dealt with especially dangerous felons. However, any officer issued with the .38 Super had to be a combat veteran who was already familiar with the 1911A1.

### The 1911 since 9/11 (previous pages)

In Afghanistan, a US Marine Corps Special Operations Reconnaissance team has encountered an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) which has knocked out one of its Humvees and injured some Marines. While a Marine medic administers to a wounded comrade, other Marines from the damaged Humvee engage while another Humvee gives heavier fire support. The Marine operator in the foreground has sustained an injury to his arm and is, therefore, engaging with his MARSOC pistol using one hand only. Note that the Taliban with the RPG was fired upon first as offering the greatest immediate threat.



A friend of the author's was a police officer in St Louis assigned to foot patrol in the low-income housing projects – one of the most dangerous jobs in the department. After a few years he decided to take a job with the St Louis County Police Department, where he felt he might encounter fewer problems. However, his superiors felt that as a veteran of inner-city St Louis he could deal well with tougher neighborhoods, so he was assigned to one of the rougher areas in the county.

On one of his first nights on patrol he saw a group of men drinking beer and shooting dice and stopped to have a chat. A couple of the locals, realizing he was new but seemed a bit old to be a rookie, asked where he had come from. When he replied that he had come from the city they paid more attention, as they inferred he was used to rough neighborhoods. Eyeing the Smith & Wesson .38 Special revolver on his hip, they asked what he carried. He replied that it was a .38, but then pulled open his jacket to reveal a Colt .45 auto in a shoulder holster and indicated that this was for serious work. That convinced those on his beat that he meant business. With a typical big-city cop's admonition that it was all right if they wanted to shoot dice, but if they started slashing each other with razors over the game he'd be back to put them in cuffs, he left. He had no trouble with those on his beat and got along with them just fine. They realized that if he carried a .45 auto, he must be a "serious man"!

A US Marine Corps MP practices engagement with his 1911 pistol while using his patrol car as cover. (USMC)







# IMPACT

## The ultimate manstopper

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The M1911 pistol has had an enormous impact on the development of combat handguns since its adoption by the US armed forces – an influence that is still widely apparent today. Before discussing the impact of the weapon, though, it makes sense to discuss the impact of the .45 ACP cartridge.

### OTHER GUNS USING .45 ACP

Numerous other weapons have been chambered for the .45 ACP cartridge. The most famous is probably the Thompson submachine gun, developed by John T. Thompson. He was very familiar with the .45 ACP round from his work on the development of the cartridge for the Colt 1911. The first production Thompson model was the M1921, which saw service with law-enforcement agencies, mine and factory security guards to counter labor unrest, US Marines during the “banana wars,” gangsters and federal agents, and the Irish Republican Army, among others (see WPN 1: *The Thompson Submachine Gun*). During World War II the Thompson’s descendants, the M1 and M1A1, saw widespread service with US, British and other forces around the world. Some users felt the Thompson was heavy and a bit hard to control on full auto fire, but they also appreciated the deadly effect of a hail of 230-grain .45 ACP bullets.

Other US military submachine guns were also chambered for the .45 ACP round. The .45 ACP-caliber Reising saw service with the US Marine Corps as well as Naval and Coast Guard units during World War II, but problems in combat – especially in the mud of the south Pacific – made it

an unpopular weapon. The M3 submachine gun, though, known among GIs as the “Grease Gun,” proved highly reliable and much less expensive to manufacture than the Thompson. The M3 remained in service with US tank crews, truck drivers, and soldiers in some other units as late as the 1991 Gulf War. When Delta Force was first formed it used M3A1s, and Marine Recon units retained them for many years. During the Vietnam era, users liked the slow cyclic rate of the M3, which let them place the .45 ACP rounds on target more effectively.

Various other submachine guns were also chambered for the .45 ACP round, including the Ingram M6 and M10, the recent HK UMP, the Argentine M57 Halcón and the Brazilian M/50.

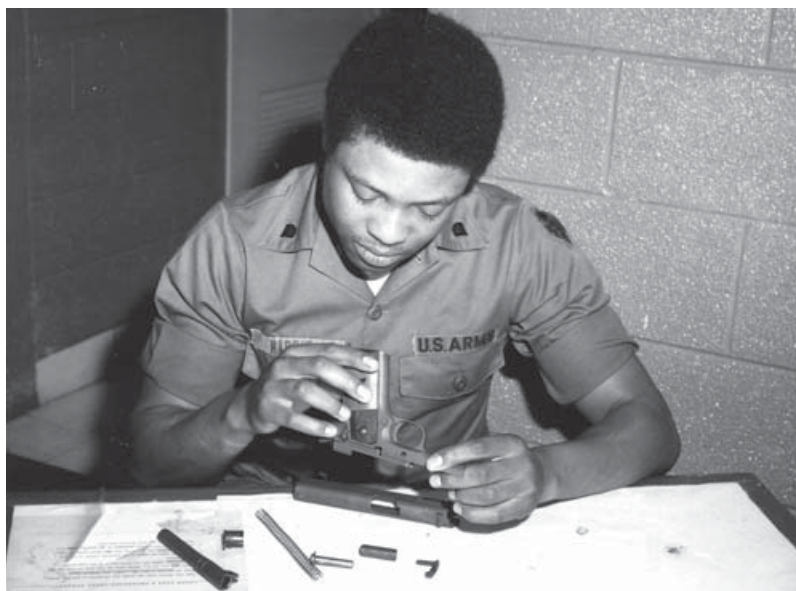
The most inexpensive pistol ever chambered for the .45 ACP cartridge was the World War II FP-45 “Liberator.” This single-shot pistol was produced from sheet metal by the Inland Guide Lamp Manufacturing Division of General Motors. Designed for inexpensive mass production, the Liberator had only 23 parts, most of them stamped. The barrel was unrifled, giving an effective range with the .45 ACP cartridge of about 25ft. The gun was designed to be dropped to resistance fighters who would, theoretically, use the pistol to kill a German or Japanese soldier so his weapon could be taken. It was packed in a sealed cardboard box containing the pistol, ten rounds of .45 ACP ammunition, a wooden dowel to push out spent cases, and an instruction sheet in cartoon form intended to negate the need to translate instructions into different languages.

Responsibility for distributing the Liberator was given to the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS well understood the “psy ops” aspect of the Liberator: any found by the enemy after they were dropped would cause the latter to ponder how many more might be in resistance fighters’ hands!



The OSS's .45 ACP Liberator pistol, intended for resistance fighters. The OSS and its British equivalent, the SOE, also found the .45 ACP to be an ideal cartridge for clandestine use with silenced weapons, for it was subsonic and did not create the resonant “crack” in flight that gave away the firing of supersonic cartridges. The OSS and SOE were both supplied with silenced weapons that chambered the .45 round, predominantly the Thompson and M3 “Grease Gun” submachine guns. Even when fired on full-automatic, these guns made no more noise than an air rifle and would have been undetectable in a busy environment. (Rama)

A US soldier cleans his 1911 pistol in 1978. Disassembly for cleaning required a more complicated drill than that used for the 1911's replacement, the Beretta M9. Care had to be taken not to lose any parts, especially the recoil spring, which was under tension. Once the weapon was disassembled cleaning was straightforward. (NARA 111-SC-110837)



In Europe, however, drops of more effective weapons such as the British Sten submachine gun precluded the need for the Liberator. Most of those distributed went to China and the Philippines. The original price paid by the US government per weapon was \$2.40, hence its nickname the “Woolworth Pistol.” Ironically, an example in its original box with all accessories might fetch a thousand times that amount from a collector of US World War II firearms.

Pistols that are direct copies of the Colt M1911 will be discussed later; however, numerous other pistols have been chambered for the .45 ACP round. One of the most interesting is the Chinese Shansei Arsenal copy of the Mauser C96 in .45 ACP caliber. Virtually every major handgun manufacturer in the West, especially if they are keen to sell pistols in the USA, has offered a .45 ACP autoloader. Among the most noteworthy are Smith & Wesson, Ruger, Heckler & Koch, Glock, FNH, SIG, CZ, and Beretta. Although some of these manufacturers now offer copies of the 1911, they have also produced double-action polymer high-tech pistols in .45 ACP as well.

The concept of the revolver chambered for the .45 ACP round, as with the World War I 1917 revolvers, did not die out either. Smith & Wesson has offered various large-frame revolvers chambered for the .45 ACP round in the years since World War I. More than a century after its introduction, the .45 ACP pistol is more popular than ever.

The US armed forces adopted one of the newer high-tech .45 ACP pistols in limited numbers. The Heckler & Koch MK23 Mod. 0 was adopted by the US Special Operations Command during the 1990s as an “Offensive Handgun Weapons System.” The MK23 is a big pistol, with an overall length of 9.7in (16.5in with suppressor). Its weight when loaded is about 51oz. Because it uses a double-column magazine, the MK23 has a capacity of 12+1 .45 ACP cartridges. Designed for use with a suppressor and an



illuminator – the AN/PEQ-6, which combines white light, infrared, and laser – the MK23 has many advantages that suit it for clandestine special-ops use; however, it is too big to serve as a companion pistol, which special operators carry as a backup to their carbine or rifle. As a result, the MK23 is generally drawn for certain missions rather than being carried at all times.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN .45 ACP

Just as modern pistols have been designed around the .45 ACP cartridge, the round itself has seen many innovations. For many years, the 230-grain full-metal-case military load for the .45 ACP has been considered an excellent manstopper. However, since World War II a lot of work has been done in developing expanding bullets for law-enforcement usage and for use by specialized counterterrorist units. To deal with criminals or terrorists wearing ballistic vests or using cover, bullets offering enhanced penetration have also been developed.

A 185-grain target load for the ACP was generally used for competition shooting, but some carried it in their combat M1911s as well. Prior to World War II and for decades thereafter, some shooters hand-loaded bullets, which gave greater expansion in the .45 ACP cartridge. Generally, though, the velocity of the standard load – around 830fps – was not enough to expand hollow-point bullets. Additionally, such bullets might not feed reliably. As the M1911 pistol grew in popularity as a combat pistol, to an extent through the advocacy of former USMC officer Jeff Cooper, many pistolsmiths specialized in making the pistol more reliable by throating the barrel and polishing the feed ramp.

Ammunition manufacturers responded by offering an array of loads designed to deliver more energy inside of an adversary. Although there were no doubt earlier experiments, the first specialized combat ammunition for the .45 ACP pistol that the author tried was a 230-grain hollow-point manufactured by Norma. This load retained the standard .45 ACP velocity – about 850fps – and did not expand generally, though the hollow point did gouge more as it entered flesh, and delivered more power. The first high-velocity load using a lighter bullet that the author remembers was the Super Vel, which drove a 190-grain jacketed hollow-point (JHP) bullet at 1,060fps and did expand.

US sailors practice with their 1911 pistols at an Alaskan firing range during June 1945. (NARA 80-G-342166)



Over the last 30 years or so, a wide variety of high-performance .45 ACP ammunition has become available. One of the most popular loads is Federal's Hydra-Shok, which uses a 230-grain JHP at 850fps, yet expands reliably to .80in or so upon impact. Remington's Golden Saber JHP uses a 230-grain bullet at 875fps that expands about as well as the Hydra-Shok. Cor-Bon employs a lighter 185-grain JHP at 1,150fps, while Winchester's Silver Tip JHP load also uses a 185-grain bullet at 1,100fps. There are other high-performance loads available, but those mentioned above are among the most popular.

There was also some call for .45 ACP loads with extreme penetration. During the late 1970s or early 1980s, France's GIGN counterterrorist unit put out a bid spec for ammunition that would expand and offer extreme penetration. The resulting THV cartridge used very light bullets with a "pagoda" shape at very high velocity. One of the five calibers loaded was .45 ACP, which drove a 60-grain bullet at 2,034fps.

To give some idea of the effectiveness of .45 ACP loads in actual shootings, Evan Marshall and Edwin Sanow in their book *Street Stoppers* cite information that they gathered from law-enforcement agencies around the world. They developed data on the percentage of the time a given load resulted in a "one-shot stop" (i.e. one hit from the round put the adversary out of action). The standard 230-grain FMC (full-metal-case) load in use since 1911 resulted in a one-shot stop about 63–65 percent of the time. By comparison, Federal's Hydra-Shok resulted in a one-shot stop 94 percent of the time, and Cor-Bon's 185-grain JHP 92 percent of the time. Other high-performance ammunition produced results in the 85 percent or better range.

## 1911: A WORLDWIDE SUCCESS

Another indication of the success of the M1911 pistol is the number of countries that have used the weapon; these include Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Fiji, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Indonesia, Iran, Liberia, Lithuania, Mexico, Nazi Germany (using captured Norwegian or US versions), Nicaragua, Norway, the Philippines, Spain, South Korea, South Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe. Many of these countries have had close ties with the USA and received M1911s or M1911A1s as part of military assistance. Nevertheless, this does show the wide influence the pistol has had.

A number of countries have actually manufactured direct copies of the M1911, or pistols heavily influenced by it. The first licensed copies of the M1911 were produced in Norway. The Norwegian Colt "Automatisk Pistol Model 1912" went into production in 1917. Weapons in this first lot, numbering 500, were virtually identical to the Colt 1911. Some changes were made in the later Model 1914, most notably an enlarged slide-release lever. This modification may have been prompted by climate factors in Norway, since users there often have to wear gloves. By 1940 some 22,000 Model

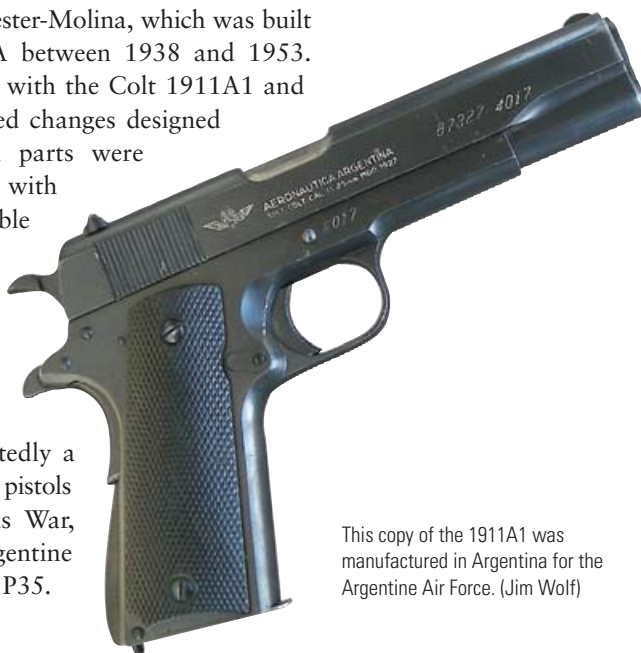


This 1911-type pistol is of Norwegian manufacture. Many were used by the Germans after conquering Norway in 1940. (Jan Jett)

1914 pistols had been produced in Norway. Once the Germans had occupied Norway that year, they used Norwegian machines to produce about 10,000 M1914s for the German armed forces. These pistols were designated “Pistole 657 (n)” by the Germans, but retained the Norwegian markings.

Argentina was the foremost user of domestically produced 1911-type pistols. Colt negotiated a licensing agreement with Argentina under which the company would make 10,000 Colt 1911A1 pistols for the Argentine Army. These weapons were delivered between 1927 and 1933. The agreement also required Colt engineers to help Argentina set up its own production facility. Argentina produced some 14,000 pistols using Colt machines between 1927 and 1942 at the Esteban de Luca Arsenal in Buenos Aires. However, in 1941 Dirección General de Fabricaciones Militares (DGFM) was established and another 88,494 Sistema Colt pistols were produced there before production ceased in 1966. Pistols were made for the Argentine Army, Navy, and Air Force as well as for police agencies.

Also produced in Argentina was the Ballester-Molina, which was built by Hispano Argentina de Automotives SA between 1938 and 1953. The Ballester-Molina had many similarities with the Colt 1911A1 and the M1927 DGFM pistols, but incorporated changes designed to simplify production and only certain parts were interchangeable. Since it was used along with the M1927 pistols, it did have interchangeable magazines. One of the most obvious simplifications to the Ballester-Molina was the elimination of the grip safety. Within Argentina many Ballester-Molina weapons were sold to police agencies. Some 10,000 to 15,000 such pistols were sold to the British during World War II, with the SOE reportedly a major user. Both M1927 and Ballester-Molina pistols were reportedly used during the Falklands War, although they had been superseded in Argentine service by the Argentine-produced Browning P35.



This copy of the 1911A1 was manufactured in Argentina for the Argentine Air Force. (Jim Wolf)





This snapshot shows an Argentine soldier from Batallón de Infantería de Marina 5 on Mount Tumbledown during the Argentine occupation of the Falkland Islands. The soldier carries a Ballester-Molina pistol under his left arm. (IWM FKD 2935)

Another Latin American pistol which owed some of its design features to the M1911 was the Mexican Obregón. Mexico had adopted the Colt 1911 after World War I and had received 1911A1s in 1926. During the 1930s, Alejandro Obregón had designed a pistol which resembled the Colt 1911A1, though it had a more rounded slide and used a rotating bolt locking mechanism. Despite some government support, fewer than 1,000 Obregón pistols were produced at the Fábrica Nacional de Armas México in Mexico City between 1934 and 1938. Because so few were produced, the Obregón is highly sought-after by collectors of automatic pistols.

The M1911 design seemed to have special appeal in Spanish-speaking countries, as the Spanish companies Star and Llama produced unlicensed copies for many years. Star offered the widest array of 1911-influenced pistols, beginning in 1920 with the Modelo Militar, though the Model in 1922 was the first to

offer .45 ACP chambering. To compete with the C96 Mauser in the Far East, versions of the Model A were offered with select-fire capability (Model AD) and detachable shoulder stocks, which were also available on semiautomatic versions. In 1931 the Model P was introduced as a .45 ACP pistol with a heavier frame and other features closer to the M1911. It was primarily designed for the Spanish market and to supply a less expensive 1911-type .45 ACP pistol to Latin America. Star copies of the 1911 did not have grip safeties. A small number of the Star Model PD were manufactured with select-fire capability and with a shoulder stock. The Model P was manufactured until 1975. There was also a “Super P” pistol manufactured between 1946 and 1983, which incorporated some improvements such as a SIG P210-type locking system, magazine safety, and loaded-chamber indicator. After World War II a substantial number of Model P pistols were imported into the USA as a cheaper alternative to the Colt Government Model. A more compact version of the Star Model P with an alloy frame, the PKM, was offered beginning in 1974.

A wide array of other Star pistols resemble the M1911 but are not chambered for the .45 ACP cartridge. The Model B in 9x19mm caliber was widely manufactured and was supplied to the German Army during World War II. The Model B and Model B Super were the primary sidearms of the Spanish armed forces until the early 1990s. Various scaled-down versions of the Star B – including the BKS, BKM, and BM, the first two with alloy frames – were popular with law-enforcement personnel or civilians who carried them concealed. Star also offered a variety of smaller “pocket pistols” in .22 Long Rifle, .32 ACP, and .380 ACP, which in general configuration resembled the larger, 1911-type Models B and P.



Llama was another Spanish manufacturer offering various pistols based on the M1911. Unlike Star, however, Llama maintained the grip safety on at least some of its models. Common chamberings on the large-frame pistols were 9x19mm, .38 Super, and .45 ACP. Like Star, Llama also offered a range of pocket pistols that resembled the 1911. Both Star and Llama pistols will sometimes be encountered with engraving or beautiful damascening work and gold plating or inlay, often along with pearl grips.

Some Spanish copies of the 1911 made by Star had holster stocks.

## THE COMMERCIAL COLTS

In the USA, after World War II, Colt continued to produce the Government Model, Commander, National Match, and other versions of the M1911 for the commercial market. A half-century after its introduction the 1911 design remained popular; in fact, it even gained popularity during the 1970s and 1980s due to the interest in “practical shooting” competitions generated by Jeff Cooper and others. However, many fans of the 1911 design saw room for improvement and a number of custom gunsmiths began catering to this market. Many shooters just wanted their pistols “accurized” with better sights, better barrel/bushing fit, and better trigger pulls. Other enhancements generally included polishing parts for smoother operation, beveling magazine wells to allow faster magazine changes, and throating barrels for more reliable feeding.

Another group of custom gunsmiths offered completely reconfigured guns, including those chopped down to pocket size or those with a double-action trigger system. To capitalize on this interest in custom M1911 pistols, new firms started making 1911-type pistols in competition with Colt. One of these firms was Detonics Firearms, in Bellevue, Washington.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, Detonics offered a compact .45 pistol of 1911 design. Between 1976 and 1988 the firm produced a variety of compact .45 autos; then, in 1989, the company was sold to the New Detonics Manufacturing Corporation. Detonics compact pistols were very popular as law-enforcement “hideout” guns, which were often carried in an ankle holster. For those who carried a full-sized 1911-type pistol as their primary gun, the compact Detonics had the advantage of taking the same magazine, though this would protrude from the bottom of the smaller Detonics grip. Detonics in its current incarnation is producing some very innovative pistols (see page 76).

## MILITARY AND LAW-ENFORCEMENT USE



### Methods of carrying the Colt 1911

#### Condition 1: cocked and locked

Professional operators generally carry the 1911 in one of three conditions. In Condition 1, the pistol is carried with a round in the chamber, a loaded magazine inserted, the hammer cocked, and the thumb safety on (A). This is normally considered the most effective way to carry the 1911. To bring it into action all that is necessary is to flip the safety off (B) and pull the trigger (C). For additional safety and to avoid causing alarm among civilians who see the cocked 1911, some holsters are made with a flap that covers the cocked hammer (D).

#### Condition 2: loaded, de-cocked and unlocked

In Condition 2, the 1911 is carried with a round in the chamber and a loaded magazine inserted but with the hammer down. Since the thumb safety may not be applied with the hammer down, the grip safety acts as the primary safety device. This method requires that the pistol be cocked by the thumb prior to pulling the trigger (E). It is easy for the thumb to lose control of the hammer using this method and for it to drop when not fully cocked. On some older pistols this can cause a negligent discharge. Additionally, the user must pull the trigger and lower the hammer onto the firing pin when putting it into Condition 2; once again not a safe manipulation.

#### Condition 3: Commando style

In Condition 3, the 1911 is carried with a loaded magazine in place and

an empty chamber. The hammer may either be left down or left cocked, the latter allowing the slide to be operated a bit more easily. To bring the 1911 into action, the slide is grasped with the support (non-shooting) hand, while the strong (shooting) hand pushes the pistol forward against the recoil spring (F). It is important that when the slide is fully cocked it is released and allowed to ride forward, chambering a round. The user should not ride the slide forward with the hand as this may retard full closure and the chambering of a round. It is important to remember that once the slide runs forward, a round is in the chamber and the safety is off. Unless immediate engagement of an enemy is required the safety should be engaged. Condition 3 carry was the method taught by W. E. Fairbairn and many other instructors. During much of the time that the 1911 was generally issued, the US armed forces also used Condition 3 carry – except when in active combat.

Two other conditions of carry are sometimes mentioned. Condition 0 indicates that a round is chambered and no safety has been applied. There was actually a California law-enforcement agency in the 1960s that used this method of carry, relying on the grip safety when the gun was holstered. Condition 0 is normally only recommended when engagement of an opponent is imminent. The other method sometimes mentioned is Condition 4. This indicates that the chamber is empty and a loaded magazine is not inserted into the pistol. Military guards have often been required to use this method, which would require them to retrieve a magazine from a carrying pouch and insert it into the weapon prior to making the pistol ready for action.





### Making a combat reload

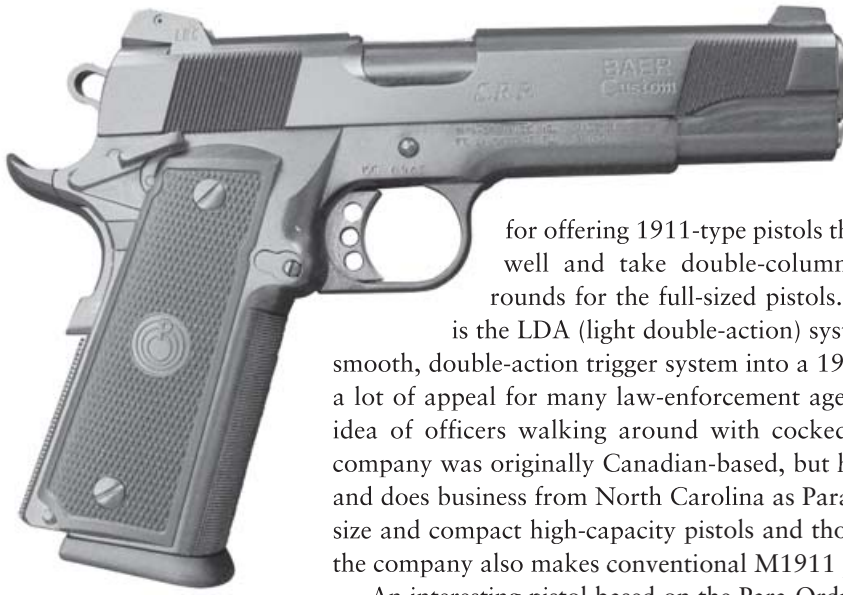
A combat reload takes place when the 1911 has been fired until empty while a threat still exists. The user should hit the magazine release, dropping the magazine free. Then the user inserts a loaded magazine using the support-side index finger along the edge of the magazine to guide it into the magazine well even in low light (G). Once the magazine is started, it is given a smart push with the palm of the support hand to drive it into the magazine well and ensure engagement of the magazine release. Some magazines designed for combat use have a rubber “slam-pad” to make this operation easier (H). Once the magazine has been fully inserted and locked into place, the slide release is hit to allow it to go forward, bringing the pistol back into action. Some users cant the pistol during the magazine change and use the shooting thumb to hit the slide release, but it is generally faster to use the thumb of the support hand. Some trainers also teach the technique of using the thumb and forefinger of the support hand to release it by grabbing the slide and pulling it backward.

In some circumstances, a trained operator will make a tactical reload in which the magazine is changed before it has been shot empty. This usually takes place during a lull in the action or when additional combat is anticipated. Normally, during a tactical reload, the partially empty magazine is not dropped to the ground but retained in case it is needed later. Also, the slide will be forward on a loaded chamber so it is normally best to put on the safety during a tactical reload.

### Malfunction clearance drills

Even the best automatic pistol can malfunction due to poor ammunition or dirty conditions in combat. As a result, trained users of the 1911 learn various malfunction clearance drills that allow the pistol to be brought back into action quickly. One of the most commonly used drills is that for clearing a “stove-pipe” jam, where a case is caught by the slide coming forward and not allowed to extract fully. The clearance drill requires the operator to quickly bring his stiffened palm backward, hitting the empty casing and knocking it free, which normally allows the slide to return to battery and the pistol to be brought back into action (I).





This Les Baer pistol is one of the type made for the FBI's HRT.

Para-Ordnance is another firm offering enhanced versions of the M1911 pistol. Founded in 1985, this company is best known

for offering 1911-type pistols that have a larger magazine well and take double-column magazines, holding 14 rounds for the full-sized pistols. Another Para innovation is the LDA (light double-action) system, which incorporates a smooth, double-action trigger system into a 1911-type pistol. This offers a lot of appeal for many law-enforcement agencies that do not like the idea of officers walking around with cocked-and-locked pistols. The company was originally Canadian-based, but has now closed in Canada and does business from North Carolina as Para-USA. In addition to full-size and compact high-capacity pistols and those using the LDA system, the company also makes conventional M1911 pistols.

An interesting pistol based on the Para-Ordnance P14-45 was built by custom pistolsmith Les Baer for the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (HRT). Taking the 14-round Para-Ordnance pistol as the basis, Baer used various custom parts, including Wayne Novak LoMount sights. Pistols were finished with Walter Birdsong's Black-T finish. Although the original contract called for 250 pistols, only 75 were delivered before the contract was canceled, reportedly because of problems with the 14-round magazines.

One of the most successful manufacturers of "Commercial Custom" 1911 pistols is Kimber Manufacturing. Although Kimber was founded in Oregon in 1979 to manufacture precision rifles, under new management the company has been producing high-quality pistols in Yonkers, New York, for more than a decade. Kimber specializes in producing pistols with the features that are normally found on expensive custom 1911 pistols, such as nightsights, ambidextrous safety, match-grade barrels, match-grade triggers, and polished parts.

Kimber 1911 pistols have achieved a certain cachet because of their adoption by many high-profile law-enforcement and military units. One of Kimber's pistols, the TLEII, was adopted by the LAPD's SWAT team. The TLEII is basically a standard 1911 with a match-grade barrel, match-grade trigger, and nightsights, and its adoption by the best-known SWAT team in the USA was a big boost for Kimber law-enforcement sales. Many other police tactical units chose to adopt this pistol as the TLE/RLII with a 1913 Picatinny rail for lights or lasers.

A Kimber pistol designed for the LAPD's Special Investigations Section (SIS) illustrates the combination of style and functionality that sets Kimber pistols apart. The SIS Model had typical Kimber-enhanced features, but also incorporated serrations that used the letters "SIS" instead of standard lines. Additionally, the model had a larger rear sight designed so that if an officer was hit in the arm but needed to make a magazine change so as to keep fighting, he or she could retract the slide by catching the pistol on an object such as a pocket or door frame.



Many special law-enforcement and military operatives carry their tactical 1911-type pistols with a light mounted, so the Don Hume company makes holsters, such as this shoulder rig, designed to carry the pistol in such a configuration.

The section is an elite unit of the LAPD comprised of very experienced detectives who target violent offenders. These detectives had a lot of input into the design of the pistol. To allow for the fact that SIS detectives generally carry at least two pistols and sometimes work in light clothing, Kimber actually made four variants of the SIS pistol. There were two full-sized versions, one with a rail and one without, a mid-sized version with a 4in barrel and full-sized frame, and a compact version with 3in barrel and compact frame. Reportedly, every one of the 20 members of the SIS purchased at least one example of each pistol. The full-sized standard pistol was the typical carry weapon, while the full-sized version with rail was used with a SureFire X300 light mounted when doing building searches and entries, the 4in Pro Model served as a more concealable duty gun or as a second gun, and the 3in Ultra model could be carried when off duty or as a concealment pistol in light clothing.

Because SIS has been involved in so many shootouts with violent criminals it has generated some controversy, especially since a high-profile pistol was named after the unit. Consequently, at time of writing Kimber has discontinued production of the pistol.





These special Kimber pistols were made for the Los Angeles Police Department's Special Investigations Section. Note the "SIS" which replaces the slide serrations, and the oversize rear sight, which can be used for cocking the pistol if the operator is injured.

Another pistol Kimber made in small numbers but which has given the company a lot of credibility is the MARSOC 1911 pistol for Marines assigned to Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Although Marine armorers had fabricated custom pistols based on 1911A1 military frames for other Marine special operators, in 2006 Kimber was given a contract to produce 200 pistols for the Marines assigned to SOCOM. This was initially known as the ICQB (Interim Close-Quarter Battle) pistol. The basis was a standard Kimber 1911 pistol to which the Marines added a Dalton rail, a lanyard ring on the butt, and their own grips. Another important feature was the addition of Novak Lo-Mount Tritium nightsights. Other features were typical of production Kimber combat pistols, though a standard-length recoil spring guide rod was specified and the internal firing-pin block was left off. Kimber offers a commercial

### Professional injured arm or hand drills (opposite)

Since it can be a matter of life or death to keep fighting, operators must practice continuing to use their weapon even if they are injured. A common injury is a shot to the gun arm or gun hand, since an opponent's eye and gun will be drawn to a gun pointing at him or her. Consequently, an operator must be trained to use the support-side hand to manipulate the 1911 with one hand. If it is necessary to change a magazine using one hand, a standard technique is to use the support-side forefinger to push the magazine release (**A**) then thrust the pistol into the belt, remove the empty magazine and insert the new one using the support hand (**B**). Since during this time the muzzle may well be pointing at the user's femoral artery, great care must be taken to keep the hand away from the trigger. Once the fresh magazine is pushed home the pistol may be removed and the support-side forefinger may be used to push the slide release (**C**). If it is necessary to operate the safety this may be performed with the support-side thumb (**D**). Some pistols enhanced for close combat may have an ambidextrous safety, which allows operation by the support-side hand (**E** and **F**). Two other situations may arise that require knowledge of a technique using just the support-side hand. If it is necessary to pull the slide back to chamber a round (e.g. for a Condition 3 carry), the front of the slide below the barrel may be pressed against a hard surface (such as a table, door frame, or vehicle) to push back the slide; then it may be released quickly to run forward, chambering a round (**G**). There is also a technique for lowering the hammer with just one hand, although this is not likely to be required. The hammer is cocked fully so that it presses against the grip safety, releasing it as the trigger is pulled and allowing the thumb to lower the hammer slowly (**H**).

## MILITARY AND LAW-ENFORCEMENT USE



A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H



Kimber's MARSOC pistol was built for USMC special-operations personnel. (Martin Floyd)

pistol, the Warrior, based on the MARSOC M1911, though it uses a Picatinny rail rather than the Dalton rail.

One other current manufacturer of high-quality M1911 pistols is Springfield Armory (which has no relationship with the Springfield Armory that produced M1911 pistols during World War I). Since the early 1990s Springfield Armory has offered an array of quality 1911 pistols with many of the enhanced features previously available on custom-built pistols. Springfield also has an excellent custom shop, which can tune the company's pistols even more. Springfield offers one pistol, the GI.45, which is virtually identical to the traditional 1911A1; another, the Mil Spec, is a 1911A1 with some subtle improvements.

A Springfield Armory pistol which has achieved a great deal of success with tactical law-enforcement personnel and has attracted military special-ops interest is the Operator model. This pistol comes with a match-grade barrel and trigger, combat nightsights, and a rail for lights or lasers as standard. The Marines tested the Operator along with the Kimber when they were looking for a special-ops pistol during 2003. The FBI adopted a Springfield version of the 1911A1 for the Hostage Rescue Team and the regional FBI SWAT teams. These guns went through rigorous accuracy and durability testing and passed readily. It should be noted, however, that the FBI guns are built as virtually custom pistols. The FBI contract specified that the Bureau would buy a minimum of 500 of the pistols, but might buy as many as 5,000. Each operator on the HRT or the SWAT teams is issued multiple pistols.

Compared to the later Browning-designed P35 Hi-Power pistol, the 1911 is complicated to disassemble for maintenance. Rather than easing disassembly, some of the current manufacturers of semi-custom 1911-type pistols actually have made disassembly more difficult by employing a full-length recoil spring guide, thus requiring a barrel bushing wrench for disassembly. As a result, some military contracts, such as that for the MARSOC pistol, specify that the guide rod should be of standard rather than extended length.



The Springfield Operator (left) and the Kimber TLE/RLII (right) are two of the 1911 pistols most popular with law-enforcement tactical operations personnel.





## THE 1911 IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The current incarnation of Detonics, discussed earlier, is perhaps the most innovative of the current producers of 1911-type pistols. Company CEO Bruce Siddle, who has an extensive background in law-enforcement and military use of handguns, has worked with Rex Applegate, legendary OSS instructor and student of W. E. Fairbairn, in researching what close-combat techniques work best under stress. Siddle's book *Sharpening the Warrior's Edge* applied Applegate's and his own research on survival stress behavior to combat training and the design of new Detonics pistols. Many of these results have been incorporated into the Combat Master Evolution and the Nemesis.

Other 1911 pistols have relied on investment-cast and forged parts – often purchased from the same manufacturers, no matter what name is on the pistols. Detonics has chosen to use CNC machines to produce a pistol with more precision yet complete reliability. Detonics pistols include many of the features expected on high-end 1911-type pistols, including front and rear slide serrations, a flared ejection port for reliable ejection, an undercut trigger guard for a higher grip allowing greater control, extended controls (i.e. safety, magazine release, and slide release), and an oversized magazine well for faster reloads. Additionally, the Nemesis has a fluted slide that reduces weight to 48oz when loaded with a 14-round magazine.



### ABOVE LEFT

A member of the FBI HRT fires his Springfield Operator pistol.

### LEFT

This close-up shows the FBI HRT Springfield Operator with light mounted.

There are several notable features of Detonics' 1911 OSS (octagonal sighting system). These include a patent-pending octagonal barrel that allows better lockup and hence better accuracy; traditionally, a 1911 has six points of lockup, while the Combat Master offers 11 points of lockup. A new recoil spring system has been designed to spread recoil from the slide onto the pistol's frame, thus dampening muzzle rise and allowing faster repeat shots. The one-degree drop between the rear of the barrel and the muzzle, a feature incorporated into the original design by John Browning a century ago, has been removed. This drop generally causes 4in of bullet drop at 25yd.

The 1911 OSS model incorporates the Primal Site System, which is based on research into how the eye operates and tracks a target in a close-combat situation. The Primal Site System offers a number of features: a delta shape to attract the eye when the pupils become dilated, hindering rear-sight focus and "primal blue" color; visibility at night without using tritium; and retention of traditional sight construction, so the shooter can line up on the top of the front blade as well as the pyramid, offering both longer-distance precision shooting and quick sight acquisition at closer range.

The new pistols being produced by Detonics are especially noteworthy because they represent a close-combat weapon that specifically incorporates features based on the study of the physical and psychological elements of a gunfight. Even so, Detonics' innovative pistols are also illustrative of the fact that fully 100 years down the road, some of the most innovative work in automatic pistol design is still being devoted to the 1911.



The Detonics Nemesis version of the 1911 incorporates many improvements based on the study of how operators react during a gunfight. (Detonics)



## CONCLUSION

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After a century of service in peace and war around the world, the Colt 1911 is one of the most identifiable firearms in the world. In fact, even those who know little or nothing about handguns can usually make some identification of the Colt 1911, along with the Colt Single Action Army revolver and the Luger P08.

The 1911 has earned the praise and the criticism of several generations of US soldiers. Those who liked it especially appreciated its close-range striking power, while those who disliked it felt it was hard to shoot. The 1911 can, admittedly, be difficult to use if it is the first handgun ever attempted, as was the case with many conscripts. On the other hand, the 1911 is a pistol that repays one's efforts. If the user is willing to practice with it and learn to maximize its positive features, it remains one of the most effective close-combat weapons ever developed.

Although the Beretta M9 replaced the 1911 as the standard US service weapon two decades ago, there is still a substantial lobby within the US armed forces that wishes to see the return of an updated 1911-type pistol. Some units have continued to use a version of the 1911 pistol, especially within the US Marine Corps. The Marines are also the branch of the US armed forces that continues to stress the use of the bayonet – for the Marines older doesn't mean obsolete! Because of the Marines Corps' mission as amphibious shock troops, closing with the enemy and destroying him at close quarters remains a task they perform and relish. Both the bayonet and the .45 auto have traditionally performed well in close-quarter combat so it is not difficult to understand why the Marines still like the big Colt .45 and its descendants.

It is unlikely that the 1911 .45 auto in its traditional form will return as the standard US military handgun, but special-operations units – which have more leeway in choosing weapons to suit their missions – are likely to continue to use versions of the .45 auto. Others, such as police SWAT



teams and security contractors who operate in combat zones, will continue to choose the 1911 as well.

In the USA, there are many shooting schools designed to teach combat techniques with the pistol to military special-ops personnel, federal agents, local law-enforcement tactical officers, private security contractors, and armed civilians with a serious interest in handguns. Many of these schools are very good. Traditionally, for example, members of the British SAS or SBS who undergo exchange training with the US special forces or SEALs try to attend one or more of these schools along with their hosts, then take the techniques back to their headquarters in Hereford or Poole. At most of these schools, unless training is for a unit or agency limited to a particular issue pistol – a Glock, for example – a substantial number of 1911 pistols will be seen on the ranges. In fact, most top-notch close-combat instructors carry some version of the 1911.

This book has attempted to give an overview of a century of the Colt 1911 pistol. It should be evident that throughout its eventful history the 1911 has been a substantial weapon for serious users. It should also be obvious that the 1911's history continues, and that its service record is a long way from over.

During the liberation of Paris in 1944, a US OSS lieutenant grasps his .45 as he takes cover from German sniper fire along with a member of the French Resistance. (NARA 111-SC-217401)



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Front cover image: With his M1911 pistol drawn, radio operator PFC Mike Farmer of Atlantic City, NJ, crouches low to avoid sniper fire during Operation *Yorktown*, northwest of Saigon, July 4, 1966. (Main image © Bettmann/Corbis, top image author's collection)

Title page image: A US soldier at Aitape, during the campaign in the Dutch East Indies of April–September, 1944, points his automatic pistol at a hole in a log: he is ordering the Japanese sniper concealed inside to surrender. (IWM NYF 42670)

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