Why There Is a Need for This Book

There are many books on the subject of handguns, so why do another one? Most of the previously published works are reference or picture books showing how to detail-strip weapons. This book is different. It is a hands-on, practical comparison of more than 100 handguns from around the world that have been used for the past 100 years.

In order to see how each weapon performed on the target range and under simulated combat conditions, I shot *every* weapon in this book. Based on these results, readers will be able to judge how well individual handguns function and how they actually shoot and respond in combat situations. It is ideal for those who are now or may be stationed in remote environs and have only a limited selection of weapons available. After reading this book, the intelligence agent stationed overseas, the missionary, the professional bodyguard, the soldier, or the traveling citizen/ businessman will understand the relative merits of various weapons that he might happen across and the proper ammo to use under less-than-ideal conditions. Even though his choice of weapons may be limited, this individual will know his options and be able to select the best handgun for his particular purpose from what is available. And he will know how it can be made workable.

But *The 100 Greatest Combat Pistols* is not just for expatriates or people who crisscross the globe. It is also an invaluable resource for weapons aficionados and collectors who might not be able to get their hands on some of these rare, exotic, or historic handguns—some of which cannot be found outside museums or special operations arsenals.

A WORD ABOUT THE WEAPONS TESTED

Each of the weapons tested in this report was a common example of the weapons used by the armies in its day. No special specimens were selected. Some of the handguns were in good shape; some were in excellent shape. All of them were good, honest-firing models, not modified in any way to improve their accuracy or speed of handling. Many times, I would have preferred to modify them in some fashion, at the very minimum to paint the sights. However, to keep the tests consistent, it was important that they be unmodified examples of generally available military weapons.

TESTING METHODS

For the comparisons to have any validity, I had to test each weapon and evaluate it based on its accuracy, reliability, and availability.

Each weapon was given a twofold test. First, using the two-hand Weaver stance position, I fired each weapon at 50 feet off-hand on a bull's-eye range. Second, I tested them on a simulated combat range—in this case, a cinema range. The cinema method involves projecting specific scenarios on a screen and having the shooter respond. The films that I used were police simulations involving innocent bystanders and moving targets, all requiring a different level of lethal force.

It is very important to use both target and simulated-combat testing methods because a weapon that is fine on the target range may be terrible on the cinema range—or in a real-life scenario—and vice versa.

It is also important to test the weapons against a known standard. For a reference medium, I used the Model 19 four-inch barrel Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum loaded with 148-grain wadcutters. This is an easily obtainable, standardized weapon with target sights. It is similar to what is commonly available throughout the Western world, and it is familiar to most people who read this book. Thus you, the reader, can evaluate the performance of each weapon even though you may never have fired the weapon being tested.

AMMUNITION

Another factor that greatly influences firearms tests is the ammunition used. Ammunition for these tests was the same type within a given caliber. All full-metal-jacketed ammunition of commercial manufacture was used for autoloaders. No hand loads were used except in obsolete and rare calibers that were unavailable commercially. I used Fiocchi, Winchester Western, and Remington Arms ammunition. All were full-metal-jacketed loads or otherwise military-standard loading except as noted. I used no special ammunition that would aid accuracy or reliability because I wanted to produce the same results the soldier would encounter in the field.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING MILITARY WEAPONS

To properly evaluate military weapons, it is important to understand some of their historical aspects and uses. In the early days, only officers and noncommissioned officers used handguns. Their job was to direct troops, using their handguns only in emergencies.

The role of officers—and the weapons available to them—has changed greatly over the years, so that now officers at the company level are typically armed with shoulder weapons as well. For instance, during World War II, a captain in the military forces probably carried only a handgun. Nowadays, a captain in the U.S. Army carries an M16 rifle in addition to a handgun. He is also laden with magazine pouches, grenades, claymores, and other equipment. The ability to carry a handgun has been severely limited by the adoption of rifles. Many of the weapons we are going to test in this book were designed to be carried on the hip, and in today's army it may be difficult for infantrymen to carry such weapons.

Of course, there are always artillerymen, pilots, and transportation corps types who are not on the battle line but who need to be armed and prepared to defend themselves. They carry—and will continue to carry—handguns because rifles are unwieldy or inconvenient for them. We may see a trend in the future for militaries to adopt one weapon for infantry people and another for these second-level troops, as was done by U.S. forces in World War II with the .30 carbine.

It may well be that the weapon carried by the infantry is less efficient—but smaller and easier to carry—than that carried by other personnel. For example, when I was an infantry officer, I carried a Model 60 .38 Special Smith & Wesson stainless steel revolver in the upper left-hand breast pocket of my fatigues. It was out of the way of my magazine pouches and rucksack straps and protected from mud and crud, and it allowed ready access to my handgun. I did not kid myself into thinking that a Model 60 2-inch was a serious fighting handgun, but it was a great aid to an M14 or M16 that could get misplaced or become inoperable. On the other hand, if I were armed with only a handgun—as might be the case in a back-of-the-lines area or as an advisor (not leading troops into combat like many of our "advisors" in the Vietnamese army)—then I would choose a serious fighting handgun, such as a Glock 17 or SIG P220 in .45 ACP.

How to carry your weapon also becomes critical in a combat situation. Typically, infantry officers do not carry their handguns in holsters on their right hips anymore. They carry them in shoulder holsters, fatigue jacket pockets, or upper breast shirt pockets. Method of carry is critical when considering what is an appropriate military weapon.

The Hague Conference of 1907

Another factor in the choice of military weapons is the Hague Peace Conference of 1907, where the use of expanding ammunition in military operations was banned, thus limiting the power available in a given handgun. In police circles, for instance, no one would dream of using a 9x19mm pistol with full-metal-jacketed loads: they are considered seriously deficient in stopping ability. Military forces, on the other hand, are compelled to use ammunition that complies with that convention; so when we evaluate military weapons, we must take this into consideration.

Ballistic Vests and Helmets

A more recent consideration in the selection of military handguns is the introduction of ballistic vests and helmets that can stop rifle fire at 10 meters and pistol ammunition at point-blank range. Military loads that previously were perfectly adequate no longer are. To date, this has not become a major problem for

Front view of 1990s era U.S. soldier with ammunition pouches, body armor, ballistic helmet, and goggles, plus weapon, which will stop bullets. You need a lot of penetration now, unlike earlier times.

Rear view of current U.S. soldier. Note the ballistic vest and helmet and the ammunition pouches.

militaries because the major actions have been basically low-technology Third World affairs, or they have involved situations where technologically superior forces are faced with climatic conditions that render ballistic vests difficult, but not impossible, to use at all times. For example, in Vietnam, the high humidity made the vests extremely uncomfortable, and comfort is not the only limiting consideration for Kevlar vests in the tropics: when wet, Kevlar loses a significant portion of its ballistic resistance, which it regains upon drying.

However, as ballistic vest technology improves, making vests lighter and cooler to wear and more impervious to environmental conditions, militaries may be forced to change completely the handguns and loads used. We are on the cutting edge of this area. One solution may be the general adoption or loads such as the French THV or Arcane, hypervelocity loads of solid material that comply with the convention yet are still capable of being fired in a handgun and possibly penetrating ballistic vests and helmets. Consequently, previously ineffective weapons, such as .32 ACP autoloaders, may turn out to be quite effective when loaded properly. Though it is difficult to imagine this happening, the results of my testing of the French THV rounds on ballistic material were very impressive.

Ease of Manufacture

In today's world, it is critical that military handguns be manufactured easily and cheaply. They should require minimal machine time and strategic resources. The availability of inexpensive, easily produced weapons has no direct bearing upon their performance in the military theater, but it is certainly is a concern for military procurement specialists.

Safety

As anyone who is familiar with police operations knows, you find that many police officers "trained" in the use of handguns are still dangerous. In the military, with inadequately trained troops, this is even more the case. Many people in the military have only a nodding acquaintance with firearms before they get there, if at all, and no interest whatsoever in handguns. They get very little in the way of training with handguns. For instance, during the World War II, it was not uncommon for German soldiers armed with handguns to be given 25 rounds, which were supposed to last them throughout the entire war. So it is in most situations of that type. Thus, it is critically important for military planners to pick a weapon that is safe to handle. Many times they trade efficiency for safety.

In the past, the safety problem was circumvented by continuing to use weapons of questionable safety and then selecting a carry system that restricted access to the weapon. Rather than training their forces to carry the .45 Government Model cocked and locked, which is the way it was designed to be used, militaries ordered soldiers to carry it with the chamber empty, hammer down—clearly restricting the soldiers' abilities to respond quickly. It is interesting to note that U.S. military manuals prior to and during World War I dictated that the .45 Government Model be carried cocked and locked with the side safety on. It was only later that the prescribed method was the hammer-down, chamber-empty method. Even U.S. military police units are told to carry their weapons in that fashion: hammer down, chamber empty. To anyone familiar with handguns, it seems foolish, but military forces typically are not overly familiar with handguns.

Acknowledgments

I truly believe that this book represents new ground in the gun field. Many handgun books have preceded it, but most of them have been either dry reference books, such as *Small Arms of the World*, or picture books. *The 100 Greatest Combat Handguns* is the only book to provide you with the results of actual tests of the handguns being used as they were intended: in combat situations. In hands-on tests, I compare each handgun with something you will be able to relate to and provide an informed evaluation of each.

I do not think that this book could have been completed anywhere else other than the United States, at least not by a private person like me who is not a curator of a national museum. In a few other countries—Switzerland, for example—various handguns are available to the general populace, but they do not have the variety of weapons that we do here. Thus, my first thanks must go to our Founding Fathers, who were farsighted enough to include in the Constitution a prohibition against government infringement on our right to own weapons. Next, I give thanks to all those brave men and women who have fought so hard since 1789 to preserve those liberties.

On a more personal note, I wish to thank my friend Leroy Thompson, who took photos, assembled weapons, and discussed this topic in general with me. For a long time, Leroy and I were the only ones who thought this project was useful or interesting.

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