Weapons Corner

Handguns of the GWOT

Not all of the handguns carried by today's combatants are of recent manufacture or are any longer standard issue. The pistols and revolvers found in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, include the venerable British .455 Webley that was in service from 1915-1947. The big Webley (Figure 1) was the standard British service pistol during most of World War I, and was later superseded by a .38/200 (.38 caliber, 200 grain bullet) revolver in 1936 because it was felt the .455 was too powerful for general military use. The .455 revolvers were resurrected from storage during the massive buildup for World War II and reissued, either in their original .455 caliber or in a version converted to fire the powerful .45 Automatic Colt Pistol (ACP) round, and which could be loaded by means of 3-round moon clips (Figure 9).

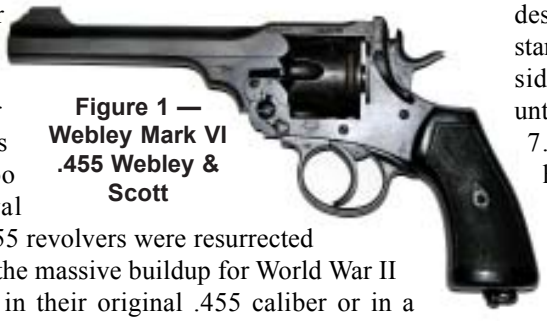

Figure 1 — Webley Mark VI .455 Webley & Scott

The United States adopted the Colt automatic pistol as its sidearm in 1911. Based upon WWI experience, changes were later made to the trigger, tang, sights, grip and other features, and in 1926 the improved weapon was designated the Pistol U.S. Caliber .45 Model 1911A1 (Figure 2). More than 2,400,000 M1911A1's were issued to U.S. forces, and the pistol served us through the Cold War. The number of these pistols made under separate contract for foreign governments and commercial markets is in the hundreds of thousands and, due to their reliability and the impressive knockdown power of the .45 ACP round, they are still to be found wherever shooters need a reliable, powerful pistol.

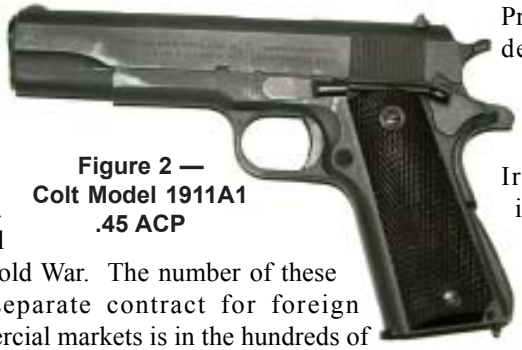

Figure 2 — Colt Model 1911A1 .45 ACP

When the United States entered World War I, fewer than 56,000 of the M1911 service pistol were available for the Army and Marine Corps, so both Colt and Smith & Wesson received contracts to produce the United States Revolver, Caliber .45, M1917, based on earlier Colt and Smith & Wesson designs. The M1917 (Figure 3) used the same ammunition as the .45 service pistol, with ammunition held in 3-round half-moon clips for ease of loading and of ejecting the fired cases. Today, the M1917 — just as the .455 Webley — can also be loaded using full-moon clips.

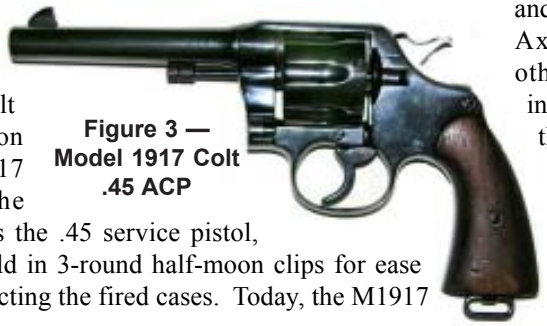

Figure 3 — Model 1917 Colt .45 ACP

The M1933 Tokarev (Figure 4) is a modified Colt and Browning design, and was the standard issue Soviet sidearm from 1933 until the 1950's. The 7.62x25mm is a high-velocity round and generates more muzzle energy than the .455 Webley, but less than the 9mm Parabellum and the .45 ACP. The Tokarev is to be found in service in many of the former Soviet surrogate and client states around the world. A cautionary note when handling this pistol: it has no manual safety, but only a half cock feature that locks the slide.

Figure 4 — M1933 Tokarev 7.62x25mm (.30 Tokarev)

The Browning Hi-Power (Figure 5) is the sidearm of British and Australian coalition forces in Iraq. Prior to the defeat of Iraq, it was also the favored sidearm of high-ranking Iraqi officers, including Saddam Hussein himself. Chambered for the NATO standard 9x19mm round, the Browning is widely distributed due to its accuracy, reliability, and the ready availability of 9mm Parabellum ammunition. The pistol's basic design was the work of American John M. Browning, who patented it in 1922. The pistol was first manufactured in Belgium, where it was refined and manufactured as the M1935. When Belgium was overrun by German forces in World War II, the M1935 continued to be manufactured and used by the Axis, while other factories in Canada made the pistol for Allied use.

Figure 5 — Browning Hi-Power 9mm Parabellum (9x19)

The Beretta Model 92 (Figure 6) pistol first appeared in 1975 and the United States Army adopted it as a

Figure 6 — Model 92 Beretta 9mm Parabellum (9x19)

CARTRIDGE	BULLET WEIGHT (grains)	BULLET TYPE	MUZZLE VELOCITY (ft/sec)	MUZZLE ENERGY (ft. lbs.)
.45 ACP	230 gr.	FMJ	880	401
.455 Webley	262 gr.	Lead	700	285
9mm Parabellum (9X19mm)	112 gr.	FMJ (U.S. Army M882)	1262	423
9mm Makarov (9X18mm)	95 gr.	FMJ	1000	211
.380 Browning (9X17mm Short)	90 gr.	FMJ	910	165
7.62 Browning (.32 ACP)	71 gr.	FMJ	905	129
7.62X25mm Tokarev	71 gr.	FMJ	425	305

NOTE: Ballistic figures are approximate and may vary according to bullet weight, powder charge, barrel length, and other factors. However, the data shown represent the characteristics of most handguns carried by coalition, host nation, and enemy forces in the COE.

Figure 10 — Comparative Handgun Cartridge Ballistics

Figure 7 — Makarov 9mm Makarov (9x18)

Figure 8 — 7.62 mm Tarik (.32 ACP)

replacement for our M1911A1 in 1985. Chambered for the NATO 9x19mm round, it facilitates resupply of ammunition between NATO partners. While made in a number of variations such as the compact version, the Model 92's carried by the U.S. and Italy are essentially the same pistol, and could be interchanged without creating interoperability issues. The 9mm Parabellum is generally adequate for most applications, and that is the overriding consideration.

In 1951 the Soviet Union replaced the M1933 Tokarev with the 9x18mm Makarov (Figure 7) as its service sidearm, which meant that the pistol would soon be adopted throughout the Soviet Union's subsidiary states. While the Makarov is more powerful that its closest relative, the .380 Browning (9x17mm or 9mm Short), it generates significantly less muzzle energy than either the 9mm Parabellum or the .45 ACP (Figure 10). While the lion's share of Makarovs were made in Russia, they were also produced in China, Bulgaria, and East Germany. According to Wikipedia — an excellent source of firearms data, by the way — handguns chambered for the 9x18mm cartridge were also made in Poland and Hungary, but are not true Makarovs.

During Saddam Hussein's reign, the Iraqis manufactured a 7.65mm pistol under Beretta license. Named the Tarik (Figure 8), it is chambered for the .32 ACP cartridge and was initially intended for issue to members of the Republican Guard. Externally, it closely resembles the Beretta M1935, another small and easily concealed pocket pistol.

This is but a glimpse of the variety of handguns that can turn up wherever our Soldiers are deployed. Some of the more esoteric calibers such as 7.62 Nagant, 9mm Ultra, 7.63 Mauser, 9mm Bergmann-Bayard, and others appear in the markets and bazaars and in private hands, but such ammunition is no longer readily available. If you come across a weapon or cartridge you cannot identify, send us a digital image and we'll try to help.

(Weapons photographed courtesy of the National Infantry Museum, Fort Benning, Ga.)

Figure 9 — .45 ACP full-moon and half-moon clips