

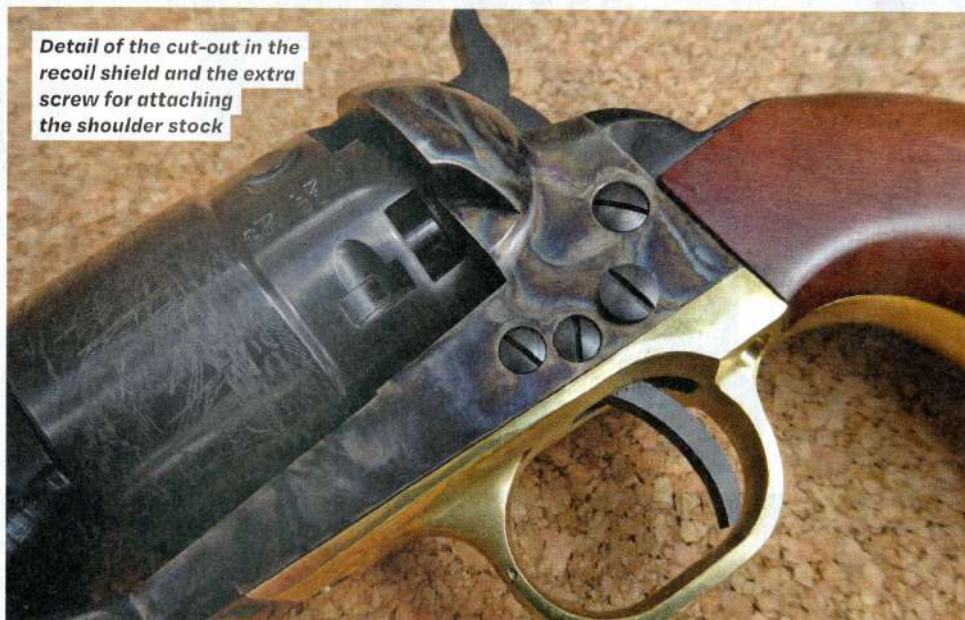
THE UNION'S CHOICE

Derek Landers looks at a reproduction of the percussion revolver that became the principal handgun of the Union forces during the American Civil War

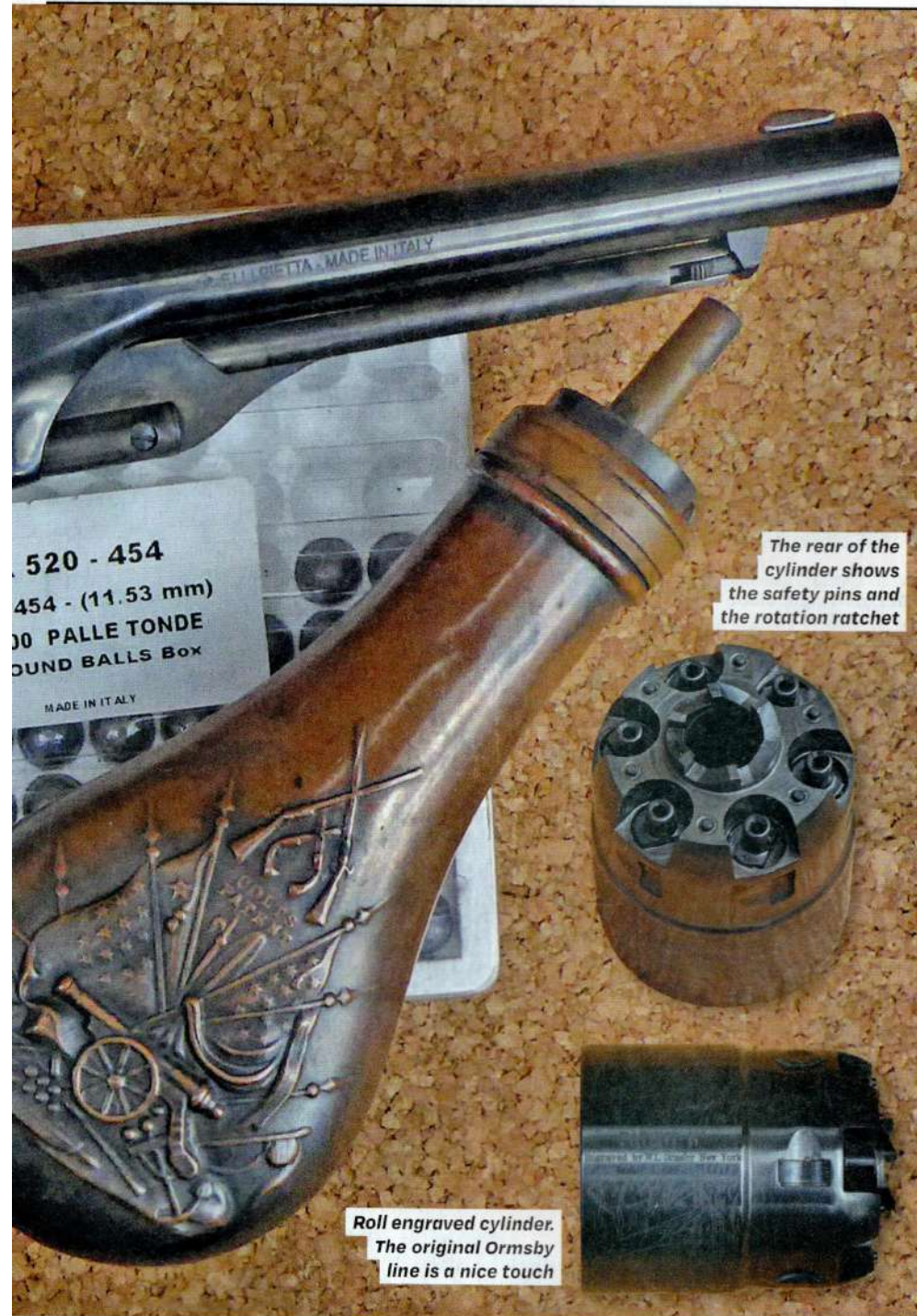
The European arms industry of today produces accurate copies of many American firearms of the mid and late 19th century, not least of which are percussion revolvers from two of America's foremost manufacturers of the day, Colt, and Remington. Among these offerings are examples of the popular Remington New Model Army and Navy pistols alongside Colt's Army and Navy models. Manufacturers usually classified their .36 calibre models as 'Navy' pistols, whilst the 'Army' designation was applied to the larger .44 calibre examples. The Remington, erroneously named the Model 1858, has a strong following among today's shooters for its perceived strength over the open-top Colt, but the latter company produced close to one million open-top pistols in various guises, so they were obviously capable performers.

Superior Colt

In May 1860, a demonstration was arranged to pit two variations (differing only in barrel length) of the new Colt pistol against the Army's current revolver, the much larger Colt Dragoon. After extensive accuracy and penetration tests, the examination board unanimously chose an 8" barrelled version of the new gun, with



Detail of the cut-out in the recoil shield and the extra screw for attaching the shoulder stock



The rear of the cylinder shows the safety pins and the rotation ratchet

Roll engraved cylinder. The original Ormsby line is a nice touch

the report stating: "The board are satisfied that the new model revolver with the 8" barrel will make the most superior cavalry arm we have ever had."

The introduction of the 1860 Army revolver, officially known as a Holster Pistol, with the .36 calibre Navy catalogued as a Belt Pistol, could not have come at a more opportune moment for Sam Colt. Storm clouds were gathering and within 12 months of the first guns rolling off the production line, the North American continent was thrown into a bloody conflict that would last for four years and claim the lives of many thousands of its citizens.

Sam was quick to realise the implications of a conflict for his business and, when Lincoln called for

75,000 volunteers in April 1861, he offered to turn his entire production facility over to government business.

The Union troops were not the first to get their hands on these new guns however, as Colt had already taken orders for just over 2,000 pistols to be delivered to civilian customers below the Mason-Dixon line and these were duly delivered before an Army contract was signed with the North.

Early problem

The original development centred on trying to lighten the Dragoon revolver, but this proved problematic, so a new approach was adopted. The success of Colt's .36" calibre 1851 Navy revolver prompted the company to use the

frame from this model as the basis for the larger Army pistol. A small rebate was cut into the forward part of the top edge of the frame, and the diameter of the Navy cylinder was enlarged slightly at its front end to accommodate the larger .44" balls and bullets. The grip straps were lengthened a $\frac{3}{4}$ ", possibly to improve grip where a cavalryman was wearing gauntlets.

The new guns were initially fitted with a fluted cylinder and word soon began to come back that some cylinders were bursting in use due to the thinner walls between the chambers. Attractive though they may have been, the fluted cylinders were quickly replaced with the version we now know - a full round cylinder with a rolled scene showing the engagement between the Texas Navy and their Mexican counterparts. However, this was not before around 4000 fluted models had left the factory. All cylinders were fitted with the Colt 'safety' device - a small pin between each nipple recess that locates into a notch in the hammer face to lock the cylinder in place when the hammer is at rest.

The low weight (2 lbs 11 oz) was a vast improvement over the massive 4+ lbs Dragoon, especially for the mounted troops for whom the pistols were primarily intended. From mid-1861 until the latter part of 1863, Colt supplied the Union Army with over 127,000 of the Model 1860, at which time the Remington New Model became the pistol of choice, primarily down to price. Colt continued to produce the Army revolver until 1873, and over 200,000 examples left the factory during its production run.

Minor detractions

Pietta offers only the full, navy-rolled cylinder version of this revolver, but those who have a fancy for a fluted model can find one in the Uberti models offered by Henry Krank.

For some reason, Pietta has chosen to fit this revolver with a matte black hammer rather than the traditional case-coloured finish, and although this does not affect the operation, purists may find it a detraction. The black finish on the barrel, cylinder, and backstrap (the trigger guard is brass), is of good quality. The case colours on the frame and loading lever are a nice mixture, with the frame being slightly darker than the lever. The one-piece walnut

grip is very plain with a matte finish and fits the grip straps reasonably well, but there are minor gaps and protruding edges. Metal-to-metal fit is better, apart from where the barrel lug meets the front of the frame – a little over-zealous polishing is evident here.

This example is designed for the fitment of a shoulder stock, with cut-outs on either side of the recoil shield, a notch in the base of the butt strap, and a protruding screw on the left and right sides of the frame. Those with larger hands could find these screws a bit of a nuisance, as they have sharp edges. While the optional shoulder stock is listed in the Pietta online catalogue, it is not currently available from the UK importer, Henry Krank.

The 1860 Model saw the introduction of a new 'creeping' loading lever, as opposed to the hinged version on earlier guns. It works very well and the catch on this gun is very tight, preventing any chance of the lever dropping under recoil.

The sights are as the original Colt percussion layout, with the rear being a v-notch cut into the hammer (depth can vary and some users may wish to modify this area), and the front being a white metal blade soldered to the barrel. It is not a precision setup but performs well for the use for which the pistol was intended. Lock-up was exceptionally tight and the cylinder face-to-barrel gap was as small as it could get without impeding cylinder rotation. It had a very nice trigger pull at a shade over 2¾ lbs, with no creep.

Doing the business

26-grains of Henry Krank fine black powder behind a .454" lead ball proved to be a satisfying combination for recoil and gave reasonable accuracy, but others will have their own pet loads for this type of pistol. Ignition was from Remington No. 11 caps and was consistent throughout the test. Shooting off-hand at 25 yards, with a six o'clock hold, it printed a little left and high, with most five-shot groups being around the 4" mark. So, not a competition-winning standard, but that is down to me rather than the gun. Personal experience has shown me that there are people out there who can wring much better results than that from these models.

At around six reloads (30 shots), I began to feel the pistol tightening up



The Army grips (L) are ¼" longer than the 1851 Navy model (R)



The front sight blade



A good, tight latch and catch arrangement for the loading lever

due to the fouling, and I had to tap out the wedge (easier than I had come to expect) and clean the affected areas. Black powder to me is just a bit of fun but those more absorbed in this aspect of shooting will likely use one of the more expensive brands of black powder that are available, which I understand burn cleaner and will thus extend the number of shots between cleanings.

As stated above, this pistol will compete with the Remington New Model Army (aka model 1858) and each one has its fans and detractors. Perhaps the biggest negative from the Colt point of view is the occasional broken or spent cap falling into the channel between the hammer and frame as you cock the pistol. I had a couple of these during the test, but it can usually be overcome by twisting your wrist to the right as you draw back the hammer, allowing the cap to fall clear.

Clean up

Cleaning Colt open-frame pistols is particularly easy when you can separate the main components. I usually remove the nipples and pop them, along with the cylinder, into a container of boiling water with a little washing-up liquid, while I scrub the barrel and attend to areas that can be reached with an old toothbrush and/or cotton buds. A wool

mop cleans the chambers and centre hole in the cylinder; then a thorough drying (a hair dryer is ideal), a little grease on the cylinder arbour, and a smidgen of oil on the nipple threads (facilitates removal next time) before reassembly, and the whole job takes no more than 15 to 20 minutes. Every two or three outings, depending on how much you shoot, I would strip my pistol completely to remove the fouling that builds up in those awkward places (I've even seen it in the channel between the back strap and the wood grip). Others will do this after every use, but I never found the need.

For those who like a little bling or something a bit different, Pietta offers this model with a brass frame in a choice of two barrel lengths, although neither is an authentic reproduction of any item from the 19th century.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Name: Pietta Colt 1860 Army revolver

Calibre: .44

Barrel Length: 8"

Overall Length: 14"

Weight: 2 lbs 10 oz

Trigger Pull: 2½ lbs+

Price: £317.00

Contact: Henry Krank -
www.henrykrank.com