

Collecting and Shooting the Military Surplus Rifle



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Governments of the world often see value in a military arm another government (generally a friendly government, but perhaps otherwise) now uses, or has used in the past. After all, a proven design is just that: proven! Adopting such a firearm just plain makes sense.

A good gun, manufactured by a *quality* vendor can be acquired for a fraction of what it takes in time, resources and money to develop an entirely new arm. If a proven arm is currently in production, no time is wasted or expense incurred by tooling or start-up costs. It's simply a matter of minor details to be ironed out with the customer before a contract is let. What might a few of those "minor details" be?

Consider the endless variations on the Mauser 98 design! Often it was a simply caliber change, or they wanted the safety to operate in reverse. A country may simply have ordered the exact arm another country used. Consider, if you will, all of the contract Mauser rifles ordered by Mexico or the Latin American countries. Instead of being chambered in 8mm Mauser, the vast majority of the rifles were chambered in 7mm Mauser. Or, they may have specified the same rifle, but, with a different configuration of nose cap. This was usually so a group of older bayonets, now in storage, could be used.

One country's contract called for their order to be made with upgraded models if another country went to upgraded models! Barrel lengths might be anywhere from 17 inches to 29 inches on otherwise identical models. Sights were another variation. Some countries specified "barleycorn" front sight blades and a tight "V" notch rear blade while another country might specify a parallel-sided front sight blade and a square notch rear blade. Sometimes the only real difference between models was the placement of the sling

attachments and barrel bands. Handguns were also adopted in a like manner.

Upon the US entrance into WWI, there were not sufficient stocks of the recently adopted Model 1911 .45 ACP caliber semi-automatic pistol available. Neither was there sufficient manufacturing capability to produce the required amount of pistols. Even with the production lines running at full capacity, another handgun source would have to be relied upon. Revolvers were the answer.

Both Colt and S&W were already producing large-frame, double action revolvers. Colt had its New Service series, and S&W had its New Century (N frame) line. Chambering the revolvers for the rimless .45 ACP round was a simple matter. Of course, the extractor star would need *something* to push against when extracting empties; this presented a problem for the "rimless" (rim not extending beyond the sides of the case wall) .45 ACP cartridge. This problem was handled by the addition of flat, spring-steel clips, each holding 3 rounds of ammunition.

The U.S. Military specified a 5.5-inch barrel and dull, military finish on the metal. A lanyard swivel was added to the bottom of the grip area. The stocks were simple, smooth, unadorned, oil-finished wood. Since the basic guns were already in production, incorporating the military specifications was easy. The contracts were let quickly.

Soon both factories were shipping large numbers of handguns to the military. After the war, both companies found a ready market for these guns. Police sales, and the civilian sector kept the market strong, production continued at both S&W and Colt.

In the late 1930's Brazil found itself in need of handguns. Training men in the safe & proficient use of a revolver is much easier than training them to use a semi-auto pistol. Generally, a revolver requires less maintenance than a semi-auto pistol. Brazil let a contract to S&W for a .45 ACP chambered revolver. The Brazilian model number is model 1937. The Brazilian 1937 is *extremely* close to, but not *quite* identical to the S&W 1917.

Both the 1917 and 1937 share the same barrel length and lanyard swivel. The two main differences are the grip panels, and the rear sighting arrangement. Let's look at those.

We'll start with the 1917.



Figure 1

The 1917's rear "sight" is a U shaped groove milled into the top strap. The curve of the top strap makes it harder to shoot close groups for my eyes.



Figure 2

The 1917's continuous curve front sight blade appears as a post when viewed from the rear.

The 1917's rear "sight" is a U shaped groove, commonly referred to as a "hog wallow" in the old vernacular.

The 1917's top strap is a continuous curve until it meets the edges.



Figure 3

It reads: **US ARMY MODEL 1917**



Figure 4

My Brazilian Model 1937 has the smooth stocks of a US model 1917

(This is not unusual, many 1937's have been observed with 1917 stocks, and some even have 1917 style frames!)

As we stated before, the 1917's grip panels were quite simple. Smooth, unadorned, oil-finished wood served as grip panels.

The metal finish of the 1917 was of a fairly non-reflective type.

Now, let's look at the Brazilian 1937 contract gun.



Figure 5

The flattop frame and square notch rear 'sight'

make easier shooting for this editor.



Figure 6

Flat top, square notch and parallel sided front blade, works for me!



Figure 7

Sighting arrangements: Brazilian 1937 on left, US 1917 or right.
The Brazilian 1937 has a square shaped rear sight notch.

The top strap of the 1937 has a flat milled across its entire length.



Figure 8

This is a current production S&W N frame revolver. I've shown it because it wears grip panels very similar to the grip panels that were fitted to most Brazilian 1937's.

Brazil specified the commercial checkered grip panels with an S&W medallion at the top of each panel.

Brazilian guns also have the commercial S&W bright blue finish on the metal ([Note.1](#)).



Figure 9

Brazilian Crest

A Brazilian crest is stamped on the right hand side of the gun.

However, as with most things, it's just not as simple as that. Some early 1937's were supplied with 1917 grip panels, (like my gun) instead of the commercial panels ([Note.2](#)).

Additionally, examples of Brazilian 1937's have been observed with the top strap profile and rear sight notch of the U.S. GI 1917! It seems some left over 1917 frames and grips panels were used in filling the Brazilian order. The total of guns ordered by Brazil numbered 25,000.

Both guns share an identical front sight blade. It's the old "half-nickel" sight. While not the most conducive to target shooting; the continuous curve of the front sight *is* a very snag-proof arrangement!

When it comes to the actual shooting, I've always found the square notch easier to use.



Figure 10

Pachmayer rubber grips with bottom opened by a Dremel tool. The gun's lanyard ring sits in the newly cut slot.



Figure 11

Lanyard ring can be seen in the slot.



Figure 12
US 1917 with Pachmayer "Signature" grips
(Notice lanyard ring showing at the bottom of the grips)



Figure 13
Brazilian 1937 with Pachmayer "Gripper" grips.



Figure 14

12 shots at 20 yards fired off-hand with Brazilian 1937.



Figure 15

12 shots at 20 yards fired off-hand with US 1917.

The following articles discuss casting bullets, reloading equipment, powder and loading for these fine guns.

<http://www.surplusrifle.com/shooting2006/swwheelgun3/index.asp>

<http://www.surplusrifle.com/shooting2006/swwheelgun2/index.asp>

<http://www.surplusrifle.com/shooting2006/swwheelgun/index.asp>

<http://www.surplusrifle.com/reviews2006/leeturretpress/index.asp>

http://www.surplusrifle.com/articles2008/frc_hippocketsnakegun/index.asp

I really like the US Model 1917 and Brazilian Model 1937 N frame revolvers. Both shoot very well. The sighting arrangement of the 1937 suits my aging eyes a bit better, but the mechanical accuracy is in definitely in both guns. The great thing is: both models are on auction sites literally every week, and seen at the bigger gun shows. Let's talk prices.

The US Model 1917 in good condition can be had for about \$600.00. An example in fine or extra fine condition with an original holster and ½ moon clips can get a bit pricey, but,

they are available. A comparable Brazilian Model 1937 typically goes for about half the cost of a usually US Model 1917! The collector market drives the prices, NOT the quality of the guns. For, in truth, the Brazilian guns were better finished than the US guns at time of manufacture. However, due to the conditions the Brazilian guns were used and stored in, they typically show more scars than US guns. Some Brazilian guns show bad rusting, but others, like my Brazilian, are in quite good condition.

If you like shooting big-frame military revolvers, you cannot go wrong with either a US Model 1917 or a Brazilian Model 1937! ([Note.3](#)).

Note 1

My model 1917 is a WWII rebuild. It has been parkerized. This was not the finish that S&W applied during its manufacture in 1918. The original finish was a somewhat dull blue.

During WWII, many older guns were in storage. Since the government had a need for guns, many of the older arms were pulled from storage, and sent through a rebuild program. My gun's barrel was replaced with a new one, and the entire arm parkerized at Augusta Arsenal.

Note 2



A grip adapter raised the gun to the proper height

Most shooters find *neither* the 1917 or 1937 grip panel design is very comfortable, or conducive to good shooting! At the very least, a grip adapter is required. A better solution is to replace the factory grips with rubber grips. I took a couple of old pairs of rubber N frame grips, and ground a slot in the rubber to hide the lanyard swivels.

Note 3

My model 1917 was a rebuild and parkerized at Augusta Arsenal. That is a US Government facility. A new barrel was installed. They made sure every part of the gun met ALL specifications before assembling; parkerizing and sending it back to military service.

We have all seen military guns on a dealer's table at a gun show that was "assembled from parts". Some of these were carefully done at government arsenals. British guns having gone through arsenal refurbishment will show the FTR stamp. Private parties have assembled some guns, they were very careful in selecting only good, serviceable parts to complete, or repair a gun.

Sadly, some guns have been assembled by 'hammer mechanics'. They could care less as long as the gun is complete when it goes on the dealer's table. Such arms are usually inaccurate in the best case, and downright dangerous in the worst case!

I looked at one US Model 1917 that was a mess. It was badly out of time. A used barrel had been installed, and a file was used on it to get clearance for the cylinder! There was a large hammer mark on the crane. The gap between the chambers and the barrel extension changed with every rotation of the cylinder. The trigger and lockworks felt lousy.

The dealer kept reminding me it was "A US Military gun" when he quoted me an astronomical price! I just smiled, put it down and walked away. Had the barrel and chambers been filled with lead, and the crane welded shut, it would have made a *fine* paperweight.

BUYER BEWARE!

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