Pen Gun!
American Derringer resurrects a type of weapon that used to be viewed simply as a curiosity.

By Frank James
Photos by Ichiro Nagata

The Second World War left us with many legacies, but the weapons and firearms developed and refined during that conflict have had a lasting effect far beyond that seen with any war before or since.

It was the war that introduced air power, mechanized armor, and atomic bombs. In small arms development we saw the introduction of the first assault rifle, the zenith of easy-to-produce submachine guns, a wide variety of suppressed firearms, and one seldom noticed type of handgun called the pen-gun.
To load the pen-gun, you unscrew the barrel from the pen’s body and drop in a cartridge, in this case a .25 ACP. After it’s loaded, to make the pen ready to fire, you pull out the rear portion of the pen and then down to fold it into an “L” shape. The trigger will then pop-out.

The pen-gun experienced extensive development during WWII by both the British SOE and the American OSS. A surreptitious firearm designed for clandestine missions, it was built to look like a common fountain pen.

Today, these pen-guns are seldom seen and if they are, it is either in a museum or a private collection. Because of their nature and background they are classified under the National Firearms Act as restricted or registered NFA firearms. To possess a pen-gun from WWII you must pay the appropriate NFA tax, be fingerprinted, and have the gun registered with the BATF in Washington, D.C.

A new pistol from American Derringer Corp., however, comes very close to these historic “spook guns” in profile and style without the restrictive BATF classification. American Derringer calls their product the “Pen Pistol” to distinguish it from the prohibited pen-gun class of firearms.

In short, the American Derringer Corporation’s Pen Pistol is available on the same basis as any other handgun and it is a unique firearm.

American Derringer sales literature states that the device “Transforms From A Pen To A Legal Pistol In Two Seconds.” While great care must be exercised during this transformation, it will change from a pen-like device into a pistol in a very short time, but more about that in a moment.

History Of Pen-Guns

The first pen-guns were gas guns. They were single shot devices that fired a tear-gas cartridge. Their purpose was to allow the purchaser to use them in a non-lethal manner by firing into the face of the attacker and disorienting the thug, thereby providing the customer with the opportunity for escape. Great theory, but one filled with faulty logic.

These early tear gas guns had little true effectiveness, but I can remember people during my youth who often carried such devices under the mistaken belief they would ward off the errant mugger and purse snatcher of the early 1950s.

The needs during World War II were far more serious. Secret agents, operating in German occupied territories, simply couldn’t risk being caught with a firearm. The Nazis, being a thorough bunch, often conducted surprise security checks on streets and sidewalks as they hunted downed Allied airmen, Jews fleeing the infamous trains, leaders of the different resistance groups and SOE and OSS secret agents.

To be apprehended with a gun under these circumstances meant instant imprisonment, if not immediate execution. (The Nazis had very strong and absolute concepts on gun control in the countries they occupied.)

What was needed by the Allied secret agents was something that wouldn’t be immediately recognized as a firearm when they were stopped unexpectedly during a security check. The pen-guns seemed to be the answer, but they were not a perfect solution.

Common Misconceptions

There are many misconceptions regarding these firearms. Many believe they were developed for use in assassinations and the elimination of enemy personnel, but some historians point out that more often than not these small “handguns” were intended to replace the lethal tablets that every secret agent was supposed to carry in enemy territory (Clandestine Warfare: Weapons and Equipment of the SOE and OSS, by James Ladd and Keith Melton, Blandford Press, 1988).

This poison, usually cyanide, was to be used for a quick suicide should the agent be captured by the enemy, their suicide preventing the betrayal of secrets during torture.

Many stories are told about agents using these devices to assassinate enemy leaders and the technique invariably relies upon the agent getting close enough to position the muzzle of the pen-gun directly behind the target’s head for a killing shot.

But, it would be an unsuppressed shot and that alone is a point that questions the validity of the “assassination theory” about these devices.

The British SOE did have suppressed single shot pistols that were deployed in assassinations and various eliminations of enemy personnel with the superlative Welrod pistol in .32 ACP, and a later Welrod model in 9x19mm being the best two examples.

British Pen-Guns

The British made a number of different pen-guns. One of the first was the Enpen. It was a single shot .22 rimfire device that was non-reloadable. Kind of a “fire and forget it” scheme of things, if you know what I mean.

A "Mark II" version of the Enpen was introduced later in the war that was capable of being reloaded. An even later device called the Welpen was available in a .38 caliber while still retaining the overall appearance of a fountain pen of that period.

The OSS used both the Welpen and the Stinger. The Stinger was a .22 caliber weapon and the original, like the earlier Enpen, was a throw-away, “fire and forget” firearm that was non-reloadable.

Many references can be found where authorities of this period did not consid...
er the Stinger to be an even marginally safe pistol. It seems the Stinger had a firing pin that operated by means of a connecting stud that stuck out the side of the tube. Pulling this stud rearward cocked the device, and releasing the stud fired it.

It could be cocked, so to speak, by slipping the firing pin stud into a notch and then pushing the stud out of the notch. The greatest concern was the fact it was difficult to carry the Stinger in a safe manner. If it was carried in a front pants pocket, a person's manhood was at great risk!

Some years ago the Military Armaments Corporation that produced the infamous MAC-10 submachine gun also produced a single shot device in .22 Long Rifle they called the “Stinger.”

They were all NFA devices, and therefore subject to registration. Occasionally, one of these things will come up for sale, but their main value is in terms of history and a possible use during the Vietnam war.

**Complete Departure**

The American Derringer “Pen-Pistol” is a complete departure from any of these firearms. It is not a simple pen-gun style of firearm. It is complex, and it must be folded into an “L” shape before it will fire. It has a safety.

It is 5½” long, is approximately ¾” in diameter, and weighs 4.6 ozs. And unlike the World War II examples, this one is made from stainless steel.

The two-inch barrel unscrews from the main body of the pistol for loading. The test sample was chambered for .25 ACP. By dropping a live round into the chamber and then reinserting the barrel to the body of the firearm, the gun is loaded. The barrel has a slightly raised knurled circumference forward of the chamber and this knurling provides purchase for removal.

To fire the gun after loading, turn the tubular body of the gun to where the safety ring on the Pen-Pistol has the indicated “S” (for safe) on top.

The shooter then grasps the knurled part of the barrel with the weak, or off, hand, but he must exercise great care to avoid placing any part of his hand or body in front of the muzzle.

With his strong hand he pulls on the rear back portion of the Pen Pistol and in a single motion pulls out and then down to fold the Pen Pistol into its “L”-shaped firing configuration. The trigger will pop-out from the main body of the gun.

Now, before proceeding further, make sure no fingers or any other part of the body are in front of the muzzle, and that the gun is aimed in a safe direction. Rotate the safety ring to the indicated “F” position.

Grasping the gun securely, push in and up on the trigger, and the gun will fire.

After firing, rotate the safety ring back to “S”. (The safety ring will automatically rotate back when the gun is unfolded back into its “pen” format, but we preferred to do this intentionally in the interests of safe gun handling.)

Unscrew the barrel, shake the spent cartridge case from the chamber, and reload if necessary.

**Shooting Test**

The Pen-Pistol has no sights, so obviously our expectations were not great in terms of target accuracy, but several shooters were able to hit a six inch rock at a distance of 20 feet or so during our testing on an outdoor target. That’s about as far away as I would want to be if I really had to shoot something with this gun, and even then it would need to be something large.

Sighting is basically accomplished by looking down the top of the barrel and upper body. I noticed that everyone who fired the gun used a two-hand hold for increased safety and control.

Everyone remarked about how light the trigger felt and later I found it somewhere between 2½ and 3 pounds with an RCBS trigger pull gauge.

The recoil of the gun is certainly a different sensation, what with its cylindrical shape. It feels like a stick vibrating in your hand.

My original intention was to test and see how quickly the firearm could be safely deployed from a pocket using the PACT timer, but upon reflection I declined that test. The chance of getting some part of my anatomy or fingers accidentally in front of the muzzle during my haste was deemed too great.

If one is careful, methodical, and thinks about what one is doing, I can see no problem whatsoever with safety.

It would be hard for me to recommend this gun as a primary self-defense firearm, but you could theoretically use it as a third back-up, I suppose. It is certainly well made, and is an interesting piece of engineering.

The truth is, however, that many will purchase it because they love and study firearms, and this particular firearm is about as close as they will get to owning a pen-gun from World War II.

In that regard, I am in complete agreement. The Pen Pistol is illustrative of things done in the past, and to me that’s important. The Pen Pistol is a well made example of an uncommon type of handgun that is now available without restrictions.

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