



Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

Excerpt of Project Report by Tom Andrews

The Thompson Sub-Machine Gun owned by Hardy Purvis

The following article has been adapted from a special project report on key artifacts in the Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. This project report was written in 2018 based on extensive research compiled by project intern Tom Andrews.

Thompson Sub-Machine Gun US Navy Model 1921 over stamped 1928

Provenance

This submachine gun was used by Texas Ranger Captain Hardy Purvis during his career and later he passed it down to his son, L.H. Purvis. It is not believed to have been fired in the course of duty, but both were said to have carried it regularly while on the job. The weapon was manufactured by Colt between May 1st and May 6th 1922. It was then shipped to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office in Beaumont, Texas.

Purvis Biographical Information

Hardy B. Purvis was born in Polk County, Texas on March 3, 1891. He served as a deputy sheriff for 12 years in various counties in Texas before joining the Rangers on April 12, 1927. His first assignment was in Borger, Texas, where he had to contend with gamblers, drifters, gunmen, confidence men, and bootleggers. In 1929, he was sent to Lufkin, and was later appointed Captain of Ranger Company A in 1935. From his headquarters in Houston, Purvis had jurisdiction over 47 counties. He retired in June 1956 after 29 years of service. He passed away soon after on July 16, 1959 at the age of 68 years old.

Louis H. Purvis, son of Hardy B. Purvis, was born on July 14, 1912 in Corrigan, Polk County, Texas. He grew up in Lufkin, where his father was then stationed. He received his Ranger commission one week after his 30th birthday and served continuously until his retirement in 1967. Sometime after his father's death, he collected and presented to the DPS enough Mexican cinco peso silver coins to make badges for all 62 of the Rangers then serving. In 1962, they became the official badge of the Texas Rangers. (Footnote: Jim Wilson) During his service, he collaborated with such legendary lawmen as M.T. Gonzauillas and Dudley White.

History of the M1921/28 Thompson Submachine Gun

John Taliaferro Thompson was born in 1860 and graduated from West Point in the class of 1882. He entered the Army, serving in artillery, and later transferred to the Ordnance Department. During the Spanish-American War, he directed the supply of munitions at a time of near chaos in the Army's ordnance and quartermaster units. He was later integral to the process of adopting both the Springfield M1903 rifle as well as the Colt M1911 pistol along with its new cartridge, the .45 ACP.

In November of 1914, Thompson retired from Army service with the intention of developing an automatic rifle. He joined Remington Arms Company and set up factories to produce several military rifles. When the U.S. entered World War I, he was recalled to duty and helped the Army to adapt the British Enfield rifle to .30 caliber and producing the M1917 rifle. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his efforts during war time and retired in December of 1918.

In his second retirement, he continued his efforts to developing an intermediate automatic weapon, which he believed would be a crucial requirement in future wars. He settled on a delayed blowback breech system developed by Navy Commander John Blish. Blish's system used a sloping metal wedge which interlocked with the weapon's breech block and held tight under high pressure, but as the pressure dropped after firing, the faces slipped across each other, unlocking the breech and operating the action. Thompson acquired Blish's patent in

exchange for shares in his company, the Auto-Ordnance Company, which he had founded during his first retirement in 1916.

Thompson and his designers quickly determined that a full power rifle cartridge would not work for their needs, and switched to the new .45 ACP pistol cartridge. The weapon finally made production in 1919, just barely missing out on serving military demand for the first World War. Instead, Thompson marketed the weapon to police forces. The “Tommy Gun” as it was named by the press, quickly gained fame and notoriety for its use by gangsters and police alike during Prohibition Era violence and after.

There are several distinctive models of Thompson, distinguished by their first years of production. The original prototype was produced in 1919 and tested by the U.S. Government in 1920. Although the results of the test were favorable, no government entity recommended adoption of the weapon.

The first production model came out in 1921, which established the characteristic appearance which has become engrained in popular culture. A long finned barrel sat above a carved wooden fore grip, behind it sitting a large drum magazine. Wooden butt stocks were detachable. 15,000 Model 1921s were produced, but never sold in great quantities. The Model 1923 was an attempt to adapt the Thompson design to a more powerful cartridge, the .45 Remington-Thompson. The weapons were offered with bayonets and bipods. Still, no notable sales were recorded, and this model is exceedingly rare. The next production run, the Model 1927, was identical to the 1921 but was single shot only.

With the Model 1928, also referred to as the “Navy Model,” the company finally found commercial success. The primary changes from the 1921 were the switch from a vertical fore grip to a horizontal fore grip, the standardization of the Cutt’s Compensator, and the addition of sling swivels. The rate of fire was reduced to 700 rounds per minute. This model was sold in small quantities prior to World War II, but did not find widespread adoption until the French ordered 3,750 in the Fall of 1939. Additional orders came from Sweden and the United Kingdom. For war production, the Model 1928 was simplified, eliminating the lock, actuator, breech oiler, butt stock catch, compensator, and barrel fins. A fire selector was added, allowing the weapon to be switched between full auto and single shot. It was dubbed the M1 in April 1942, with full production beginning in 1943.

Total production of the M1 Thompson was approximately 2 million, with weapons manufactured by Auto-Ordnance and Savage Arms. All M1s were issued with 20-round box magazines. The weapon was highly popular among specialized troops such as Rangers, Marine Raiders, Armored Units, and Paratroopers. The Thompson went on to see service in the Korean War and Vietnam War.¹

¹ Charles H. Smith, “The Thompson Submachine Gun,” A Brief History of Auto-Ordnance Corp., n.d., www.auto-ordnance.com/ao_ao.html.

Information Specific to this Firearm

This Thompson is a Model 1921 over stamped 1928. The serial number is 10186. It features a Cutt's Compensator and a vertical fore grip. Included with it are a carrying case, cleaning rod, five 20 round box magazines of the later type, and one 50 round drum "L" type magazine. The shoulder stock contains an oil bottle. There is an anchor proof mark at the front of the stock below the attachment rails.