

The Legend of the Colt .45 Caliber Semi-Automatic Pistol and the Moros



Did This...

Photo courtesy of www.sight1911.com



Stop This?

Tausug kris from author's collection



...by replacing this?

Photo courtesy of www.OldGuns.net

In the late 1960's, waiting for a flight out of Zamboanga airport on the island of Mindanao, I was approached by a grizzled and somewhat scary looking old Moro gentleman. A colorful and garrulous fellow, he regaled me with tales of his time as a guerrilla warrior in World War II fighting the Japanese. At one point, he pulled up his shirt and pant legs to show me the many bullet wounds he had sustained, more than half a dozen. When I marveled at his ability to survive such damage, he proudly boasted in broken English, "Well you know, we were the people your Army had to invent the .45 automatic for!" Nowadays whenever anyone hears I have written a history of America and the Moros, I often hear the comment, "When I was in the service I heard that the Colt .45 automatic pistol was invented to stop the fanatical Moros from cutting down our soldiers in the Philippine Islands. Is it true?"

The short answer is, "Yes and no." Yes, the American experience in fighting the Moros was a primary motivator for the "invention" of the weapon, or more precisely, its development. As a result from 1911 until 1985, the Colt Model 1911, .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol went on to become the official sidearm of the U.S. military and one of the most widely-used and famous

pistols in military history. That part of the legend is accurate. But did it succeed in “stopping” the Moros in their tracks? The surprising fact is that Colt .45 M1911 was never put into by the U.S. Army for its original, most urgent purpose. Why?

But first, let me insert a short disclaimer. This is an article about what is fact and what is myth behind the popular legend. It is not about the weapon per se. To learn more about this famous sidearm, including well-known heroes and desperados who used it, I recommend going to the web site www.sightm1911.com.

In the late 19th century, the U.S. Army’s Bureau of Ordinance and the U.S. Navy and Marines adopted the **Colt Model 1894 .38 caliber double-action (DA) revolver** as the standard sidearm for officers, commissioned and non-commissioned (except corporals). Between 1894 and 1900, 144,000 of these handguns were purchased for use by the Army and the state National Guards. The six-shot Colt .38 DA represented advanced late-19th century firearms technology and replaced the famous **Colt .45 “Peacemaker”**. The principle draw back of the old-yet-reliable Peacemaker revolver was that it was single-action, meaning it had to be cocked by hand or thumb between each shot. Plus the cartridges could not be loaded with smokeless gun powder, which meant the smoke cloud could reveal the location of the shooter. The lack of an adequate safety also meant that it was usually loaded with only five cartridges rather than six, best carried with an empty chamber in the firing position. But, despite the modernity and elegance of the new Colt .38, it was never embraced by the small, Regular “frontier” Army (less than 28,000 men in 1898) because of serious doubts about the efficacy of its smaller caliber.

The first test of the new Colt .38 came with the Spanish-American War, from early April to mid-August, 1898. However there were only two-days of actual ground combat, far too short to draw reasonable conclusions. However, the far more deadly and extended conflict that followed soon proved that the fears about the smaller caliber had been justified. While the Spanish-American War was perhaps the shortest major conflict in this nation’s history, the Philippine-American War (called at the time the “Philippine Insurrection”) was almost as long as World War II, lasting from February, 1899 to July 4, 1902. The war in the Philippines began as a “conventional” war but quickly morphed into a guerrilla war; in fact becoming the model for the many “wars of national liberation” of the mid-20th century. It became the U.S. Army’s first experience with jungle warfare and fighting against a full-blown insurgency in a foreign land far removed from North America.

The Filipino “Army of Liberation” (drawn from the northern Christian provinces of the islands) was poorly armed, with only about one rifle for every three-to-four of its soldiers. An even bigger problem was severe lack of ammunition; due to lack of funds and the efficiency of the U.S. Navy in catching and deterring gun-runners. For the most part, the Filipinos had to rely on making their own bullets, using home-made black powder and brass curtain rods. Many U.S. historians have belittled the military ability and leadership of the Army of Liberation, comparing it unfavorably to the Viet Minh and Viet Cong of more than fifty years later. But the fact is the Filipinos were easily as motivated and tough, but unlike the NVA or Viet Cong did not have the advantage of massive assistance from a friendly major power hostile to the U.S. There were no foreign trainers nor an unlimited stream of modern weapons and ammunition. Otherwise there might have been a far different outcome. Even then 4,234 Americans killed out of 126,468 “cycled through” give that war the dubious distinction of having one of the higher “death rates” for American wars, that is troops committed to troops dying, half-again higher than the decade-long Vietnam War.

Like all good guerilla fighters, the Filipinos were improvisers. They took advantage of the tropical topography with its exceptionally high grasses (well over six feet tall), dense jungles, and winding, constricted trails, to mount ambushes using a tactic called “the bolo rush”. The

Philippine bolo is a fearsome, short (16" to 18"), single-edged, razor-sharp cutting weapon. Every farmer had one and knew how to use it, whether for harvesting crops, hacking trails through jungle, or taking off a limb in a fight. Often as many as 100-200 "bolo men" would lie in ambush near a trail. When an American patrol came along in single-file, Filipino snipers would open fire, forcing the Americans to drop to the ground for cover. At a signal, the bolo men would rush the soldiers lying prone on the trail, willingly losing a large number to rifle fire in order to overwhelm the Americans by their sheer numbers and the ferocity of the charge. Commissioned officers and sergeants, armed only with the Colt .38 revolver, were a favored target.

Think about it! There you are, suddenly sprawled in the mud of a narrow jungle trail, scared as hell, hearing the thud of hundreds of feet and screams in a language you don't understand. You can't see more than a few feet because of the thick grass and vegetation. Suddenly several blurry shapes are running towards you. And all you have in your hands is this "little popgun." It is not a question of getting off a quick shot or two. With the Colt .38, if you did not hit each attacker in a vital part, the head or heart, the bullet would go right through the man and by then or the man next to him would be on you. An avalanche of complaints were made to the Army's Bureau of Ordnance, which controlled weapons sourcing and development. But while there was a lot of discussion and analysis, little happened.

Two years later, by early 1902, the war had taken a sharp turn in favor of the Americans, as province-by-province, guerilla commanders surrendered. The pressure to address the sidearm problem notably diminished. But then unexpectedly, just as the conflict in the northern islands neared an end and far to the south on the island of Mindanao the first battle took place between the Americans and the Muslim Moros on **May 2, 1902; the Battle of Bayan**. Although considered an American victory, the Battle of Bayan foreshadowed what lay ahead. Out of 600 Moros defending two earthen forts, half were killed. But out of the American assault force of less than three hundred men, eleven were killed and forty severely wounded; all in a matter of minutes, at the very point their advance had brought them up to the walls of a Moro fortress. The American infantrymen were almost out of ammunition. Bayonets were fixed. Suddenly waves of Moro warriors sprung from hiding in nearby trenches while others poured out of the cotta walls, swinging their terrifying edged short swords; the double-handled kampilan, the short barong, and the most lethal, the double-edged wavy kris. Two years later, a former Medal of Honor winner and veteran of the Moro Campaigns, Capt. C.C. Smith, observed, "in hand-to-hand combat our soldiers are no match for the Moro. If our first shot misses the target, we rarely have time to get off another." In a matter of minutes, Company F of the 27th Infantry lost both its officers and nearly half its men to the flashing blades. They were only saved from extermination when nightfall and an obscuring fog accompanied by a drenching downpour shielded them from sight while they crawled away from the battlefield through the mud.

Referring to the battle in his Annual Report to the War Department for 1902, Major General Adna Chaffee the Philippine Department Commander underscored the weakness of the .38 caliber Colt, "it failed to stop Moros unless it struck them in a vital spot", and urged the immediate adoption of a heavier caliber sidearm. Chaffee's complaint had been echoed by a flurry of personal letters that came from within the Army, War Department and the Bureau of Ordnance, usually in much stronger and saltier language, substantiating the inadequacy of the .38. One story in particular was told time and time again of an incident during an expedition by (then) Captain John J. Pershing:

Perhaps the most dramatic moment of the Maciu campaign came when two infantry companies were carefully advancing toward a cotta through the six-foot-high cogon grass. Suddenly, a powerfully built Moro jumped from hiding and charged, swinging a kampilan (a long, double-edged, two-handed sword) like a scythe. He nearly lopped off the arm of one scout before charging into the main skirmish line of men

some 30–40 yards away. It took seven bullets to his torso to finally stop him dead in his tracks. The attacker turned out to be Sultan Cabugatan of Maciu. Pershing noted in tribute that he was “the last of a long line who had always fought the Christians. He had held out against us, I think, purely as a matter of principle and he vindicated his courage in his death.

The US Army’s Moro Campaigns ended up lasting more than a decade, from 1903-1913. One of the most famous of the Moros, Panglima Hassan a Tausug war leader, was cornered and refused to surrender. Singly, Hassan rushed the American line with only his barong, cutting up a soldier and two officers before being brought down. "It was determined that thirty-two Krag bullets hit Hassan before a last bullet from a sergeant's revolver [an old Peacemaker] plugged him dead between the eyes." It was asserted in newspapers that the Moros were "hopped up" on drugs and wore bamboo armor and old Spanish helmets for protection during these charges, but this was totally false. The Moros were a warrior culture; to surrender was considered shameful and their religious and cultural values did not permit them to be afraid of death. In fact, they often embraced death, as their Imams told them they would be granted instant entry to heaven if they died in battle defending their faith against kafirs (non-believers). But they were simply tough as nails, propelled by will and naked belief, not chemicals.

Under renewed pressure, the Bureau of Ordinance finally began a serious effort at finding a replacement for the Colt .38. The Bureau’s priority had been replacing the **.30-.40 Krag** with a new high-powered rifle identical to the German Mauser. This would become the **1903 Springfield** that American doughboys would carry into World War I (troops in the Philippines did not get the new rifle until 1907.) Somewhat enamored by then with German weapons, the Bureau procured 2,000 new, technologically-advanced, **9mm German Luger** semi-automatic pistols and shipped them to the Philippines. However, as noted with some sarcasm in the June, 1903 Annual Report of Brigadier General Samuel S. Sumner, commander of the Department of Mindanao and Sulu,

The Luger automatic pistol as a hunting pistol and for dress occasions is attractive and useful. I have one which I prize highly, but for field service, in the hands of officers and men, it is a failure. It is too complicated, and cartridges often jam, but the main defect is that the bullet will not stop a Moro.

More embarrassing for the Army their civilian counterpart, the Philippine Constabulary, had come up with a satisfactory solution a year earlier; and it was “off-the-shelf” and immediately available.

For the first two years of the American presence in the Philippines, the territory was kept under martial law. The commander of the U.S. Army in the islands was also its Military Governor. In mid-1901 President William McKinley abolished the office of Military Governor and replaced it with a civil government headed by a civilian Governor General, William Howard Taft. In a move strongly resisted by the U.S. Army at all levels, Vice Governor Luke Wright created a new paramilitary organization to replace the US Army in pacifying the recently conquered but still very restive provinces. Wright had been in the Philippines for two years as a member of the Philippine Commission, a civilian governing board. He was the only southerner and former Confederate soldier in a committee of Yankees. The model for Wright’s new organization was the Texas Rangers, a law enforcement agency fashioned along paramilitary lines and, operating locally in semi-autonomous fashion. Its Filipino constable-soldiers were led by American officers. Wright petitioned the War Department to loan a large number of junior Army officers for the new organization, particularly since due to the wind down in the war they were in surplus. But the Army offered little cooperation, and after considerable pressure grudgingly agreed to reassign only four officers, one Major and three Captains, to function as the top officers of a new organization of nearly 5,000 men. As it was, the lack of Army involvement turned out to be an unintended favor.

Wright and his new cadre offered hundreds of commissions to enlisted Army non-coms from the many state volunteer regiments heading back to the U.S. for disbandment, and even to junior officers from European countries in nearby China fighting the Boxer Rebellion. Eventually commissions were opened up to qualified Filipinos as well. Unlike the US Army, there was no requirement an officer be an American citizen. As a result the Philippine Constabulary would become a virtual American foreign legion.

The man picked to head up the Philippine Constabulary was Major Henry T. Allen. Considered by some as insubordinate and overly self-righteous, he had nevertheless been an effective unit commander and had pioneered the use of civic-action beside military operations in fighting the northern Filipino "insurrectos." Allen became livid when General Chaffee refused to allow constable-soldiers to be armed with anything other than ancient single-shot shotguns and their officers hand-me-down Colt .38 DA's. Allen was determined to chart a course different from the Army and was not afraid to ruffle feathers. He turned to Wright, who in turn went to the politically formidable Governor-General Taft, who had abundant clout with president Theodore Roosevelt. Taft, working through Secretary of War Elihu Root, strong-armed the Ordinance Department into accepting Allen's shopping list for weapons, circumventing Chaffee and the Army General Staff.

Because of Allen's persistence, the Constabulary rank and file were armed with the obsolete but still quite lethal **.45-.70 Springfield Trapdoor Carbine**, **2,000 Winchester 97, 12-gauge, pump-action, five-shot, repeating shotguns** were purchased with extra short, "sawed-off" 20 inch barrels (later known as "**riot guns**"). These were carried by both commissioned and non-commissioned officers, including a sidearm selected by and manufactured to Allen's specifications. This was a new, improved version of the Army's obsolete double-action Colt .45, M1878 "Frontier" revolver, but with a longer barrel and modified to fire a higher-velocity and smokeless powder cartridge. Several months later, the **.45 caliber Colt Model 1902 revolver** was produced. It came to be known as **the "Philippine"** (and later **the "Alaskan"**) model. 2,000 were purchased by the Bureau of Ordinance and shipped to the Philippines, solely for Constabulary use.



Photo **Colt .45 DA "Philippine"** (also-known-as "**Alaskan**") revolver courtesy www.ocyoung.com. Right is 2nd Lt. Guy Fort of the Moro Constabulary, in the field in 1912. An unresolved question has always surrounded the "Philippine" Colt among collectors, the reason for its enlarged trigger and

trigger guard. The explanation appears to be a longer trigger which provided increased leverage which enabled a stiffer mainspring for firing a higher velocity cartridge. The Constabulary also had its own special holster and cartridge belt, as seen in the photo above, distinctly different from the one worn by the Army, open without a flap closure.



The **Remington M1897 sawed-off shotgun** used metallic cartridges rather than paper cartridges due to the high humidity of the Philippines.

In mid-1903, the jurisdiction of the Philippine Constabulary was extended to the lands of the Moros through a newly-formed subsidiary organization called the Moro Constabulary. In early 1904 the Moro Constabulary fought side-by side with the U.S. Army while serving as scouts against the Moros. In his Annual Report of June, 1904, General Leonard Wood stated what he thought was obvious to anyone paying attention.

It is thought the .45 caliber revolver [meaning the Constabulary Model 1902] is the one which should be issued to troops throughout the Army.... Instances have repeatedly been reported during the past year where natives have been shot through and through several times with a .38 caliber revolver, and have come on, cutting up the unfortunate individual armed with it.... The .45 caliber revolver stops a man in his tracks, usually knocking him down.... It is [also] recommended that each company serving in this department be furnished with four 12-gauge Winchester, repeating shotguns. For outpost duty and advance guard [walking point]... there is no weapon in our possession equal to the shotgun loaded with buckshot.

Meanwhile for the Army, it was not until more than a year later, October of 1903, that a new Chief of Ordnance, Brigadier General William Crozier, finally issued orders to his department to “solve the caliber problem.” But, for whatever reason, the Bureau of Ordnance continued to turn a deaf ear to the demands for a better revolver and simply ignored the comparative field test laboratory that had been created by introduction of the “Philippine”—whether out of pique, since it had been forced upon them, or out of a bad case of “not invented here.” Ordnance stubbornly took and held to the position that the only viable solution was to pursue advanced technology, and issued a challenge to firearms manufacturers to compete on the design of an all new, advanced .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol.

The next five Annual Reports to the War Department simply repeated verbatim the prior year laments and urgent requests for double-action .45 caliber revolvers and Winchester shotguns. In the meantime, letters from officers in the field to their compatriots in U.S. regiments urged that, if assigned to Moroland, they buy the revolvers and shotguns on their own account. Major Hugh Scott, a veteran of the wars with the Sioux and Apaches, heeded the advice and arrived with both, as did many others. He did not regret it. But the real burden fell on the sergeants, who seldom could afford such an expenditure on their meager pay.

Five years later, in 1908 the Bureau of Ordnance, their new semi-automatic pistol still in the future, finally approved a “new service” revolver from Colt, similar in design to the Colt .38. This was the **Colt .45 DA Model 1909**. In 1910, Brigadier General John J. Pershing gave a mild pat on the back for something that should have been done many years earlier, writing, “The substitution of the caliber .45 Colt’s revolver for the caliber .38 is a distinct improvement. This kind of gun more than compensates for the extra weight.”



Colt .45 DA Model 1909

Photo courtesy of www.OldGuns.net

In March of 1911 the **Colt .45 Model 1911 semi-automatic pistol** was selected as the official sidearm of the armed forces of the United States, replacing the M 1909 revolver. But it would not be put into production for another year. However the new **M1911** did not reach U.S. Army units just after they had fought their last battle against the Moros, in mid-1913. At the beginning of 1914, the last US Army unit exited the Land of the Moros after a steady three-year drawdown; replaced by Philippine Constabulary companies backed up by a battalion of the Philippine Scouts, the Army's own native troops led by Regular Army officers. The Constabulary, which upgraded to Krag .30-.40 carbines in 1907, continued to use the Colt .45 "Philippine" revolver together with pump-action Winchester M1897 shotguns right up until World War II. Scout officers continued with the Model 1909 revolver. In a bit of irony, rather than being used for their original stated purpose, to "stop the Moros" the first Colt .45 M1911 semi-automatic pistols were finally shipped to "Moroland"; thirty years later in 1944-45 by submarine from Australia, together with .45 caliber Thompson sub-machineguns, in order to give Moro guerillas sufficient firepower needed to stop another hard-to-stop warrior society, the Japanese.

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