

The Historical Perspective

Among America's shooters the .45-caliber M1911-A1 pistol is at once probably the most loved and hated handgun on the market. Many consider it the most accurate centerfire target pistol available. Others consider it the finest combat pistol ever designed for use in either military or law-enforcement circumstances. It's one of the pistols most often chosen as a platform for the Action Pistol shooting sports and conventional Bullseye matches. At the same time, it's often cursed for its "excessive" recoil, its inaccuracy, and its inability to function with a variety of ammunition types. Its proponents and critics are both right.

The Government Model pistol was originally designed for maximum reliability in military combat. As such, it was made to function only within the performance standards of ammunition specifically designed for it; in its initial form, the .45 ACP 230-grain FMJ ball cartridge, loaded to pressures that provide a muzzle velocity of about 850 fps.

Further, it was made to continue functioning reliably in sand, mud, heat, cold and all the other problems that face the ground soldier in war. To do this a military-issue handgun must have very loose tolerances which, in turn, are not conducive to premium accuracy. But, accuracy in a military handgun is secondary in consideration to functional reliability. A military combat pistol that will hold a 25-yard group of 8 inches may be considered satisfactory for service. Such accuracy, or lack of it, is unsatisfactory in a civilian context.



Above: The Government Model pistol was designed for maximum reliability in combat, using the .45 ACP 230-grain FMJ ball cartridge.

THE REALITIES OF WAR

It's interesting to note the attitude of soldiers in combat regarding this matter. During WWII American GIs in Europe prized their captured Lugers and P-38's. Those pistols were often more accurate, held more ammunition, and were much easier to shoot than the pistols provided to them by their own supply system. Their German counterparts, on the other hand, were delighted when they managed to procure U.S. issue .45s, because they were more powerful and more reliable. It seems that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

In recent years, reams have been written about the GM's efficacy as a sporting handgun, or personal defense and law enforcement tool, with many "experts" espousing the idea that it's the best possible pistol for such use. What's strange is that, at the same time, so much is written about the alterations required to make the pistol accurate enough and so functionally reliable that it can be considered suitable for practical use in any reasonable civilian context.

A rack pistol from a military arsenal will usually shoot GI ball ammunition without a bobble. With any other type of ammunition the likelihood of getting through a magazine full without a jam is remote. No other semi-automatic pistol on the market gets such tolerance from the shooting public. It's our considered opinion that if the Smith & Wesson 4506, the Glock Model 21 or the SIG P-220 needed as much work as the basic Government Model to function as reliably with a variety of ammo, they wouldn't last more than a few months in the marketplace.

CIVILIAN VERSUS MILITARY DESIGN

What needs to be understood is that we're comparing apples with oranges when the GM is stacked against most other service pistols. With the exception of the Glock, which was also designed for military use, albeit in 9mm, the pistols mentioned above and most others that are popular for sport and service use are unlikely to hold up under the conditions of heat, cold, mud, and sand that a GI issue pistol can tolerate. What the stock 1911-A1 gains in reliability, it loses in accuracy and versatility. By the same token, as reliable and versatile as its competitors are, one shouldn't expect them to slog through the jungles of southeast Asia or the deserts of the Middle East without experiencing problems.