



The Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team

www.coleshillhouse.com

Researching Winston Churchill's Secret Army, The Auxiliary Units.

The 'American' Enfields

By Peter Antill



(Left) Near the top of the picture, a pair of Pattern 1914 Enfield Rifles at the Infantry Weapons Collection, Warminster.

This family of manually-operated, Mauser-style bolt action rifles originated with the Pattern 1913 Enfield (or P13) that was an experimental rifle developed due to the combat experience of the British Army during the Second Boer War (1899 – 1902), where they met Boer marksmen armed with the Mauser Model 1895 in 7x57mm calibre.

Several years later, when the new .303in Short Magazine Lee Enfield No. 1 Mk. III had come into service, doubts about its

long range accuracy caused the War Office to develop a potential replacement, a high-powered, rimless .276 cartridge (known as the .276 Enfield). In 1910, both the Birmingham Small Arms (BSA) Factory and the Royal Small Arms Factory (RSAF) at Enfield produced rifle designs chambered for .276in. RSAF Enfield also produced a design chambered for .256in but this was dropped in favour of the .276in calibre.

Additional testing confirmed that the cartridge was powerful and had good ballistics but was too powerful for the rifle design, with excessive recoil, muzzle flash and heat being produced. Further development however was curtailed as the First World War broke out in August 1914. The massive expansion of the British Army to fight on the Western Front meant that the UK was desperately short of small arms. In response, the UK Government not only bought rifles from abroad (from Japan for example), but contracted three US arms manufacturers (Winchester, Remington and Eddystone) to build a re-designed P13, this time being chambered for the standard British military round, the .303in (7x56mmR) cartridge. Broadly, the design featured a Mauser-style bolt but with Lee features, optimised for rapid fire, such as having a 'cock-on-closing' (same as the SMLE) action rather than the 'cock-on-opening' action of traditional Mauser designs such as the Gewehr 1898 and M903 Springfield.



(Right) The bottom rifle is an M1917 Enfield at the Infantry Weapons Collection, Warminster.



However, while the 'Pattern 1914 Enfield' (or the Rifle, 'No. 3 Mk. 1' as it was also called) was superbly accurate, it was awkward to handle in close combat conditions, was ill-balanced

and the bolt / action took considerable maintenance. While it filled a need, as larger numbers of SMLEs became available, it was gradually withdrawn from service into reserve. Some were however kept in service as sniper rifles, due to its formidable accuracy.

Now this might have been the end of the story, but the Pattern 1914 Enfield was to be reprieved twice. The first time was when the USA entered the First World War in April 1917. Just as the British had found, the massive expansion of the Army completely outstripped the available stocks of weapons and the available manufacturing capacity. The USA therefore adapted the Pattern 1914 Enfield design to the .30-06 rifle cartridge, a round for which it was well-suited. This was designated the 'United States Rifle, Caliber .30, Model of 1917' or 'M1917 Enfield' and the three factories turned out over 2,270,000 units. Many soldiers appreciated the accuracy and robustness of the rifle but some disliked the weight (well over 9lbs, unloaded). Over time, the M1917 came to outnumber the M1903 in the American Expeditionary Force, fighting in France. As a side note, there is a continuing controversy over which rifle was used by Sgt. Alvin York during his famous action on 8 October 1918 during the Meuse-Argonne offensive – the M1903 Springfield or the M1917 Enfield.

The second reprieve was in the Second World War. After the armistice, both the United States and the UK put large numbers of their respective rifles in storage. However, with the outbreak of war, the USA took the majority of weapons and refurbished them as reserve, training and Lend-Lease stock. Many of these were sent to the UK and, alongside the re-discovered Pattern 1914 Enfield rifles (which themselves had been refurbished), were issued for home defence purposes, especially to rear-echelon units and the Home Guard with some undoubtedly finding their way into the inventory of the Auxiliary Units.



Specifications (Pattern 1914, top):
Calibre: .303 (7.7x56mm)
Length: 1,175mm (46.25in)
Length of Barrel: 660mm (24in)
Muzzle Velocity: 725.6mps (2,380fps)
Rate of Fire: Manual
Feed: 5-round integral magazine

Specifications (M1917, bottom):
Calibre: .30-06 (7.62x63mm)
Length: 1,175mm (46.25in)
Length of Barrel: 660mm (24in)
Muzzle Velocity: 823mps (2,700fps)
Rate of Fire: Manual
Feed: 6-round integral magazine