

# Thompson Sub-Machine Gun: Factsheet

By Peter Antill

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Model M1928, with what seems to be a Russian-made drum magazine. (Bill Gibson)

The Thompson SMG, made famous through its widespread use during the Prohibition Era in the United States (the 'Roaring '20s), was invented in 1919 by

John T. Thompson (1860 – 1940). In 1904, Thompson and Col. Louis A. LaGarde conducted tests to find the most appropriate calibre for handgun ammunition. These tests included firing rounds into live cattle at slaughterhouses and human cadavers from medical schools. They found that larger, slower velocity ammunition caused more damage than higher velocity, smaller calibres and so helped develop the .45 ACP rimless cartridge, which was adopted first, in the Colt M1911 semi-automatic pistol designed by John Browning and eventually, in the Thompson SMG.

Thompson, seeing the potential of a handheld version of the machineguns being used to deadly effect in the trenches of the First World War, developed a weapon based on the *blowback* principle but incorporating a 'Bliss Lock' – a device that delayed the weapon's cycle until the pressure in the chamber had dropped to safe levels. Thompson started his own company in 1916, Auto Ordnance Corporation, to design and test these weapons, while he signed a contract with Colt, who would manufacture them. Unfortunately for the company, the war ended just as the first weapons arrived on the quayside in New York.

Thompson refocused his efforts on the domestic market within the USA (while trying to interest foreign buyers) and eventually had some success with private sales and sales to a number of Police Departments and Law Enforcement Agencies. Even the IRA bought some. But it was in the hands of the gangsters of Organised Crime, which had sprung up during 'Prohibition', that the weapon really found fame, becoming associated with criminals such as Al Capone, John Dillinger and 'Machine Gun' Kelly.

Finally in 1926, the US Coast Guard accepted the weapon into service, as did the US Post Office to arm US Marines who were guarding the mail. These same weapons went with them to Nicaragua and proved so successful the Corps bought another 200 and accepted it into service in 1930. The US Navy also adopted them in 1928 for use on their gunboats and the US Army, somewhat reluctantly at first, accepted it into service on a limited basis in 1932.



M1928 and M1A1 (Author's Collection)

By 1939, the company was in trouble financially but the Second World War proved to be a turning point. With the widespread use of sub-machineguns by Germany, not only did the US Army order huge numbers (339,450 weapons by August 1941) but the UK (107,500) and France (6,000) did as well. This meant AOC could use its old stock but also had to lease a plant in Bridgeport, Connecticut to build new weapons, in addition to contracting the Savage Arms Company to build them as well.



By the time the Second World War had started, the Thompson was approaching obsolescence – it was heavier, harder to mass produce and was more expensive than most of the others but it had one distinct advantage – it was the only SMG to be in production. In addition, the Thompson evolved over time. During the war, Savage went to work making it simpler, lighter and cheaper to manufacture. The sights were simplified, a simple *blowback* system was adopted,

eliminating the 'Blish Lock', the cooling fins were removed and the butt stock permanently attached to the receiver. This was the M1 variant – the M1A1 was even simpler with the firing pin and hammer removed and in its place, a fixed firing pin was machined into the face of the bolt.

The Auxiliary Units were first issued with the Thompson SMG, upon their formation in July 1940. All the known and authenticated Thompsons owned by Aux Units were built by Savage and numbered between 35,000 and 60,000. Personnel from RSAF Enfield were at Savage inspecting the guns destined for the UK and stamped their marks (a broad arrow above the Royal Crown, an examiner's number and 'E' denoting the Enfield Inspectorate) on the right of the body, forward of the magazine cut out.

By the time production stopped in late 1944, over 1,750,000 Thompsons had been produced, with spare parts to make an estimated 250,000 weapons. Most of these were made at the Savage facility, which can be identified as having an 'S' prefix before the serial number on the left side of the upper receiver, compared to the 'A.O.' prefix on the weapons coming from AOC's Bridgeport plant.

Specification (M1) –  
Calibre: .45 ACP  
Length: 813mm (32in)  
Length of Barrel: 267mm (10.5in)  
Weight Loaded: 4.74kg (10.45lbs)  
Magazine: 20 or 30-round box  
Rate of Fire: 700rpm  
Muzzle Velocity: 280mps (920fps)



Winston Churchill with a Thompson SMG (The National Archives)