

CORONET

September, 1945

Meet the Chopper



by J. D. RATCLIFF

A GROUP OF Army Air Forces recruits were taking instruction in use of the tommy gun. One soldier fondled the weapon lovingly, broke it down with a few sure, swift motions and put it together again. On the range, he placed the gun snugly against his hip and blasted the target to pieces.

The bug-eyed instructor watched this performance. "How come you know so much about this gun?" he asked.

A faint, reminiscent smile came over the recruit's face. "I used to take these things to pieces at night in the back of a car going seventy miles an hour," he said. Then he explained: "I was in the beer business in Chicago."

Since 1831, when Samuel Colt whittled out a wooden model of his famed 6-shooter, there has been no gun quite so colorful, or quite so lethal, as the tommy gun. It wrote flaming history in the Chicago underworld, in the Irish rebellion, and in Nicaragua. It was present when Russian troops, covered with powdered brick-dust, blasted their way into Berlin; was with the British in Burma. Its hot breath was largely responsible for routing the Japs from Guadalcanal.

In individual actions it assumed heroic proportions. It spoke eloquently during the British commando raid on Rommel's headquarters at Beda Littoria, and again when blackfaced troops slipped ashore in France at night to blast the drydocks at St. Nazaire.

Soldier respect for this weapon traces to two things. It fires .45 calibre slugs at a cyclic rate of 600-700 per minute. An enemy struck by a carbine or rifle bullet can keep coming—as Japs have shown. A man struck by a tommy gun slug is stopped dead—literally—in his tracks. A burst of fire can cut a man in two.

OldMagazineArticles.com



In official Army language the tommy gun is known as the M 1928 A-1 submachine gun. Gangsters had a better name for it. They called it the chopper.

Two men developed it during World War I: Commander John Blish of the Navy and Brigadier General John Thompson of the Army — for whom the gun was named. Thompson recognized the need for putting greater fire power in the hands of individual soldiers. Blish discovered the basic mechanism about which a light, rugged gun could be built.

They knew it would be an invaluable weapon for mop-up work in trench warfare. But the war was over almost as soon as they started work. The first model wasn't completed until 1920. In 1920-21 a total of fifteen thousand tommy guns were built. Irish revolutionists bought a few for Maginot Line patrols. The British took a token shipment—1,500 guns. Maguire continued to pile up inventory.

Then, on May 10, 1940, the Nazis swept into Belgium, ripped through Holland and into France, pressing the British against the Channel Coast. Four days before Dunkirk, Maguire got a frantic call from Britain. Could he supply 26 thousand guns immediately? Three weeks later there was another call—for 25 thousand more guns.

Our own Army added the Thompson gun as standard equipment for tanks, paratroopers, and commando-type units. Seabees and Marines picked it up. When Germany marched into Russia in June, 1941, the Russians submitted a list of wanted Lend-Lease materials. There were 146 items on the list. Tommy guns were third. The Russians, incidentally, give the tommy gun major credit for the Nazi debacle at Stalingrad. Other weapons went to the Chinese—the first they received in any quantity.

The tommy gun was a dream weapon for jungle warfare. It is virtually impossible to see a well-camouflaged Jap in a thick undergrowth, hence impossible to take a bead on him with a rifle. But a tommy gun can spray a whole area where there is the slightest movement. It can be fired from the hip, or can be fitted with a buttstock



for shoulder firing.

The gun is rugged, simply-constructed and light enough for easy transport. Empty, it weighs about eleven pounds. Loaded with a twenty-shot clip it weighs twelve pounds, and nearly sixteen pounds when equipped with a fifty-shot drum. It can be fired semi-automatic—that is, one shot with each squeeze of the trigger. A flick of a switch makes it fully automatic. It can be fired in bursts by squeezing the trigger for a fraction of a second, or it can empty an entire drum in four seconds.

Perhaps the greatest point in favor of the tommy gun is the ease with which a man learns to fire it. A rifle takes time, but a man learns to spray an area with tommy gun fire the first time he has the gun in his hands.

Put all these things together and they explain why the tommy gun is, almost without question, the most significant weapon of World War II. It has been superseded by more recently designed submachine guns, but it was one which was ready at the time of greatest need.



OldMagazineArticles.com