

On the volley



Most people have never heard of the Pieper volley gun. It is another good example of a make and class of arm that has, to all intents and purposes, disappeared

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Those among you who know the name Pieper will associate it with either small calibre semi-automatic pistols, or possibly from the variety of inexpensive, single-shot Flobert (rimfire) rifles that Belgian gunsmiths churned out by the boatload. It is very easy to dismiss these arms, along with the plethora of Belgian-made hammer shotguns as cheap rubbish. However, Belgium, like most gun making countries, made high quality arms as well, and Pieper was no exception.

Henri Pieper was born in the German town of Soest in the Westphalia region in 1840. After basic training in machining and a brief employment at a woollen mill, he apprenticed with a gunsmith named Warstein. Quickly becoming a talented metalworker, Pieper emigrated to Belgium in 1859 and subsequently mastered his craft in Herstal, Verviers and Liege.

Around 1866, Pieper opened his own firearms factory in Bayard Street in Liege making rifle barrels. Business was good and by 1870 his shop had grown to occupy more than 6,000 square yards. That same year he partnered with a barrel-maker named Nessonvaux in the Vesdre valley.

Over-worked

In 1887, he joined a consortium of high-profile Belgian arms makers including Jules Ancion, the Dumoulin brothers, Joseph Janssen, Pirlot-Frésart, Draws up-Laloux & Co., Albert Simonis and Emile and Leon Nagant. Of these, the rifles of Dumoulin and the famous Nagant gas-seal revolver will be the most familiar to many readers, the last of which was probably designed by Pieper. As if this was not enough, Pieper found the time to manufacture bicycles and one of the earliest automobiles, the so-called Pieper "Bicyclette", and then topped the lot by co-founding Fabriqu e Nationale,



Seven shot

The Pieper volley gun has seven rifled .22 calibre barrels, all of which fired at once

soon to be producing the famous range of Browning arms. Henri Pieper was to die prematurely on 23 August 1898. The company reorganised as "Anciens Etablissements Pieper" and continued for a time under the direction of Pieper's son, Nicolas. The strain of diversification, particularly in the area of vehicles, brought the company to its knees, and in 1905 the board of directors told Nicolas Pieper to go.

Rare beast

The company was once again reorganised, this time as "Les Anciens Etablissements Pieper," and moved to an entirely new factory in Herstal in 1907. Concentrating solely on the manufacture of weapons and sporting arms, it is estimated that at its

peak, this factory was turning out 60,000 shotguns, 30,000 automatic pistols, 30,000 rifles and 12 million cartridges a year! So, as we can see, the Pieper brand was no manufacturing slouch. Even so, the Pieper volley gun is a rare beast indeed. It is based on the Remington Rolling Block Action, which was one of the simplest, strongest single-shot actions of the late 1800s and one that successfully bridged the black-powder and smokeless eras.

Meat hunter

Last year we looked at the original Nock volley gun built in 1779 for the Royal Navy. It was used to shred the sails of enemy ships at close range and to clear their decks by firing it, more or less indiscriminately, into

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Hunting tool

The Pieper volley gun was intended as a tool for professional hunters

“Most market hunters used shotguns, but professionals used punt or volley guns”

the ranks of enemy sailors. Naval warfare wasn't what Henri Pieper had in mind when he built his volley gun. More likely he intended it as a tool for professional hunters. Back before 1918, game shooting, especially abroad, was a bit of a free-for-all and in America there were no bag limits on waterfowl like there is today, with many hunters making their living by shooting as many ducks as they could in a single day and taking them down to the local meat market to sell. Most market hunters used everyday shotguns, but professional market hunters used punt guns or volley guns.

Punt gunning

A punt gun, of course, was an enormous

smoothbore with a calibre frequently larger, sometimes much larger, than one inch. It was loaded with as much as a half-pound of shot and lashed to the gunwale of a punt, a small skiff-like boat. You'd paddle the punt gun toward the birds, point the front of the boat at them, then — BOOM! Afterward, you'd pick up the dead birds with a long-handled net and off to market you went.

The Pieper volley gun must have served the same purpose. It has seven rifled .22-calibre barrels, all of which fire at once. There's a single pair of sights on top of its barrel cluster, which suggests it was never meant for precision shooting. When you saw a bunch of geese or ducks on

the water, you simply aimed at the unlucky one in the middle and squeezed it off. You were bound to bag two or three birds at the least.

All of this sounds terribly unsporting to us today, but the market hunter of the past never claimed to be a sportsman. He was a meat hunter, pure and simple, and if a punt gun or volley gun helped him put a roof over his head and bread on the table, he'd use one if he could afford it. But in America, market hunters nearly wiped out several species of waterfowl, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 put an end to the practice forever over there, with punt-gunning dying out in Britain before the last war.

Expensive

In a rare print reference, the Pieper volley gun was advertised in the 1888-1889 Great Western Gun Works Catalogue as “Pieper's 7-Shot Mitrailleuse,” (“mitrailleuse” being an old French word for a multi-barrelled firearm). It was said to be “an accurate gun for 125 to 150 yard shooting” and “an excellent gun for wild geese and other wild game”. The catalogue boasted that the Pieper gun, which was available in .22 or .32 rimfire, “will throw bullets farther than any other shotgun will throw buck shot, and persons who only want a gun for geese, crane, turkey, etc., cannot get anything that will do the work as well.”

The gun retailed for an astounding \$70, (the Winchester Model 1886 Express Rifle in .50-95 is listed in the same publication for \$20.25). That makes the Pieper volley gun one of the most expensive guns of its day.

Fiddly

To fire the Pieper volley gun you opened the action by thumbing back the hammer and operating the action lever, which also serves as a trigger guard. You would then remove the disc-like cartridge carrier, insert seven cartridges into its chambers, put the whole thing back into the chamber and close the action lever to bring the breech into battery. You could then put the gun on half-cock or just squeeze the trigger. To extract the fired cases, you had to open the action and remove the entire carrier, which is a separate piece fitted tightly to the barrel group and a re-useable item, drop the cases out of the holes and reload. Fiddly, but I suppose after firing there would be plenty of time as it must have spooked the wildlife for miles around! **SG**