

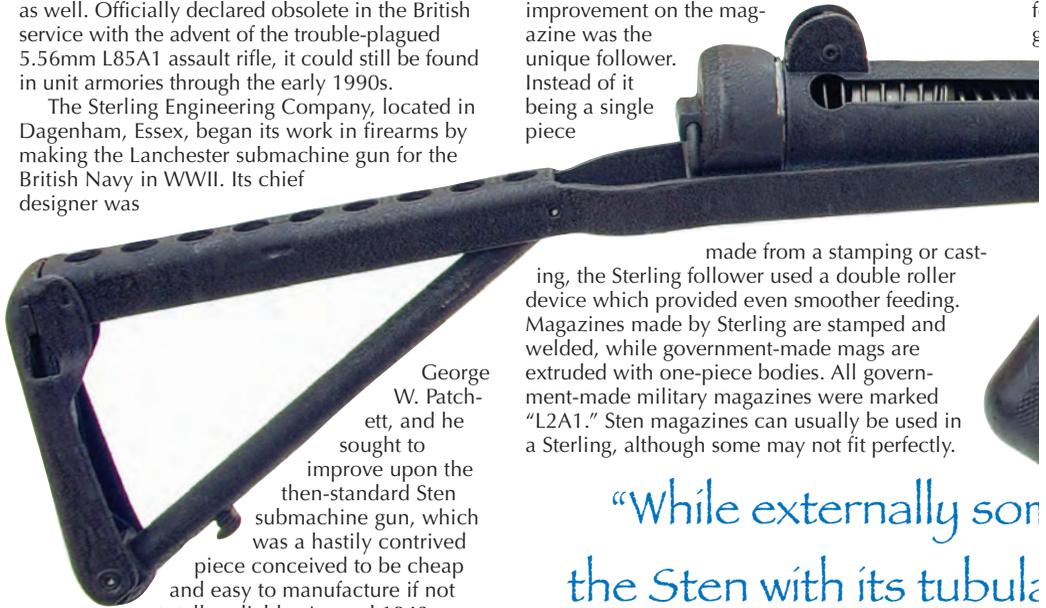
CLASSIC FIREARMS: The Sten

By John Marshall

This classic submachine gun was developed by the British in the early 1940s. While early experimental models saw action in World War II, the Sterling served the U.K. armed forces officially from 1953 to 1988. It has been regarded by experts as perhaps the most reliable subgun ever made, and it garnered a reputation for excellent accuracy as well. Officially declared obsolete in the British service with the advent of the trouble-plagued 5.56mm L85A1 assault rifle, it could still be found in unit armories through the early 1990s.

The Sterling Engineering Company, located in Dagenham, Essex, began its work in firearms by making the Lanchester submachine gun for the British Navy in WWII. Its chief designer was

“traffic jam” of two columns merging into one feed point was responsible for too many malfunctions. The Sterling solution was a 34-round curved double-column double-feed magazine. The cartridges fed into the chamber from each column alternately and smoothly. This was the system used by the Thompson submachine gun, and it worked quite reliably. Another improvement on the magazine was the unique follower. Instead of it being a single piece



made from a stamping or casting, the Sterling follower used a double roller device which provided even smoother feeding. Magazines made by Sterling are stamped and welded, while government-made mags are extruded with one-piece bodies. All government-made military magazines were marked “L2A1.” Sten magazines can usually be used in a Sterling, although some may not fit perfectly.

George W. Patchett, and he sought to improve upon the then-standard Sten submachine gun, which was a hastily contrived piece conceived to be cheap and easy to manufacture if not totally reliable. Around 1942,

Patchett had developed prototypes which were then known as Patchett Machine Carbines. Some of these experimental 9mm guns were used by British paratroops in September 1944 at the Arnhem Bridge during Operation Market Garden. As the Sten gun was plentiful after WWII, not a great deal of attention was paid to a possible replacement in spite of the Sten’s crudeness and lack of complete reliability. However, in 1947, the British government conducted trials pitting the Patchett design against others from BSA, Enfield Armory, and the Australians. Although no decision was made at that time, further development of the Patchett resulted in its eventual selection in 1951 to replace the Sten. The first guns were delivered in 1953 and were known as the Submachine Gun, L2A1. Inasmuch as the gun was developed at Sterling, it was commonly referred to as the Sterling. The firm became Sterling Armaments Company, Limited, and was at that time the sole supplier of the new guns.

While externally somewhat resembling the Sten with its tubular receiver and side-mounted magazine, the Sterling provided some much-needed improvements. The Sten magazine was a double-column design with a single feed position. The

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The Sterling fires from the open-bolt position for better cooling. It uses a fixed firing pin which ignites the primer just before the bolt reaches home on its forward stroke. This gives momentum resistance during firing and helps to insure that the bullet is well out of the 7.7” barrel before case extraction. The bolt has four spiral grooves integrated into its outer surface, giving smoother bolt travel and forcing any accumulated dirt and fouling forward and down under the barrel. The bolt, bolt spring and barrel are all easily removed from the rear for maintenance and cleaning. The buttstock folds forward under the barrel for compactness when needed, and is exceptionally rigid when deployed, probably more so than any known design. The operating handle reciprocates with the bolt when firing. A selector switch on the left side of the pistol grip allows for either semi-automatic or full automatic fire as well as serving as a safety lever. The