By John Marshall

In 1914, as Britain anticipated a coming war in Europe, the country was very short of suitable firearms. An inquiry was placed with Smith & Wesson in the U.S. for a revolver that would chamber the .455 Mark II cartridge. S&W responded with a sample of their .44 Hand Ejector (first model) revolver re-barreled and re-chambered for the .455 round. At first, the revolver was judged by the British as being too heavy and easily jammed with dirt. However, when England entered into “The Great War” in August 1914, the badly gun-strapped Brits sent an urgent message to S&W to start making .455 revolvers as soon as possible. The first models were shipped in September 1914. These had the original S&W “triple lock” action, which provided a middle lock for the cylinder in addition to the normal fore and aft devices. These also had a shroud for the ejector rod under the barrel. In January 1915, after about 5,000 revolvers had been sent, the design was changed to eliminate the middle lock and dispense with the ejector shroud. The company was in full swing production of this lighter-weight second model by June 1915. Production was completed in September 1916, with 74,755 units having been shipped to England and Canada. This was all done through the Remington Union Metallic Cartridge Company in New York City, the purchasing agent for the Crown’s interests.

In 1915, Joseph Wesson, a son of one of S&W’s founders, had succeeded his brother Walter as president of the company. He directed that work be completed on developing .45 caliber revolvers in anticipation of possible U.S. entry into the war. Much of that development work was carried out in conjunction with the Springfield Armory, the nation’s prime research and development center as well as its largest producer of military small arms. As both S&W and Springfield were located in Springfield, Massachusetts, their coordination was easily expedited. The result of these efforts was a modification of the .455 Hand Ejector that could chamber and fire the U.S. standard .45 ACP cartridge. Because the American round was a rimless design, the ejector star on the revolver could not engage the fired shells for proper extraction. This problem was solved in an ingenious manner. A small sheet metal clip in a “half moon” configuration fastened three rounds together in a semicircle. This loaded clip could be inserted into the cylinder, thus loading three rounds at once. Two of these fully loaded the cylinder. Following discharge of the cartridges, opening the cylinder and depressing the ejector rod would allow ejection of the clips and spent shells. This innovative fast-loading process trumped speed loaders and the principle is still used today. Samples of this new revolver were submitted for testing.

On April 2, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, and arms production was ramped up. Existing supplies of 1911 semiauto pistols were scant, and projected production figures showed the U.S. could not manufacture enough of these for the troops being trained for overseas duty. Accordingly, the .45 ACP Smith & Wesson Hand Ejector revolver (called the Government Model by S&W employees) was adopted as the Model 1917 revolver and manufacturing started. The first one was completed on September 16, 1917. These revolvers had 5-1/2” barrels, a blue finish, smooth walnut grips without the S&W medallion, and featured a lanyard ring in the butt. These had a two-step rounded front sight, and the rear sight was a stepped groove in the frame’s top strap. The chambers in the cylinders had a ridge, which allowed proper headspacing of the rimless rounds. Thus individual rounds could be loaded and fired without the half-moon clips, but would have to be plucked or poked out of the chambers. “UNITED STATES PROPERTY” was stamped underneath the barrel, and the top of the barrel was marked “SMITH & WESSON SPRINGFIELD MASS.USA” over “PATENTED DEC.17, 1901, FEB. 6, 1906, SEP.14, 1909.” The butt was stamped with the serial number (the series began with ‘1’) and “U.S. ARMY MODEL 1917.” The left side of the barrel was stamped “S&W D.A. 45.” Inspection markings found at the left rear of the frame near the rear sight area will be GF5 (Major Gilbert H. Stewart), a “flaming bomb,” or an eagle’s head with a number. Nearly 170,000 of these revolvers were manufactured through January 1919, with 163,476 produced for the war effort. This it did on September 13, 1917. These Model 1917s showed the U.S. could not manufacture enough of these for the troops being trained for overseas duty. Many were arsenal reconditioned and used in World War II. As substitute standard arms, these gave good service during World War I, where many soldiers preferred them for their rugged reliability. Placed into inventory after that war, many Model 1917s were issued to World War II, many Model 1917s were issued to World War II, many Model 1917s were issued to World War II, many Model 1917s were issued to World War II, many Model 1917s were issued to...