

CLASSIC MILITARY RIFLES: The



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By John Marshal

The Arisaka Type 99 rifle was one of the key firearms facing the U.S. and its allies in the Pacific theater of war during World War II. It was the standard battle rifle of the empire of Japan throughout those years, and it extracted a heavy death and injury toll from our troops. Although denigrated as crude and rather primitive by some, the Type 99 was actually powerful, reliable, rugged, fast firing, accurate and easy to maintain. In comparative tests conducted in the years following the war, Arisaka actions proved superior in strength to U.S., English and German bolt-action designs of that era. Many thousands came into the U.S. as war trophies. As a major WWII classic, it has now become a popular collectible.

In 1894, Japan sought to replace its obsolete Murata rifles. Accordingly, the Imperial Army authorized a commission headed by Colonel Nariakira Arisaka, superintendent of the Tokyo Arsenal. The lead designer was Captain Kijiro Nambu, who also designed the Nambu pistol. The rifle resultant from this collaboration was called the Type 30 (the nomenclature representing the 30th year of the reign of Japan's Emperor Meiji), first produced in 1897. This rifle was found wanting to some degree during the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, so an improved design was developed in 1905-1906. This became known as the Arisaka Type 38. It chambered a 6.5 x 50mm semi-rimmed cartridge. There were a number of variants, mostly long rifles and carbines. Its turnbolt action was a spin-off of the then-standard Mauser pattern.

Following experience in battle with China in the 1930s, the Japanese wanted to provide its troops with a harder-hitting caliber. They settled on a 7.7 x 58mm round, nearly identical to the British .303 cartridge, but rimless instead of rimmed. It provided a muzzle velocity of around 2390 feet per second.

This round was then used in rifles and in machine guns, including aircraft-mounted types. The rifle to chamber it was based on the Type 38, but with some interesting changes. The Type 99 was adopted in 1939, which was the Japanese year 2599. The last two digits gave the rifle its type number. It was simpler to machine and had some stamped parts. There were several variants: a long rifle, a short rifle, a carbine, two takedown rifles, and sniper models equipped with 2.5x or 4x scopes. The short rifle was adopted as standard in 1940, replacing both the long infantry version and the shorter carbine. The standard rifle had a length of 44.1 inches, a barrel length of 25.87 inches, and weighed approximately 8.2 pounds. The takedown rifles were for issue to paratroopers. The first version had an interrupted screw joint between barrel and receiver. A later version was adopted in 1942 that utilized a cross-wedge lock, and it went into production in 1943. Made in small numbers, both types are very collectible. All Arisaka rifle production ceased in 1945 at the end of WWII.

Type 99 rifles had some intriguing features. The bolt action is cock-on-closing, and the knob at the rear of the bolt is the safety. Push it in and turn it clockwise to make safe. The early production models had radiused-edge lands and grooves. The bores and the bolt faces were chrome plated for ease of cleaning and rust resistance. The rear sight incorporated flip-out “wings” designed to give calibrated lead points for shooting at low-flying aircraft. These early models also had a fold-down monopod and a sliding dust cover over the bolt. In battle, the dust cover rattled a lot, and the monopod was essentially useless. Soldiers in the field usually removed both. The butt stocks were made in two pieces, an upper and lower, which were dovetailed and glued together. This enabled use of smaller stock blanks. As the war progressed, manufacturing shortcuts were implemented, resulting in what collectors call