

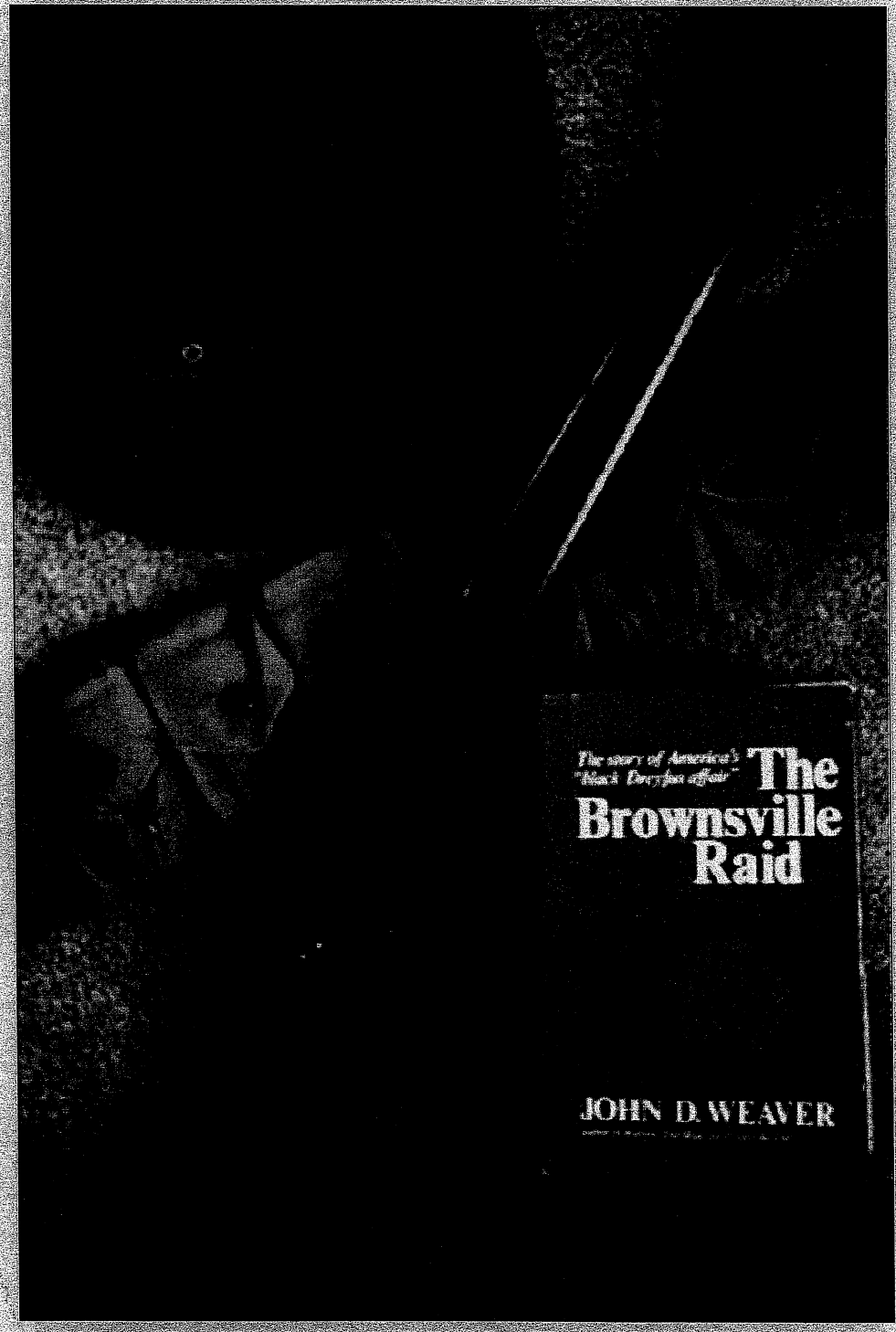
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Cover: Springfield '03 rifle no. 43013
was used by Co. D, 25th Inf., which
was implicated in the notorious
"Brownsville Raid" of August, 1906.
Photo courtesy Dr. Zachary Leiner.

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Small Arms Procurement By The New York City Police Department During World War Two

by R. M. Vivas

One of the first steps taken by the US Government after the declarations of war with Germany and Japan was to suspend the manufacture and sale of civilian firearms. All arms manufacturing was redirected towards production of military arms. Existing stocks of firearms, made before the beginning of hostilities and on dealers shelves at the beginning of the war, were frozen. In many cases the government, under blanket procurement programs, purchased all civilian arms that could possibly be used to support the war effort. The need for firearms was so severe that government purchasers would even visit police departments and purchase their confiscated or evidenciary firearms. This may help to explain the mysterious absence of any New York City Police Department Property Clerk records on firearms destructions from 1941 to 1943.

From 1942 to late 1945, there were no civilian arms being produced, and very few new pre-war guns were sold. When production of civilian arms resumed in 1945, the backlog of police and government orders received priority, with actual civilian sales not commencing until 1946.

The result of all this was to place most police departments in the position of not being able to equip their new officers with the appropriate sidearm. In New York's case, this was especially critical, since New York City was a vital political and military center.

For a brief time, new recruits were forced to assume patrol duties without a revolver. This was remarked upon in the New York Times on April 5, 1942:

57 POLICE LACK PISTOLS BECAUSE OF PRIORITIES

The Police Department was struggling yesterday to cut through a swathe of red tape and

obtain revolvers for fifty-seven rookies who have been doing patrol with only a night stick because war priorities have blocked delivery of 250 of 300 weapons ordered and paid for in December.

The weaponless men are part of the class of 197 appointed in February. They attend the Police Academy daytimes and perform two hours of patrol each night, except Sunday, accompanied by a seasoned member of the department. The 140 others have sidearms. Ninety brought them along from previous service as special patrolman with the Board of Transportation.

Officials were hopeful that when the men are ready next month for full time patrol they will be properly equipped, but seemed none too sure of that.

To address the needs of of vital services for arms, the U.S. Government arranged for suitable military arms (since all arms production during the war years was military) to be made available through an agency known as the Defense Supplies Corp. Any organization or department with a legitimate need for firearms could arrange for their purchase through the Defense Supplies Corp.; thus, factories, power plants, police departments and others critical to the war effort could purchase arms for their security forces.

While many arms were available, the primary revolvers were the Smith & Wesson Victory Model and the Colt Commando. Both revolvers were virtually identical in concept and manufacture, and for that reason will be dealt with together in this article.

At the outbreak of World War 2 the most popular revolvers used by the New York City Police were the Smith & Wesson Military & Police and the Colt Official Police. Other guns such as the Colt Army Special or the Smith & Wesson .38/44 Heavy Duty were authorized for police use and were occasionally purchased by

individual officers from outside sources, but these were not common.

When civilian arms production was halted, the M&P and the Official Police were dropped from production. In their place were the same guns, but in 'militarized' versions: the S&W Victory Model and the Colt Commando.

In both cases the guns were the mechanically the same as their pre-war ancestors, the M&P and Official Police. However, as military contract guns, certain modifications were made. The modifications were designed by the government as a way of reducing costs and machining time, allowing for the greatest number of revolvers in the least amount of time and at the best cost. The rich deep bluing that marked the guns was replaced by the non-reflective matte finish known as Parkerizing. Small machining steps, such as grooved triggers, topstraps and backstraps were dropped to speed production. Checkered walnut grips were replaced by smooth walnut or checkered plastic. Polishing was kept to a minimum; and toolmarks are frequently visible on the finished products.



Colt Commando Revolver (Ord. Dept. photo)

Although these guns lacked the fine finish and detail of earlier times, they were as mechanically efficient and potentially lethal as they ever were. As a model variation of an already approved pattern, there was no need for them to be re-evaluated for police use.

Of the two revolvers, the Victory Model saw the greatest total production; almost 800,000 guns as compared to only 51,000 Commandos. In terms of NYCPD usage however, the Commando was issued to almost 1,100 officers, compared to 850 Victory Models.

These numbers may seem low, especially given the fact that there were virtually no arms available for officers from sources outside the police department. The implication is that during the war years, the NYCPD hired only 2,000 or so

new officers. This bears commenting on, since it does affect firearms purchases.

As can be expected, the military requirement for increased manpower created a shortage of suitable police recruits. Along with the lack of suitable candidates, the police department faced shortages created by officers being drafted. At the beginning of the war, medical personnel, policemen and firemen were considered vital services; and they were, at the Mayor's behest, exempt from military call up. Mayor LaGuardia, responding to the need for more troops, removed the exemption for police officers, rationalizing that the 'new' warfare of firebombing cities would require experienced medical and fire personnel. Police, on the other hand, could accomplish their jobs without needing extensive prior experience.

The result of this was that at a time when NYC needed as many police as possible, it wound up graduating its smallest classes. Consequently, firearms purchases were relatively small. The extent of this can be more readily seen in the post war graduation figures, when more men were appointed in

one year than during the entire WW2 period. The number of post war police appointments was so great that the Police Department actually had to send men and trucks to the factories to pick up revolvers so that the new officers would have them in time.

All of the wartime guns were shipped to Equipment Bureau at 400 Broome Street for sale to the police recruits.

Once the guns were received by the Equipment Bureau they were logged in and sold to recruits or officers needing new guns. It is worth noting that almost all of the Victory/Commando sales were made to new recruits. When veteran officers needed a new gun, they were sold one from the dwindling supply of pre-war guns that were still in inventory. By the end of the war, the

supply of pre-war guns had been exhausted, and all officers regardless of years of service were receiving Victory Models or Commandos.

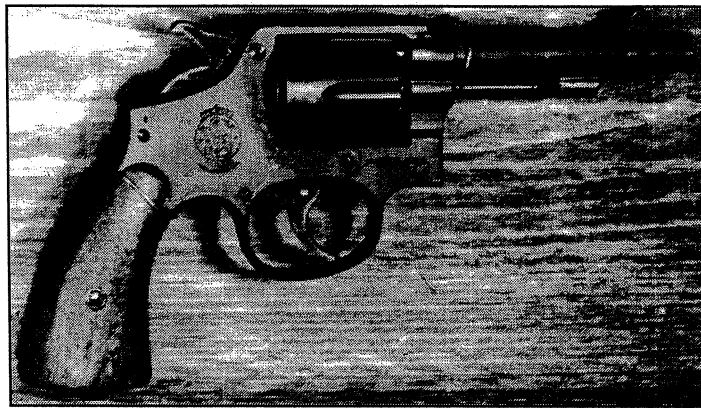
After the recruit purchased his gun (females did not purchase .38's), it would be examined by the firearms instructors to ensure that it was mechanically sound. They would then hand stamp the recruit's shield number on the backstrap or on the butt. Typically this was a 3,4 or 5 digit number. This would be the only way, other than a factory letter or NYCPD records check, to verify a gun as having been used by the NYCPD. Other than the shield number, there would be no marks indicating affiliation with the PD. Although the stamping of shield numbers on the guns was prescribed in police regulations, it's practice was somewhat spotty. Numerous war-time guns have turned up that appear in records as having been sold to an individual officer, but lack any type of stamping. There doesn't seem to be any reason for this, although one could speculate that the lack of sufficient manpower on the part of the police department required that an officer's time be spent on more pressing matters.

Although the Commando and Victory Model were sold under the auspices of the U.S. Government, the Police Department did have to pay for them. The Department's cost was approximately \$40, while the individual officer typically purchased his gun from the department for approximately \$42.

There are certain peculiarities found in the purchase of both models. Although the serial numbers of both guns are spread over several thousand guns, there are certain clearly defined ranges. Unlike other police purchases, if a Commando or Victory Model does not appear in police ledgers, it is almost certainly not a police purchase, since these guns were not available to

the general public or gun dealers during the war. It is possible that an officer acquired his gun after the war from an outside source, but is not likely, since by then civilian production of better quality arms had resumed.

The Colt Commandos had the smallest total production, approximately 51,000 guns. The police purchase of 1,100 revolvers accounts for over 2% of the total production. As a result, there are numerous instances of serial numbers running consecutively. Several trios of consecutive guns can be found, and even a rare 6 consecutive serial numbers. It is worth noting that there were only two revolvers within the 17,000 to 29,999 range. Also, no revolvers above s/n 33512 were received.



S&W Victory Model Revolver (Ord. Dept. photo)

The Smith & Wesson Victory Models, having had a greater production and smaller police distribution, are liberally spread over two major serial number blocks: 13x,xxx - 16x,xxx and 62x,xxx - 66x,xxx. Numerous guns also fall outside these ranges, but most are well within them.

A close examination of serial number records shows that one gun may have gone to the NYCPD, and the next gun in the serial number sequence went to the Army Air Corp. There does not appear to be any particular pattern to the distribution of the guns by the manufacturers. There were no 'police blocks' or 'Defense Supplies blocks'.

Rumors Of A Variant

An interesting locally produced variant of the Commando and Victory Model has been reported, but not verified. The rumors are so persistent that they bear repeating, with the caveat that, as yet, they are just that: rumors.

Several older retired officers maintain that the shortage of weapons for the police was so

severe during the war that to allow for an officer to have an off duty gun, an unspecified number of Commandos (and S&W Victory Models) had their barrels cut back to 2 inches and fitted with shot-gun bead front sights.

While a cut down NYCPD gun has yet to turn up, Smith & Wesson Victory Models from other sources that have had their barrels cut down with varying degrees of professionalism are not that uncommon. A 2-inch version of the Commando and of the Victory Model was produced, but these are scarce items. Although the police records do not specify the barrel lengths on the NYCPD guns, it can be stated with an extremely high degree of certainty that they were all of the 4 inch 'on duty' variety. This would tend to support the rumors of cut down guns; short barreled revolvers simply weren't commercially available.

One version of the cut down gun rumor that has been repeated often enough to make it worth considering is that the gun shortage was so severe that the cut down guns were a sort of 'precinct property' affair. When a patrolman ended his tour, he would receive the cut down off-duty gun from the patrolman who just came in to start the new tour. In this way, one gun could handle the off duty needs of two officers. If this were true, these cut down guns would not have any shield number stamped on the backstrap.

Again, all of this is just rumor. However it has enough logic in it to sound plausible. Until a verified NYCPD cut down revolver turns up though, one can only speculate.

I have seen some Victory models, almost all German/Austrian Police (Occupation-era) marked, that have had the barrels cut down and the front sights redone with varying degrees of expertise. Apparently the cutting down of barrels as needed was not an isolated practice.

Post-War Guns

At the end of the war, the supply of Colt Commandos was exhausted. A large number of Victory Models still remained in inventory and some of these were sold after the war when the supply of post-war commercial guns was still low. However, as civilian arms production resumed and

larger quantities of guns became available, police recruits would purchase the new finely finished arms rather than the cruder, more utilitarian, wartime production guns.

A large number of Victory Models remained in inventory for this reason, finally being traded to Colt's New York office at 20 Vesey Street in 1950 and 1951.

Because the war years occupied only a short 5 years of NYCPD history, the entire record of World War Two purchases was saved amongst a small batch of records. Unlike other guns, the serial numbers and dates of sales are available for almost the entire amount of Commandos and Victories. These serial numbers are in the SRS database.

I would be interested in communicating with anyone who has a Victory Model, or any other arm, associated with the New York City Police Department. Contact RM Vivas, 1673 East 16th Street #108, Brooklyn NY 11229-2901, CompuServe Address: RM VIVAS 73352,2254 or InterNet: 73352,2254@CompuServe.com

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Special thanks to:

New York City Police Department —

Police Commissioner William Bratton

Deputy Commissioner Kelly - Public Information

Sgt. Turetzky and his able cadre at the Equipment Bureau for helping me find and review these records.