



THE TRAIL TO THE UNFAMOUS CENTAURE Mystery Conversion

By James "Panhandle Paden" Frugé and
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Who needs a Colt Model 1860 conversion cross between an army barrel with the cool looking barrel lug of an 1861 Navy conversion profile, on which a Richards-Mason type ejector, cylinder, and frame assembly with narrow "saddle" type conversion ring has been mounted for good measure? Exactly—every red-blooded cowboy should have one ... or better still, a pair! **(Photo 1)**

Why? Because less than a dozen of these exotic breech load-



1 Original Colt 1860 Army "Mystery" Conversion engraved in Mexican style, nickel plated, carved ivory grips: Picture liberated from R. Bruce McDowell A STUDY OF COLT CONVERSIONS AND OTHER PERCUSSION REVOLVERS.

ing conversions from yesteryear are known to exist. In the opinion of late "Conversion Guru" R. Bruce McDowell, they were probably made in Mexico around 1875, but who made them and exactly when is open to discussion. A couple of interesting theories are pushed around among collectors, and new speculations pop up now and then, but except for the surviving pistols, there are no hard facts, just mysteries.

Here's what we know for sure. The 1860 base guns used for these conversions are from Hartford. However, the conversions were not executed at the Colt factory; hence their nick-name, "Mystery" conversions, used by collectors.

There are some indications these unique breech-loaders were fabricated around 1875. Two or more Mexican gunsmiths are allegedly the makers of this mini-series of Colt 1860 Armies-go-conversion by the 1861 Richards-Mason Navy method. **(Photo 2)**

The majority of the Mysteries known are chambered for the .44 Colt round and have 8" barrels. Many feature some Mexican style engraving, are nickel plated, and enhanced with ivory grips.

To the best of my knowledge, none of the conversion artists

in the USA or Europe converted a 2nd or 3rd generation Colt or Italian Colt Army clone into a Mystery. That is, until Austrian master gunsmith Karl Nedbal entered the scene, better known in Europe as, "The Tinkerer from Vösendorf."

Among many other accomplishments, Nedbal is famous for his small series of newly made Lugers in .45 ACP cal., but he is also an experienced cartridge converter.

Since the 1980s, he has transformed mostly Uberti C&B revolvers into state of the art Colt Richards-, Richards-Masons, and Thuers or gated Remington Armies for his demanding clients the world over. Nedbal strives to make them the way they used to be made at Colt's in Hartford or Remington in Utica. A couple of years back yours truly introduced him to the Belgian Centaures and their harder steel. Since then, these Belgian Colts became the base pistols for most of his newly made Colt Army conversions. **(Photo 3)**

The Making of the Centaure "Mystery" Conversion

After some reading through the McDowell "Conversion Bible"



3 Centaure Regular New Model Army (RNMA) #11691—base pistol for the "Mystery" project



2 Original Colt 1861 Navy RM Conversion: note "ship bow" contoured barrel lug. Picture courtesy Collectors Firearms Houston, TX.

and calculating measurements, Nedbal started the project in earnest in the fall of 2009. **(see Table below)** Here is what we

Custom "Mystery" Centaures	Project Outline
Base pistol	RMMA 1 st variation, 2 nd sub-variation #1860, made 1875
Barrel	18" long with Colt 1860 Army conversion profile "flaw" corrected
Barrel marking	THE COLT CO. HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT "made in NY" MODEL ARMY
Caliber	.44 Colt, saddle lugged barrel, 45° rifling groove diameter
Ejector	Richards-Mason type
Frame	altered to Centaure profile, notches added to divide thick to thin deck
Wedge	Centaure
Conversion ring	special, Richards III type
Conversion cylinder	newly fabricated macaroni type, Centaure proprietary
Flange	altered to match general altered conversion type from Centaure
Locking gate spring	altered
Flange strap	Centaure Grand, with notch on back for absolute safety
Trigger guard	Centaure Grand
Plating	barrel, cylinder, both using nickel plated, other parts original Centaure finish

had on November 9, 2009. See pictures below. Nedbal had completed the following steps:

- reshaped the 1960 Army barrel lug like one of a Colt 1861 Navy Richards-Mason conversion,
- plugged the slot for the loading lever in the barrel lug, and
- installed the RM-type ejector housing. **(Photo 4)**
- Although the "S" line on both sides of the barrel lug is now more pronounced in true 1860 Colt-fashion, no harm was done to the Liège Proof house acceptance marks on its left side dur-



ing this operation (below picture), and

- removed the typical "Centaure step" where frame and barrel lug meet.
- For the Mystery, Nedbal left the Belgian factory arbor in place. A modification for reliable function was not necessary. Note the lack of separate grease grooves on this late type Centaure arbor.
- However, he opened the right side of the recoil shield wide to make room for the internal spring loaded gate of general RM Navy 1861 outline, making it just a mite larger. **(Photo 5)**
- For a PC installation of the Richards III type conversion ring of "saddle" design, the mas-

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ter would have to attach it to the recoil shield by a screw. This required working on the two



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notches for the shoulder stock and welding them shut. He then contoured and finished the area to shape, and *voila* ... now this is no longer a RNMA frame...

(Photo 6) ... but this little operation transformed it into a Civilian frame, see above and below. Neat little job, isn't it?

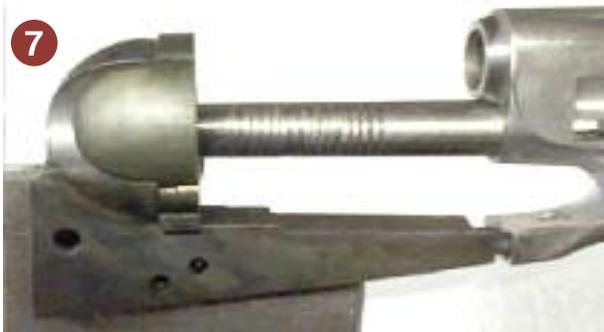
Regarding the finish of the Mystery conversion, we have a change of the original plan that called for nickel plating in true Mexican fashion. After the RM



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experience, it is going to be Nedbal's traditional rust blue. He will make every effort to maintain the pretty factory case colors of the frame. (Photo 7) November 14, 2009: The loading gate is shaped and installed.

Please, note the following small, but important, details of



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this conversion ring: it has this enlarged section at its base to straddle the frame, and it flares out on both sides where it meets the frame.

December 3, 2009 and the beat goes on: Nedbal is approaching completion of the Mystery conversion. The conversion cylinder has already been milled to specs by now, but Nedbal had to remove a tiny layer of steel from the forward area of the frame. This is because, for reasons unknown, Fabriques d'Armes Unies de Liège had lathed the original C&B cylinder of #11691 with a diameter ca. 1 mm less than what is

the norm (!), and had adjusted the position of the arbor in the recoil shield accordingly. In other words, the overall height of the barrel lug is smaller than those of other Centaures or an original Mystery. (Photo 8) December 7, 2009

brings more news from down range on the Mystery front: The cylinder lathed from 1.7225-42 CrMo4-V320 steel is completely done now. This #11691 is turning into a glorious PITA. The technician 1972 back at Fabriques



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Conversion cylinder lathed, ratchets cut ...

d'Armes Unies de Liège in Belgium had cut the slot for the hand in the recoil shield too far off center compared to original Colts and other Centaures. Therefore, it will engage only half of a ratchet tooth. However, the teeth of the conversion cylinder have only half the width of what is needed for reliable engagement, due to the recesses for the cartridge rims in the breech side. To correct this, Nedbal opened up the slot towards the center for proper functioning and made a new, wider hand (same as for an original). This is one of the chal-

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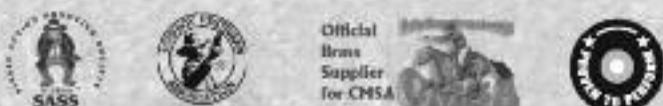
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lenges the master needs from time to time to maintain his sharpness, I reckon ... (Photo 9) December 15, 2009: Notches are cut into the cylinder. Nedbal test-fires the Mystery conversion for the first time with my light nitro load behind 200 grainers. (Photo 10) The pistol will be transferred to the Vienna Proof house now for proof testing before the finishing tasks can be completed. (Photo 11) January 30, 2010: The deed is almost done. The Mystery conver-



... and cylinder installed. Note slot on the right side of the barrel for the ejector housing

sion has passed the Viennese proof testing procedure. Nedbal's contract engraver has applied the naval scene with the legend NEW MODEL 44 between the scenes. The barrel marking CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK "1960 NEW



MODEL ARMY" has been maintained. (Photo 12) She is now ready for the master's finishing touches: Installation of the .429 diameter liner for my .44 Colt inside lubricated bullets, adjustment of the sights to hit POA and finally, the rust bluing of the barrel assembly, new cylinder, and other

formerly cyanide blued parts.

1st European FROCS Meeting 2010 and the Other Important Little Details: Unfortunately, due to some business projects, I could not put my hands on her before July 16, 2010, but the Centaure Mystery conversion was pre-

sented to the public on occasion of the 1st European FROCS Meeting to celebrate 50 years of the Centaure "1960 NEW MODEL ARMY" in Hofheim, Germany, on July 17 and 18, 2010. (Photo 13).

Together with the factory engraved Presentation RNMA and the FROCS Special, the Mystery

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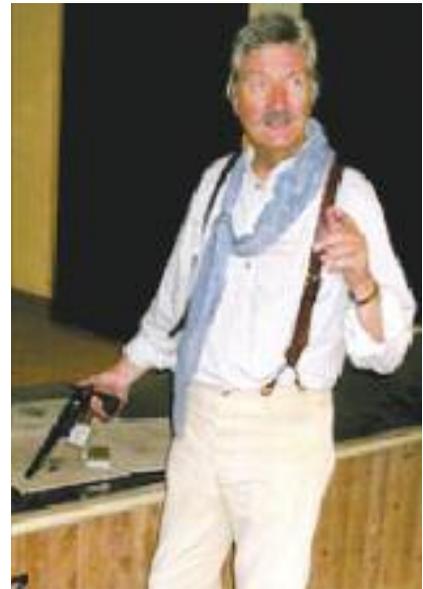
Right side view of the Nedbal Centaure "Mystery" conversion: Does this re-contoured forward portion of the barrel lug look like the bow of a yacht to you? Now I understand why the US Navy preferred the stylish RM conversion of the Colt 1861 Navy over the 1860 Army, ha!

conversion was one of the highlights of the Centaure exhibition of Sunday, July 18, 2010. She surely got proper attention of the initiates.

Our visiting cowboys and cowgirls of the German Cowboy Action Shooting™ faction, and particularly, ruling European champion of the Classic Cowboy category, Lederstrumpf, SASS



Right side view of frame and cylinder



Yours truly a bit blurry, but happy, just before the 1st round is fired!



After 10 rounds of relaxed shooting



Narrow conversion ring rests like a saddle on frame, 44 CAL stamped on trigger-guard



Hole in conversion ring for firing pin, long lip of loading gate



Proof marks, caliber stamp, and NK again for Karl Nedbal under barrel



#69087, all liked her a lot after firing a couple of rounds at the pistol range of the club.

The functionality of the Centaure Mystery was flawless. Experienced Cowboy Action Shooting™ and bulls eye shooters had no issues with the narrow rear sight, unlike some target shooters who were used to Remmies and R&Ss.

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... engraved Centaure naval engagement scene with correct marking between the scene ends. Diameter of rebated portion is increased in line with other Nedbal conversions

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The tiny rear sight is difficult on some shooters not used to Colt open-top (OT) type revolvers.



"Mystery" is a very special, one-of-a-kind conversion revolver. None of the US or European conversion artists ever made one as far as I can tell! That is, until Karl Nedbal got bitten by the vicious Centaure conversion bacillus!

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