



ON THE TRAIL OF THE BELGIAN CENTAUR

The Belgian-made "Colt" Army Model 1860 "Centennial"

By Long Johns Wolf
Hofheim, Germany

A "Re-Discovered" European Piece of American "PC" – The emergence of new interest among American shooters in a certain Belgian "Colt" cap-and-ball pistol has confirmed what has been long known to some Pardes across the Atlantic. The Model of 1860 Army revolver produced by Fabriques d'Armes Unies de Liege ("United Arms Manufacturers of Liege") was, for the first several years of its manufacture, superior in materials and workmanship to clones made elsewhere then or since. One testament to its superiority is the fact that all parts will interchange with "originals", down to the last screw.

Of equal interest is the somewhat murky history of its origin and distribution. Some feel justified in referring to it as a "re-issue," rather

than simply a very close copy, and the debate is not likely to be closed soon. The story thus far is made up of reported fact and memory, and it is this lack of exacting information that has led me into a project to try and re-create the production and distribution history by collecting and collating information on existing examples. The story makes great reading for Colt fans, and begins over a century ago.

Colonel Sam Strikes a Continental Deal – In April 1853, Samuel Colt entered into a contract with a consortium of seven Belgian arms makers in the city of Liege for the licensed production of Colts Patent (Brevete) revolvers. These Belgian Pockets, Navies, and Dragoons were to be sold only outside the United States. Note the

agreement was never amended to include the Army Model of 1860, and the consortium would make none until 100 years later.

In 1959, with the approach of the centennial anniversary of the American Civil War (and in a time of already expanding interest in black-powder firearms), the young firearms historian and consultant William B. Edwards saw what he felt would be a huge market for the '60 Army among the thousands of re-enactors and enthusiast groups then forming. Edwards had already demonstrated his business sense in 1957-58 in negotiations between Val Forgett of Navy Arms and Vittorio Gregorelli for the manufacture of the first Navy Model 1851 replicas in Italy. The market niche for a reproduction of the Army model was still unfilled. At

that time only replicas of the '51 Navy, in either steel or brass frames, and the Remington model of 1858 were available. Edwards and colleagues quickly put together the Centennial Arms Corporation of Chicago to import and distribute a new "Army" revolver. That company would become the principle dealer for Belgian "Colts," and the number two replica distributor overall behind Navy Arms.

Production by a "Heritage" Company – Edwards and the other principals of Centennial concluded an agreement to produce the "New Army" with – who else? – Fabriques d'Armes Unies de Liège in Belgium, the modern descendant of the same company that made the original deal with Sam Colt back in the 19th

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Models and Variations

Like Colt's, however, surprisingly Fabriques d'Armes Unies de Liège produced a great number of variations of the basic Colt Army Model 1860. Reasons seem to be the desire to reproduce all major known Colt models, but also the ambition to have proprietary FAUL variations and the use of existing stock of inventory. For a better understanding of the models plus sub-models/variations made between 1960 and approximately 1975, it is suggested to use barrel length as primary determinate to differentiate three basic models.

The 8" barrel variation is most often found. To date six variations are known.

- The Civilian Model is an important, but rare and early variation with "C" prefix ("C" for Civilian Model) before the serial. Civilian Models were manufactured from the end of 1960 in a separate block of serial numbers beginning with C1. Only blued/case colored finish was available with silver plated trigger-guard and back-strap, in 3-screw configuration without cuts for shoulder-stock. The cylinder sported the proprietary Centaure naval scene. Barrel marking "1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"
- Rebated, plain cylinder pistols are the exception in the USA, but represent the majority of pistols found in Europe. They have regular blue/case hardened finish with the 3-screw frame cut for stock in recoil shield and back-strap.

Three different barrel markings are known today, namely

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

- Relatively common in the USA but rare in Europe, this variation is identical to the aforementioned one, but sports a cylinder with the proprietary Centaure naval scene (like Civilian Model) and NEW MODEL 44 between scene. Barrel marking

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

followed sometimes by CHICAGO U.S.A. (for US importer Centennial Arms Corporation, Chicago)

- Centaure pistols with a Colt-type naval scene engraved into the cylinder, plus the wording ENGAGED 16TH MAY 1843 and CENTENNIAL between the scene have only been reported from the USA so far. Two types of barrel markings are known

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

- Belgians with the fully fluted cylinder, 3-screw frame with recoil shield and back-strap cut for shoulder stock, in high gloss polish "in the white" finish are very rare in the USA, but quite common in Europe. Barrel marking

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

- Stainless steel versions have surfaced in Europe. Barrel marking

CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

Only one model has been encountered with 7-1/2" barrel, dubbed Cavalry Model in Europe: fluted cylinder, four-screw frames, serials with "F" prefix ("F" for fluted cylinder). The 4th screw or stud rather functions to stabilize the shoulder-stock. Probably only a few hundred were manufactured from late 1961 in a separate block of serials starting with F1. The only finish available was the standard blue with case color hardening. Regular accessory was a shoulder stock numbered to the gun. Barrel marking

"1960 NEW MODEL ARMY"

So-called Marshal Models have 5-1/2" barrels without barrel marking. Fluted cylinders, recoil shield, and back-strap are cut for shoulder stock and a high gloss polish "in the white" finish are standard.

- 3-screw frames are regular.
- 4-screw frames are very rare. Contrary to the Cavalry Model, the 4th screw here has a flat head without function.

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Century. The company logo and trademark for this firearm, to be struck in the same place on the left side of the frame as was the rampant "Colt" of American manufacture, was a stylized centaur—a mythological creature with the body and legs of a horse, and the torso,

head, and arms of a man, brandishing a rifle, deliberately chosen in homage to Col. Sam's mark. To this day, the Belgian '60 Army is known in Europe as the "Centaure."

Fabriques d'Armes at this time was owned by cousins Paul and Albert Hanquet. Paul was the great-grandson of J. Hanquet, who, in

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turn, was a member of the original consortium of seven gun makers who had contracted with Colt back in 1853. Edwards provided them with two Colt '60 Army originals for use as models. One had a slightly bent trigger guard, resulting when the pistol had been dropped on concrete. So concerned were the Belgians that their product match the originals in every way, trigger guards on the prototypes included the dent! This was, of course, discovered and corrected before the first revolvers were shipped.

Paul Hanquet received the first unnumbered pistol. The second one, stamped "MODEL" was presented to the then-President of Colt's with the subtle barrel engraving "ADDRESS FRED ROFF, HARTFORD, CT."

The barrels of production guns shipped to the US for distribution by Centennial bore the inscription, "1960 NEW MODEL ARMY" CENTENNIAL TRADE MARK and sometimes CHICAGO U.S.A. A few variant markings have been observed.

By the time Fabriques d'Armes ended production in the mid 1970s, only some 60,000 examples of both the US-bound "Centennials" and those produced for sale in Europe were made in various configurations, finishes, and markings. Thereafter, the company was known to have been involved in some arms

distributorship, but disappeared during the 1980s.

Copy or "Re-Issue?" – It has been established while quality of the Belgian Army model fell off in the last years of production, for most of the total produced, quality was very high. When Italian replicas, or 2nd and 3rd generation Colts themselves are compared to the Belgians, the superior quality of material and workmanship of the latter is apparent as they are made from a very hard forged steel, and the fitting is extremely close. Barrels were bored for a size .451 round ball (later Colts were bored to .457) with rather shallow button rifling. Parts, including screws, are interchangeable with 1st generation Colt Armies. Nor are they lacking in performance—shooters working with well-maintained Belgians report solid accuracy and reliability.

The Challenge: Separating Fact from Fiction – That's the more-or-less accepted "story" assembled piecemeal from old magazine articles and memory. Sure makes for a fascinating tale, but is it the truth?

It depends on how you want to see it. The facts of dates, places, persons, and circumstances were reported by well-known American and German authors in the 1960s and 1970s (see #'s 1, 4, 5, 6, & 7).

It can be shown that:

- Quality of steel, workmanship, and

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About the Author

(Long Johns Wolf, known to non-initiates as Wolf D. Niederaastroth of Hofheim (near Frankfurt), Germany, was born out on the Range in 1946, has been hitched more than 34 years, and includes a daughter and pard, Willie, the dog in his gang.

After a career in the healthcare industry, he now owns and leads a consulting company, and travels extensively throughout Europe and the US on business.

Although he's always had a certain affinity for guns and shooting, he didn't obtain his first pistol until 1974 for target shooting – an Uberti Colt 1860, which just seemed to fit his hand perfectly. He generally hits his target despite the funny rear sight notch on top of the hammer.

An early victim of the collecting virus and associated technical history infection, his focus currently is on the "period correctness" aspects of cowboy guns, Mauser C96 "Broomhandles," and Eastern European issue sidearms. He provides expert opinions for collector's licenses, shoots regularly with other German pards, and has been attending cowboy shoots in Texas regularly since 2003.)

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BELGIAN CENTAUR . . .

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finish is superior (4, 8). All deteriorated, however, during the last years of production (4, 9);

- Interchangeability of parts with original Colt Armies has been recently confirmed (4);
- A licensing agreement with Colt from the 1850s does exist (2, 3).

Additional and intriguing questions remain:

1. Why were no Colt Brevetes made by the Belgian consortium with the Centaure logo and trademark?
2. Why did Colt not amend or extend the 1853 contract later to include the '60 Army at a time when many other Belgian-produced guns were used during the War between North and South?
3. Why can't serial numbers of the 1960 "New" Army be correlated to year of production?
4. Why are identical models in the USA and Europe serial-numbered using different schemes?
5. What variants to the basic pattern were manufactured by the Belgians?

These are some of the questions asked and objectives to be gained in my research project – THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN COLT ARMY,

aka CENTAURE, aka CENTENNIAL COLT.

Efforts to locate company records and import documents have so far been unsuccessful, and that leaves us with the painstaking methodology of bit-by-bit reconstruction by inspecting and documenting existing specimens. Ultimate success depends on reaching owners all over the USA and Europe, and in their willingness to cooperate and provide input regarding their prized revolvers. Once comprehensive information has been gathered and analyzed, and solid conclusions have been drawn, the findings will be published.

To that end, I have designed a questionnaire for owners. All are kindly invited to either FAX completed forms to +49-6192-901293 or to request a form (in Microsoft Word format, or as a scan) via e-mail to niederaastroth@niederaastroth.com. I will be happy to receive the completed survey with specific data on your individual pistol(s). Close-up digital photographs would be very much appreciated. Many thanks to all in advance for your help!

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