

By Peter Caroline

Some years before the congressional grinchês passed the Gun Control Act of 1968, I had what I thought was the best moonlighting job in the world. My employer of record was the U.S. Army, but in my off-duty hours I worked for an arms import firm. This outfit bought surplus or confiscated arms from armed forces and police departments all over the world. These were imported as disassembled parts, parts being subject to lower duty than whole guns. It was my job to match up the parts and reassemble them for retail sale. I was paid in guns. Both my part-time employer and I were more than delighted with this arrangement.

At the time, I was fascinated with big, old British revolvers...Webley, Tranters, Enfield and the like. They retailed at about \$12-15 each, and seemed to offer a great deal of well-crafted metal for the money. On occasion, I was able to take some to the post range and fire them with surplus cordite ammunition. Great noisy fun, and usually more accurate than our clapped-out issue 1911s.

There was, however, one big, old British revolver I was never able to find...the Webley-Fosbery. This was, to me at least, the Holy Grail of big, old British revolvers. If you're a fan of old movies, you might recall, in "The Maltese Falcon," that this was the gun used to kill

Sam Spade's partner, Miles Archer. Humphrey Bogart's character referred to it as an "automatic." And yes, it was both an automatic and a revolver.

The Webley-Fosbery was the invention of Colonel George V. Fosbery, V.C., and was manufactured by Webley & Scott from 1901 to 1915. It closely resembled the large, break-open Webley military revolvers of the era, but with an important difference: the upper frame, barrel, cylinder and hammer assembly moved on rails machined into the lower frame. Loading was accomplished by pressing the barrel release and swinging the upper assembly open, then inserting the cartridges into the chamber. When loaded, the gun was cocked either by grasping the hammer between thumb and forefinger and pulling the hammer and entire upper assembly straight back, or by simply pushing the muzzle against a solid object. The gun was single-action-only, and was intended to be carried cocked-and-locked. For this purpose, there was a safety lever on the left side of the grip frame. This "Condition One" carry predated the Colt Model 1911 by 10 years! When the gun was fired, recoil

would push the whole upper assembly back against a spring, recocking the hammer and rotating the cylinder. Cylinder rotation was accomplished by a fixed stud that engaged zigzag tracks on the cylinder. This turned the cylinder one-twelfth of a full rotation on the backstroke and another twelfth going forward, bringing the next chamber into alignment with the barrel.

Although the Webley-Fosbery was a complex design, it was in fact no more complex, and far more accurate and reliable, than most of the semi-automatic pistol designs at the turn of the century. With a fairly light trigger pull, it fired six rounds of standard issue .455 Webley ammo as fast as you could pull the trigger. Like many automatic pistols, it did not function well when "limp-wristed"; a firm grip was required. Despite its exemplary performance, the Webley-Fosbery was never officially adopted by the British military. Although privately

purchased examples served well during the Boer War and WWI, ordnance authorities perceived the gun as potentially unreliable. Only 4,750 were ever produced, in both .455 Webley and a later eight-shot version in .38 ACP.

Just recently, I finally had an opportunity to see and handle a Webley-Fosbery. My editor Mark Pixler called me up with the news that a *Blue Press* reader in the Tucson area actually

owned one of these rarities in .455 Webley caliber, and would I be interested in reviewing it. Would I? Shortly thereafter, the lucky owner and his wife showed up at my door, and I got my first look at the fabled Webley-Fosbery. It is a beauty! It has been lovingly preserved, in at least 95-percent condition. There were only two disappointments: I would not be able to fire it, and it was not for sale. The owner had no ammo for it, and even if such were available, it would be folly to risk such a treasure with modern, non-cordite ammo. Frustrating, but understandable.

To make my day complete, the owner also brought along two other guns he had purchased along with the Webley-Fosbery back in 1964: a very nice Japanese Nambu Type 14, and an equally well-preserved S/42 Luger, with all-matching serial number 1000, including magazine. The price he paid for all three, back in 1964...\$100! At a recent auction, a .455 Webley-Fosbery in 70-percent condition went for nearly \$6,500. Although Envy is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, I must unashamedly plead guilty!

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