Ahern Under the Gun:

By Jerry Ahern
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Arguably the most technologically advanced military pistol of its day, the Walther P.38 has a colorful history. Designed to win against the competition to replace the P.08 Luger as the German service pistol, the “Heeres,” or “Army,” Pistole was officially designated after the year in which it was accepted as the new service standard, 1938. It was only one of a multiplicity of sidearms drafted into service for pistol hungry Nazi Germany. In 1957, the West German government needed a service pistol and the P.38, re-designated “P1,” was the logical choice. Post-War P.38s served West Germany well. Commercial P.38s – these kept the original name – were popular in many venues, not the least of which was television and motion picture drama.

In the popular 1960s television series “I SPY,” which featured Robert Culp and Bill Cosby as globe-trotting CIA agents, Culp’s character’s favorite pistol was a Gestapo Barreled P.38. That designation – however unfortunate – is derived from a modest number of P.38s being created for the Gestapo with barrel lengths reduced to a nominal two and one-half inches or so. Some P.08 Lugers can also be found with such shortened barrels. This does absolutely nothing for concealment, except when the gun might be dropped in an overcoat pocket. But, although Lugers look rather silly with the chopped barrel, Walther P.38s look downright cool that way.

“James Bond” had a P.38 hidden in his Aston-Martin DB5 for the box office smash “GOLDFINGER,” using this full-sized Walther in a brief shootout against his enemy’s evil munitions. Perhaps the greatest exposure for the P.38 was the MGM television series “The Man From U.N.C.L.E.” in which, after the first few episodes, U.N.C.L.E. agents carried specially customized P.38s, done up in the MGM prop department. The guns ended up with short barrels terminating just in front of the slide, basket-style flash suppressors attached to the muzzles. The principal prop guns were capable of full-auto fire, could be equipped with an extended length magazine, a shoulder stock, a Bushnell Phantom pistol scope and a suppressor. The prop people outdid themselves in that these guns really worked!

The reason P.38s were so popular in film work is because of the lightweight slide. They are among the easiest pistols to modify for reliable use with theatrical blanks.

Meanwhile, P.38s have such a distinctive look that they were and are the cosmetic basis for various toy guns. There have even been P.38-shaped water pistols!

Back in the real world, Walther continued to produce the five-inch barrel P.38, but came out with some rather interesting innovations. A weakness of the original P.38 was that, if the dust cover at the top rear of the slide had been removed too often, it could shoot loose during firing. I’ve never heard of an actual incident, although I’m sure there were a few. The “P.4,” which had a four-inch barrel, also had a solid slide top strap, obviating the potential for this problem. Rather than a slide-mounted thumb safety that also dropped the hammer, the P.4’s slide-mounted safety dropped the hammer, then rebounded into the fire position. But, the new internal workings of the safety were extraordinarily advanced, incorporating a block and alignment shift that could only be circumvented by pulling the trigger. Walther offered the “P.38k,” the “K” designation standing for “kurz,” meaning “short.” Short it definitely was, the barrel terminating just ahead of the front face of the slide (shorter than the World War II variants), the front sight on the slide bridge rather than the barrel. The P.38k also incorporated the new safety system and was, in fact, based on the P.4. The P.38k was created at the behest of one of Germany’s counterterrorist groups.

All the guns incorporated the same eight-round single column magazine, had magazine disconnect, were 9mm Parabellum caliber and, like the bulk of post-War P.38s produced, incorporated aluminum-alloy frames. Many would argue that the P.38 was, at the very least, the inspiration for Smith & Wesson’s Model 39, the original of the firm’s automatic pistol line and the first semi-automatic ever adopted by a major U.S. law enforcement agency (Illinois State Police). Because of currency considerations and such, original full-size P.38s started getting very pricey. To the best of my knowledge, the last were produced in the year 2000. Any new-in-the-box P.38s of any description would not be inexpensive to acquire.

This is a shame, really, because the P.38 is a fine firearm. Granted, it has a heel-of-the-butt magazine release (not all that wildly popular on the American side of the Atlantic), is complicated...