1690-1790: 100 Years of French Naval Pistols

By Charles Katsainos

The year 1717 marked a great step forward in the progress of standardization of French armaments, and the development of more efficient methods of arms procurement, as well as the centralization of royal authority over both in France.

The regulation of 25 January 1717, creating the Model 1717 French infantry musket, the first truly *regulation* firearm in France, served moreover as an ideal pretext for the crown, by adducing the necessity for servicewide uniformity of this basic weapon, to impose the royal prerogative on the procurement, stockage and issuance of military weapons in the then most powerful nation of the world.

The date 1717 is more important as marking the beginning of the imposition of royal control over French armament procurement, however, than as an indication of a significant technologic innovation or radical change in the weapons themselves. In essence, the characteristics of the 1717 musket do not differ in any marked degree from its non-regulation predecessors. The pertinent regulation of 1717, moreover, applied only to the infantry musket and associated rampart version.

Since the procurement of *naval* weapons in France—our main interest—followed a path of its own, it is appropriate to add a few comments on the means of arms procurement prior to 1717, which continued to apply, in large measure, to naval small arms for many years subsequently.

As in other European countries under the then-prevailing feudal system, the land-owning nobility raised and led their troops in the name of and under the monarch. In return, the king paid for troop upkeep while overseeing the proper use of the funds provided. Quite understandably, complaints were rampant from both sides, particularly from the officer-nobles who protested the impossibility of maintaining full strength units with insufficient funding from the crown.

In 1666, King Louis XIV, concerned over the state of armament of the units of his vassals, conceded to one Titon de Villegenou the privilege of procurement of arms, their subsequent storage in the royal arsenal (Magasin Royal) of Paris and eventual issue, at fixed regulated prices, to the units commanded by the landed nobility.

The new system represented some progress, since it facilitated a certain uniformity and theoretically ensured a reduced cost while, of course, providing certain monetary benefits to Titon himself. However, as the king could not legally impose nationwide arms procurement through Titon, many commanders continued to pass their contracts with private—i.e., the only available—gunmakers. These were, in essence, the armorers of Charleville, Maubeuge, and St. Etienne, as well as some other minor localities, already providing for Titon.

The fact that the King of France decreed and assumed the responsibility for directly providing the arms of the French infantryman is not to say that the decision was self-effectuating. It took almost 3 decades for the replacement of the previous weapons by regulation-type arms.

Contracting for the production of the 1717 infantry musket was opened to public competition in 1716. Technical requirements were specified by the Chief of Artillery, the authority exercising technical supervision, inspection and control over the armaments of the land forces. Selection of the best weapon was the responsibility of the War Council which issued the regulations on the basis of a royal ordinance.

The successful gunmakers and/or entrepreneurs, six in all from the traditional arms producing towns of Charleville, Maubeuge, and St. Etienne, were granted a virtual monopoly for the production of arms for the king's service. Their royal privilege did not extend, however, to the weapons of the French Navy for reasons which we shall examine later.

A subsequent regulation of 18 January 1728, covering, in addition to a modified infantry musket, the individual firearms of cavalry and dragoons, specified the characteristics of the musket and pistol for the former and the musketoon and pistol for the latter. Although the War Minister's prior authorization was required (in order to ensure the king's priority and a certain control over production), cavalry and dragoon commanders continued to contract directly with the now-Royal Manufactories for their requirements. The initial regulation weapons of 1717-28 were superceded over 30 years later by those of the 1763-66 "system" of arms.

The French naval forces had also procured their firearms and other weapons by contracting with private gunmakers. By preference and tradition, the latter were located in the towns of St. Etienne and Tulle. Since the French naval forces were responsible for two geographic areas, i.e., the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, it was both customary and economical for the St. Etienne entrepreneurs to provide for the needs of the southern fleet and those of Tulle for the ships facing the New World. French Mediterranean naval forces, in-

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cidently, comprised two distinct navies, one consisting of sailing vessels and the other of the customary galleys propelled by their chained oarsmen.

Naval forces and overseas possessions of the period were combined under one department, the Ministry of Navy and Colonies. In other words, the Naval Ministry provided individual weapons for its ships' crews as well as the infantry for service in the French possessions, the latter consisting mostly of so-called "separate companies" (compagnies franches) similar to those on board the galleys of the Mediterranean.

An official document of the French Naval Ministry dated 1673, "Le Grand Reglement," (44 years before the first official regulation governing infantry arms procurement) provided a description of firearms and edged weapons in use by the naval forces. The Royal Ordinance of 1689 confirmed the dispositions of 1673. A most interesting document of the French Naval Archives dated 1693 (Series G. 205) provides a drawing of the French naval pistol based on the dispositions already set forth in 1673.

No specified dated regulation(s) nor regulation model(s) governed early French naval firearms procurement. The 1673 document served as the basic "blueprint" for gunmakers supplying the French naval forces. Contracts were based on previous dispositions and general weapons characteristics, or "standardized" types, with or without subsequent modifications or improvements prescribed by the Crown. Custom, in other words, as opposed to formal regulations and/or sealed patterns, was the key factor.

However, beginning in 1696, both caliber and barrel length were specified in contracts. By 1729, contracts for naval firearms contained as many as 17 paragraphs defining all modalities of weapons ordered and their method of manufacture.

A few words are in order on the respective key roles of the two French manufactories, Tulle and St. Etienne, serving the naval forces and their production of firearms.

Although there is mention of production of gun barrels in Tulle as early as 1648, it was only in 1690 that one Michel Pauphile I, descendant of a family of gunsmiths and the owner of a mill, was contracted to furnish musket barrels to the arsenal at the Atlantic port of Rochefort for the needs of the French Royal Navy. In the same year, Marcial Feris de la Combe, King Louis XIV's magistrate in the region, as well as a mill owner, combined forces with Pauphile to become director of the (now) Tulle Manufactory. Having already obtained the first royal contract (1691) to furnish buccaneer muskets, existing facilities of Tulle were enlarged and improved to produce both barrels and complete muskets.

The next few years witnessed the expansion of operations and the influx of gunsmiths from other gunmaking localities. St. Etienne in particular, as well as Charleville and Liege, furnished both personnel and valuable expertise. The larger part of the weapons produced at Tulle consisted of muskets, pistols and edged weapons for the separate companies of the Navy stationed in the Western Hemisphere colonies, especially Canada and the Caribbean.

Production during the first 50 years of the Tulle Manufactory was represented by 17 contracts with the crown averaging 2,500 muskets per year. Arms made at Tulle, which furnished all the weapons for the French colonies, were delivered to the naval arsenals of the Atlantic, namely, Rochefort, L'Orient, and Brest, where they were inspected and proofed by naval artillery officers.

Since Tulle was not subject to the authority of the War Ministry but to that of the Navy, naval muskets, while generally similar to those governed by "regulations" (especially of the St. Etienne style) beginning with the Model 1717, had certain characteristics of their own.

Although arms production at St. Etienne is recorded as far back as the Middle Ages, procurement for the crown began in 1553 when St. Etienne gunmakers were contracted to arm the King's matchlock musket corps. The town continued thereafter as the key supplier of the French land forces.

The earliest mention of a St. Etienne contract for naval weapons is dated 1690. A grenadier-type musket of the same period, marked "GALERE DE FRANCE" on the barrel, bears on the lockplate the name "G. Rousset," the latter a St. Etienne arms supplier for both the sail and galley navies. The same entrepreneur, although with a different name spelling, viz. Rouzet, emerges in official correspondence on arms procurement dated 1705.

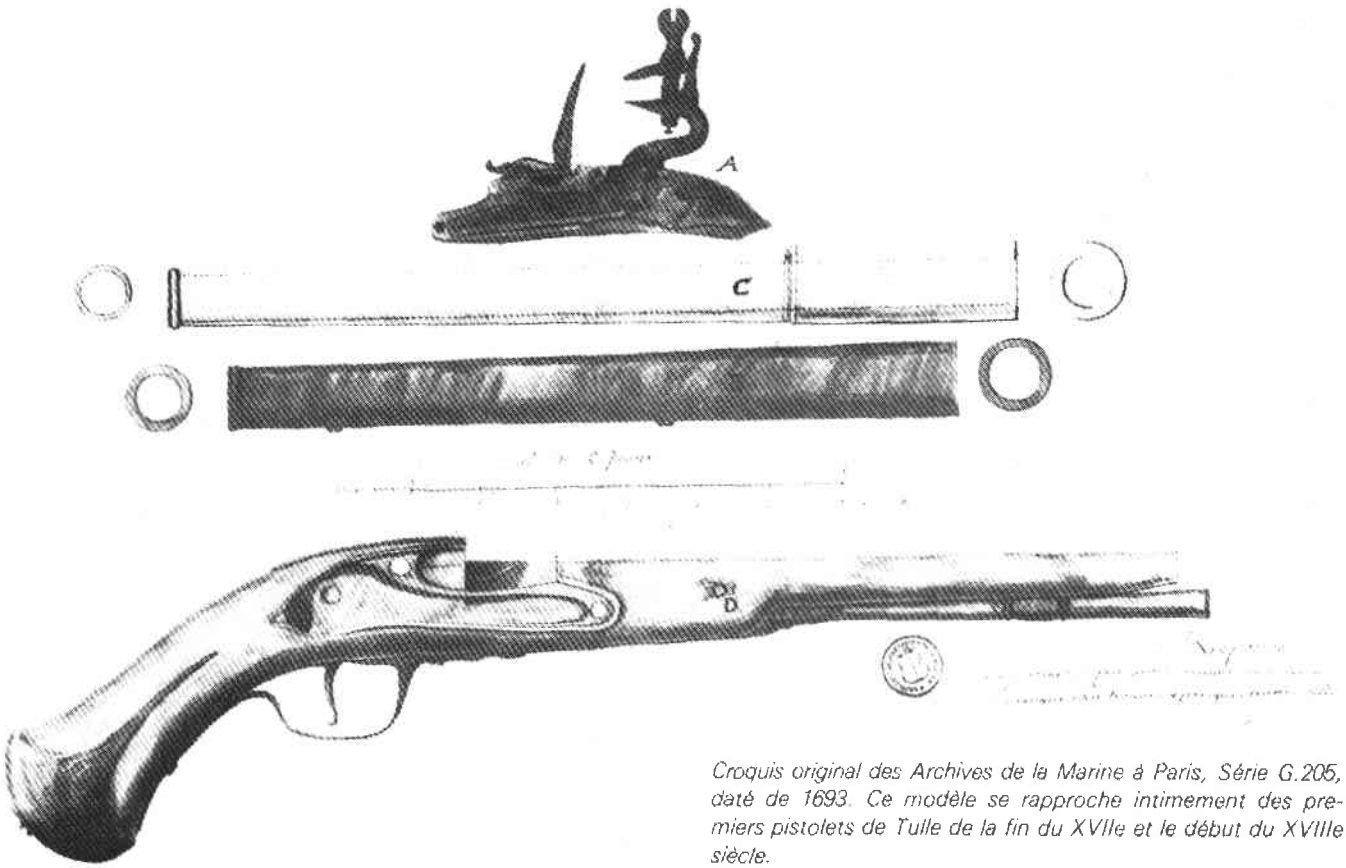
By the beginning of the 18th Century, Tulle had managed, thanks to the quality of its production, to retain a preponderant percentage of the orders of the Crown for muskets for the French Navy and to hold on to its virtual monopoly of furnishing muskets to the French Atlantic naval forces and the colonies in the New World.

A Tulle contract dated 2 June 1696 mentions a Navy order for 600 pistols with 14 inch barrels and a caliber of 20 balls to the pound. An order for 100 pistols the following year already speaks of a barrel length shortened to 12 inches but still with convex lockplates. Tulle, hotly engaged in competing with St. Etienne in furnishing naval pistols, appears to have delivered at least 2,000 to the French Navy from 1696 to 1711.

A drawing of what this pistol may have looked like is pictured in the aforementioned 1693 document (Series G. 205 of the French Naval Archives). Mounted in full stock walnut with two thimbles; small angle to grip; slight molding around lock; two-step barrel with reinforcement at muzzle, pin-held; convex lock, goose-neck cock; no pan or tumbler bridles; single piece buttplate with long stirrups, screw-fastened; simple triggerguard, pin-held in front, two screws in rear; iron furniture, occasionally brass (for Caribbean possessions and Louisiana).

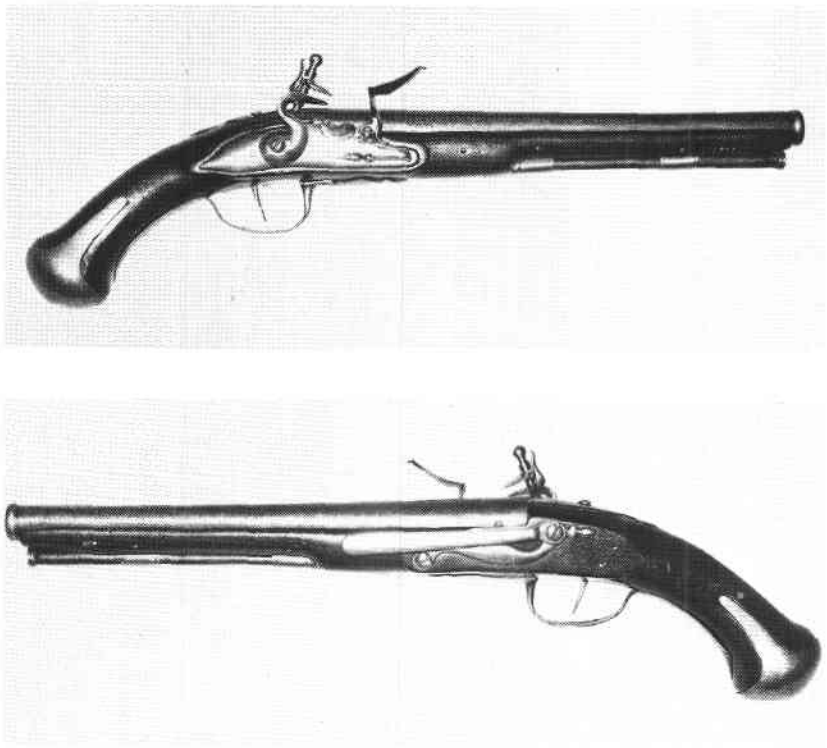
What may well have been a pistol of the above production, with convex lockplate, is signed "IMBER GIRAUD" and closely resembles the drawing. However, the pistol in question, although provided with a reinforced muzzle and belthook, bears no naval markings nor is Imber Giraud recorded in official contracts. Although the name does appear on another, probably a bit later, civilian-type pistol, and is juxtaposed to markings of "A TULLE" on the barrel, it is also noteworthy that by 1716 Tulle contracts provided only for pistols with flat lockplates.

By the second quarter of the 18th Century, activities in the production of naval pistols at St. Etienne appear to have taken a good step forward. As early as 1722, a contract is recorded to have been passed with St. Etienne entrepreneurs Blanchon and



Croquis original des Archives de la Marine à Paris, Série G.205, daté de 1693. Ce modèle se rapproche intimement des premiers pistolets de Tulle de la fin du XVIIe et le début du XVIIIe siècle.

Drawing from the Naval Archives in Paris, dated 1693, which suggests how the Tulle pistols of the late 17th and early 18th Centuries may have looked.



IMBER GIRAUD pistol discussed on the opposite page. Bob Brooker photo.

Duchamps. Contracts concluded in 1729 and 1734 by Tulle provided for the procurement of additional naval pistols. The latter contract, in fact, alluded (in para. 15) to their similarity with those of the Blanchon and Duchamps contract of 19 December 1734. This firm and its successor, Dumarest and Blachon, appear to have furnished large quantities of pistols to the Mediterranean naval forces of France.

Most of the naval pistols produced were provided with iron furniture. Only Tulle appears to have furnished brass-mounted versions and these for units serving in humid areas such as the Caribbean and Louisiana. Although enough Model 1734 cavalry pistols have surfaced to provide a good sampling of the army pistol, very few indeed of what might be called the naval version are known. Those that are, however, are in surprisingly fine condition and provide distinct and identifiable features.

The two French naval pistols of the second quarter of the 18th Century examined were both contracted to the St. Etienne entrepreneurs Dumarest and Blachon, suppliers of the French Mediterranean forces between 1740 and 1760. The two pistols are identical in configuration and construction, with slight technical differences and different service markings due to the fact one was made for the sail navy and the other for the galley fleet.

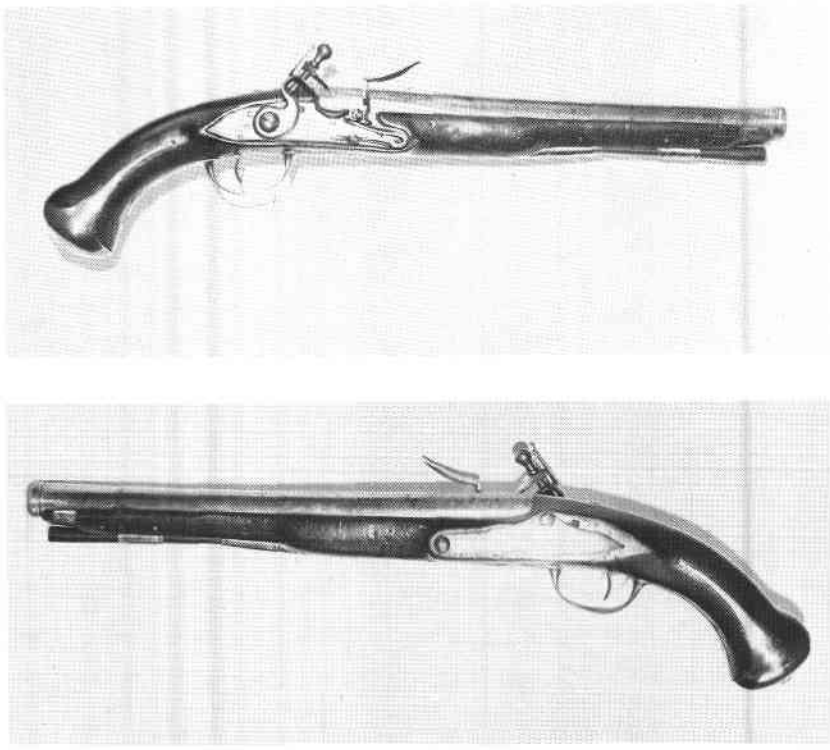
Generally speaking, the naval pistols produced during the first half of the 1700's have the overall silhouette of their predecessors. However, besides exterior differences—as the substitution of the earlier convex lockplate by a flat one and the elimination of any molding on the barrel, several technical differences and/or improvements deserve mention.

Perhaps the most important improvement was the strengthening of the internal mechanism by the addition of a tumbler bridle to ensure a smoother and more robust functioning of the arm. A bridle was also added externally between flashpan and frizzen. Although barrel length was diminished from 14 to 12 inches on an average, it was the increase in caliber from 24 to 18 balls to the pound that improved firing qualities and effectiveness.

The naval pistol also resembles its Model 1734 cavalry/dragoon cousin. Both have flat lockplates with a slight vertical channel 1/5 of the way from the rear end; both pistols are full stocked with two thimbles for a metal tipped wooden ramrod. Sideplates are plain and elongated—triangular in shape. A thin metallic band protects the muzzle end of the stock from splitting.

Significant differences between the two weapons are the presence of a front sight on the land model, while the naval arm retained the traditional muzzle ring reinforcement with the stock terminating just short of it. All Model 1734s were made with pan bridles, this not being true of all naval pistols. Finally, although the mounts of the 1734 were of brass, most of those of the naval pistol continued to be made of iron, exclusively so after 1740. Minor differences include a small apron on the 1734 tumbler bridle as well as molding on the wood along lockplate, with relief "teardrops" to the rear of the tang, lockplate and main thimble. The plainer one-piece buttplate of the naval pistol is affixed with a screw while the two-piece buttplate of the cavalry/dragoon is held by a long nail hidden by a small convex cap.

Reverting to the two naval pistols under study, it is of interest to note some differences between them. Although both bear on the lock late the markings DUMARES over BLACHON in stamped capital letters, additional inscriptions on the sail-navy version include a pair of crossed anchors. The latter are repeated on the flat breech section of the barrel plus the word



French naval pistol of the early 1700s, discussed in the text above. Bob Brooker photo.

"TOULON" (the main French Mediterranean port/arsenal), the stamped initials "CP" and "J" (representing, probably, inspector and proofer) and a large capital "C".

The galley pistol bears the large engraved inscription, in capitals, "GALERE DE FRANCE" (as on the previously discussed musket) along the flat of the breech. In addition, on the side of both the breech and nearby stock the stamped number "114," the sail navy version bears the number "763." Both pistols appear to have had belthooks which now are missing.

Technical differences consist of a barrel length of 32.2 cm. (12¼ in.) for the sail-navy pistol and only 27.8 cm. (11 in.) for the galley. The latter is provided with a pan bridle which the former lacks.

As regards the reason for the differences, it is possible only to speculate. Both sail- and galley-navies had different chiefs who contracted independently with the entrepreneurs. The latter in turn subcontracted for component parts to various part makers. Since the 1740s witnessed the War of the Austrian Succession (1741-48), with concommitant demands on arms producers, receiving authorities were probably lax in imposing rigorous adherence to smaller details of construction.

In point of fact, unless the naval pistols under examination were categorically identified as pertaining to specific production years, their date of manufacture could easily be related to the 1730s, there being no firm evidence, other than extant information re Dumarest and Blachon contracts, to indicate otherwise.

Although in the 1760s a completely new system of infantry and cavalry weapons (numbering 13 firearms in all) was designed and produced, this did not affect the French Navy. It was not until the advent of the 1777 system of firearms (numbering 9 models) that the traditional form of the naval pistol was altered. The new French naval pistol of 1779 represented as much of an innovation in individual naval armament as did the 1777 for cavalry and dragoons.

Prior to embarking an an analysis of the 1779 model(s), a few comments are in order concerning a pistol made at the Royal Manufactory of St. Etienne and identified by a known French authority as a naval pistol, Model 1774-75. The pistol in question, while in general configuration quite similar to the 1766 cavalry arm, differs therefrom by its shorter length barrel and the sharper bend of the grip. Its main point of interest, and the reason for its identification as a naval pistol, is that its barrel length and the manner of fixation of its double-loop barrelband resemble the later 1779 model(s).

While true that its barrel length of 19 cm (7½ in.) is the same as the Model 1779, it also corresponds to that of the 1777, as does the caliber. The truly unique feature is that the barrel band along its lower part extends to cover the forward tip of the triggerguard where it and the latter are affixed to the stock by a common screw.

Although this more efficient method appears in a different form on the 1779, it is also a fact that this pistol has neither naval markings nor evidence of a belthook. Moreover, this pistol is nowhere mentioned in regulations nor does it exist as a sealed pattern, which formed the basis for a contract with an entrepreneur or a manufactory.

In December 1777, Charles Joseph de St. Victour, to whom the Tulle Manufactory had reverted in 1760, in his capacity as governor of Tulle, obtained letters patent converting the establishment into a Royal Manufactory with the exclusive privilege of furnishing arms for the French Navy and colonies. Thus Tulle became the fourth royal establishment after Charleville, Maubeuge and St. Etienne. From this date onward, a naval artillery officer as inspector with a subinspector (controleur) and three reviewers (reviseur), would survey production on the spot.

The new royal manufactory received its first order in 1779 for what became known as the 1779 naval pistol. The contract of 12 February 1779 provided for the procurement of 6,700 pistols, in addition to 54,000 naval muskets, over 8 years.

Surprisingly, no formal regulation of the War Council defined the Model 1779 naval pistol. The terms of the contract itself added little. However, the new model, approved by the Minister of the Navy, and represented by a sealed prototype, was to serve as a pattern for subsequent production. (It was customary for sealed patterns to be sent to the manufactories selected to produce the particular arm, with one remaining at the Ministry.)

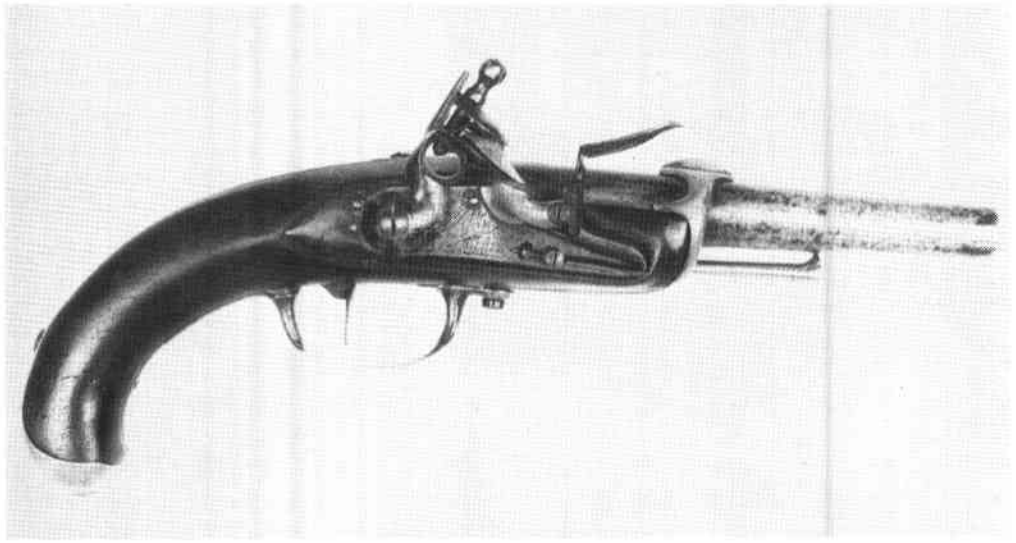
The 1779 pistol was manufactured in two distinct versions, undoubtedly more by necessity than by design. The earlier version, produced until 1782, was followed by what had originally been foreseen as the new model. The key difference between the two is represented by the size and shape of the lock, or more especially its rear extremity.

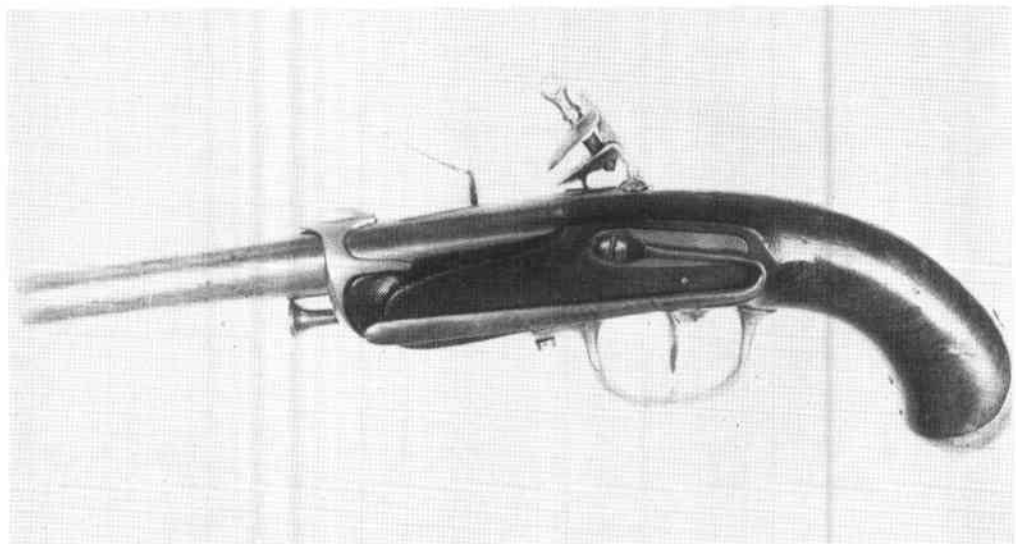
The 1779 pistol shares several characteristics in common with the Model 1777 cavalry/dragoon pistol, including caliber (17.1 mm or .65") and barrel length (18.9 cm. or 7½ in.). Both involve a generous utilization of brass; they both have the same accentuated slant of the grip reinforced by an iron bridle connecting barrel tang to buttplate. This metallic reinforcement is necessitated by the sharp bend of the grip where the narrow wrist no longer enjoys sufficient support of the straight grain wood.

The entire contour of the wood stock of the 1779 pistol is enclosed in what amounts to a metallic frame, thus providing the weapon with a very robust base. In addition to the aforementioned grip bridle, an extension from the brass triggerguard (held with a short screw) winds up and over the barrel where it ends midway as both a barrelband and a front sight. The triggerguard is affixed by a half-twist hook to an iron support extending just short of the bottom part of the brass buttplate, the front end being held by a long screw passing through the stock into the bottom of the breechplug extension. The front end of the lockplate has, instead of a screw hole, a small hook to fit into an iron implacement in the stock cut-out, thus requiring only one screw to hold the lockplate securely in place, as well as the belt-hook. The mainspring retaining screw was eliminated, relying on pressure to hold it in place. An iron ramrod with button head held by an inside spring completes the picture of this novel pistol.

For some reason, undocumented as yet but assumed to be due to a shortage of lockplates (the demands of rearmament were most pressing at the time, necessitated by the American War of Independence), the early 1779 version was furnished

The early 1779 pistol with truncated lockplate. Bob Brooker photo.





Later version of the M1779 pistol with pointed lockplate and slightly longer grip. Bob Brooker photo.

with what is assumed to be a 1770-type musketoon lock with an unevenly truncated rear end. The wider lock called for a thicker and somewhat shorter stock.

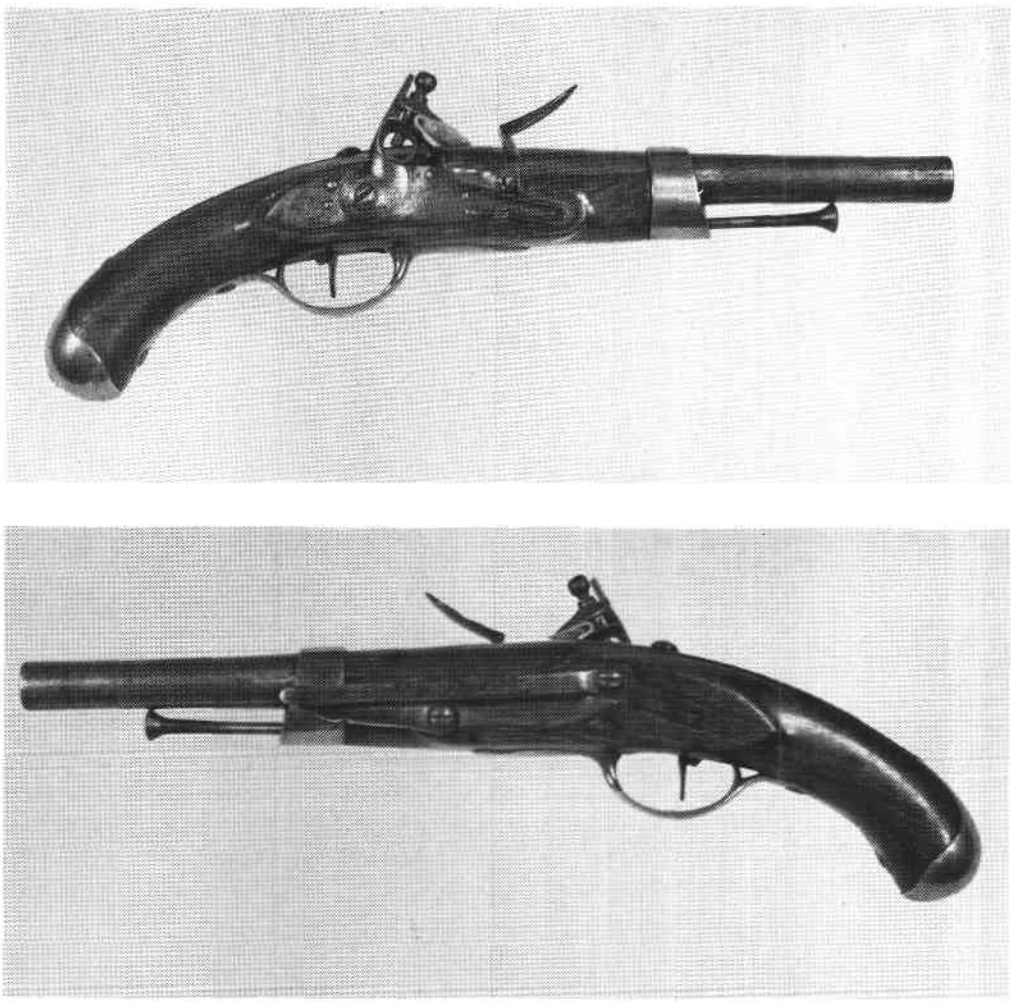
The later and standard version of the Model 1779 came with a narrower, normal-shaped lockplate fitted into a slimmer and slightly longer grip. Both versions bore on the lockplate the engraved, abbreviated inscription of the Manufacture Royale de Tulle with subinspector initials on lockplate and stock as well as year of manufacture on left side of breech, together with subinspector initials, as all metal mounts had, also.

Innovative features of the 1779 naval pistol include the grip bridle (also utilized on the Model 1777, produced almost simultaneously), a single-retaining-screw-held lockplate, a unique barrel band without retaining spring. Yet this practical and robust pistol was produced only from 1779 to 1787. Why it was so soon abandoned in favor of the Model 1786 has not been adequately explained. As with the 1777 cavalry model, it could well have been due to its unconventional and untraditional configuration, pride of corps, and human disinclination to accept change.

The subsequent Model 1786 naval pistol, except for one significant feature, represents a reversion to traditional form and style. Moreover, in contrast to previous naval pistols, it does not stand alone, being the pistol element of an entirely new system of naval firearms. In this respect, the French Navy had followed the land forces' example with a system which included a musket, a musketoon and several edged weapons.

The configuration of the new naval pistol resembles to a high degree that of the previous cavalry model of the 1760s, except for its half-stock and innovative barrel band. The latter was transposed to the middle of the barrel (as with the 1779) and connected to the S-shaped sideplate by a bar-like extension soldered to the barrel band. Both the former (sideplate and extension) are secured by the front lockplate screw. Lock characteristics are similar to the aforementioned 1766 cavalry pistol of the St. Etienne 1769 production, i.e., with convex double-throated hammer and lockplate as well as a horizontal iron pan. The mainspring is again held in place by a screw. As with the 1766 cavalry model, the caliber is 17.5 mm. (.65") but the barrel length has been increased by one inch to 25.2 mm. (10 in.). However, as with the 1779 Navy, a grip bridle connects breech tang with buttplate, while the triggerguard extends to the buttplate thus creating once again an all-metal-encompassed wood stock.

Production of the 1786 pistol, which began the subsequent year, continued until 1806—that is, through the French Revolution and well into the Empire period. After 1792, the pan was made of brass, while in later production a trig-



The French Model 1786 pistol. Bob Brooker photo.

gerguard and hammer of the cavalry An 9 (1800-01) type were adopted, both very similar to the 1779.

The barrel band of the Model 1786 is of considerable interest. It indicates the continuing concern of the Navy for a firmly-held barrel as well as a solidly-affixed barrel band. It also displays the spirit of innovation at the Tulle Manufactory and highlights naval insistence on having weapons of its own design.

In fact, the new barrel band was adopted by the land forces as represented in the An 13 (1804-05) cavalry/dragoon pistol, following the abandonment of the short-lived An 9 pistol furnished with the already archaic side-spring-held double barrel band.

The 1786 pistol was produced only at Tulle. In addition to the usual inspection marks and date, the inscription on the lockplate may indicate the Tulle Manufactory as Royal, National or Imperial corresponding to the period during which it was produced.

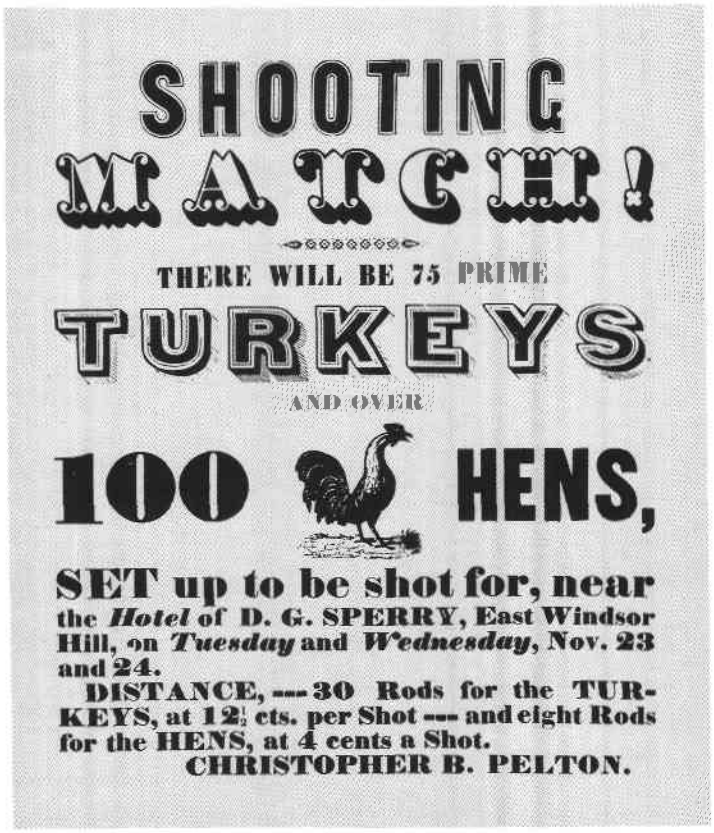
The 1786 pistol of the French Navy marked the end of the specifically naval flintlock pistol. An Imperial Decree of April 1804 transferred the Navy-controlled Tulle Manufactory to the War Ministry. Emperor Napoleon could not visualize the need for individual weapons to be other than standardized throughout the entire French military establishment. Flint pistols thereafter were of a single design for both land and sea use. The only difference was that regulation pistols of the period—and until the end of the flint era—were furnished with belthooks for naval use, as were pistols for dragoons. All four French imperial—and subsequently royal—manufactories supplied both the army and the navy in their production of flint models An 9, An 13, 1816 and 1822 pistols.

The firm insistence of the Navy, however, in not adopting the Model An 9 and in retaining instead a pistol with a more securely-held barrel band was instrumental in the modification of the full-stocked An 9 cavalry model and the adoption, so to speak, in mid-stream, of the half-stocked Model An 13. Thus the emergency of the excellent and famous An 13 cavalry pistol of the Napoleonic Wars may be considered the result of a happy and promising marriage between the otherwise robust and efficient An 9 basic design with the excellent aspects of the Model 1786.

The outstanding performance of the French Navy's Tulle Manufactory over many decades constituted a distinct contribution to the war-making and civilizing capabilities of pre-republican France. Its innovative ideas, moreover, placed it at the head of all other manufactories. Evidence of its innovations persisted in the pistols of many important countries as long as 70 years later.

THANKS: I have had considerable recourse to valuable archival research conducted by Jean Boudriot of France (ARMES REGEMENTAIRES FRANCAISES) and by Russel Bouchard of Canada (LES FUSILS DE TULLE EN NOUVELLE FRANCE) and herewith express my gratitude to both. My appreciation is also due Robert Brooker Jr. for the excellent photos of items in his collection.

(Col. Katsainos was scheduled to give this talk Thursday at the Williamsburg meeting, but his time was inexplicably taken by another speaker. He found it necessary to return home that afternoon to attend his wife, who was ill. En route, he was seriously injured in an automobile accident. We are happy to report that he is making an excellent recovery and has been able to assist in preparing this text of the talk for publication here.)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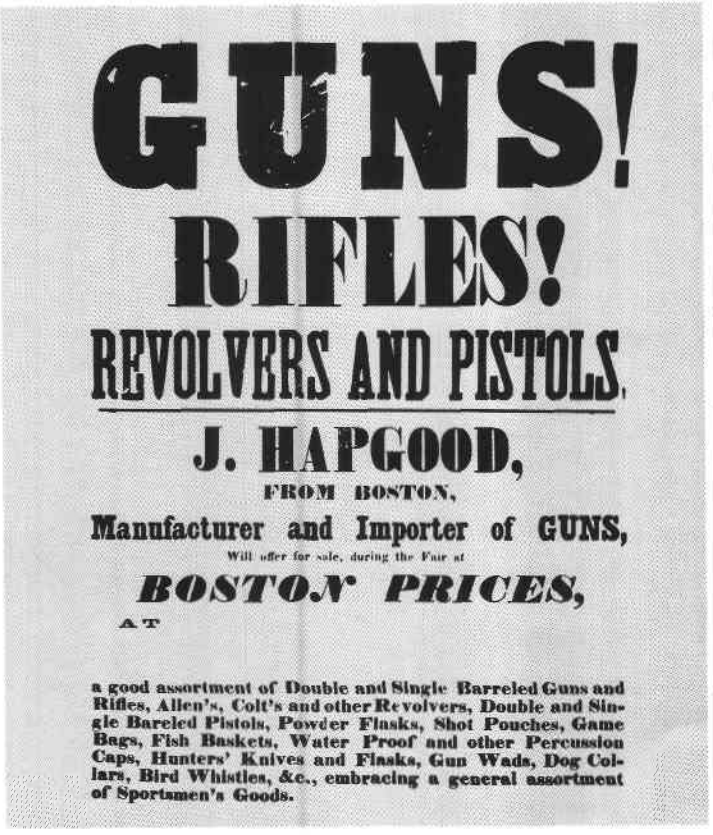
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