

THE U.S. M1917 CARBINE: MYSTERY SOLVED

By David Albert



Figure 1. Two Eddystone M1917 Rifles in the author's family collection. The M1917 carbine in the photo was acquired inexpensively in 1987 by responding to an Austin American-Statesman ad for a ".30-06 Rifle." It resulted in a quest for information about what appeared to be a legitimately shortened version of the M1917. Photo Credit: David Albert Collection.

In 1987, an Austin American-Statesman newspaper advertisement for a ".30-06 rifle" led to the purchase of a well used, dark bored M1917 Rifle for \$85. Over many years, it saw periodic range use, but was otherwise perceived as unexceptional by the author. Not much further attention was given to M1917's by the author until 2005, when another one in much better condition was added to the collection. Upon receipt of the new rifle, it immediately seemed longer than the first M1917, and a comparison confirmed the earlier purchased M1917 was considerably shorter (Figure 1). The short rifle appeared original in every way, except with a reduced barrel length, and a slightly shorter buttstock. That led to a quest of several years for more information, which involved referencing available books on the subject, corresponding with a well-known subject authority and posting in internet forums. Skepticism abounded that the M1917 Rifle was ever officially shortened, and the example in our family collection was written off by most as a gunsmith creation of unknown purpose. In talking to individuals about the rifle at gun shows, the only promising story encountered was that some M1917's saw use by Filipino troops, and that perhaps they were shortened for such service. While the M1917 Rifle did serve in the Philippines, the shortening of M1917 Rifles was never substantiated in that role.

The author's information quest continued, driven based on the physical evidence and a desire to know the rifle's history. The rifle just didn't make sense as a gunsmith creation. It was obviously not a sporterized version. Other examples were spoken of, but never witnessed in person. Internet postings were made, but no new leads came forth for the next several years.

In December 2013, the mystery finally drew to a conclusion. A person who saw some of the author's online posts on the subject forwarded a photo of their M1917 Rifle, exactly like the short M1917 in our family collection (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Another example of the M1917 Carbine, compared to a standard M1917. These rifles are owned by the individual who saw the author's online postings about short M1917's, and provided the clues that subsequently enabled the mystery to be solved. Photo Credit: Anonymous M1917 Collector

No major publication with M1917 focus has documented a short M1917 Rifle version previously. Books referenced included Bruce Canfield's *U.S. Military Bolt Action Rifles*¹, C.S. Ferris' *United States Rifle Model of 1917*², and Charles R. Stratton's *British Enfield Rifles*, 2nd Edition, Revised, Volume 4, Pattern 14 and U.S. Model of 1917³. They contain no mention of a short M1917 Rifle.

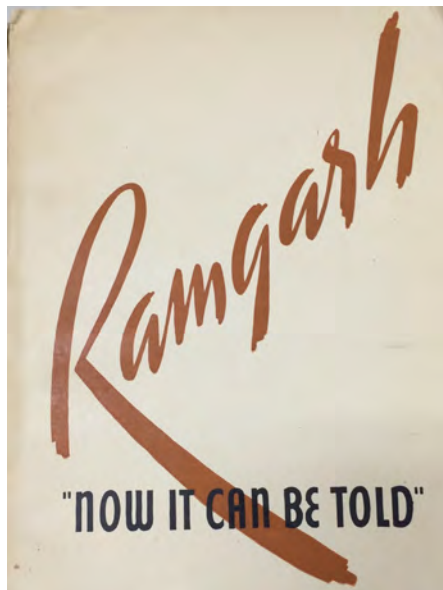
It turned out the answer existed under the author's nose for almost 2 years, and the individual who made contact via e-mail provided information that shed light down the correct trail. The "M1917 Carbine" (author designated name) was indeed a variation that saw service, and was modified at the direction of the U.S. Army. It saw WWII service with American trained Chinese troops, fighting the Japanese in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre (Figure 3). The Chinese had an urgent need for weapons, and the allies provided and trained the Chinese with a variety of them through the efforts of the U.S. Army Services of Supply, China Theatre. (SOS CT).



Figure 3. WWII U.S. Army patches representing the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theatre (left), and China Operations (right). Photo Credit: Anonymous Contributor

The M1917 Rifle became the main weapon issued by the U.S. to Chinese troops. The standard M1917 is a long rifle, and its ergonomics did not match well with the stature of most Chinese soldiers. As a result, 18,000 M1917's were experimentally shortened by 4" in barrel length, and had their stocks also slightly shortened. (Shorter length of pull) The initial experimental carbines were likely modified by U.S. Army armorers at a Ramgarh, India training camp. Ramgarh was a U.S. Army facility for a large Chinese troop training effort, located in eastern India, close to the Nepalese crossing route from China. Period photographs, training documents and the 1945 book, *Ramgarh: Now It Can Be Told*⁴ (Figure 4), confirm the M1917 Carbines were modified under contract. The 2011 book *Soldiers of the White Sun*, by Philip Jowett⁵ contained 2 photos of the M1917 Carbine, but they had gone unnoticed by the author, as the book was purchased to research Chinese Thompsons, and the M1917's just did not register during the author's perusal. Interestingly, after initial drafts of this article were written in 2014, the author became aware of Bin Shih's book, *China's Small Arms of the 2nd Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)*, 2nd Edition⁶, published in 2014, and obtained a copy directly from the author. In that book, Mr. Shih documented that M1917 Rifles existed at Ramgarh with shorter barrels and stocks.

Figure 4. Front cover of *Ramgarh: Now It Can Be Told* 4



The U.S. Army base at Ramgarh was converted from a British POW camp, and initially served to rehabilitate Chinese soldiers following their May 1942 withdrawal from Burma. Its purpose soon expanded as additional Chinese troops were flown in for training, until it became the prime training site for the CBI Theatre in late 1942. Weapons and other training courses were taught by U.S. Army personnel in a challenging physical environment. In addition to the M1917 Rifle, many at Ramgarh were trained on the M1928A1 Thompson Submachine Gun, Bren Light Machine Gun, and the M1917 Browning Machine Gun, and also some larger support weapons, including mortars, pack howitzers, as well as 105mm and 155mm howitzers. Courses of instruction were published for each weapon.

The M1917 was commonly referred to as the "Enfield," which referenced an earlier version of the rifle used by the British. The "Enfield" nickname became so commonly used that it officially appeared in the August 3, 1942 version of Field Manual 23-6 for the M1917 rifle, titled, "*U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1917 (Enfield)*" (Figure 5). Both the long and short M1917 Rifles were referred to generically as "Enfields" in the Ramgarh accounts. The M1917 Rifle is an excellent weapon that served as the primary U.S. rifle in WWI, contrary to what most people believe was the M1903 rifle, which also served in that conflict. The M1917 has a European cocking style bolt that activates on the forward stroke, rather than on the backstroke like the M1903, and other U.S. bolt action rifles. It saw very limited service with U.S. forces in WWII.

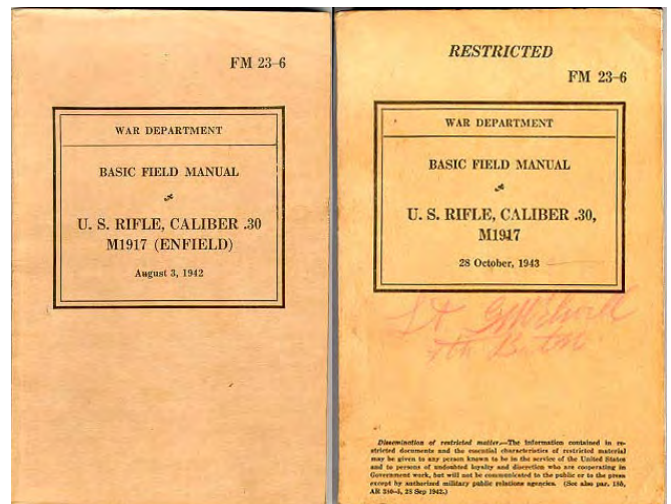


Figure 5. Two WWII era Field Manuals for the M1917 Rifle. (FM 23-6) The example dated August 3, 1942 serves to document the official nickname of "Enfield" that was commonly used to reference the M1917 Rifle. Photo Credit: David Albert Collection

The modification of the standard M1917 Rifle to the M1917 carbine involved shortening the barrel by 4", shortening the front of the stock and handguard, and removing about 1" of the buttstock. The short rifle measures 41 1/8" overall, while the standard rifle is 46 1/4" overall. Both rifles documented were manufactured by Eddystone, however Remington examples were almost certainly also modified, based on the circumstances of their in-theatre modification. Both example rifles have markings on the stock, indicating they were reworked at Ishapore Arsenal in India (Figure 6). This mark went unnoticed by the author until the rifle was displayed at a 2014 meeting of the American Society of Arms Collectors, where a fellow member inspected the stock very closely and noticed the mark. Upon discovery, the other M1917 Carbine example was

checked and confirmed as having the same arsenal mark. The Ishapore Arsenal was only about 27 miles from Ramgarh, making it a convenient resource for the modifications.



Figure 6. This faded Ishapore Arsenal stamping appears on the right side of the author's M1917 Carbine. Beginning at the 9 o'clock position, you can see an "I," followed by "S" at 6 o'clock, and "A" at 3 o'clock. A British Broad Arrow, customarily stamped on Ishapore Arsenal firearms, is present at 12 o'clock. Photo Credit: David Albert Collection

Various photographs exist of Chinese troops using the M1917 Carbine in WWII, one of which is proof by itself of the rifle's use in WWII. The photo shows a U.S. Army Captain instructing a Chinese Major General to shoot an M1917 Carbine (Figure 7). Other photographs show the rifle in training and field use (Figure 8) or in surplus stores (Figure 9).



Figure 7. A U.S. Army Captain instructs a Chinese General officer in the use of the M1917 Carbine in 1942. Photo Credit: *Ramgarh: Now It Can Be Told*⁴

Figure 8. A Chinese soldier at the U.S. training base in Ramgarh, India with a full-size M1917 Rifle. Both regular M1917's and M1917 Carbines were issued at Ramgarh. Photo Credit: *Ramgarh: Now It Can Be Told*⁴



Figure 9. In this photo of various surplus U.S. small arms from India, several M1917 Carbines may be observed in the pile. Photo Credit: Bruce Canfield

The M1917 Carbine is indeed a scarce U.S. variation that deserves further historical documentation and collector awareness. Over 75 years after its official modification, it is quite possibly the only remaining undocumented U.S. small arms variation of WWII. The M1917 served admirably in both World Wars, and has a colorful production history tied to the well known namesake of the Thompson Submachine Gun, Brigadier General John Thompson. Today, the M1917 has less of a collector following than other U.S. Rifles, and can still be purchased at reasonable prices. Be on the lookout for its short version, as it surely saw combat use, and comes as close as any firearm to fulfilling the commonly heard wish of "If only this rifle could talk..." It was used quite effectively against the Japanese by American trained Chinese troops.

Author's Note: This article serves to introduce a WWII battle rifle that has never before been fully documented. It should be recognized as a legitimate U.S. small arm variation. Concerns exist about the M1917 Carbine gaining value to the point that full sized rifles could become modified today, and unscrupulously represented as original. Few examples remain of the original 18,000 modified rifles. They saw hard service in WWII, and many saw use by Mao after the war. In light of concerns about reproductions, some details have been withheld that could be used to specifically confirm the originality of M1917 Carbines. These will be kept close to the author's vest. If anyone has an M1917 Carbine which they believe is original, the author is easily accessible on the internet, and will authenticate photos of any new examples that may surface following the publication of this article.

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Endnotes

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- 5 Jowett, Philip. *Soldiers of the White Sun: The Chinese Army at War, 1931 - 1949*, Schiffer Military History, 2011.
- 6 Document No. 1917, *Description and Rules for Management of the United States Rifle Caliber .30, Model of 1917*, Government Printing Office, 1918.
- 7 Shih, *China's Small Arms of the 2nd Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), 2nd Edition*. Bin Shih Publishing. 2014. 294 pp.
- 8 FM 23-6, *U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1917 (Enfield)*, U.S. Government Printing Office, August 3, 1942.

