

THE FIRST PATIENT MACHINE GUN - THE PUCKLE GUN

by Joseph McClain



My passion for collecting guns was fueled in the seventies, when I saved my money to buy what I, and many others consider, the “Gun Bible” – Chinn’s Blue Books, *The Machine Gun*.¹ Reading about the history of the machine gun ignited my interest in the Puckle Gun. As fate would have it, I went off collecting cars and tanks, but never lost sight of my main passion, collecting guns! One particular gun that fascinated me was the Puckle Gun, an early form of a repeating firearm in the age of flintlocks. It is said to be the first machine gun.

In London, England, on May 15th 1718, the Patent Office issued patent number 418 to James Puckle for a revolving type firearm (Figure 1). This is what I consider the most controversial in all firearms history. I found the Puckle Gun allowed the various gun engineers to advance the development of the gun to the next level. Such as Collar, Colt and many others. This gun was designed for use aboard Navy ships. British merchant ships and even Navy ships were having trouble with pirates. The pirates were using small boats that were very fast and maneuverable to effectively engage with the big ships that only had large cannons. Thus, they needed something that was a multi-shot and was maneuverable.

The Puckle Gun filled that niche with a nine-shot repeating capability. Reloading was accomplished by placing a fresh cylinder on the rear (Figure 2)! However, in 1717 the Navy tested the Puckle Gun and turned it down. Pirates are an ongoing problem, even today. Thus, without the potential sales of this gun to the Navy, production was stopped. I am told that only three of these guns were manufactured.

One might say that the Puckle Gun was a concept gun that spurs ideas in to the future. As collectors we have a desire to preserve the prototypes that didn’t work. Rich in history, I was excited to find out more about the gun and uncover little known facts and educated the public on this history. For more information and a video on the gun’s operation see: Puckle Gun (Video) - Forgotten Weapons <https://www.forgottenweapons.com/puckle-gun-video>

My odyssey: acquiring an original Puckle Gun

In early 2013, I wanted to locate blueprints of the Puckle Gun, believing that the gun would be impossible to acquire because it was in London’s Tower Museum. Several of my friends and associates recommended the most prominent source; the Leeds Museum and

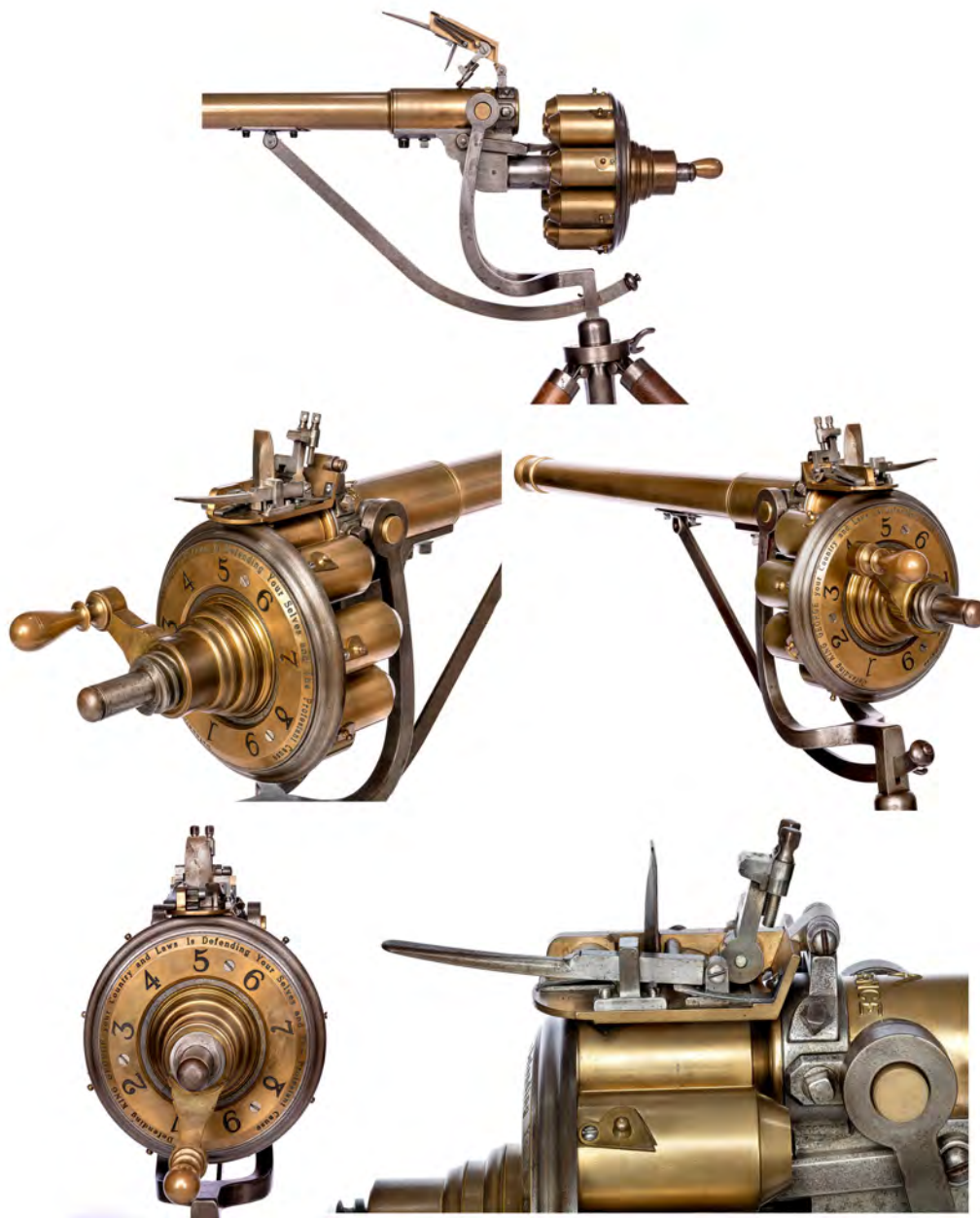
the Duke of Buccleuch based at Boughton House in Northhamptonshire. As I did more research, I learned that possibly there were additional gun(s) in Belgium or China and/or Russia at St. Petersburg and possibly Tula Arsenal, the Kremlin and Copenhagen, Denmark. As I continued to research and investigate the possibility of mul-

tiples guns, I learned that three Puckle Guns were made. I located two guns, but the third was unaccounted for. Representatives of the Duke of Buccleuch and the Tower of London, the holders of the two known Puckle Guns, suggested I call Mr. Baer in Belgium, which I did. He said, "I will not sell the plans or my gun!"



Figure 1. Original patent for the Puckle gun.

Figure 2. Different views of the Puckle Gun. Top: cylinder is pulled back, ready to be replaced. Middle: different angles of the rear cylinders with numbers on them for firing count. Bottom: back of the gun and flint firing mechanism.



Not wanting to give up, I called him each month for six months. In January 2014, he did not answer. I called again and again, but no answer! It's impossible to answer the phone when you're no longer alive! I learned that Mr. Baer had passed away in December 2013. In June 2014, I contacted and hired an English friend, Victor Huff, who made contact with the family in July. Negotiations began poorly because Mrs. Baer could only speak Flemish and Victor Huff's second language was French, so we had to hire a translator.

On August 8, 2014, I believe the family finally decided to sell me the Puckle Gun and the plans (Figure 2) because they found my name and phone number on a pad in Mr. Baer's workshop. Finally, over many months of negotiations, we came to an agreement. Then the complicated steps of physically getting the Puckle Gun to the United States began. Fulfilling the contract clauses; making shipping arrangements; having a crate built for the gun; working with export companies; setting up Holland requirements to export (customs, etc.); selecting a U.S. import company and Homeland Security to handle U.S. import regulations; hiring an attorney;

traveling to West Palm Beach to have Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the U.S. Department of Justice write a letter from the Firearms Technology Industry Service Branch (FTISB) rendering an opinion. All had to be organized and executed in perfect sequence to successfully get the gun to the United States. All these issues were finally moving forward when one after another, each one derailed.

Shipping

At the time Belgium had experienced a series of gun-related terrorist acts. As a result, the Belgium government had closed the borders to imported guns. I was afraid that Belgium would also close its borders to out-going guns as well, and would lock the Puckle Gun up in that fiasco. I asked Victor Huff to pick the gun up and take it to his home in England. This too was not a good idea. With the strong English gun laws there was the fear that the Brits would declare the Puckle Gun a national heritage item and seize it. Ultimately, we were able to get the gun on a plane to the United States.

Crate Building

What's the big deal?... Import regulations dictated that the type of wood had to be "certified" and sprayed for bugs. I had to hire an international cabinet maker to build and certify the box. Finding a cabinet maker and the materials to build the cabinet was costly both in money and time. For shipping considerations, this meant that the anticipated crate weight and size doubled. Again, costly!

International Export Companies

Originally, I hired an export agent in Belgium to arrange pick-up of the crate containing the Puckle Gun and to put it on a plane for the United States. All was great until I decided to switch the shipping point from Belgium to London and then to the United States. This meant that I had to change shipping agents and find an agent in London to arrange for the shipment to the United States. This delayed shipment for months – but it got done!

Holland / England Officials

For the reasons I previously stated, Belgium Customs got excited when the paperwork indicated "Machine Gun." Before anything could delay the shipment again, I quickly moved it to England. As well, English Customs saw "Machine Gun" on the paperwork and held it up until customs shippers were able to explain why it was not deactivated. Satisfied, English Customs released the box for shipment and alerted the U.S. Government that a machine gun was on its way to the United States.

ATF and The Firearms Technology Industry Service Branch (FTISB)

Fortunately, I know a few ATF agents and requested a determination letter for the 1715 machine gun. ATF uses a point system to make a determination. My gun was too old, had an obsolete ignition system and used obsolete ammunition, etc. As a result, ATF was kind enough to furnish me with a letter of determination for the Puckle Gun. I put copies of the letter with the box, with the paperwork, issued a copy of the letter to my attorney and the ATF office in Miami. In doing so, I thought I had covered every

possible problem. I was wrong.

U.S. Import Customs and Homeland Security

The Puckle Gun made it to the United States and was placed in a small U.S. Customs office in West Palm Beach, Florida. Agents from both Customs and Homeland Security had a major issue with the Puckle Gun because the paperwork indicated, "Machine Gun." When I showed up to claim my box, Homeland Security, with the help of Customs, wanted to arrest me! I asked both agencies if they had read the documentation. Both said they had inspected the gun and read all the paperwork. In reality, they had not! In order to stay out of jail and move forward, I had to have my Import Attorney and the Head of Miami ATF work with the Customs Office and get the Puckle Gun cleared for release. This added another couple of days onto the entire process, but finally after all the roadblocks, I took possession of the Puckle Gun!

Final Comments (or *In Conclusion*):

I don't believe that Mr. Puckle was the original developer of the first machine gun of this type, but that he bought, traded or stole the idea from someone else. He seems to have earned his living as a notary public and wrote a book called *The Club*.² The fact that Mr. Puckle patented the gun only, without the tripod, makes this gun significant to the evolution of the machine gun. In my opinion if he had developed the gun, he would have known how important the creation of the first portable, folding-leg tripod would have been to the success of firing the Puckle Gun. He did not. Therefore, in my opinion, he was not the original developer and should have patented the tripod as well. What a mistake! I believe that a line of thought for creation began with the Puckle Gun and the Collier Pistol, followed through other inventors to the Colt patent. All information in the development of today's revolver. Final thought: In my life as a collector, I was told by an old collector that I should never count my guns or tanks. The reason: when my wife asks me, "How many guns or tanks do you have?" I can say, "Honey, I only need one more!"

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Chinn, George M. *The Machine Gun: History, Evolution, and Development of Manual, Automatic, and Airborne Repeating Weapons*. US Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.
- ² Puckle, James. *The Club; or, A Gray Cap for a Green Head. A Dialogue Between a Father and Son*. 1713. London.

