

“This is My Rifle”

How the M1 Garand Became a Legend Among Riflemen

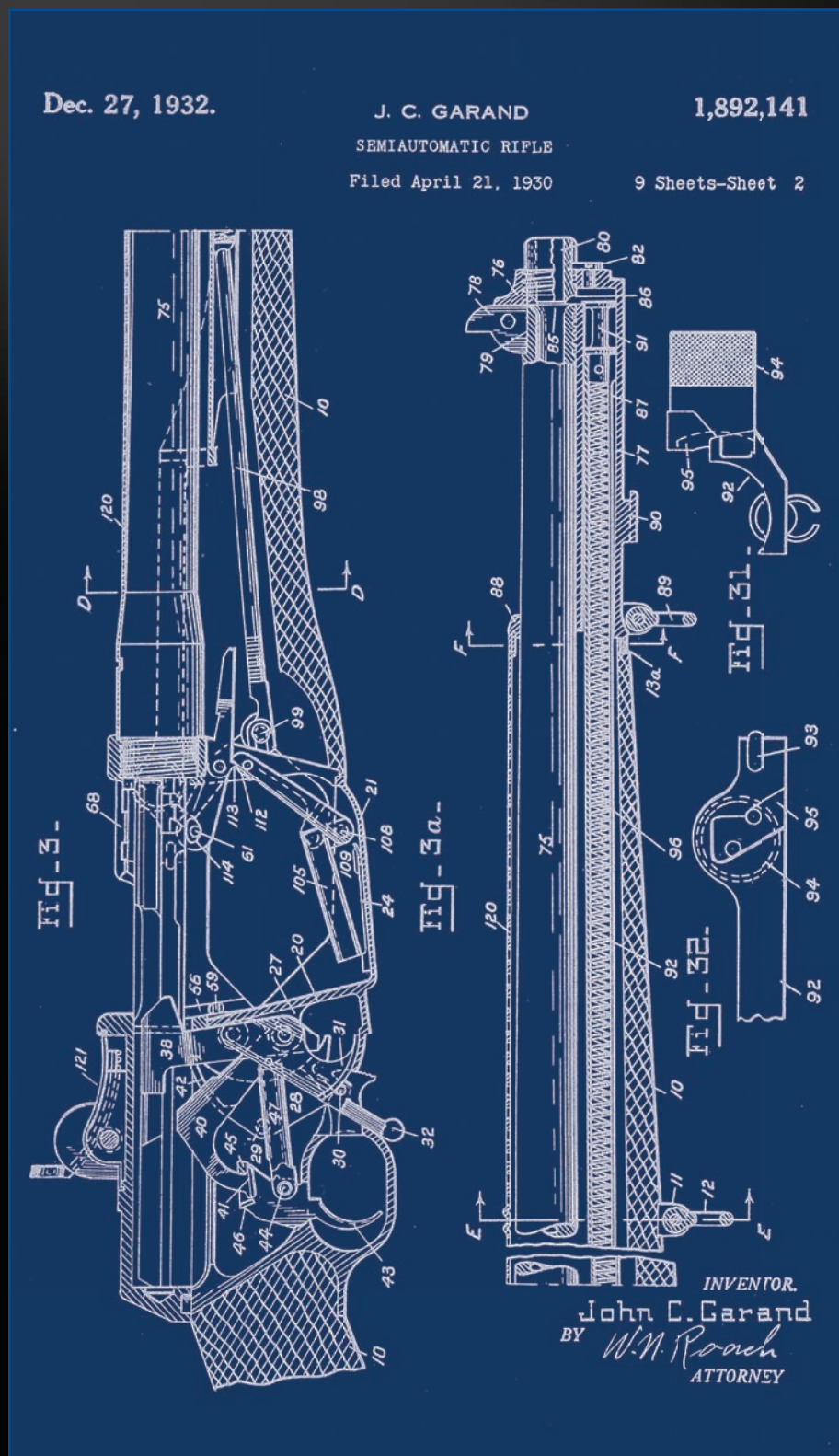
By Sam Lichtman

Perhaps more than any other military rifle, John Garand’s iconic M1 holds a special place in the hearts of military riflemen and civilian enthusiasts alike. From the jungles of the South Pacific to the infamous “Frozen Chosin,” Marines carried this revolutionary arm for nearly two decades, using it to deadly effect in some of the Corps’ most famous battles.



SGT ROBERT KNAPP, USMC

Marines with 2nd Plt, “Bravo” Co, Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., march in formation during a full honors funeral for three formerly unaccounted for Vietnam veterans at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Va., Sept. 27, 2018. M1 rifles are still widely used for ceremonial purposes by militaries which formerly fielded it in battle.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

John C. Garand was a relative unknown in the firearms world. Hailing from Canada, he was a mechanical engineer by training and trade. Much of his career had been spent designing industrial machinery for factories, a skillset which would later come to serve him well.

The year was 1932, and then-Major (later Major General) Julian S. Hatcher at the U.S. Army Ordnance Office had a problem. The Army had already decided that it wanted to replace the venerable bolt-action M1903 Springfield with a self-loading rifle to provide its riflemen with rapid-fire capability. Although there were no shortage of talented designers looking to sign a contract, Hatcher had no way to tell who was serious about building a suitable rifle and who was just a hobbyist looking for an easy cash grant. Furthermore, the workable designs that already existed had significant problems—after all, self-loading infantry rifles had been produced in small numbers since before the First World War, but no design had been good enough for a major military to adopt it as standard. A round of trials in 1924 had failed to find a rifle that was entirely suitable, but those trials set the stage for what was soon to come.

Self-loading, or semi-automatic, rifles had been modestly popular among hunters and sport shooters for decades. The ability to fire multiple shots in rapid succession without having to manually cycle the action was highly valuable in the field, but the designs weren't nearly adequate for military use. Engineers had tried to scale up civilian designs like the Remington Model 8 and Winchester Model 1907 rifles, but they encountered serious problems: the rifles were usually some combination of heavy, inaccurate, fragile, unreliable, or expensive to produce. It quickly became clear that the standard .30 M1906 cartridge was much too powerful and the military's requirements too stringent for an existing design to simply be adapted for soldiers and Marines to use in combat.

Enter two men named John—John Pedersen and John Garand. Pedersen was a seasoned, experienced firearm designer who had developed several commercially successful firearms while working for Remington. During WW I, Pedersen designed a conversion device which allowed the M1903 Springfield to be quickly adapted into a semi-automatic pistol-caliber carbine; it was adopted by the U.S. military and saw limited use by war's end. John Moses Browning once called John

Pedersen “the greatest gun designer in the world;” high praise from anyone, let alone Browning. Throughout the 1920s, Pedersen had been working on prototype designs for a reliable, accurate self-loading infantry rifle. When the Army started looking for one, he saw this as the perfect opportunity to have his design adopted.

Compared to heavyweights like Pedersen, John C. Garand was a relative unknown in the firearms world. Hailing from Canada, he was a mechanical engineer by training and trade. Much of his career had been spent designing industrial machinery for factories, a skillset which would later come to serve him well. Garand's experimentation in arms design began in the early 1920s, culminating in his submission of a self-loading rifle to the unsuccessful 1924 Army trials. Changes to the way military ammunition was manufactured rendered the basic



John C. Garand, at work in his model shop in the 1940s, was a mechanical engineer whose place in history was secured with the design of the M1 rifle. (Photo by Alfred T. Palmer, Courtesy of Library of Congress)



Sgt Rinaldo Martini fires shots of opportunity during the Battle of Iwo Jima, March 12, 1945, with an M1 Garand while sitting on a stack of captured enemy ammunition crates. Martini, a machine gun section leader assigned to C/1/27, earned the Silver Star for his actions earlier during the battle.

This Garand prototype, designated T3E2, competed in U.S. Army trials beginning in 1932. It features a primitive “gas trap” system which taps expanding gases from the muzzle rather than the simpler and more efficient gas port arrangement found in most production M1 rifles.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

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John Pedersen had designed his rifles around the .276 cartridge, but Garand had an ace up his sleeve.



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Above: The back of the T3E2's receiver prominently features caliber information and other details. This rifle, manufactured in January of 1931, bears serial number 20.



LCPL ALLEN SANDERS, USMC

Left: Firing from a modified Port Arms position, Marines with “Alpha” Co firing party execute a three-round volley using blank-adapted M1s during a funeral for repatriated Marine PFC Harold H. Hayden at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Va., Oct. 27, 2021.

operating mechanism unworkable, but by the early 1930s, John Garand had again produced a design worthy of proper military trials.

In 1932, the Army ran another trials program to select and adopt a self-loading infantry rifle to replace the Springfield. This time, the playing field was dominated by only two serious contenders: John Pedersen with his T1E3 rifle and John Garand with his new and improved T3E2, both in caliber .276. Pedersen's

design used a toggle-delayed blowback mechanism with the breech locked by a sort of knee joint during firing. Garand's design used a more conventional rotating bolt driven by a gas piston, which tapped expanding powder gases from the muzzle to operate the action. In the trials, John Garand's rifle was found to be more robust and reliable than Pedersen's and had one crucial advantage—it didn't need lubricated ammunition. By virtue of its delayed-blowback operating mechanism,

John Pedersen's rifle would seize up and stop functioning unless the cartridges were lubricated, but its internal lubrication system increased complexity and allowed dust and grit to accumulate in the receiver, eventually causing malfunctions without careful cleaning.

The Army also had been testing the prototype rifles not in the standard chambering of .30-'06, but in an experimental .276. Military analysts had already determined that the new cartridge had

Marines carrying the M1 Garand on the bayonet course charge over a log obstacle while training at Montford Point, April 1945.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

a number of advantages suiting it well for use in a self-loading infantry rifle. Somewhat smaller and less powerful, the cartridge placed less strain on a rifle's operating components and produced significantly less felt recoil, allowing soldiers and Marines to fire more rapidly and accurately. Furthermore, the lighter weight and lower production cost of each round allowed men to carry more ammunition into the field and stay in the fight longer.

During the late stages of testing, General Douglas MacArthur personally intervened to throw a proverbial wrench in the whole program. Wary of the additional complications a new infantry cartridge would pose for the U.S. military's logistical network, MacArthur ordered that the .276 be abandoned immediately and all rifle development focus on the standard .30-'06. John Pedersen had designed his rifles around the .276 cartridge, but Garand had an ace up his sleeve—he had been working with the .30-'06 for longer. One of his crucial advantages was that he could readily redesign his T3E2 in .30-caliber, whereas Pedersen could not as easily scale his own designs up to fire the more powerful round.

Although Pedersen was known across the developed world for his design expertise, Garand's rifle proved more effective

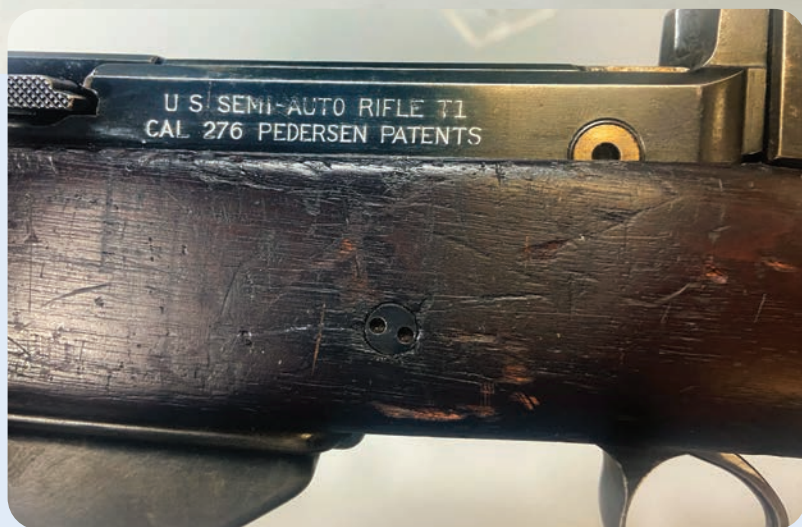


USMC

Marines armed with the M1 Garand waded ashore on Tinian from landing barges during World War II.

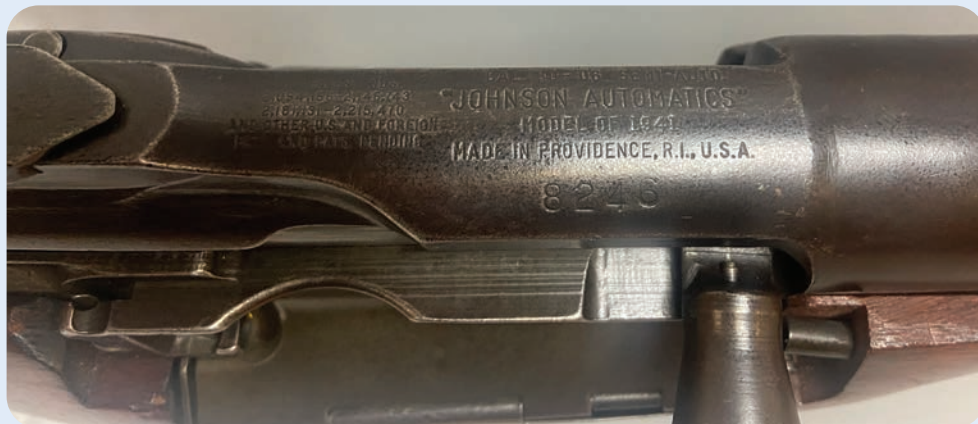


Right: The Pedersen T1 performed well during trials but the rifle was more difficult to mass produce than John Garand's design. Additionally, the Pedersen design required lacquered ammunition and was less easily adapted to the standard .30-'06 chambering.



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Below: The Johnson M1941 was used by Marine paratroopers during WW II..



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Right: In this view of the Johnson M1941, National Museum of the Marine Corps curator Jon Bernstein points out where the additional rounds would be fed into the rifle's unusual rotary magazine. Melvin Johnson used such a magazine in part because he hoped it would deter others from stealing his design.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

Rifles That Didn't Make The Cut

During the 1920s and 1930s, small arms designers the world over developed prototype semi-automatic military rifles. Here are just a few of the many that the U.S. military tested but ultimately discarded in favor of the Garand.

Pedersen T1E3: John D. Pedersen's self-loading rifle was the most promising of those that didn't make the cut. His toggle-delayed blowback mechanism used a knee joint to hold the breech closed until pressure inside the chamber dropped to a safe level. While visually similar to the Luger pistol's toggle-locked short recoil system, Pedersen's simpler design is conducive to better reliability and accuracy. Its feed system is similar to that of the Garand, consisting of an internal box magazine loaded with 10-round en-bloc clips; unlike on the Garand, these could only be inserted in one direction. The Pedersen rifles performed well in testing but their greater difficulty to manufacture, requirement for waxed ammunition, and non-standard .276 chambering doomed them in the long run.

Colt/Auto-Ordnance Model 1923: Designed by John T. Thompson of submachine gun fame, the so-called "Autorifle" was found to be entirely unsatisfactory in preliminary trials. Thompson's rifle began testing at a disadvantage as it required internal lubricant pads to grease each round with whale oil in order to extract reliably. Its unusually large receiver made the rifle bulkier than its competitors, measuring a whopping 50 inches long and weighing in at nearly 11 pounds. Most damning of all was the faulty action—Thompson's screw-delayed blowback system allowed the bolt to open prematurely, allowing dangerous high-pressure gas to escape. After ejecting cases so violently in an early test that they embedded themselves in wooden boards several feet away, the prototype was deemed too risky to investigate further.

Johnson M1941: As a Marine Corps Reserve officer, Melvin M. Johnson developed his rifle with a close eye on accuracy, portability, and ease of manufacture. His rifle and its light machine gun stablemate used a short-recoil mechanism similar to that used in most pistols but with a multi-lug rotating bolt design which would later find its way into the M16 and M27, among others. Marine paratroopers liked the Johnson as its quickly removable barrel made it easy to carry while jumping out of an airplane. In the end, however, Marine Corps testing showed that the Garand rifles already in production for the Army were equally capable in most respects.

The Dutch military adopted Johnson's rifle as the M1941; their colonial forces received some 30,000 and used them on a limited basis in the Pacific theater. Also of note is the Johnson rifle's rotary magazine, which could be continually fed by five-round stripper clips while firing.

Winchester G30M: Completed too late for Army trials, Winchester's rifle was tested by the Marine Corps and found to be inferior to its competitors. Continued development led to the G30R, which again failed to unseat the M1, and the Winchester Automatic Rifle, marketed as a lightweight replacement for the famous BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). Winchester later adapted its unusual tappet-style gas piston system, designed by David Marshall Williams, for use in the enormously successful M1 Carbine.

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Above: In this close-up view of the Pedersen T1E3's receiver, the toggle mechanism is easily visible on the top. This "knee joint" bends upward to open the action, eject a spent casing, and load the next round.



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LCPL GABINO PEREZ, USMC

LCpl Makenze Kunzlemen, with 2nd Bn, 5th Marines, 1stMarDiv fires the M1 Garand during a competition as part of San Francisco Fleet Week, Oct. 4, 2017.

Firing an M1 Garand Today



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Of the more than 5.5 million M1 Garand rifles produced from 1936-1945 and 1952-1957, many are still functional and continue to circulate on the civilian market. If you own one of these rifles, ensure you care for it in accordance with its specific needs, which may be different from those of a modern rifle.

For the sake of safety, please fire only military surplus ammunition or ammunition specifically marketed for use in the M1. Modern .30-'06 ammunition is loaded to higher pressures and can damage the operating rod rendering your rifle unusable. If you would like to fire commercial ammunition safely, you can change out the gas block for an aftermarket adjustable model and tune it for the specific load you will be firing.

Finally, some M1s were re-chambered in 7.62×51mm NATO. Before using any firearm, check the caliber markings on the barrel or receiver and ensure you have the proper ammunition.

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and easier to manufacture. It was officially adopted as "U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1" by the Army on Jan. 9, 1936.

The Marine Corps has traditionally been a little more conservative than the Army with adopting new rifles. Marine Corps brass in the late 1930s saw the rapid-fire capability of the Army's new rifle as nothing more than a great way to waste ammunition and impede precision marksmanship. Despite their initial skepticism, the Corps ran a trials program of its own in 1940 to determine whether a semi-automatic rifle could be better than the venerable Springfield. They tested

Pedersen's and Garand's designs along with a recoil-operated rifle designed by Marine reserve officer Melvin M. Johnson.

The Corps eventually decided to send some Johnson and Garand rifles to the Pacific theater to see how viable they were in combat. Both rifles, especially the Garand, quickly proved their worth against the Japanese in battles like Guadalcanal. The Japanese had long used the banzai charge as a way to dislodge enemy forces, and this tactic worked very well against Chinese conscripts armed with slow-firing Mausers. But against highly trained U.S. Marines with semi-automatic

M1 rifles, a bayonet charge never stood a chance. Far from wasting ammunition, the sheer volume of fire provided by the new rifle allowed Marines to suppress enemy defenders and make rapid follow-up shots at moving targets.

Hearing positive feedback from Marines who had used the M1 in combat, the Marine Corps formally adopted the rifle to completely replace the M1903 and began mass issuing the new rifle to Marines in the field in early 1942.

Recall that John Garand was a production engineer with a great deal of experience designing factory equipment. This background allowed him to design the rifle for ease of production as well as the machines that would perform each operation. This proved to be a key factor in giving the United States an edge during World War II. They could manufacture and field in the mass quantities needed, something that tripped up the likes of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany with their own self-loading rifle programs.

With America's industrial might at their backs, riflemen of the United States Marine Corps used the M1's fire superiority to fight their way all the way across the Pacific. Marines carrying M1s raised the American flag over numerous islands, and when war broke out on the Korean peninsula in 1950, soldiers and Marines picked their M1 rifles back up and went to go fight.

Warfare in the bitter Korean winter is very different from fighting on the hot, humid islands of the South Pacific, but John Garand had designed his rifle to function in extreme cold as well as heat. During the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir in 1950, Marines found that their M1s still functioned perfectly fine, except for one thing—lubrication. All firearms require proper lubrication in order to function reliably, and the M1 is no exception, but the natural oil in service at the time had an unfortunate tendency to thicken and gum up in the extreme cold temperatures. Undeterred, Marines simply stripped all the lubricant out of their M1s and ran them bone-dry—and the rifles kept on working.

Even after serving in two wars, the M1 kept soldiering on. Years of work on modifying and improving the rifle's base design culminated in the adoption of the M14 in 1957. Despite the external differences, every M14 and variant thereof can trace its lineage directly back to the M1. Despite its official replacement, the M1 itself endured in frontline service. It dutifully guarded the inner German border and other hotspots around the world until 1961 when the last examples were finally phased out and sent back to Springfield for refurbishment and storage.

During the 1950s and beyond, militaries



USMC

Cpl Richard J. Griffin, left, and PFC James H. Appleton, train in the art of precision marksmanship in the early 1950s. Appleton is armed with an M1903A4, while Griffin carries the short-lived M1C mounted with a four-power riflescope. The Army and Marine Corps both developed scoped variants of the M1 for use by snipers; these quickly fell out of favor due to accuracy problems.

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on six of the seven continents fielded M1 rifles received from the United States as military aid. Even after they were taken out of American service, M1 rifles gained a new life among civilian marksmen—many of them soldiers and Marines who had carried them in combat. Through the Office of the Director of Civilian Marksmanship (DCM), managed by the War Department, members of shooting clubs across the country could purchase refurbished military surplus rifles that were no longer needed by the U.S. military. To this very day, the DCM—now known as the Civilian Marksmanship Program—sells original 1940s and 1950s production M1 rifles for match shooting.

Few historic military arms have garnered such enduring popularity as the M1. This rifle, revolutionary for its time, is still held in high regard; its influence

on tactical doctrine, marksmanship, and later firearm designs is felt in the modern day. Marines at Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Inchon, Outpost Vegas and hundreds of other battlefields didn't know how famous the rifle would become, of course. All they cared about was whether it worked, and as the record reflects, it did indeed.

Editor's note: Special thanks to Jonathan Bernstein at the National Museum of the Marine Corps and Geoffrey Roecker of MissingMarines.com for technical research and assistance with photos.

Author's bio: Sam Lichtman is a college student and licensed pilot. He works part-time as a manager at a gun store and occasionally contributes content to Leatherneck. He also has a weekly segment on Gun Owners Radio. 🦋



USMC

Marines with RCT-7 move up a ridge in Korea, Dec. 6, 1950. The M1 Garand saw wide use during the Korean War as the standard-issue infantry rifle of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps as well as a few allied militaries.