



"The Ranger pistol"

The 1846 Mexican War saw the introduction of the Colt's revolver as a viable combat weapon. The success of the 4-pound - 9 ounce "Walker" revolver led to public and military demand for a lighter, handier sidearm. Ever the shrewd entrepreneur, Samuel Colt seized the opportunity and began production of a whole series of .44 caliber "Dragoon" or "Holster" revolvers. Nothing less than scaled down versions of the Colt-Walker revolver, these weapons did not achieve widespread public acceptance due to their still excessive weight.

It was not until 1851 that Colonel Colt designed a pistol that would finally meet the public's requirements. Initially named the "New Ranger Size Pistol" to honor Texas Rangers who had so decisively used Colt's early "Paterson" revolvers in battle against Comanche Indians, the new revolver was a smaller .36 caliber bore which weighed in at 2 pounds - 10 ounces. It had an octagonal 7-½" barrel, and the cylinder was elegantly roll-engraved with a depiction of an 1843 Texas naval battle with Mexico.

The "New Ranger" pistol's performance was as equally impressive as its handling characteristics. Tested by the U.S. Board of Ordnance, a test pistol was fired 1500 times in a single day without cleaning. Loaded with 20 grains of powder (it could hold 30) a conical bullet could easily penetrate six 1" pine boards. Accuracy was exceptional: Factory sighted for 60 yards, the pistol was capable of aimed fire to 200 yards. Maximum range was 600 yards.

Not long after the pistol's introduction, the "Ranger" name was dropped and the revolver re-named the Colt "Belt" or "Navy" revolver. The 1851 Navy was eagerly accepted by both the U.S. Military and public alike. The U.S. Navy adopted the pistol and initially issued it with a detachable butt-stock that incorporated an internal canteen.

The Ranger Pistol, continued:

The Colt Navy was also a favorite of Frontiersman-Gunfighter James "Wild Bill" Hickok, who often carried his two ivory stocked Navies tucked butt forward into a red sash worn about the waist. During the War Between the States, the Confederacy produced several brass-framed copies of the Colt Navy that today are considered valuable collector pieces. Conversely, captured Union Navies with their all-steel frame construction were prized by C.S.A. cavalrymen.

Colt Navies were also authorized by the British Army for individual purchase by Officers. Colt's Navy saw combat in various British conflicts, including the 1857 Indian Sepoy Mutiny. However, the Navy's small bullet failed to stop Indian mutineers even when shot with all six rounds, and were subsequently replaced with Colt's .44 Dragoon revolvers. The failure of the Colt Navy to effectively incapacitate the enemy was also a problem during the U.S. Indian Wars, and again the .44 caliber Colt's revolvers were preferred.

Nonetheless, the Colt Navy remained a favorite with many who ventured forth on the U.S. western frontier right up through the 1870's when it slowly began to be eclipsed by cartridge revolvers like the 1873 Colt Single Action Army which, by the way, incorporated the Navy's grip frame into its design.

Most Westerners were of rather meager means and the new cartridge revolvers, and ammunition for same, were priced well beyond the budgets of most. For them, the Colt Navy percussion revolver continued to provide an adequate degree of personal protection at an affordable price.

If this article has whetted your interest in owning a Colt Navy revolver, be advised: authentic Colt Navies usually command premium prices from collectors and counterfeit pieces abound. However, shootable modern reproductions of the Colt Navy revolver are readily available at very modest prices. I purchased my own reproduction .36 Navy and found it to be a very accurate six-gun, despite remarks made by friends that I would not be able to hit anything beyond six feet. Recalling that these revolvers are sighted for about sixty yards, at a distance of twenty-five yards I have found it necessary to aim about six inches low to place my shots in the black on a standard 25 yard bulls-eye pistol target.

The sights, a brass cone front sight and rear notch cut into the hammer nose are not the best but seem adequate when I do my part. At twenty-five yards I can keep all six shots in the black; about an eight-inch circle. At fifty yards my group spreads out to about twelve inches, but still stays within the scoring rings.

The graceful 7-1/2" octagonal barrel, coupled with the traditional Colt "plowshare" grip make for wonderful handling characteristics. It is very easy to see how a shootist like Hickok was able to accomplish some of his shooting feats when you have fired a Colt's Navy.

Prepared by Manny Silva, 2006. All rights reserved.