

# THE AUTO ORDNANCE THOMPSON TA5

By Leroy Thompson

Cover and lead photo by Mike Anschuetz

I think you could say I come by my affection for the Thompson SMG honestly—in my DNA you might say. My grandfather, a career Army officer who served in World War I and World War II, was named John Thompson, a name he shared with the inventor of the Thompson SMG, who was also an Army officer. It goes deeper than that, though. I'm of Scots-Irish descent, so I've listened to a few Rebel songs in my time. Among the lines that have stuck with me are the following from "Off to Dublin in the Green":

*...And, I'm off to join the IRA and I'm off  
tomorrow morn*

*And we're all off to Dublin in the green, in the green  
Where the helmets glisten in the sun  
Where the bayonets flash and the rifles clash  
To the rattle of a Thompson gun*

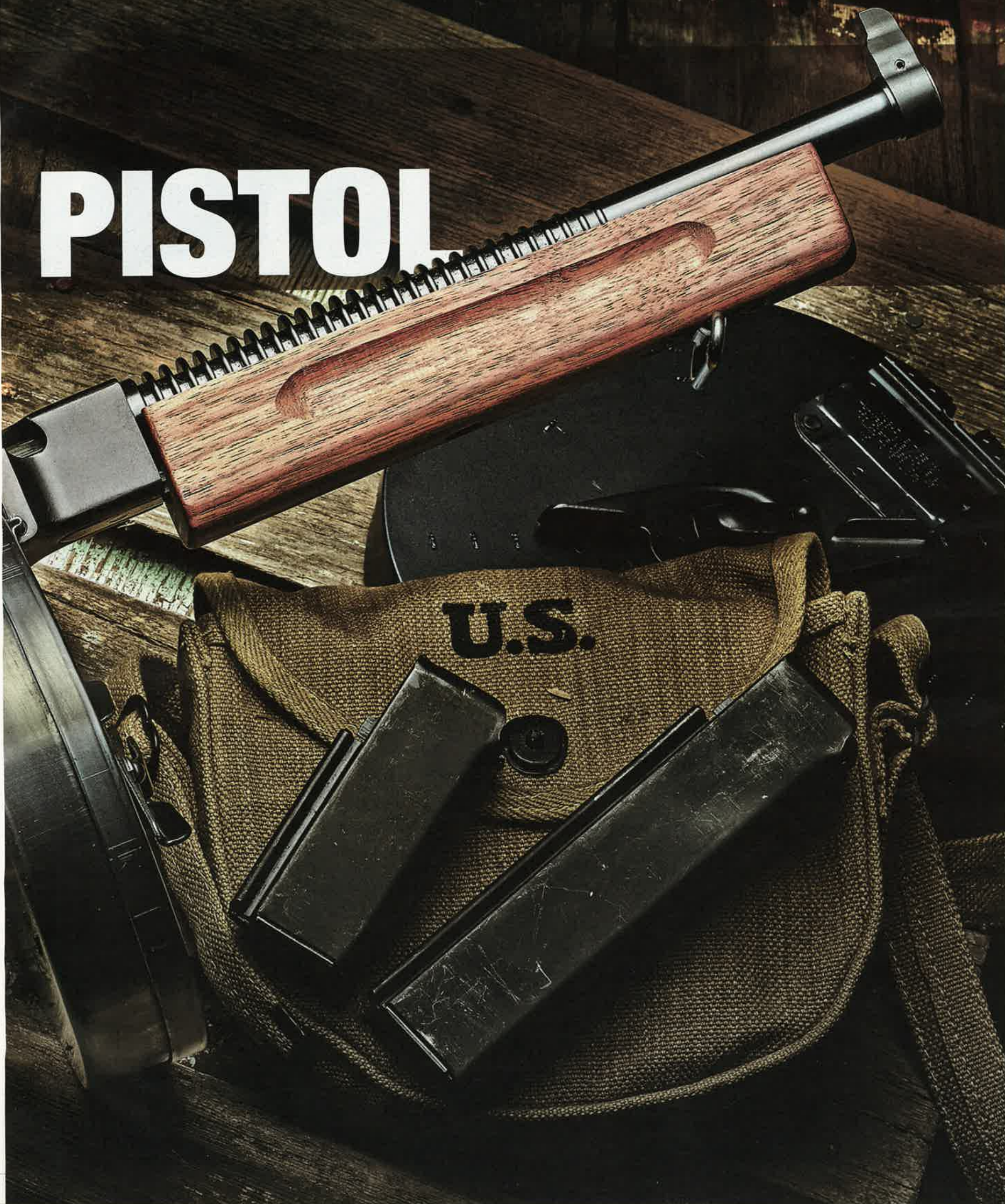
I've never turned down the chance to hear the rattle of the Thompson, normally preferring to be the one

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# PISTOL

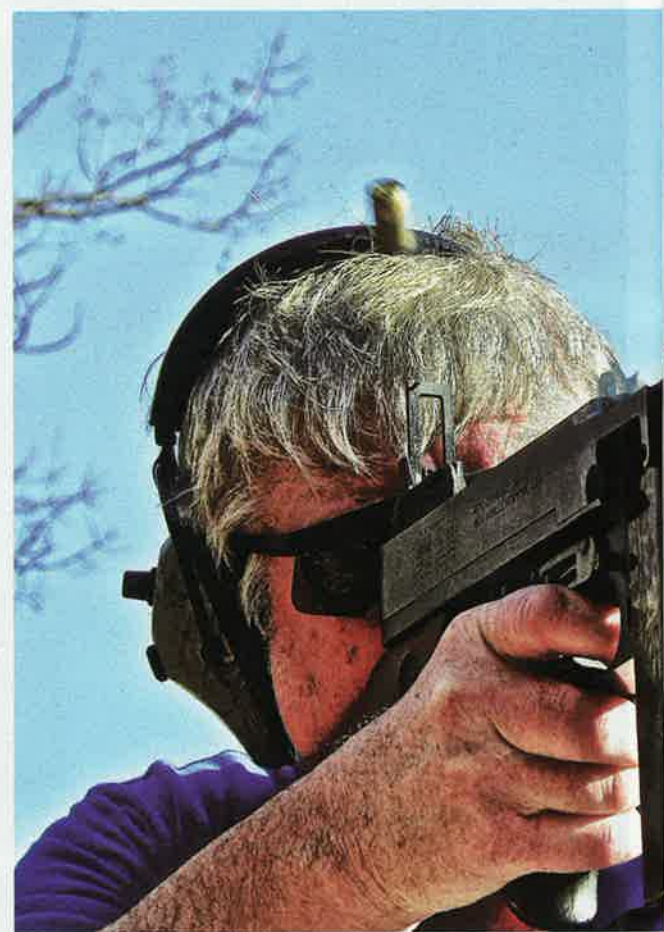






Right side view of the Auto-Ordnance Thompson TA5.

The Thompson is a true American Classic in the hands of lawmen and other fighting men. Here, a member of the 1st Marine Division in World War II fires his M1 Thompson (NARA).



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doing the rattling. The Thompson is heavy, no doubt of that, but it is also THE iconic American submachine gun. I've shot M1927/28, M1928, M1928A1 and M1A1 Thompsons. I did shoot an FBI Thompson one time. After the 1986 FBI shootout in Miami, for a while, some officers took the Thompsons out of armories and onto the streets. A friend of mine was a firearms instructor in the St. Louis FBI office and was carrying a Thompson in

the classic FBI hard case in his vehicle. I believe it was an M1921/28 but don't remember for sure. We were having lunch one day when he told me he needed to take the Thompson to the range to make sure it was functioning properly, and did I want to come along? Of course, I did. The FBI hard case was designed to store the Thompson with the stock in a separate compartment from the barrel/receiver. If I remember correctly, the case stored one

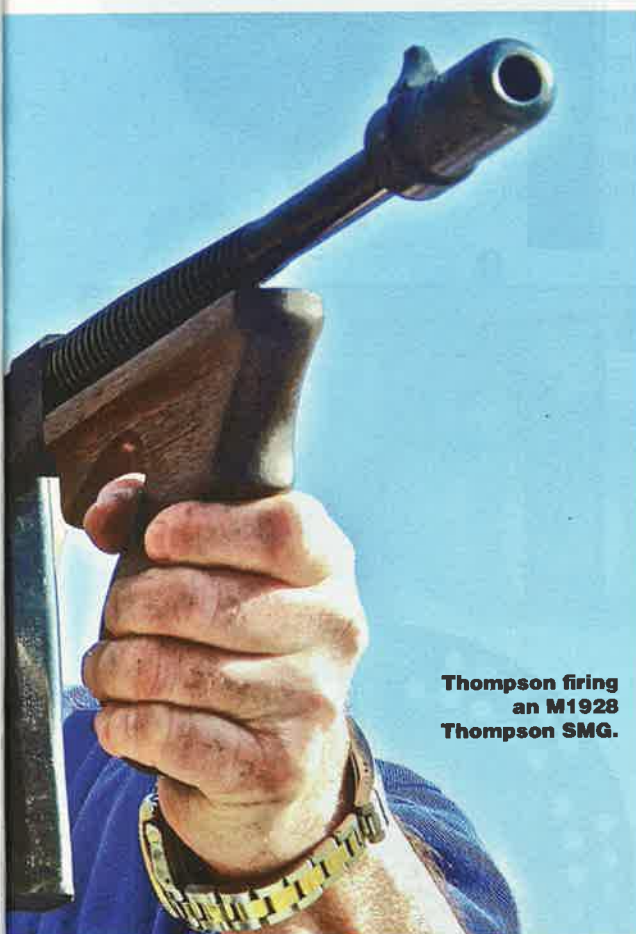
50-round drum and four 20-round stick magazines. We tested all of the magazines as well as the Thompson—thoroughly tested!

I don't remember ever shooting a 1921, but that is the one sung about in "Off to Dublin in the Green." Friends in the *Garda Síochána* have told me that one will still occasionally turn up in a cache in the Irish Republic. The last one I remember hearing about was found some years





Left side view of the Auto-Ordnance Thompson TA5.



Thompson firing  
an M1928  
Thompson SMG.



A Thompson M1928 SMG.

ago under the bed of an elderly woman who had been asked to store it for a brother in the IRA sometime in the 1920s or 1930s.

I've shot a couple of the semi-auto Thompsons and found them enjoyable, but the Auto-Ordnance Thompson TA5 is the first pistol version of the Thompson I've fired. When I took the TA5 out of the box, I was surprised at how light and handy it felt: the result of the re-

ceiver being fabricated of 6061-T6 aluminum. Actually, it reminded me of taking the receiver/barrel group out of the FBI hard case 30 years ago. It was not unknown in the day for the Thompson to be carried without the stock for concealment under a coat and fired that way, especially if it had a vertical fore grip. However, that would be illegal on a current pistol version due to the overall length being under 26 inches. An earlier version of the

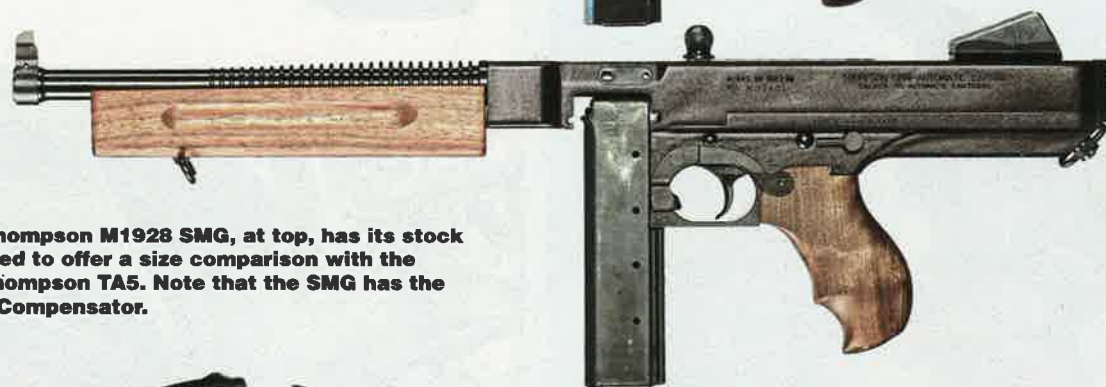
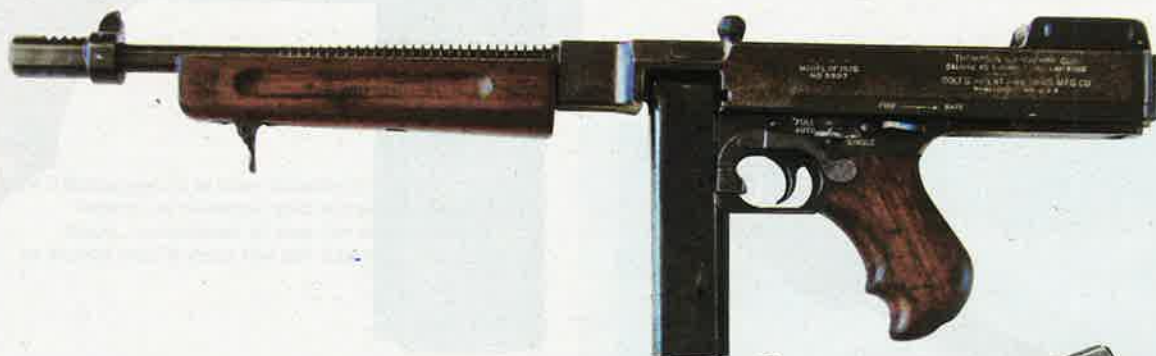
TA5 made in the late 1970s through the 1980s was the Auto-Ordnance Thompson A5 Pistol and it did have the classic Thompson vertical grip but the barrel was 13 inches to give it "firearm" status at over 26 inches.

One of my first considerations before taking the TA5 to the range was how I was going to shoot it. I decided to try a variety of methods: offhand with a two-handed hold, from a rest, from the hip, and offhand but pushing

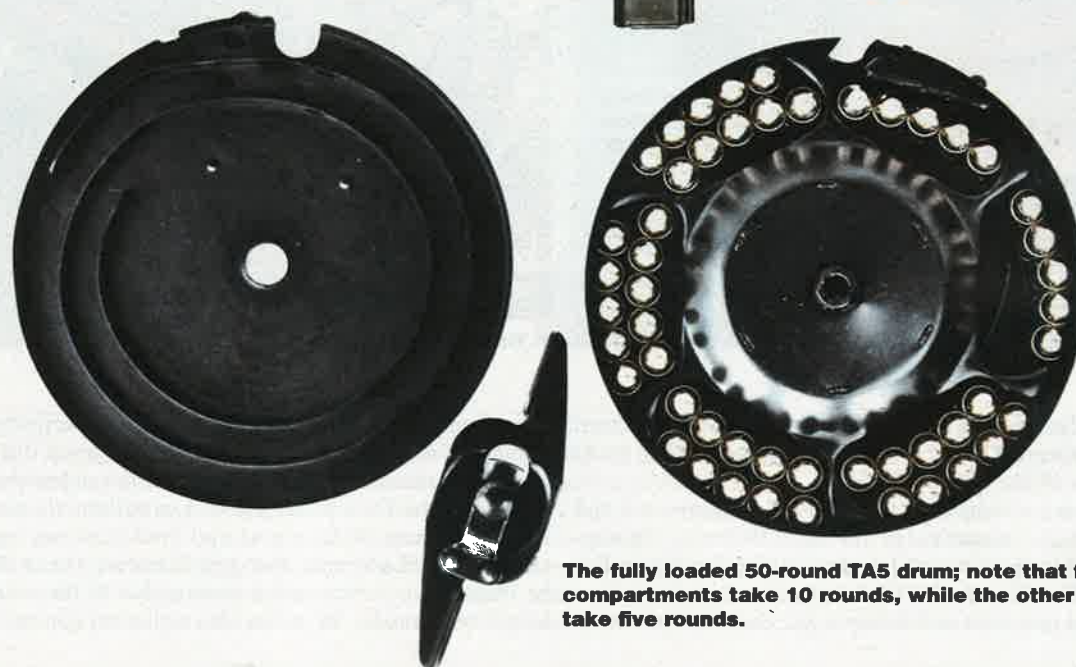




**The A-O Thompson TA5, at bottom, shown in comparison to an M1928 Thompson SMG.**



**The Thompson M1928 SMG, at top, has its stock removed to offer a size comparison with the A-O Thompson TA5. Note that the SMG has the Cutts Compensator.**



**The fully loaded 50-round TA5 drum; note that four compartments take 10 rounds, while the other two take five rounds.**

it forward against a sling mounted onto the sling swivel at the rear of the receiver.

My next preliminary task was to load a drum magazine so I would have it ready at the range. After removing the magazine key and lifting off the magazine cover, cartridges must be inserted bullet-up in the compartments of the magazine base. Four compartments will each get 10 rounds, and two will each get five rounds. The final and most difficult step is pressing the magazine cover back in place and re-attaching the magazine key. Re-attaching the key can take some effort. While pressing down hard on the cover, the key must be pushed back in place. Auto-Ordnance offers a 100-round drum, but I felt that for purposes of testing a semi-auto "pistol," the weight of the 50-round drum would suffice.

A friend who owns a couple of registered Thompson SMGs brought one of his weapons along so we could shoot both. One of the things we immediately noticed when we tried military surplus 20- or 30-round stick magazines in the TA5 was that they would not lock in place. An examination showed that the holes in the back of the magazines to lock them in place differed in size— $5/16"$  for the military surplus mag and  $3/8"$  for the Auto-Ordnance mag. Less expensive surplus magazines can be used if the hole were opened up slightly and this was done for semi-auto Thompsons in the 1970s until about the time that Kahr Arms bought Auto-Ordnance.

The other thing that was obvious, since we had an M1928 there for comparison, was that the TA5 combines features of both the 1928 and the military M1 Thompson. The M1928 we had along did not have the vertical fore grip mounted but instead was using the straight forearm, so the difference was not as apparent as it might have been. Both had the cocking handle atop the receiver and both had barrel fins. The M1928 had the Cutts Compensator, while the TA5 did not (Cutts Compensators are available from Kahr Arms for the TA5). M1 and M1A1 Thompsons were not capable of taking drum magazines, but the TA5 will take either drum or stick magazines.

To test reliability and accuracy with the TA5, I brought along two types of 230-grain FMJ ammo—Black Hills and Aquila—and also some of Federal's 165-grain FMJ Guard Dog. My intent was to test accuracy at 25 yards and 50 yards with each type of ammo. I did, but I found when doing the 25-yard tests that my groups were not really that good because I was using a standing rest and either had to stand back too far to get a good sight picture, or get close to the sights and get whacked on the nose by recoil. However, my friend who had brought his Thompson suggested that we try a different method. At 50 yards, we used a seated rest and braced the support hand against the rear of the TA5's receiver, allowing proper use of the rear sights. The peep sight was entirely usable at 50 yards. Our 50-yard groups, as a result, were better than the 25-yard groups fired using the other method. Accuracy was especially good with the Black Hills and Federal loads.

One thing we noticed in shooting the TA5 was that it was quite difficult to pull the cocking handle back all the way to chamber a round. Both of us work out and are in good shape. Nevertheless, we both had great difficulty in pulling the cocking handle all the way to the rear. We surmised that the heavy spring might have been employed to keep the bolt from beating up the aluminum receiver. I checked some websites and found dozens who commented about the difficulty pulling back the bolt on Auto-Ordnance Thompson carbines. The fix suggested on the website was a spring kit from Tommygunner.com.

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## Supplement to Thompson Semi-Auto Owners Manual Care and Loading of 100 round (C-Type) Drum Magazine

**WARNING:** It is very important to keep drum magazines free from grease or oil on the inside.  
Use only 230 grain factory loaded hardball .45 ACP ammunition.

1. While lifting the magazine key spring, slide the magazine key off the rotor shaft and magazine cover. Remove cover from magazine base.
2. Place 230 grain hardball .45 ACP ammo with the nose of the bullets pointing up starting at the 12 o'clock position and loading the sections counter-clockwise. Fill each section complete; do not skip any section, and do not fill beyond the spiral track or the looped end of the track. Load 16 sections with 6 rounds each, then load one cartridge in each of the four fingers immediately preceding mouth of the magazine to obtain 100 round capacity.

**SAFETY WARNING:** Where looped end of the bullet guide ends, do not load in this area as jams will occur when the rotor turns, resulting in possible injury or death.

3. When the drum is fully loaded, replace the cover and magazine key. The cuts in the rotor shaft need to be aligned with the magazine key; while exerting downward pressure on the cover, slide the key fully onto the rotor shaft. For the C-Type 100 round drum, wind the key 15 clicks as stated on the magazine cover.

Continue with section 4, page 13 of the Thompson manual with additional safety warnings and the rest of the loading procedure.

*Thompson*®

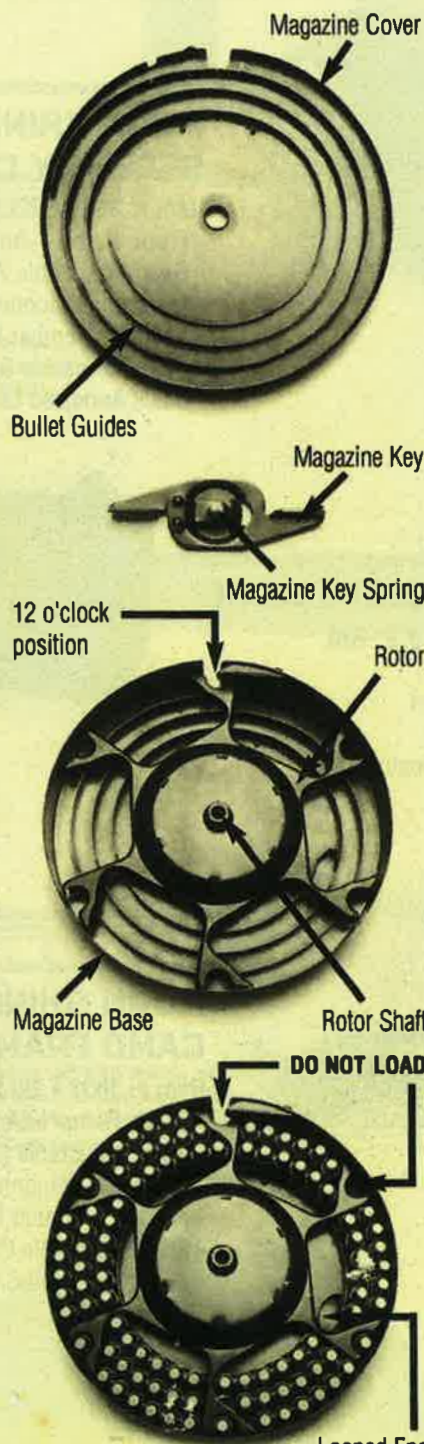
C-Type Thompson Drum fully loaded (100 rounds)

### Instructions for the 50-round drum.

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If you ever get a chance to examine the earlier A-5 model, you will notice a considerably larger charging handle instead of the small SMG-style one currently used on the TA5. Perhaps Kahr Arms should offer these older ones as an option.

Though some features of the TA5 have been around since the 1920s, they are still quite usable. The safety lever may be easily rotated with the thumb of the shooting hand, and the magazine-release lever may be operated by the thumb of the support hand while withdrawing a magazine.



Comparison between an original military surplus Thompson SMG stick mag, at left, and an A-O stick mag, at right. The smaller hole for locking the magazine in place on the surplus mag prevents it from working in the TA5.



The TA5's top cocking handle; note the slot to allow seeing the front sight through the cocking handle.

The cocking handle is notched so that the front sight may be seen through it. I've actually found that this helps draw my eye to the front sight when acquiring a target.

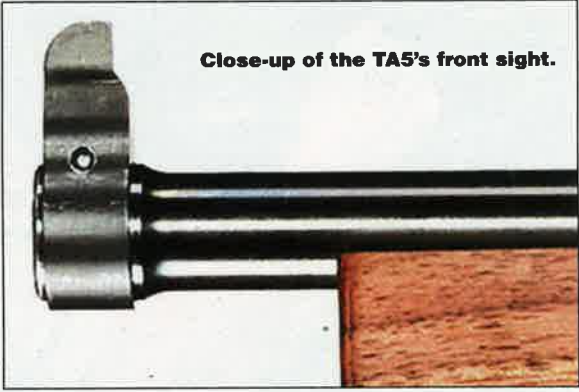
All shooting from the bench had been carried out using 20-round stick magazines. I also wanted to try shooting the TA5 using a single-point sling and pushing forward to get stability, in effect making offhand shooting more stable. Using a stick magazine at 10 yards on a silhouette target, this technique worked fairly well, though my shots were impacting to the left. Presumably, this was a result of the way I was pushing forward against the sling. Still, with practice, it would be a viable way to shoot the TA5. I would note, though, the single-point was designed for use with a stocked M4, so I had trouble getting the sling adjusted right for the TA5 pistol.

My final test was going to be hip firing using the drum magazine. I would suggest anyone not familiar with mounting a Thompson drum read the instruction manual that comes with the TA5. First, the bolt must be locked back (something much easier to do with an open-bolt full-auto 1921 or 1928 Thompson) and the safety applied. The drum is then slid into its receiver slots from

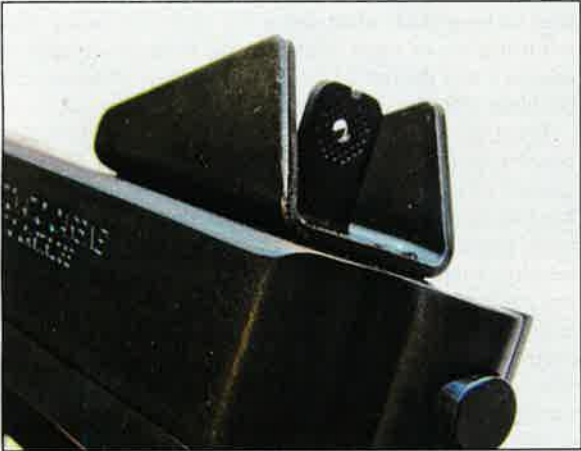




The TA5's forearm.



Close-up of the TA5's front sight.



The TA-5's rear peep sight and protective "ears."

the left side. The operation took some effort, at least partially because the fit was tight. The manual states that the drum and slots will need to wear in. Based on using drums in other Thompsons, I have found this to be the case. Removing the drum from the TA5 was quite an operation and took two of us. The bolt locks back on an empty stick magazine but not on an empty drum, so to remove the drum, it is first necessary to lock the bolt back. This is a relatively easy process on a Thompson SMG, which is an open-bolt gun, but on the semi-auto, closed-bolt TA5, with its heavy bolt spring, it is even more difficult. In fact, a device called a "Third Hand" is included. To assist in locking back the bolt, it is inserted into the stick magazine rails to push up the trip lever.

Although shooting a Thompson—whether an SMG, semi-auto Auto-Ordnance carbine, or the TA5—with the drum is fun, it should be apparent why military Thompsons used the far simpler stick magazines to allow quick changes in combat.

I decided to shoot the TA5 with the 50-round drum in place from the hip on one of the Threat Down "bleeding terrorist" targets. My feeling was that I should have at least basic competency using the hip-shooting technique. I had been friends with Rex Applegate, and once at an NRA show many years ago, he worked with me on proper hip-shooting technique. Not only that, but I've done three books on W. E. Fairbairn!

However, my hip shooting has always been with a stocked weapon. I was used to pulling the stock in against my side as I crouched and leaned into the gun. With the



Thompson found this method of firing the TA5 at 50 yards offered stability and kept the receiver from hitting him in the nose.

SHOOTING TEST	
AUTO-ORDNANCE THOMPSON TA5	
50 Yards, Five Shots	
Federal Guard Dog 165-grain Expanding FMJ	3½"
Black Hills 230-grain FMJ	3¼"
Aguila 230-grain FMJ	4½"



50-yard 3" group fired with Federal 185-grain Guard Dog.

50-yard 3¼" group fired with Black Hills 230-grain FMJ.





The cocking handle of the TA5 is difficult to operate; the tensed muscles of Thompson's forearm indicate how much strength it takes to fully cock the pistol.



Close-up showing the TA5's magazine release and safety/selector.



Switching the TA5's safety from safe to fire.



To remove the magazine, the lever must be pushed up while pulling the magazine down; the lever also has to be pushed up when inserting a magazine.

TA5, I could crouch and lean into the gun, but couldn't pull it into my side, as it had to be thrust forward. Instead, I pulled the elbow of my shooting arm in tight against my side to get the most stable firing position possible. Shooting at seven yards, I then looked where I wanted to hit on the target and fired my first couple of rounds to see where I was hitting, then adjusted my point of aim and started firing quickly.

I didn't count my hits on the target, but know at least a few of the 50 rounds impacted the berm to the side of the target. Most hit in the torso/head area of the target, as identified by the red and blue splotches (for the lungs), as well as the non-seeping holes. I had four instances of the bolt locking back when using the 50-round drum, thus requiring me to exert effort to pull back far enough to release it and get the TA5 back into action. I had no such problem with the stick magazines.

Because of the aluminum receiver and the nicely shaped pistol grip, the TA5 is surprisingly handy for a 23.3-inch overall pistol based on an SMG. Though handy, it is hard to figure out how best to shoot the TA5. For me, at least, shooting it past 10 or 15 yards with any accuracy requires some type of rest. Trigger pull is acceptable, if not great. Hip shooting or by pushing forward against a sling offers possibility for fast close-range work but will require quite a bit of practice to master the technique. The biggest problem remains the difficulty in pulling the cocking handle all the way to the rear.

My friend who shot the TA5 with me speculated that an arm brace that resembled a Thompson stock might be offered for the TA5, thus making it far easier to use. Auto-Ordnance also offers an SBR version of the Thompson with a 10.5-inch barrel that would be easier to shoot but would also require registration and the \$200 tax.

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Thompson firing the TA5 by pushing it forward against a single-point sling.



Target shot using the TA5 while pushing against the sling; note the tension exerted on the pistol by the sling was causing it to shoot left.





Normally, the stock of a Thompson would be pulled against the side/hip when using this firing position, but with the TA5, the elbow is braced against the side to gain some stability.



Firing the TA5 from the hip, though without a stock, it didn't really touch the hip.



Threat down target after receiving a drum magazine from the TA5.



Firearms News Editor Vincent DeNiro, a previous owner of Thompson full-autos back in the 1980s, and current owner of the earlier A5 "pistol" model since 1980, was confident enough in the design to try some Federal Premium +P 230-grain HST hollow points. The increase in power is seen here with the TA5 in full recoil. Handgun hunting is a definite possibility. (Folding shooting bench is by KnotholeDesigns.com)



DeNiro stated that consistent hits on 12"x20" torso targets from ShootSteel.com at 45 yards were easy. The 10-round magazine is perfect for bench shooting.

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The TA5, if used as a house gun, offers the stopping power of the .45 ACP cartridge in a large pistol that takes a 20-round magazine, but if it were kept with a loaded magazine and the bolt closed on an empty chamber, I would not want to try to rack that bolt in the middle of the night under stress.

Finding the niche for the TA5 will be the task for most shooters who purchase one. That niche might just be that it's fun and looks retro tactical. I would think for most shooters, though, who want a retro Thompson, one of the Auto-Ordnance 1927-A1 or M1 semi-auto carbines will be more practical. **FN**

### AUTO-ORDNANCE THOMPSON TA5 PISTOL

**Action:** Semi-Auto, Closed Bolt

**Caliber:** .45 ACP

**Overall Length:** 23.3"

**Barrel Length:** 10.5"

**Weight:** 5 lbs. 14.5 oz.

**Magazine Capacity:** 10-, 20-, or 30-round Stick Magazine, 50- or 100-round Drum Magazine

**Sights:** Rear—Protected Peep  
Front—Blade

**MSRP:** TA5 with 10rd drum magazine (50rd blocked to 10rds) \$1,362  
TA5 with 50rd drum magazine \$1,460  
TA5 with 100rd drum magazine \$1,638

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE TA5 OR OTHER PRODUCTS MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE GO TO:

<https://www.auto-ordnance.com/thompson-pistol/>

<http://tommygunner.com/>

[https://www.federalpremium.com/products/brands/guard\\_dog.aspx](https://www.federalpremium.com/products/brands/guard_dog.aspx)

<http://www.black-hills.com/shop/new-pistol-ammo/45-acp/>

<https://www.aguilaammo.com/centerfire/>

<https://www.triumph-systems.com/>