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BY  
GARRY  
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# THE TERRIFIC T



**S**ELDOM DOES one firearm define an entire era—even the Wild West required the Colt Single Action *and* the Winchester 73—but such is the case with the Thompson submachine gun. Known variously as the “Tommy Gun,” “Chicago Typewriter” and “Trench Broom,” along with hip flasks and raccoon coats this iconic SMG came to personify the Roaring ’20s.

But it didn’t stop there. The Thompson went on to help win World War II, evolve into a highly prized collector’s item and, in the guise of a semiauto now purveyed by Auto-Ordndance, a semiauto for the general public. This is one of the most fascinating firearms in history. It would be

doing it a gross injustice not to give some of its background before we look at the current offerings.

We should note that the lineage, usage and development of the Thompson is nothing less than Byzantine, so in the limited space available, we’ll only be able to touch on the highlights. For those who would like to delve into more detail, there are a number of fine books on the subject available.

#### A BIT OF HISTORY

First introduced in 1919, the Thompson, originally known as The Annihilator, has been produced in various guises and by different companies virtually since its

inception. It was by no means the first submachine gun—a term coined by the Thompson’s inventor, Brigadier Gen. John Taliaferro Thompson, to denote an automatic carbine that fired pistol cartridges. That distinction goes to Italy’s Villar Perosa, which first appeared in 1915. Germany’s Bergmann MP18 was the first really practical SMG to see service, but as it was introduced late in World War I, it was still something of a Johnny-come-lately.

At the same time Theodor Bergman and Hugo Schmeisser were working on the Maschinenpistole 18/I, Thompson was developing his own concept of a war-winning device. Conceptualizing an arm using the



# HOMPSON

AUTO-ORDNANCE  
OFFERS A FULL-RANGE  
OF CLASSIC SEMIAUTO  
“CHICAGO TYPEWRITERS”  
THAT WILL GLADDEN  
THE HEART OF ANY  
WOULD-BE G-MAN.

Carrying on the legend: Auto-Ordnance's Model T1B50D with 50-round drum, cooling fins and Cutts compensator (left) and TM1 with 30-round stick magazine (right).



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ANSCHUETZ

idea of designer John Blish who patented a device involving the principle whereby two different metals adhere to one another under high pressure but will move against one another when that pressure subsides, Thompson obtained backing and formed the Auto-Ordnance Company in 1916. A year or so later the firm's designers came up with a relatively simple mechanism with an action that employed friction-delayed blowback.

As the U.S. M1911 pistol chambered .45 ACP ammunition, that was the natural round for the Annihilator and the one for which it was chambered—though it is

said that some prototypes were also made in other calibers. With its 10½-inch barrel, relatively compact dimensions (early Annihilators had no buttstocks, only front and rear handgrips) and large-capacity magazine, Thompson envisioned his brainchild as the ideal arm with which to clear trenches. Cyclic rate was some 1,000 RPM. But before early versions could be delivered to the front, the war ended.

The company now found itself with a fine arm and no place to sell it. Obviously, a new marketing strategy was needed. The U.S. government's interest in the piece was tepid, so it was promoted as an ideal arm for police departments and other

government agencies.

The M1921 Thompson looked somewhat like its predecessor, but now had a buttstock. It could be fitted with either a 20-round “Type XX” stick magazine, 50-round “L” drum or 100-round “C” drum. While the M21 was an excellent design, its price tag of more than \$200 per unit was a bit daunting for many agencies.

Interestingly enough, some M1921s were purchased by the Irish Republic for use in the revolution, but about two-thirds were seized by American authorities before they could be shipped. Still, 158 made their way to the rebels, and they were used in the last days of the Irish Civil War.





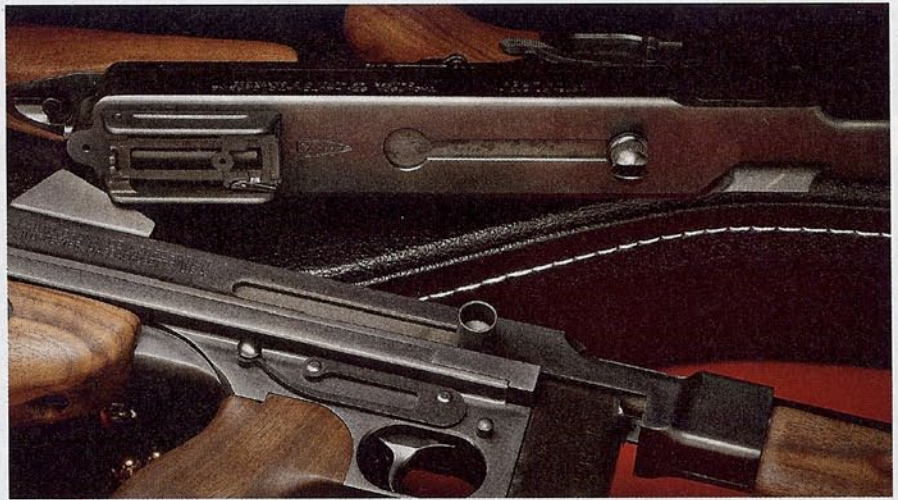
**The Thompson Submachine Gun**  
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This ideal weapon for the protection of large estates, ranches, plantations, etc. A combination machine gun and semiautomatic shoulder rifle in the form of a pistol. A compact, extremely powerful, yet simply operated machine gun weighing only seven pounds and having only three parts. Full automatic, fired from the hip, 1,500 shots per minute. Semiautomatic, fired with a stock and fired from the shoulder, 50 shots per minute. Magazine hold 50 and 100 cartridges.

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Auto-Ordnance advertisement, 1920-21. (T. H. Eickhoff)



This early ad (left) touted the Thompson as ideal protection for "large estates, ranches, plantations, etc."

The top-mounted bolt handle of the T1B50D (top) is grooved to allow the use of the sights. With the side-mounted bolt handle of the TM1 (above), that's not a problem.

As well, the M1921 became popular with desperados and gangsters, and was the model that first caught the public's attention. At this time it was possible for anyone to purchase a Tommy Gun, as it was soon nicknamed, over the counter. In fact, it was touted as an ideal protection for "large estates, ranches, plantations, etc." One advertisement of the period showing a wooly-chapped cowpoke fending off rustlers with his Thompson.

In 1923 another model was introduced that chambered a more powerful .45 Remington-Thompson round, but this also failed to generate healthy sales. Three years later, the M1927 semiauto Thompson hit the market, again with moderate interest. It could easily be converted back to full auto, which a number of them

ultimately were, today making unaltered M1927s highly valued collectors' pieces.

Though limited numbers of Thompsons were used early on by some governmental agencies, such as the U.S. Postal Service, and by the military, it really wasn't until the introduction of the M1928, which had a slower cyclic rate, that the U.S. started buying Thompsons in substantial numbers, most notably for the Navy and Marines. It was with the M1928 that America entered World War II, though large numbers also saw use in China and with British and Soviet forces, among others.

Of course, to the general public, the Thompson is *the* gangster gun. Promoted by Hollywood and used by such underworld figures as John Dillinger, George

"Machine Gun" Kelley and Baby Face Nelson, it achieved perhaps its greatest notoriety as a major player in the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre, in which some of Al Capone's minions mowed down members of Bugs Moran's gang with Tommy guns and shotguns in a Chicago garage.

Original production of early Thompsons was undertaken by Colt and during WWII by Auto-Ordnance and Savage, but some guns were ultimately made by others, including Britain's Birmingham Small Arms Co.

With the onset of the war, the M1928 was modified here and there with such things as a horizontal fore-end (to replace the vertical fore-end grip) and the elimination of the adjustable rear sight in favor of a fixed one.

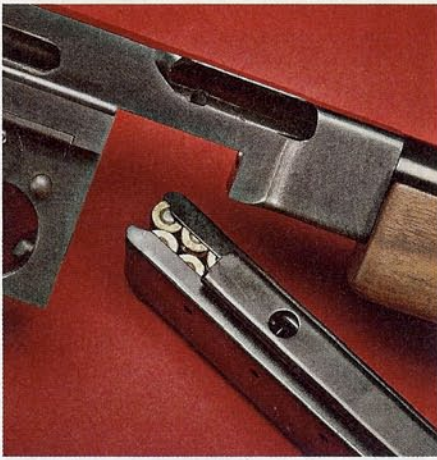
There is no question that in any form, the early Thompsons were precision pieces of machinery and costly to manufacture. It was decided that the thing to do was simplify the gun as much as possible, and in 1943 the M1 appeared. The Blish system was eliminated in favor of a straight blowback mechanism. Sights



The 50-round drum of the Model T1B50D, carries on the iconic look of earlier drum-fed models favored by such disparate and legendary figures as Sir Winston Churchill and John Dillinger.







The stick magazine—shown here on the Auto-Ordnance TM1 (left)—was eventually deemed superior for military use. A GI (above) shows a couple of French Resistance fighters how to lock one into place.

were reduced to fixed, sheetmetal apertures. The Cutts compensator, introduced as early as 1926, was eliminated, and the operating knob was moved from the top of the receiver to the right side. The original blue finish was eschewed in favor of Parkerizing, and the gun was built to only take the stick magazine due to complaints that the drums were heavy and difficult to manipulate. Magazine capacity was upped from 20 to 30 rounds. The M1 could be produced faster and considerably cheaper than the M1928. Later the M1A1 came out, the major difference between it and the M1 being that the bolt had a fixed—rather than a floating—firing pin.

Though the bare-bones M3 SMG, known as the “Grease Gun,” was introduced late in the war (cost of production was about \$12 each), it would never come close to achieving the distribution of the Thompson during WWII. Huge stocks of Thompsons remained in arsenals worldwide following the war and saw use all over the globe in Europe, Asia and Africa as late as Vietnam and even beyond.

The large quantity of Thompsons extant, coupled with the development of better, more inexpensive SMGs, resulted in the assets of Auto-Ordnance being sold to Numrich Arms in the 1950s, which built Thompsons for law enforcement out of the parts that came with the deal and in 1974 began producing semiautos for general sale. In 1999 the company was again sold, this time to Kahr Arms. After Auto-Ordnance was acquired by Kahr, it began offering Government Model 1911 pistols, extremely nice copies of the U.S. .30 M1 Carbine and, of course, the company's staple product, the Thompson.

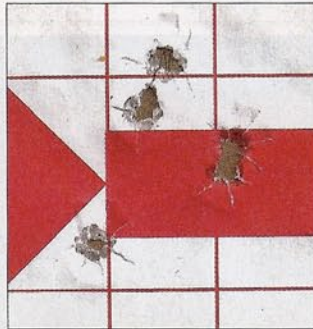
Though the line consists of two basic models, the 1927 and the M1, Kahr/A-O has taken those two platforms and come up with a wide selection of variations—everything from standard 1927s with several magazine options to Annihilator-style pistols (sans buttstocks). There are models

with lightweight aluminum receivers and even a Parkerized 1927 in a black-finished stock “Commando” version. To comply with federal law, the carbine versions have 16½-inch barrels, but other than that are ringers for the originals. For the purist who lives in an enlightened state and wishes to spend the extra money and go to the bother of arranging for proper paperwork, semiauto Thompsons—both 1927 and M1 styles—can also be had with the proper 10½-inch barrels.

## AT THE RANGE

For our evaluation we took a look at a trio of Kahr/A-O Thompsons. Two were incarnations of the standard 1927, one with a fixed stock (Model T150D) and the other with a removable butt (T1B50D). Both came with 30-round stick mags and 50-round drums. The other was the basic M1 (TM1) with a 30-round box mag.

The M1927s were virtually identical, with the exception of the detachable stock. Sights were a ladder-style with both notch and peep, adjustable for elevation. As the gun has a top-mounted bolt handle, the knob has a deep groove down its center to allow one to see the front sight. The safety is mounted on the left side and rotates through a 180-degree arc—forward for Fire, to the rear for Safe. The barrels are complete with Cutts compensators, cooling fins and a nonadjustable blade front sight perched atop the Cutts. The straight blowback action fires from a closed bolt and is entirely different from that of its full-auto progenitor. The magazine release is a generous lever mounted on the left side of the action above the triggerguard. Both guns had beautifully figured walnut stocks, including front and



The author fires his T150D with both the 50-round drum and the 30-round stick. His best rested 50-yard group with Federal Match 230-grain hardball measured just under two inches.



## THE TERRIFIC THOMPSON

rear pistol grips. Weight, sans magazine, is 9½ pounds. Depending upon which mag is fitted, the total heft can be upped by another four pounds or so.

The M1, as per original specs, was pretty bare-bones. Parkerized, it had a vertical fore-end, no Cutts Compensator, side-mounted bolt handle and fixed peep rear sight. It cannot accept a drum magazine. Controls are basically the same as those on the 1927.

For our shooting evaluation, we took out the Model T150D along with a selection of 230-grain .45 ACP hardball, the only ammunition recommended for use in the Thompsons. Brands were Black Hills, Federal Match and American Eagle.

Let there be no doubt about it, the recoil spring in this carbine is one serious hunk o'coiled steel and requires considerable force to manually cock the gun for the first shot. To insert a mag, pull the bolt to the rear and lock it in that position via a trip lever sited inside the rear of the magazine channel. To help push this component into place, the Thompson is furnished with a "third hand" consisting of a piece of machined steel, which is inserted in the channel and more easily manipulated for this purpose than fiddling with the trip lever itself. It is then



The Thompson was never inexpensive to make. Its WWII successor, the M3 "Grease Gun," was.

removed and the drum magazine pushed in from the left side of the receiver or the stick mag clicked into position vertically. The latter is much easier to manage than the former, as original Thompson users discovered a few decades ago.

The bolt is then pulled to the rear and allowed to move forward and strip off the first round. Trigger pull on our piece was a bit creepy, but totally manageable, and didn't exhibit any stacking. Coming in at



Field-expedient: This GI taped two mags together to facilitate reloading his M1A1.

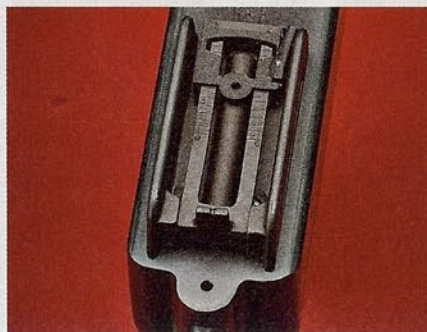
7½ pounds, it allowed us, after a bit of rear sight adjustment, to get excellent rested 50-yard groups, slightly to the right. Best performance was with the Federal Match, which averaged 2¾ inches including a "best of" five-shot cluster of 1¾ inches. As might be expected, recoil was zilch.

Rapid-firing with the drum maga-





The cooling fins and vertical fore-end grip shown here on today's deluxe T150D were eventually phased out on later WWII models.



An excellent ladder-style aperture sight on the T150D was used on the M1928 (top) before it was superseded by a simpler "L-type" rear.

zine was perfect. Not one glitch in two 50-round strings. Loading the drum is pretty simple. You merely pop off the magazine key, lift off the mag cover and, starting at the 12 o'clock position, insert cartridges into the rotor sections until it's full. The cover and key are then replaced and the spring wound nine to 11 clicks. For the Thompsonite who wants his carbine to look right but who is afflicted with living in a place where magazine capacity is limited to 10 rounds, Auto-Ordnance offers 10-round stick and drum mags.

Accessories for the Thompsons abound—including copies of the gangster-style violin case and FBI hardcase.

I've got to admit, this was a fun shooting session. Of course, it is tempting to say the gun would make a great home defense piece, but let's face it, there are



Inventor John Taliaferro Thompson hoists the original stock-less Annihilator.

a lot more practical firearms for that purpose on the market. No, the "Chicago Typewriter" is simply for those who want to own as close to the real thing without getting into the low- to mid-five-figure bracket one would have to shell out for an original period piece. To that end, it more than fulfills its mission.

Auto-Ordnance catalog offers almost a score of Thompson variants for purchase. For more details, check out [www.auto-ordnance.com](http://www.auto-ordnance.com). **GA**