

# WE SHOOT THE MILLION \$\$ LUGER

**I**n the film *Wall Street*, entrepreneur Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) takes his rival (Terence Stamp) on a tour of his mansion, to include his gun collection, where he reaches into the glass case, removes a handgun and says, "Rarest piston in the world—the .45 Luger."

Well, as far as rarity goes, the .45 Luger is no scarcer than any other unique handgun. But when it comes to value and desirability, it's in a class by itself with a mystique so considerable that even Hollywood acknowledges it. The .45's current possessor, Michael Zomber, values the piece at in excess of \$1,000,000, and despite many serious overtures by collectors, it's not for sale.

To be sure, the Parabellum has

**Guns & Ammo fires the .45 Luger...  
"the most valuable auto pistol  
in the world!"**

**By Garry James**

COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN LEE





*The .45 Luger is the behemoth of the clan. Only two were ever made for the U.S. service pistol trials in 1907, and just this gun remains. It is unquestionably the world's most valuable auto pistol.*



Lugers sent over for the trials. Gun number "1" was the actual test pistol, while number "2" was held in reserve. Both autos were made under the personal supervision of Herr Luger and were stamped on the rear of their toggles with the initials "GL." Otherwise they were unmarked.

Gun number 1 was given a grueling run-through by Ordnance officials; and as it has not been found, it can be surmised that it was probably broken down



*The only marking on the gun was a "GL" on the rear of the toggle. This stood for Georg Luger, who personally supervised the construction of the .45 test pieces.*

always been a hot item, from the time Doughboys brought them back from the Great War as cherished battle trophies to the current interest in recreating various rare models. But just what makes the .45 Luger the most valuable pistol in the world in private hands?

I can remember that when I first became interested in firearms there was a special aura about the guns that featured in the 1907 U.S. Army service pistol trials. While there were many interesting entrants, for some reason the product of Georg Luger received the most acclaim. As noted above, the toggle-top has always been a popular auto pistol, and as far as aesthetics, workmanship and popularity with the military and civilians there can be no doubt that it ranks right at the top of the list. In his landmark work *Lugers at Random*, author Charles Kenyon, Jr., goes so far as to say, "The rarity and historical importance of this pistol to collectors makes it literally priceless."

Actually there were two .45-caliber

*The .45 Luger (top) is a slightly scaled-up version of the standard pistol. It is shown here compared to a 7.65mm Model 1900 American Eagle model similar to the guns that were tested by the U.S. government at the turn of the century.*



*The only target fired (above) with the gun produced a 2 3/4-inch group with one four-shot cluster going into 1 1/2 inches. The gun shot about six inches high.*

*A field strip of the .45 Luger shows that there was virtually no difference (other than size and attendant slight configuration changes) between the .45 Luger and the company's regular product.*



and discarded after the competition.

Despite a pretty good showing in '07, the piece was finally eliminated from consideration and a memorandum from the board of officers to the assistant secretary of war stated, "The Luger automatic pistol, although it possesses manifest advantages in many particulars, is not recommended for a service test because its certainty of action, even with the Luger ammunition, is not considered satisfactory because the final seating of the cartridge is not by positive spring action, and because the powder stated by Mr. Luger to be necessary for its satisfactory use is not now obtainable in this country."

Gun number 2, on the other hand, survived in pristine condition and has



# MILLION\$\$ LUGER

been resting in a prominent East Coast collection (not Gordon Gekko's) for over half a century—until it was purchased, along with several other unique .45 auto pistols by The Michael Zomber Company of Culver City, California, late in 1993.

When Mike told me he actually had the .45 Luger in his possession, the first words out of my mouth were, "When can I see it?" He surprised me by countering, "You can see it anytime you want, but how would you like to shoot it? I think your readers might get a kick out of an article about firing the most valuable auto pistol in the world."

Once I regained my composure, I eagerly accepted but insisted that ammo be properly loaded as per the rounds furnished with the test guns in 1907. I also asked Mike to have the pistol gone over by a competent gunsmith so we both would feel comfortable that it was serviceable and in good shape to handle a couple of magazines full of .45 ACP.

*Despite the gun's larger size, the controls remained eminently manageable, to include the magazine release button.*



*One of the unique features of the "Million Dollar" Luger was its curiously crooked trigger. This was probably done to produce a more comfortable purchase due to the gun's slightly larger grip size.*



Gun Number 1, along with the other contestants, was also subjected to varying conditions like sand, dust and saltwater.

I chose to let discretion be the better

part of valor and have loads made similar to those actually supplied by Luger, which averaged around 760 feet per second (fps) with a 230-grain bullet. As a comparison, the ammo by Frankford Arsenal ran in the 810-fps range.

I discussed the shoot with Jeff Hoffman at Black Hills Ammunition Company, who soon became as intrigued with the project as I was and assured me that he'd have no trouble

*continued on page 90*



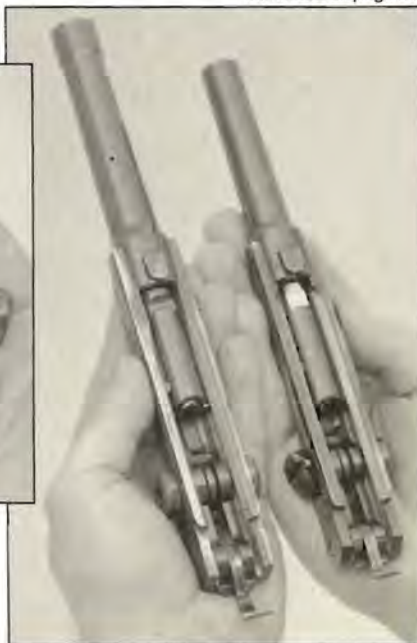
*The gun functioned perfectly, and like other Lugers the toggle remained open after the last round. Recoil was light, controllability and target acquisition excellent and functioning just about perfect.*

*As can be readily seen, the bolt and toggle setup on the .45 was considerably beefier than that of the 7.65mm Model 1900 American Eagle Luger. The faulty recoil spring guide can be seen protruding from the rear of the .45's bolt. This was repaired prior to the test.*



He agreed and we both set forth on our tasks. After some research I found that the evaluation Parabellum was actually fired with different ammo loads supplied both by Luger and the U.S. officials.

*The .45's barrel was slightly longer than that of the standard Luger of the period. From this comparison of upper receivers, the larger scaling is very evident.*





# MILLION\$\$ LUGER

continued from page 32

in duplicating the 1907 German specs.

We compared the .45 to a Model 1900 American Eagle Parabellum (the U.S. had actually considered the "Luger" as a service arm as early as 1901, when it tested some 1,000 of these guns in 7.65mm) and found that it was definitely beefier, as befitted the heavier caliber. The barrel measured some five inches long as compared to the 1900's 4¾-inch tube, and the .45 weighed some two pounds, eight ounces—11 ounces more than its precursor. For the most part, the .45 looked pretty much like a standard Parabellum, although the shape of the trigger was unique in that its curve is somewhat exaggerated toward the bottom, presumably to give a better purchase because of the slightly larger grips. Sights were your standard sharp blade front and non-adjustable notch rear, which was milled into the back of the toggle. A comparison of the innards of the two guns showed that, for the most part, the larger pistol employed the same basic Luger mechanism—scaled up, of course. Grips were checkered walnut and the safety setup included a grip safety and standard Luger catch on the rear left of the frame.

In the meantime I had stripped the .45 Luger for some photography and noticed that the firing pin recoil spring guide/keeper needed a bit of adjustment, so the gun was sent to gunsmith Chris Allabee for touchup and a going-over. In short order it was declared totally serviceable, and upon the arrival of the Black Hills ammo, we decided to pop a couple of rounds off in a bullet trap to make sure that all would be well for the "extended" shooting session.

I've fired lots of pretty exotic guns in my time, but the satisfying report, light recoil and energetically ejected case from the first round fired from this historic gun in almost a century, was pretty thrilling. The second cartridge chambered perfectly and also fired without a hitch. The next step was to set up a range session to see what it could really do.

We took the "Million Dollar" Luger to the Angeles Range in Tujunga, California, with a couple boxes of the recreated ".45 Luger" ammo put together by Black Hills.

One of the Parabellum's vexing idiosyncrasies was the way one had to load the magazine. The mag was fitted with a

small knurled button, which the shooter had to manually pull down to release tension on the follower and permit insertion of the rounds. As spring tension increased, the pressure and discomfort on one's thumb intensified proportionately. This was eventually rectified by the invention of a special loading/takedown tool that could be slipped over the button and which gave the thumb a little better purchase. Unfortunately there was no such device available for the .45.

The mag was then inserted into the well and a round chambered by pulling back on the toggle. This, too, was accomplished without a hitch. The first round was touched off from a rest at 25 yards. Letoff was crisp (we measured it later at just over four pounds) and recoil was very light, owing in equal parts to the weight and excellent design of the gun and the fairly light load we were employing. After a couple of shots it was determined that the gun was firing about six inches high, so we fired the remaining five

rounds offhand to get a feel for the piece and to determine ejection patterns.

Our next five-shot string was fired from the bench, using a six o'clock hold on the bottom of the target paper. The first shot hit in the "X" ring, with the next three clustering around it at a distance of 1½ inches. Unfortunately I spoiled a very good group by pulling the last shot to the left and spread the pattern to 2¾ inches—still not too bad. I am convinced that the gun is capable of consistent 1½ to two-inch groups without much difficulty although, good sport that he is, Mike was getting a bit antsy about putting too many more shots through the piece. Both he and G&A Editor Kevin Steele fired a couple of rounds each through the .45 Luger to satisfy their curiosity, and then the gun was retired from shooting for the day—and probably permanently.

To further solemnify the session, the target was signed by the shooter and the two witnesses. Usually I toss targets out after I have finished writing about them, but this is one that will probably go on a frame on the wall—it is the only group in existence from the most valuable auto pistol in the world, and it is highly unlikely that there will ever be another!

One thing is sure, however—shooting the most valuable auto pistol in the world was a treat that I will never forget. When I left the range you might say I felt like a "million dollars."



**The .45 Luger's magazine holds seven rounds. Like other Parabellums, the magazine loading button (under the left thumb) became a bit difficult to hold onto as the last round was inserted.**

**The "Million Dollar" Luger was fired from a rest at 25 yards using specially loaded Black Hills .45 ACP ammo, which pushed out a 230-grain FMJ at 760 fps.**

