THE SWEDISH m/1887 REVOLVER

By Marc Gorelick

In the early 1880's Sweden lagged behind other European countries in terms of military small arms. Ever since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, Europe was in an arms race, with numerous large and small wars, revolts and rebellions springing up. While Sweden was well served by the Remington Rolling Block rifle, it was beginning to show its age when compared to the new smaller caliber, repeating arms that other countries were adopting. The same is true of Swedish handguns. Sweden was still using the m/1863-71 and the m/1871 both fairly large bore weapons of old fashioned construction. The m/1863-71 was originally a single action Lefaucheux pinfire converted to fire an 11mm centerfire cartridge that retained all the weaknesses of the Lefaucheux design. The m/1871 was a Swedish-Franchotte design based on the Lefaucheux that also fired the same comparatively low powered 11mm cartridge. Both handguns were worn from use, of limited numbers and issuance (officers had to purchase their own sidearms) and obsolete when compared to handguns that other European armies were being equipped with.

Sweden decided to put its house in order in the matter of small arms and to seriously study handguns. It established an arms commission in 1884 with the object of modernizing its weapons and ammunition. One of the results of the commission was to change the caliber of Sweden's Remington Rolling Block rifles from 12.17x42mm to 8x58mm Danish Krag and to introduce the m/1889 rifle. The commission was also tasked with selecting a new double action revolver in a modern caliber. The commission studied the Austrian Gasser-Kropatschek in 9mm, the Belgian Nagant Model 1878, the Norwegian Model 1883 Nagant in 9mm, and the Swiss Schmidt 7.5mm issue revolvers, as well as a Swedish Husqvarna design and a Warnant design in 9mm. No single design met the Swedish requirements although the two favorites were the Norwegian Model 1883 Nagant and the Swiss Schmidt Model 1882 ordnance revolver. The commission concluded that the best design would combine the Nagant design with the 7.5 mm cartridge of the Swiss Schmidt revolver. Thirty revolvers were ordered to be made up for trials and the result was the Nagant designed Revolver m/1887.

Left - Swiss Schmidt M1882 Ordnance Revolver

Right – Austrian Gasser-Kropatschek M1876

Norwegian Model 1883 Nagant Revolver in 9mm, Photo – Forsvarets Museer

After a few minor modifications were made in the design (i.e., the grip was slightly extended and the sights altered), Sweden commissioned the firm of Emile and Leon Nagant of Liege, Belgium to manufacture the m/1887 revolver. Nagant produced and delivered 2,600 revolvers to the Swedish Army in 1887-88. The Swedish Navy adopted the new revolver in 1891, giving it the designation M/1887. Nagant produced and delivered 480 revolvers for the navy in 1891-93. At that time Sweden and Norway were united and were striving for commonality in their arms. The Norwegian Navy adopted the revolver in 1891 and the Norwegian Army adopted it in 1893. Designated as the Model 1887/93, the revolver was issued to all branches of Norway's armed forces and the National Police, and remained in Norwegian service until Germany invaded Norway in1940.

The m/1887 was initially intended only for officers and NCOs. Officers had to purchase their own sidearms for 38 krona each. NCOs were issued revolvers at no cost. However, when Sweden began issuing the revolver to all ranks and branches of the army it realized that it needed many more revolvers than were ordered. At the same time the Swedish government decided it would be strategically wiser and more economical to manufacture the revolvers in Sweden.

Swedish m/1887 made by Nagant

Swedish m/1887 made by Husqvarna. Photo Courtesy of Olof Janson, Gothia Arms Historical Society

In 1897 Husqvarna Vapenfabrik acquired a manufacturing license from Nagant and started manufacturing the revolvers. The first Husqvarna-produced 350 revolvers were delivered to Norway in 1897 and in the following nine years Husqvarna produced 13,619 m/1887 revolvers for the Swedish military, and 465 revolvers for the Norwegian military between 1897 and 1905. Husqvarna also made some for private sales. Although Sweden and Norway were united, Norway purchased the vast majority of its Model 1887-93 revolvers from Nagant in Belgium. According to one source, between 1894 and 1899 Nagant shipped 12,400 revolvers to Norway for the army. In addition, the Norwegian Navy bought some 3000 similar revolvers from Nagant from around 1891 until 1900. The Norwegian revolvers differ from the Swedish only in the shape of the front sight. The Norwegian front sights are rounded and notched being somewhat similar in shape to the Russian Model 1895 front sight while the Swedish front sights are rectangular. The 465 revolvers that Husqvarna produced and shipped to Norway had Swedish type front sights. The Table 1 below shows the yearly Husqvarna production of m/1887 revolvers for the Swedish and Norwegian militaries. Table 2 shows the Nagant production and shipments of M/1887-93 revolvers for the Norwegian Army.

Table 1: HUSQVARNA Production of Swedish m/1887 Revolvers for Swedish & Norwegian Militaries

Year	Number	Notes
1897	350	To Norway
1898	5400	To Sweden
1899	3252	To Sweden
1900	690	To Sweden
1901	238	To Sweden“
1901	115	To Norway
1902	377	To Sweden
1903	3135	To Sweden
1904	144	To Sweden
1905	383	To Sweden
Total	**14084**	

Table 2: NAGANT Production of Norwegian M/1887-93 Revolvers for the Norwegian Army

Shipment	Date Received in Norway	Serial Number Range	Number
1st	6 June 1894	1-2150	2150
2nd	28 Nov. 1894	2151-2900	750
3rd	14 April 1896	2901-4900	2000
4th	20 Dec. 1898	5350-6649	1300
5th	22 June 1899	6650-12249	5600
6th	29 July 1899	12250-12849	600
Total			**12400**

Norwegian Model 1887-93 Nagant. Right side above, left side below. Note the front sight which differs from the Swedish m/1887. Photos courtesy of Poulin Antiques and Auctions.

Soon after the m/1887 was adopted a weakness was discovered in its design. The cylinder could be turned while the hammer was down, potentially putting the gun out of battery. In 1888 Swedish Lieutenant T.F. Törnell patented an improvement using additional cylinder notches to ensure positive lockup to block the cylinder from turning with the hammer down. The Swedish government approved the improvement in 1893 but it was never formally adopted and only a few weapons were equipped with Törnell's improvement.

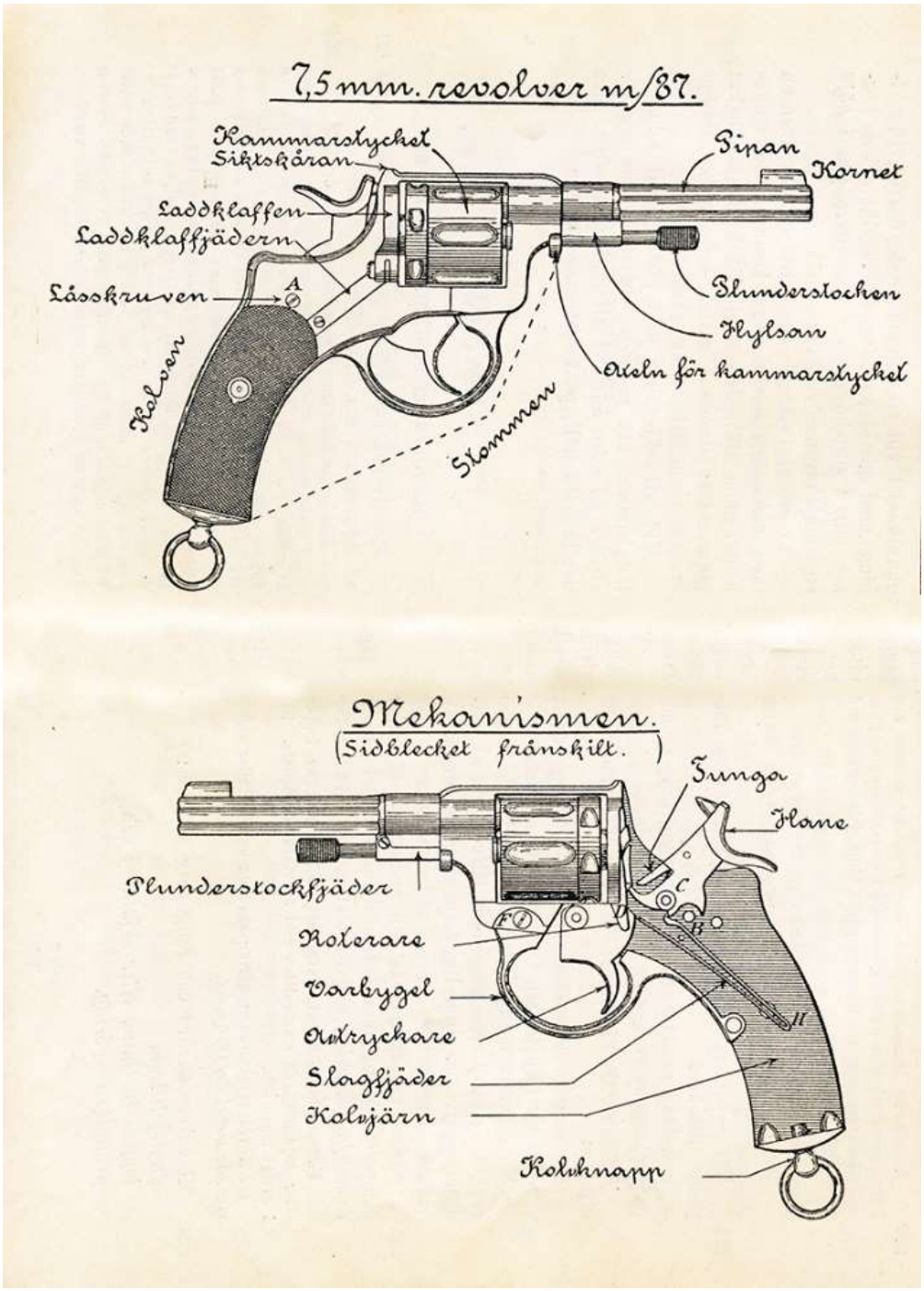

Diagram of m/1887 from Swedish manual.
Image courtesy of Olof Janson, Gothia Arms Historical Society

The Swedish Army m/1887 and Navy M/1887, and the Norwegian M/1887-93, is a 6-shot double action revolver. There is a side gate on the right side behind the cylinder for loading and unloading. It fired 7.5x22mm ammunition, first the m/87 black powder cartridge and then the m/98 smokeless round. The revolver is 9.33 inches long with a 4.5 inch long, 4 groove, part round, part octagon barrel and it weighs 1.76 pounds unloaded. It was relatively robust, reliable and easy to disassemble for cleaning. Unlike the later M1895 Nagant pattern adopted by Russia, the Swedish m/1887 did not feature a sealed gas system, and lacked a forward moving cylinder.

Each m/1887 was delivered to the army with a holster, a spare cylinder, a cleaning rod and a screwdriver. The officer's holsters at first had loops for 12 cartridges under the flap but this was later reduced to 6 rounds. The enlisted man's holster had loops for 6 rounds. The army holsters were brown and the navy holsters black.

Left – Enlisted man's holster for the m/1887. Photo Forsvarmuseum.
Right – Screwdriver issued with each m/1887 revolver. Photo courtesy of Olof Janson, Gothia Arms Historical Society

The 7.5mm ammunition used by the m/1887 revolver was an improvement over the 11mm ammunition used by the m/1871 and m/1863/79 revolvers. When the m/1887 revolver was adopted it was initially regarded by military personnel, who were accustomed to the heavier 11mm caliber, as using a weak cartridge. The transition from the large, heavy revolvers with 11mm 13.2 gram bullets and with velocities of 394-525 feet per second to a much smaller revolver with a 7.5 mm 103-105 grain bullet performing at 725-787 feet per second was significant. The advantages of the new, smaller and handier revolver with its 7.5mm cartridge were obvious and were soon appreciated by the troops. The effective range was extended from a maximum of about 361 feet with the older 11mm cartridge out to 558 feet the new 7.5mm cartridge. Within the intended range of 100 to 150 feet the 7.5mm cartridge exhibited much better overall ballistics and a flatter trajectory which translated into better accuracy. Target penetration of the higher velocity 7.5mm ammunition was much better than the older ammunition.

The first type 7.5mm Swedish cartridge. Black powder & paper patched bullet.

The new revolver was not only proving to be much more accurate than the m/1871 and m/1863-79 but it was also proving to be much easier to clean. The m/1887 did not suffer as much as the earlier revolvers from firing residue in the mechanism and lead fouling in the bore. And with the 7.5mm ammunition recoil was much milder than the older revolvers.

The original ammunition used in the 1884 trials was made in Switzerland but with the adoption of the new revolver in 1887 production was begun in Sweden at the Marieberg ammunition factory. The original cartridge used black powder and a paper patched lead bullet. Around 1898 a cartridge with smokeless powder and a cupro-nickel jacketed bullet was introduced but soon replaced by another smokeless powder cartridge with a 105 grain waxed lead bullet.

Husqvarna manufactured a small number (138?) of m/1887 revolvers for the civilian trade. These have no army markings and will often have custom grips instead of the regulation checkered grips of the service revolvers. About 20 were sold to managers and employees of Husqvarna. Some revolvers were highly decorated.

Detail of one of five private sale m/1887 revolvers that are reported to have been decorated by master engraver Hasse Svensson. Photo courtesy of Olof Janson, Gothia Arms Historical Society.

Husqvarna manufactured civilian version of the m/1887 with bone or ivory grips. Photo courtesy of Olof Janson, Gothia Arms Historical Society.

The m/1887 remained in Swedish service until 1907 when it was replaced as the primary sidearm by the John Moses Browning designed FN Model 1903 in 9mm Browning Long (Swedish Army designation m/07). During World War 1 the m/1887 was issued to Landstorm army units and during the Second World War it was carried by some home guard units. Many revolvers were purchased by the Swedish National Shooting Organization, the Frivilliga Skytteroreelson (a police organization). From 1954 to 1957 Svenska Metallverken converted a number of m/1887s to fire .32ACP cartridges. These were used until 1989 to fire blanks during training of military and police dogs. In the 1950s, during the Cold War, a Swedish para-military unit called the Verkskyddet was issued refurbished m/1887s for guarding institutions like the post office, railways, power plants, bridges, ferries and major factories. As previously stated, the M/1887-93 remained in Norwegian service as the primary sidearm until 1940 when the country was invaded by Germany.

In 1954 Husqvarna bought back all the revolvers that it could, refurbished them and sold them in Sweden and abroad as military surplus. Many were imported into the United States during the 1950's and 1960's. Back then they were sold for $13.95 to $17.95.

Above Left – Federal Firearms Corp. ad from a 1963 American Rifleman for m/1887 in 7.5mm.
Above right – Federal Firearms Corp ad for m/1887 converted to .22 long rifle.

Occasionally, one will run across a Husqvarna m/1877 that was converted to fire .22 Long Rifle cartridges. The conversion was done by inserting .22 caliber sleeves in the barrel and cylinder chambers. There is a lot of misinformation and confusion about these .22 caliber m/1887s with some people claiming that they are factory conversions and were used by the Swedish army as "trainers" and for target practice. Others say that some were converted in Sweden and some were converted in the United States by importers. Research in in the United States and in Sweden revealed that the Swedish military did not use the .22 caliber conversions as trainers, and only a very few, if any, were factory converted in Sweden. It appears that all, or almost all, of the conversions were done in the U.S. by the Federal Firearms Corporation, and possibly two other importers during the 1950s and 1960s.

To summarize, the Swedish m/1877 revolver was a robust service weapon was an improvement over Sweden's previous revolvers. It was more effective, more robust, more reliable, easier to maintain and more accurate. It served both Sweden and Norway well into the 20th century.