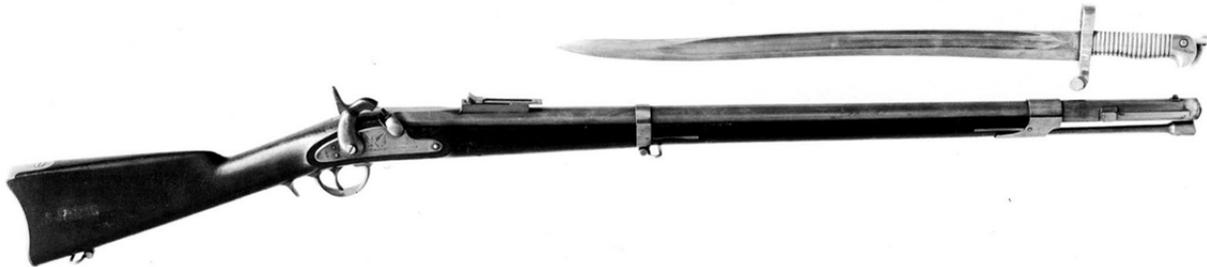


THE NAVY MODEL 1861 PLYMOUTH RIFLE IN WORLD WAR II

Marc Gorelick
Virginia Gun Collectors Association
Potomac Arms Collectors Association

In the years after the Civil War the United States sold thousands of obsolete percussion muzzleloaders to surplus arms dealers. Many of these guns served the nation well during the late conflict. Many went on to serve in foreign wars. What is not generally known is that at least one of these obsolete Civil War weapons served the United States during the Second World War. This firearm is the U.S. Navy Model 1861 Rifle, also known as the Plymouth Rifle.

The Plymouth Rifle was developed by Admiral John Dahlgren during the late 1850's when he was a Commander in the U.S. Navy Ordnance Bureau assigned to the Washington Navy Yard. He is most famous for developing a family of heavy naval ordnance and boat howitzers that served the navy from the 1850's to the 20th century. He designed the Plymouth Rifle to meet the specific requirements and conditions encountered in ship to ship fighting and amphibious operations by naval infantry. The rifle was based on the design of the French Model 1846 Carabine a Tige.



Model 1861 Navy Plymouth Rifle & Sword Bayonet

Photo - West Point Museum

The Model 1861 Navy Plymouth Rifle is a handsome .69 caliber, single shot, percussion muzzleloader. It weighs 9 pounds, 10 ounces. The overall length is 50 inches and it has a 34-inch long bright finished barrel and two spring-fastened barrel bands. It has iron mountings and furniture and a thick steel ramrod with a large cylindrical tip that is pierced by a small hole. All metal is finished bright, or in the white. There is a finger spur on the guard plate behind the trigger guard bow. The rear sling swivel is attached to the bottom of the stock near the buttplate and the front sling swivel is on the bottom of the rear barrel band. It has an oil finished, black walnut stock. The thick barrel has 3-groove rifling and a small iron blade front sight. The barrel has a large bayonet lug on the right side near the muzzle. The large, long-range rear sight leaf is graduated to 1,000 yards range. During the Civil War the Union Navy ordered 10,000 Plymouth Rifles from Eli Whitney.

The Plymouth Rifle served Union Navy well during the Civil War and it continued in U.S. Navy service for several years after the war ended. However, with the advent of breech loading

metallic cartridge firearms it soon became hopelessly obsolete as a military weapon. During the 1870's the navy disposed of most of its Plymouth Rifles. Many were purchased by surplus arms dealers, like Schuyler, Hartley and Graham in New York, who subsequently sold them to the public or to foreign governments. Apparently, the U.S. Government also purchased them in order to fight the Japanese during the Second World War.

Colonel Robert Rankin, in his book, "Small Arms of the Sea Services," recounts the story that during the Second World War the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) purchased several hundred Model 1861 Navy "Plymouth" rifles for distribution to friendly natives in New Guinea and on South Pacific islands. According to Rankin, New Guinea and the islands fell under Australian mandate and Australian law prohibited natives from using breech-loading weapons. Presumably some bright lad sitting behind a desk in Washington believed that the "primitive" natives would not know how to operate breechloaders. Never mind that New Guineans and Pacific Islanders who operated with British and Australian coast watchers were apparently quite proficient with their Lee-Enfield rifles and Sten sub-machine guns.

This story was doubted by some until George Layman, the noted expert on Remington Rolling Blocks, recently confirmed it in an article in the February 2015 edition of Man at Arms magazine. According to Layman, there was a notation in correspondence of the M. Hartley Co., (formerly Schuyler, Hartley and Graham) relating to the story. A company record dated May 25, 1943 stated: "500 U.S. Navy muzzle loading rifles sold to the U.S. Govt. Office of Strategic Services." The OSS was involved in covert operations during World War II, including supplying weapons to resistance groups in Europe, the Pacific and the China Burma India Theater.

Layman further confirmed the Plymouth Rifle story with an anecdote from his personal experience. While a member of the Army Special Forces in 1971 he participated in a mission to the Philippines during which he inspected a cache of weapons that Philippine authorities had seized from HUK guerillas over the years. Layman recounted seeing five or six muzzleloading rifles with two barrel bands and an odd-shaped hammer that he recognized as Plymouth Rifles. He assumed that some of the 500 rifles that the OSS purchased to equip resistance movements in the Pacific wound up in the Philippines, where many Americans and Filipinos had refused to surrender when Corregidor fell and continued a guerrilla war against the Japanese.

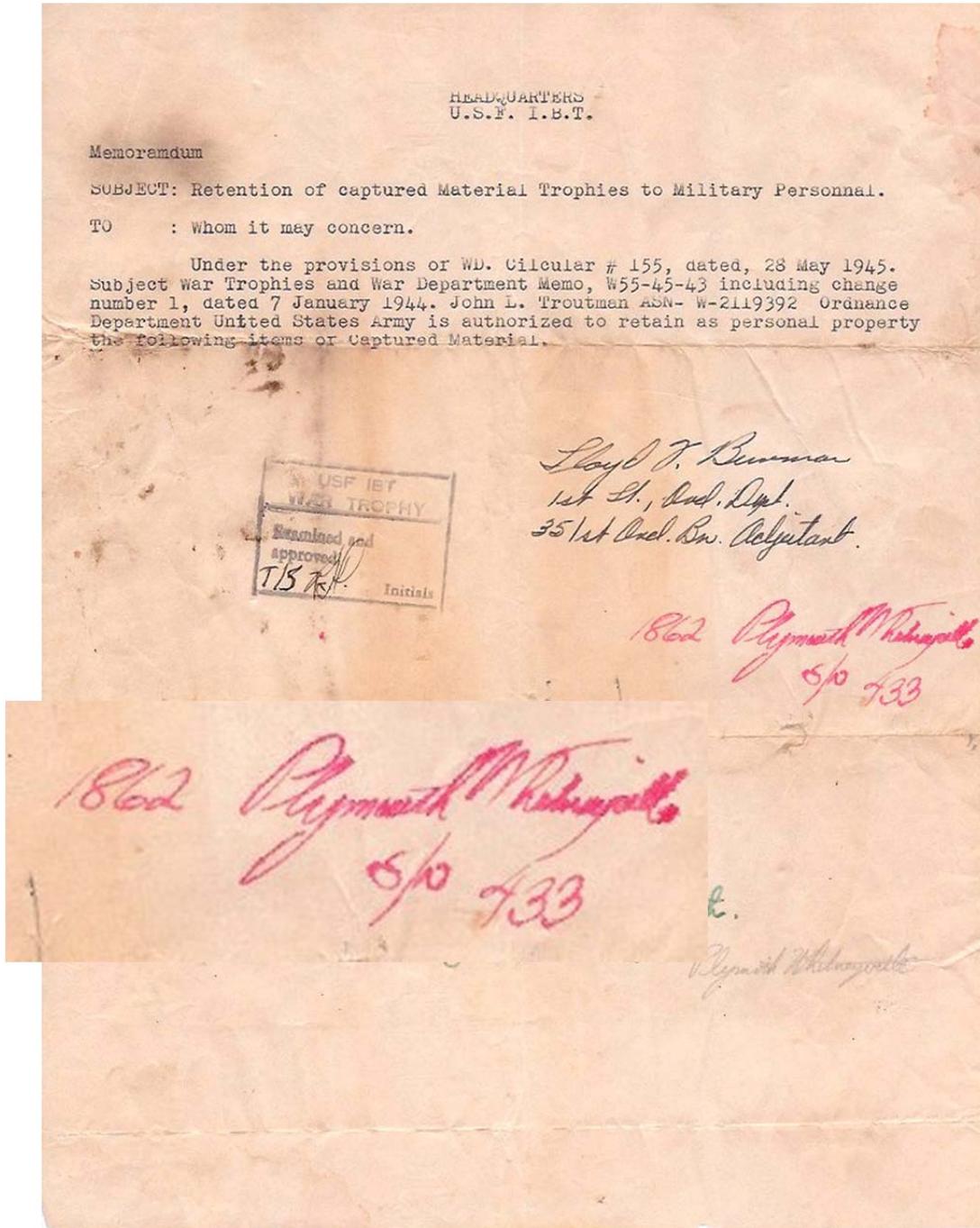


Model 1861 Navy "Plymouth" Rifle

Photo Courtesy of Tim Prince, College Hill Arsenal

Additional evidence was supplied by Tim Prince, of College Hill Arsenal, who gave the author a copy of a World War II U.S. Army "bring back paper" from the India-Burma Theater (I.B.T.). The paper, signed by the adjutant of the 351st Ordnance Battalion, Headquarters U.S. Forces, I.B.T., authorizes John L. Troutman "to retain as personal property the following items or captured material." The paper then lists "1862 Plymouth Whitneyville S/N 433." This was one of the early Plymouth Rifles. The date 1862 was probably the date stamped on the lockplate and

indicates that the lockplate was made in that year. The serial number 433 indicates that the gun was originally assembled by Whitney and delivered to the navy in June 1862.



Bring Back Paper of John Troutman for his Model 1861 "Plymouth" Rifle described as an "1862 Plymouth Whitneyville S/N 433." Photo Courtesy of Tim Prince, College Hill Arsenal

Thus ends the saga of the Plymouth Rifle, a gun that served the country during the Civil War and continued to serve it 80 years later during World War II.