



The Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team

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Researching Winston Churchill's Secret Army, The Auxiliary Units.

The Sten Machine Carbine (or Sten Gun)

By Peter Antill



A display case at the Infantry Weapons Collection at Warminster, showing the very first Mk. 1 Sten Gun (top), a Mk.2 (middle) and a Mk. 5 (bottom).

In 1940, the UK desperately needed a sub-machinegun, not having an indigenous example and so while the Government ordered Thompson SMGs from the United States, a direct copy of the German MP28 Bergmann was produced called the Lanchester, after George Lanchester of the Sterling Armaments Company of Dagenham. This was only accepted into service by the Royal Navy however, as another design, by Major Reginald V. Shepherd and Mr Harry J. Turpin of the Royal Small Arms

Factory (RSAF) Enfield was accepted for service in the Army and Air Force in early 1941.

The weapon was given the name 'STEN', the word being an acronym of 'S' from Shepherd, 'T' from Turpin and 'EN' from either Enfield (where RSAF was located) or England, depending on which source is consulted. It was a relatively simple piece of kit, being a blowback-operated sub-machinegun, firing from an open bolt with a fixed firing pin on the face of the bolt. This means that the bolt remains to the rear when the weapon is cocked and on pulling the trigger, the bolt flies forward under pressure from the spring, stripping a 9mm round from the magazine to feed into the chamber which is immediately fired, all in the same action. It has no breech locking mechanism; the rearward movement of the bolt is attenuated only by the main spring and the inertia of the bolt.

The weapon was relatively cheap and simple to manufacture and put a significant amount of short range firepower in the hands of the infantry. The use of the open bolt and pistol ammunition limited effective range however to around 100m.

From top to bottom: A Mk 1* Sten Gun, a silenced Mk II (MkIIS), a Mk II and a Mk III.



There were five types of Sten produced by Britain during the Second World War:

- The Mk. 1 was very well made and featured a conical flash hider as well as a wooden foregrip, forward handle and part of the stock was wood as well. But the weapon needed to be cheaper and quicker to produce, so all the wooden bits and the flash hider were removed, resulting in the Mk. 1*. Over 300,000 were made.
- Next was the Mk. 2, which entered production in August 1941. It had a removable barrel, the magazine housing could be swung 90° and the stock taken off, meaning it could be stored in small spaces. It was designed initially for airborne troops and for resistance fighters (see the 'Sten Gun to be Forerunner of Invasion' article). Over 2.6 million were made and it had a special silenced variant, the Mk. 2(S).
- The Mk. 3 was even simpler and quicker to produce, being made of pressed steel with the barrel being pressed into a rifled mandrel, giving a work hardened tube that only needed the chamber reamed to complete it. The top flange incorporated the foresight with a handy aiming rib running along the top of the gun. It also had an ejection port stop to stop a user's little finger inadvertently wandering into the port. Over 876,000 were made, the only disadvantage being that if there was any damage to the barrel or casing, the whole thing had to be scrapped.
- The Mk. 4 (an unofficial designation) was only produced as a prototype.
- The Mk. 5 was first issued in February 1944 and with the war going in the Allies' favour, the finish was far better than the Mk. 3 or even the Mk. 2. Changes included a wooden pistol grip, a vertical wooden foregrip (deleted on later models), a fitment for a small bayonet and a No. 4 SMLE foresight. Over 527,000 Mk. 5s were produced.



A Mk. 4 Sten Gun (top) with a Mk. 5 below it and a Mk. 5(S) variant below that.

The Sten 'Family'.

It was used in British service as late as the early 1960s border campaign in Northern Ireland by the RUC, in the early 1970s in Vietnam by US Special Forces and in the 1971 India-Pakistan War. The two most famous uses of the Sten gun were during the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich on 27 May 1942, where the weapon of Warrant Officer Jozef Gabčík jammed (Heydrich was mortally wounded by a grenade) and the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984 by two of her bodyguards.

