

THE BELGIAN RATTLESNAKE



The Lewis Gun is 101 years old and yet even today, it is said that this weapon could hold its own against similar weapons on the modern battlefield. The history of warfare is littered with examples of weapons being invented that are far superior to what is on offer at the time, but because of the "closed mind" attitude of politicians and decision makers, opportunities are lost and more importantly, lives are lost. The

Lewis Gun is one such weapon.

Isaac Newton Lewis (1858 - 1931) was a soldier in the US Army and prolific inventor. He graduated from the US Military Academy in 1884 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Artillery. He quickly became an authority on all types of ordnance. In 1888, now a lieutenant, he patented the first successful Artillery Range and Position finder. He offered it to the US Government as a gift but they refused it. He sold the patent to the firm of Driggs-Seabury, but because the device was so efficient the US Government had to buy it commercially in 1898, when they could have had it for free ten years earlier. By this time Lewis, now a Captain was not a very popular person with a man named General William Crozier who was the head of the US Board of Ordnance, as Lewis was seen as a rival and had committed the cardinal sin of outshining his less competent superior. From now on the knives were out.

Lewis however had friends at court, and was sent by the US Secretary of War, to Europe in 1900 to study ordnance. Upon his return he pressed for new standards of artillery organisation. This was blocked by Crozier, but the Secretary of War overruled and the recommendations were carried out. General Crozier retaliated by sending Lewis to the then far away post of San Francisco, but Lewis was very successful there, building a new system of Harbour defences. You just couldn't keep the man down. General Crozier kept posting Lewis here, there and everywhere, hoping he would fade into obscurity, but Lewis's professional reputation was such, that again Crozier was overruled and Lewis was ordered back to Washington, much to Crozier's humiliation.

During his time in Washington, Lewis used some patents of a Dr. Samuel McClean and some of his own ideas and the Lewis Light Machine Gun was born. The first test of the gun in 1911 was a disaster, but on June 7th



1912, the corrected gun was demonstrated to the US Military. During these tests, the Lewis became the first Machine Gun to be fired from an aircraft, a Wright type B Pusher.

The Lewis gun performed flawlessly, but General Crozier promptly attacked Lewis and his gun. He accused Lewis of misusing junior officers to sell his guns for profit. Lewis again offered the machine gun to the US Military as a gift, but because of Crozier's objections, the Board of Ordnance rejected the gun. (It is interesting to note that a few years later when Britain was not able to produce enough of the weapons, production was contracted out to Savage Arms of America. Over the years all US

royalties that Lewis earned from this contract were given to the US government. This eventually amounted to over \$1,000,000).

After the US rejected the gun, Lewis, then Colonel, decided that enough was enough and retired through "ill health". Lewis took his gun to Europe (shades of Hiram Maxim) where it was first adopted by Belgium and then Britain.

The Great War had now come along. The Belgium Army were the first to use the Lewis Gun against the Germans. Lewis had instructed the Belgian Army to use the gun in a shoot, duck, run, and fire from another position tactic. This is where the gun was nicknamed the "Belgian Rattlesnake" by the Germans, for as they said, it struck without warning from different places of hiding.

In 1916, 353 Lewis Guns were ordered by the US Marines to accompany General Pershing to Mexico in the war with Pancho Villa. It performed well; however, General Crozier was not finished. After years of slandering the Lewis as a bad design, he could not be exposed as a liar, so when the US Marines landed in France in 1917 they were ordered to hand in all stocks of their Lewis Guns, and these were replaced



by the French Chauchat machine gun. The Chauchat already had a poor reputation with the French Army, who were only too happy to unload their stocks of this gun onto the Americans, as they were now using the more

reliable Hotchkiss Machine Gun.

The Chauchat was poorly made, unreliable and its heavy recoil action would jarr the gun off target, but worst of all, the magazine was open to the elements one side, resulting in mud, rain and dirt causing numerous stoppages. It was a nightmare, reminiscent of the Canadian Ross rifle. Performing OK on the ranges back home, but subject the weapons to trench and combat conditions and they failed miserably. However, the Lewis Gun came into service with the British Army in 1915. They were at that time issued on average 4 to a battalion. By 1917 the average was 1 to each section. 6 Lewis guns could be made in the time it took to produce 1 Vickers machine gun. It weighed 27lbs, compared with the Vickers 83lbs. It fired the .303" cartridge, and was fed by a 47 round Drum Magazine. (96 round magazine on aircraft guns). An accurate range of about 500yds. Air cooled, it fired between 500-600 rounds every minute.

The German army had evaluated the weapon prior to WW1, and were seriously thinking of adopting it, however the Great War began and the impetus was lost. The Germans highly regarded the Lewis, and used captured guns, even issuing a manual for them.

Flying a BE2c Biplane, Captain Leefe Robinson VC shot down the first Zeppelin on the night 2/3rd September 1916, using a Lewis gun, firing incendiary ammunition.

All in all the Lewis was an easy weapon to train troops in its use. Its 62 parts were designed for easy care and assembly, and each part had only one position so the gun could not be assembled incorrectly. It had a wide and varied role in all of the services, and was used throughout WW2 in a secondary role.

Readers might like to visit Youtube, where there is film of one being fired, and also of its disassembly. **Charlie Southern**