

Gunleather: Evolution of the Military Belt Holster

by Will Ghormley

Many military holsters found their way from the battle fields of the Civil War to the expanding western frontier. Since reproductions of these holsters continue to find their way into reenactors' wardrobes, a superficial study could help to date and clarify their time periods.

Single shot pistols, Colt Walkers and early Dragoons were large, heavy, and cumbersome. If you've leveled off the sights of a Walker you know what I'm talking about. In the mini-series *Lonesome Dove*, Texas Ranger Gus McCray carried a Walker in a California style cross draw. I'll have to admit, that skinny little old guy was more of a man than me.

In the military's infamous wisdom it was decided that the horse was better suited to carrying the weapon than the soldier. For this reason, most antebellum holsters for side arms were mounted on the pommel of the saddle. The pommel holster was the

on the near side (left), balanced by a utility pouch containing a horse shoe, nails, curry comb and other grooming items on the off side (right). I reckon the grooming items were for the horse and not the Dragoon.

Military pommel holsters had a way of working their way up over the pommel during rough riding and combat, leaving horse and rider. The dismay of any soldier thus deprived of his side arm was audibly announced in a string of flavorful and descriptive metaphors, often calling to question the lineage of the designers of military equipment.

The military adopted the lighter Colt 1851 Navy Model revolver in 1855, making it practical for the soldier to carry it himself on the existing saber belt. George B. McClellan had visited Russia as a captain during the Crimean War. In 1856 he suggested the United States adopt the Russian practice of carrying the pistol about the waist. Three thousand, four hundred belt-mounted pistol cases were manufactured for the military that very year.

All military holsters were manufactured for use with the left hand by reaching across the belly and drawing the weapon from where it was worn butt forward on the right side. The saber had long been hung from the left side for cross draw use with the right hand. This made perfect sense in the evolution of weaponry. When soldiers first began carrying pistols they were single shot weapons and required time consuming reloading. The saber never needed reloading and was more practical in close quarters combat.

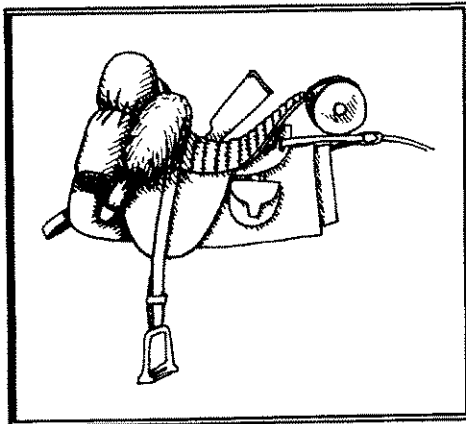
The pistol became more practical with the first reliable revolvers. The soldier then had at least five shots before reloading. Still, the saber was more reliable when the enemy was at arms length. Many soldiers came to rely on revolvers, but it wasn't until the brass cartridge made reloading faster that the saber was finally supplanted.

All the same, traditions die hard in the military. The military holsters remained on the right side, butt forward, for use with the

left hand in cross draw fashion. During the Civil War civilian manufacturers supplied weapons cases to be worn on the right side for use with the right hand. All military contracts specified left handed holsters, however, till after the turn of the century.

Pommel holsters continued to be used throughout the Civil War. Most were used by officers, but the era of the gun belt had dawned. There was little standardizing of military holsters in those tumultuous years leading into the war. They were universally full flapped holsters, providing the most security and protection against the elements. They were left handed cross draws. Most had a round toe plug to keep debris from getting in the barrel. The belt loops were small to fit on the waist belt or the saber belt. One contractor even offered a canvas pistol case impregnated with plastic resin.

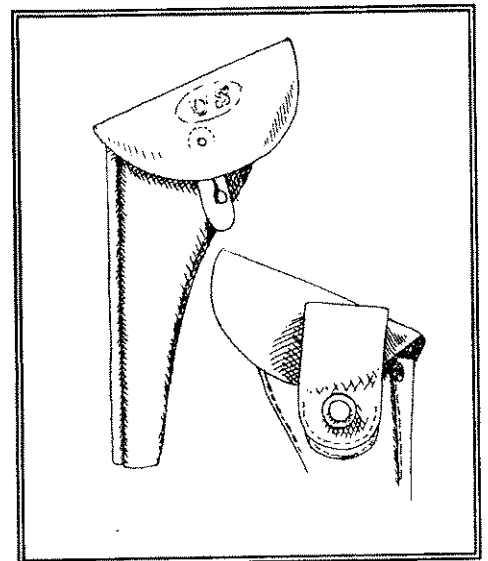
It wasn't till 1872 that the military standardized the holsters by modifying an 1862 design. Modified at the Watervliet



*U. S. Dragoon Horse Equipment, c. 1850
Bearskin-covered pommel holster
waterproofed the holster to keep caps &
powder dry.*

earliest means of carrying mounted side arms.

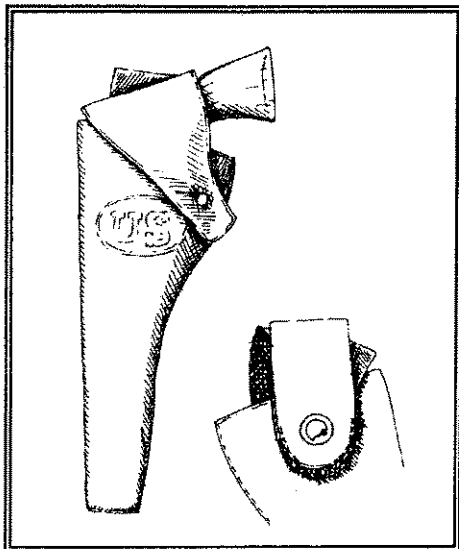
Officers usually carried a brace of pistols in the pommel holster, each balancing the other on either side of the saddle. Mounted Dragoons carried one pistol



*1872 Modification with 360-degree
Hoffman swivel and Tileston wiping rod
sleeve.*

Arsenal in New York, the holster incorporated the Tileston wiping rod sleeve

The Shootist



1875 with embossed "US" in oval. Modified Hoffman swivel with stop rivet. Designed to fit Colt Single Action Army and Smith & Wesson Schofield.

along the leading edge of the holster's pouch. This full flapped holster introduced the Hoffman swivel belt loop. The belt loop was attached to the holster with a brass swivel, allowing the holster to spin a full 360 degrees while attached to the belt. Many weapons were dumped from their holsters and not missed until they were needed. The brass swivel would wear out as well. The holster would drop off leaving the loop dangling empty from the belt. A series of modifications were introduced to deal with the swivel problems and many soldiers simply yanked off the wiping rod sleeve because they didn't like the way it looked.

The 1874 Pattern Holster introduced the half-flap. With brass cartridges now in use, the full flap was no longer needed to keep caps and powder dry. Although a stop rivet was added to the Hoffman swivel to keep it from spitting out its weapon, the brass swivel continued to wear out dropping entire holsters in the dust. Many disgusted soldiers riveted the loops to the holsters.

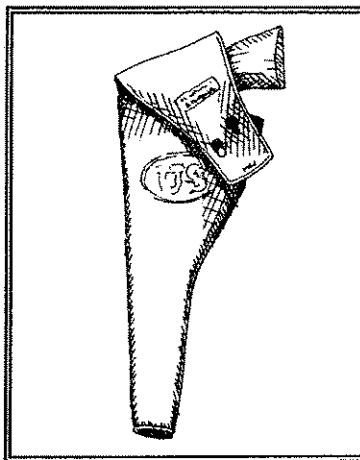
The 1875 Pattern Holster was manufactured at the Watervliet Arsenal and was the first military holster to be universally embossed with the "US" in an oval. It was positioned on the upper portion of the pouch. They fabricated 32,000 units. The 1875 was just like the '74 but with a modified pouch to accept not only the Colt Single Action Army Model already in service, but the newly adopted Smith & Wesson Schofield Model revolver also. The

brass swivel continued to wear out leaving new Schofields on the trail among the horse apples.

The 1878/79 Pattern Holster did away with the Hoffman swivel and attached the belt loop to the holster body with stitching and six rivets! When the military gets around to fixing something they fix it good. The holster was held at a sharp cross draw angle. The "US" with oval was moved to the flap. The half flap itself was redesigned. The end was rounded off and a separate closure strap was sewn and riveted onto the flap to secure it. This was the last military holster produced at the Watervliet Arsenal and only 2,000 were made.

The last military holster we'll look at is the 1881 Pattern Holster, manufactured at the Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois. Thirty-five thousand units were produced in five variations until it was discontinued in 1907. This was "the" holster of the late Indian Wars. It's also my favorite military holster for brass cartridge revolvers.

The 1881 was designed with two button holes in the half flap. The lower left buttonhole fit the Colt and the upper right fit the Schofield. The "US" and oval were



1881

embossed on the upper portion of the pouch. This design never altered during production. The only differences in the five variations were to increase the size of the belt loop and shorten the barrel portion of the pouch to accommodate the five and a half inch barrel of the artillery model side arm.

The Type One variant was

manufactured in 1881/82. Four thousand units were built with a narrow belt loop to fit the waist belt or saber belt. At the same time the "Prairie" and "Mills" fabric cartridge belts were being adopted. The Type One would not fit over the wider belts with their carbine and rifle ammunition.

The Type Two variant was introduced with a slightly larger loop that would fit the leather "Calvary" or Whittemore pattern belts. Four thousand five hundred Type Twos were produced from 1883 to 1885, but they still didn't fit the cartridge belts. The demand for a cartridge/pistol belt led to the development of the Type Three.

The Type Three variant of the 1881 Pattern Holster is sometimes mistakenly referred to as an 1885 Pattern Holster. While it was introduced in 1885 it was still an 1881. An 1885 Pattern Holster never existed. The Type Three's larger loop was designed to slide over an empty "Prairie" or "Mills" pattern cartridge belt. Ten thousand five hundred were manufactured between 1885 and 1890.

The Type Four variant had an enlarged belt loop to fit over the fully loaded "Mills" cartridge belt. From 1890 to 1896 12,800 units were produced.

The Type Five variant was introduced in 1896 with an even larger belt loop to fit over the even larger double-row "Mills" cartridge belt, adopted by the military in 1895. Some 3,200 Type Fives were produced before the 1881 Pattern Holster was discontinued.

Many civilian manufactured holsters were used among soldiers of the Civil War and Indian Wars. Experimental military holsters were designed and tested. Some took after the "California" style, others were based on the civilian "Mexican Loop". Soldiers adapted and field modified the issue holsters.

Worn military holsters from the battles of Shiloh and Gettysburg found a new life on the frontier as soldiers became pioneers. Civilian innovations found use among the soldiers filing across the plains. In the swirling dust of an expanding young nation, gunleather kept pace with the evolving frontier.

