

Winchester Lever-action Rifles

Osprey Weapon series No. 42 (2015)

By Martin Pegler; illustrated by Mark Stacey

£12.99/\$18.95

Review by Jonathan Aird

Contents:

Introduction

Development

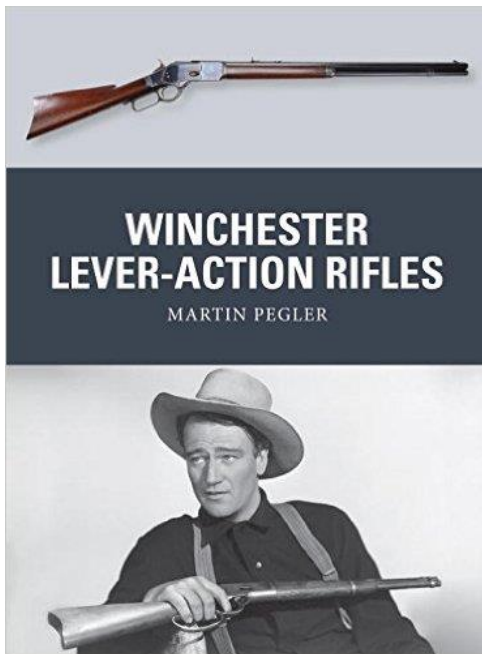
Use ó North, South ó and West

Impact ó The Winchester's place in history

Comments:

Osprey's Weapon series falls into three main strands ó weapon types (e.g. titles such as The Flamethrower or The Hand Grenade), long-lived weapons and shorter-lived but iconic weapons (e.g. the STEN gun). Naturally enough, there is some overlap of these three themes ó this latest volume being a point in case. With an active service life of around 60 years, the family of Winchester lever-action rifles was a fairly long-lived weapon (and it is noted that several classic

models were actually brought back into production by FN d'Herstal in 2008) but, as the cover photo of John Wayne with an 1894 model Winchester indicates, this is also very much an iconic weapon as well -- being, as every film-goer knows -- one of the weapons that won the American West.



Starting with a short history of earlier attempts to make a repeating or multi-shot rifle ó one of the main difficulties which these encountered was the development of a suitable bullet and charge case -- Martin Pegler draws out the step-by-step progress to the Henry (later Winchester) rifle in a fascinating section which tracks the progress of a number of influential designs, and of the progress through a number of companies of the designers themselves. I was particularly taken with the Volcanic rifle which used a novel bullet, but one which was really only suitable for repeating pistols due to a relatively small calibre. These steps along the way were, relatively,

failures and it is interesting that the first Winchester designs were very nearly failures as well, suffering from a small cartridge charge and one or two remaining design weaknesses. However, these were eventually ironed out and there is a long section detailing all the various models from the Model 1866 through to the Model 1895. Many of these designs benefitted from the engineering genius of John Browning, who made many changes as fashions ó and available materials ó changed leading to weapons chambered for big game hunting and others designed to use the new smokeless powder. Tied to this is the money-making ability of Oliver Winchester ó a shirt manufacturing magnate prior to buying a controlling share of the Henry

company ó who has ideas, such as limited editions of special models with minor tweaks or just special decorative features: a very modern sounding concept, which worked.

The remaining two-thirds of the book are given over to the Winchester in action ó starting with the Henry rifle in the American Civil War. This is a fascinating section ó covering the difficulty of persuading the Union army to purchase the repeating rifle, the unexpected issues it had in service if not cleaned regularly, and also ó and probably most usefully for wargamers ó there are write-ups of in-action usage and details on the numbers and spread of the Henry rifle in the Union and Confederate armies. This section includes a double-page painting of a handful of Henry rifle-armed Union troops holding off a much larger number of Confederates intent on crossing a bridge over a creek: wonderfully evocative and just calling out to be gamed. Moving to the Indian Wars, there is a useful summary of the American army's rifle selection process which led to the Winchester not being adopted ó one of the main issues being its short effective range compared to more conventional rifles. However, the Winchester was to become very popular with civilians who weren't interested in fighting much beyond a couple of hundred yards and, because of gun runners and other methods of acquisition became popular with the Native American tribes as well. There is another beautifully executed double-page painting of Native Americans ambushing a cavalry patrol ó and alongside the profusion of period photographs of all sorts of people bearing Winchesters ó army, civilians, Native Americans, and female sharpshooters amongst others ó gives a real feel of the ubiquity of the weapon.

The Usage section is rounded out with a couple of pages, and another superb painting, addressing the military sales abroad of the Model 1895 ó with thousands coming to Turkey and Russia with smaller numbers to France, Latvia and elsewhere. Seeing use in the Great War, some 10,000 were shipped to Spain by the Russians in the 1930s.

The sections on the historical place of the Winchester, and its place in cultural history, are very fair and well balanced. None of the shortcomings of the Henry/Winchester rifle are overlooked ó it wasn't up to really rough handling, it had a short range and the more bullets it could accommodate the less their stopping power was. On the other hand, it offered a high rate of fire to a single man, something highly desirable in the 'untamed West.' The cultural impact ó through period photography and later movie usage ó has unarguably made it the rifle most associated with the Wild West and Martin Pegler makes his case convincingly well.

Overall, this is a really inspiring book for the wargamer ó there is an immense amount of detail that could be incorporated into detailed skirmish rules, there are a number of very interesting and 'game-able' descriptions and depictions of the weapon in use, particularly in North America but also for unusual WWI and Spanish Civil War scenarios (and big game hunts!). On top of all that it is very well written. If you find detailed weapon descriptions of interest, then this will interest you!