

The Le Français double-action pistol

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The Le Français original Army self-loading double-action pistol, top, and the 1931 model with the grooved barrel.



Testing the Le Français Army pistol at the range. Photo taken by remote control means.

The light, 350g self-loading pistol known as 'Le Français' (the French) was first issued in 1913 for civilian use as the 'Le Français Modèle E' in the small calibre of 6.35mm (.25 ACP) by the Manufacture Française d'Armes et Cycles de St-Etienne. Le Français was at the time one of the original and innovative self-loading double-action pistols, as the slide did not need to be cycled, and once loaded, the pistol was ready to fire.

The pistol had to be as simple to operate as a revolver. The firing mechanism had to be reliable and safe and would not need an active or passive safety system. The pistol functions exclusively in double-action mode - striker fired - and it cannot fire unless the magazine is fully engaged into the frame and the first cartridge manually inserted into the chamber, as there is no way to activate the slide.

The pistol does not include any loaded springs to reduce wear and eliminate any risk of breakage. All springs are therefore in a 'rest' position, except when pulling the trigger with the magazine engaged. Then, pulling the trigger is enough to cock the firing pin and release it. Last, but not least, the handgun is easily field-stripped without any specific tool.

A rare .22LR-calibre version Le Français with an adjustable rear-sight was marketed between 1929 and 1934 for shooting competitions, but was soon forgotten. It was also produced in 7.65mm Browning (.32 ACP) calibre between 1950 and 1969 and was issued to the French police and forestry rangers. This 1950 police model has slide serrations and a spent cartridge extractor, unlike all earlier versions.

At the end of the First World War, the French Army reassessed its available armament and a thorough review of the individual armament was inception as early as 1920. The Manufacture Française d'Armes et Cycles de St-Etienne (Manufrance) felt that its unique pistol would be a serious contender and persuaded the French Army to test a 'beefed-up' Le Français Army model chambered in 9mm Browning Long on June 5, 1928. Manufrance was convinced that it had designed and manufactured a gun best fitting the needs and specification of the army, combining the simplicity and reliability of a



revolver with the capacity and operating speed of a self-loading pistol.

Several Le Français pistols were tested by the Army Experimental Commission in Versailles between November 6, 1928, and February 17, 1933, with seven series of tests. Surprisingly, the French Army Assessment Committee twice turned down options to utilise the gun on the grounds that double-action operation was binding and that the handgun lacked an extractor, the spent cartridges being ejected out of the chamber by gas pressure.

In spite of this, a few officers bought the handgun to replace their own standard-issue 1892 French Army 8mm revolvers. Later on, most Le Français pistols in 9mm were sold to civilians, but were almost never used. This is why we may still find Le Français Army pistols in near-new condition. A few of these occasionally turn up in the former French Asian and African colonies. This pistol is one of the most coveted firearms by French guns collectors.

There were two main Army pistols chambered in 9mm Browning Long issued over its short career. The first version from 1928 is characterised by its grip plates manufactured from black cross-checked ebonite, and its bulky and smooth barrel. Several changes were brought about to the second version of the pistol released in 1931, with a new barrel elegantly ribbed to make it lighter. The new grip plates are made of chequered wood and fixed to a steel counterplate on the frame. The 1931 magazine also includes a single ammunition carrier ring below the catch.



We do not know precisely how many of either model were made, since no archives are available. Some authors estimate there were fewer than 5000 units, all variations included. Production of the Le Français Army type in 9mm Browning Long ended by the mid-1930s.

On both models, the pistols are made out of solid forged steel all over and are beautifully manufactured with a clean finish blueing. The high-quality steel-forged barrel is 128mm long with six clockwise grooves to form a one in 370mm (14.6") twist. The magazine contains seven single-stack rounds, plus one in the lower ring located near the heel-release catch. The pistols have a lanyard ring on the lower part of the frame, as do most service handguns.

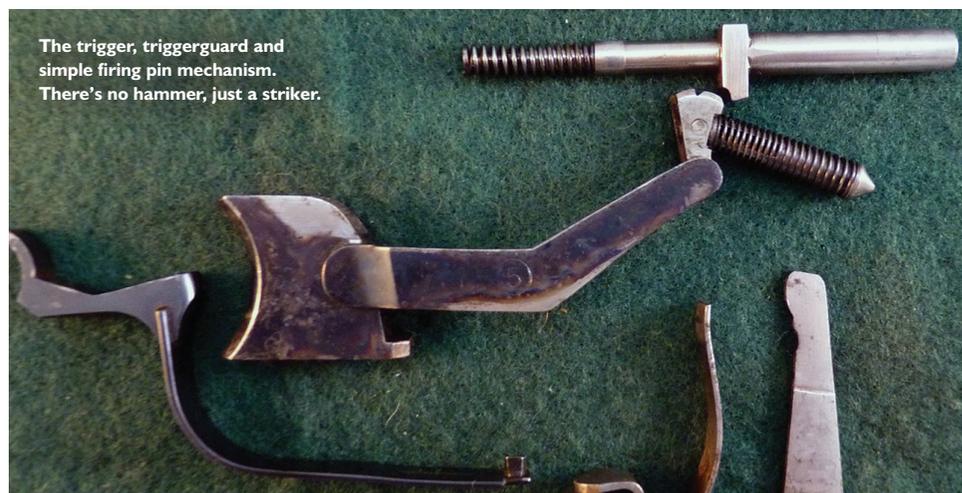
The Le Français 1931 Army model field-stripped: 1. The extractor fixed on the frame, 2. The rear and slide plug maintaining the firing pin and its spring in the slide, 3. The recoil rocking levers, 4. The recoil spring.

Operation

The pistol is based on a simple blowback-action mechanism where the slide is unlocked. The slide recoil spring, even though of a blowback system, is powerful. It is worth noting too that the pistol is not equipped with a slide catch lever. After firing the last round, the slide closes on an empty chamber and the barrel tilts open, exposing the empty chamber. Technically and mechanically, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to manually operate the Army model slide (no serration on the slide side) or to hold it in the rear position (no slide catch lever).

Barrel 'tipping' is a characteristic feature of this pistol. As soon as you remove the magazine, the barrel swivels on its pivot located below the muzzle and connected to the frame by a simple catch below the chamber. It exposes the chamber, facilitating cleaning. With the chamber exposed, the pistol is safe and the firing mechanism is deactivated.

After engaging the magazine, manually loading a cartridge into the chamber and tipping back the barrel into battery, the barrel is automatically locked and the firing mechanism is ready to operate. If you need to replace faulty ammunition



or unload the pistol, you may tilt the barrel, thanks to a lever located on the right side of the frame above the trigger.

The recoil spring is vertically enclosed within the pistol grip in front of the magazine well. The recoil spring energy is transferred through a set of two parallel rocking levers connected to the gun frame. Those are mobile on an axis, compressing the recoil spring, and follow the slide back and forth in a longitudinal move. The cocking of the striker is achieved only by the pull of the trigger. The firing pin then moves back and compresses its own spring.

At the end of the process, the sear release lever is lowered due to the guiding angled ramp and the firing pin is released striking the primer. For a second shot, you must release the trigger and repeat the process. There is no 'pre-cocking'. The pressure on the trigger remains identical from the first to the last cartridge.

As noted, there is no manual safety system, whether active or passive. The operating mode of this pistol can therefore be confidently compared to the concept of a revolver. The firing pin is of an inertial type, and there is no risk of accidental discharge, as the firing pin spring is not compressed unless you press the trigger.

The pistol is easy to operate. First, insert a magazine into the pistol. Then put a cartridge into the chamber and lock the barrel. The pistol is now ready to fire. To unload the pistol, simply remove the magazine. The chamber will open automatically, so take out the round if any are still in the chamber.

Field-stripping

This combat pistol can be completely field-stripped without the use of any tool. First, remove the magazine and check that the chamber is empty. When the magazine is removed, the barrel will tip on its axis due to the spring blade fixed to the triggerguard, exposing the chamber. On the left front side of the slide, rotate the round slide-barrel lock key and remove it. Firmly holding the front part of the barrel, take out the retainer pin. Pull the triggerguard forward out of its housing. To pull out the slide body, move it front upwards then pull the slide forward.

At this stage, the firing pin mechanism may be removed from the frame. To do so, press the rear end slide plug with your thumb and turn it a quarter counterclockwise - as you would for the MAS36 French Army rifle. Carefully remove the plug from the slide and extract the firing pin and the two springs.

To remove the buttplates from the frame, push them upwards. To take out the brackets and release the recoil spring, place the pistol on a flat, hard surface. Seize the frame with both hands, compress the base of the recoil spring onto the hard surface, freeing the two brackets that will be released and easily removed. The recoil spring and retention spring are then extracted from underneath, and the trigger can be extracted from the front. This process only takes a few minutes. To reassemble, repeat the different steps in reverse order.



A rear view of the P08-Luger and Le Français Army pistols. Note their V-shaped rear sights.

Ammunition

The 9mm Browning Long cartridge was designed by John Moses Browning for the Browning Pistol Model 1903. While the cartridge was an ill-fated one compared to the 9x19mm Parabellum, it was adopted by the Swedish Army in 1907. There are only three chambers for the cartridge, which shows this pistol was restricted to very few - the Browning 1903, Webley & Scott Model 1909 and the Le Français.

The cartridge is far from being as powerful as the other 9mm ammunition developed during the same period. The maximum permissible pressure for the 9mm Browning Long is 1800 bar and the velocity would reach 300 to 325 metres per second. By way of comparison, the permissible pressure of the 9mm Parabellum is 2600 bar and its velocity would reach up to 370mps in self-loading pistols.

The 9mm Browning Long cartridge case is cylindrical, straight and 20.20mm long with the base semi-rimmed, while the bullet diameter is 9.09mm (0.3578"). This type of ammunition can be faithfully reproduced by shortening .38 Super Auto cases to 20.20mm using a case trimmer, though bullets are available on the market. They must be loaded much lighter than the the 9mm Parabellum, so opt for the 90- to 100-grain



A 9mm Luger cartridge, left, two original 9mm Browning Long cartridges (note their heavy crimps) and a .38 Super Auto. The bullets are a 100- and 90-grain jacketed Fiocchi and a cast 100-grain bullet.

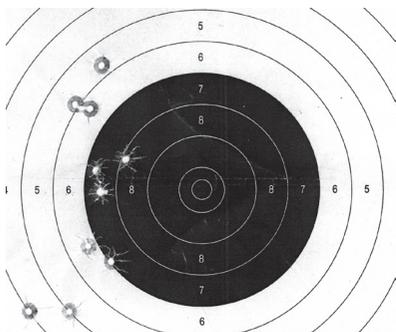
bullets. The bullets used for the 9mm Short are particularly suitable. It is worth underlining too that the bullet crimp must be quite deep. For the appropriate powder charge, please refer to a suitable manual. A set of reloading tools is available from the American brand CH4D.

At the range

The Le Français Army pistols are rarely seen on firing ranges. The pistol itself is massive, weighing about 1000g, which is similar to the P08 Luger at around 900g, but it is well-balanced and easy to handle. The nearly right-angle/straight-shaped grip and its suitable size enable the shooter to hold the pistol firmly and shoot accurately. The grip is appropriate for a shooter with medium-sized hands to comfortably reach the trigger and you can follow your instinct when aiming - an important feature for a good combat pistol.

Unfortunately, the factory-set rear-sight was poorly designed. While the antiglare serrated front-sight is similar to the one from the P08, the rear-sight is of a V-shaped type such as the P08 but quite high above the barrel and does not allow proper and steady sighting.

We tested the Le Français Army at the range at 20m to assess its dynamics and trigger control while shooting. It had a special feeling; you need to get used not only to the pistol weight when shooting, but also to the linear trigger travel. You may feel as though you are shooting a double-action revolver, and you have to hold the pistol firmly and keep your thumb resolutely pressing against the buttplate. The two-stage trigger pull is the same from the first to the last cartridge, as the firing pin is never pre-cocked.



The result of one-hand hold testing the Le Français Army pistol at 20m.

The trigger pull weight is a hefty 4200g, which is in line with other army pistols, even modern ones. After an 8mm trigger linear travel, you will feel a clear stop right before firing. This strong point can be felt just before the firing pin is released. So, during slow-fire, you are able to control the shoot release and simultaneously attempt focusing on the target. When using the pistol in rapid-fire, you do not feel the trigger stop and you may shoot very fast.

Once controlling the firing method and the trigger pull weight, the pistol is pleasant to shoot and gives satisfactory results. The first positive point is accuracy; at 20m, even with a one-hand hold, it is quite acceptable, even with factory-set sights and no possible adjustment. The recoil is fairly muscular, and with reloaded ammunition, the bullet velocity is between 230 and 240mps.

Primers must be carefully selected when reloading. The pistol does not tolerate hard primers, inevitably leading to misfires, but with this double-action pistol you may strike again the reluctant primer. After several reloading tests, only two brands were found to be reliable: Winchester and Federal. The cases were properly ejected and collected on the ground within a 30cm circle at 4 o'clock, and the spent cases were neither scratched nor distorted. A photo taken during the shooting tests clearly shows how fast the slide works. Whereas the cartridge case has just been ejected, the slide is already at battery and you are ready to shoot the next round. This impressive speed is due to the unlocked slide.

Shortcomings

You have to get used to inserting the first round into the exposed chamber and click the magazine in place to leave the pistol ready to shoot. It appears to be not very practical or fast in a combat situation when the vital cartridge may escape from the user's slippery and trembling fingers. But is it really a problem when with other single-action self-loaders you still have to action the slide to load a cartridge from the magazine into the chamber and release the safety catch?

More frustrating is that there is no ejector on the Army model and no way to operate the slide, so you may have to use a rod to extract a stuck case. Another negative point is that the V-notch



The P08 Luger and Le Français 1931 Army model side by side.

rear-sight is antiquated and awkward, though admittedly, that was the standard at the time.

Critics also point to the fact that this pistol has no passive or manual safety device. However, is this also not the case with the famous modern Glock or SIG P226 pistols? Finally, while Le Français pistol is a beautiful piece of engineering, it is quite complicated, with a lot of components.

Summary

Despite some of the aforementioned criticisms, we were pleasantly surprised by the quality, reliability and satisfactory accuracy of this self-loading double-action. The Le Français Army is totally different from the other self-loading army handguns from the early 20th century. It can be used for target shooting, but it would not go as far as to gain a gold medal. It is simply rare on the market and considered by collectors as a remarkable handgun, so if you do find one in Australia, hang on to it. ■