

Collecting and Shooting the Military Surplus Rifle



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Article written by: Bob Shell

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Safety Note From the Editor

We at Surplusrifle.com attempt to produce and publish information that is as accurate as possible. Sometimes like any person or publication we get it wrong. Please keep in mind that most information that is presented to you here is from a collector just like you with varying experience (s). The common element for us all is that we love to collect and shoot and share our experiences with others. One bit of advice that we can give that rings true when discussing reloading a rifle that is over 100 years old is to take the information presented by us as only a general guideline. The subject of the GEW 88 Commission rifle and its bore size is a controversial subject. There are varying opinions on the subject and these opinions almost always contradict each other. The first thing to take into consideration when reloading is safety. Only when you are certain as to what you are doing is safe do you try and tackle the next issue ...accuracy. If you are uncertain of the bore size of your rifle then you should always slug the bore to measure the exact specifications so as to select the proper sized bullet for your weapon. This will not only be a safe approach but will greatly enhance your accuracy. To learn more about slugging and measuring your bore please [click here](#). Until you are uncertain as to the bore size of your weapon with a reasonable to absolute certainty then you should not order dies and expensive equipment or even try reloading for your weapon. Please reload safe and smart.

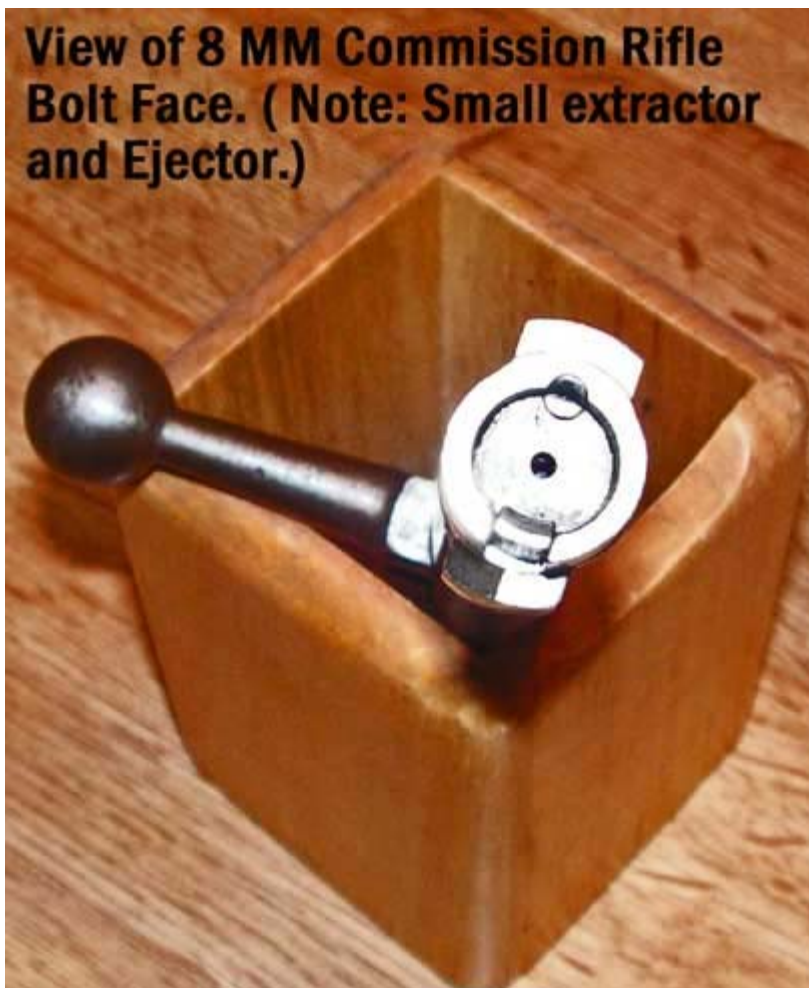


In 1886 France came out with quite possibly the most important development in small arms which was the first successful smokeless cartridge, the 8mm Lebel. It made everything up to that time obsolete immediately. It shot a fairly small projectile at velocities that were not obtainable with black powder. As much as France wanted to they could not keep the secret of smokeless powder to themselves for very long. One of the earlier countries to adopt a smokeless cartridge was Germany. They came out with their own 8mm rifle in 1888 known as the Commission rifle that was designed by a commission (hence its name). The Commission rifle was a composite of features from other rifles at the time. I imagine it would have been an interesting experience to be on that commission.



The German's cartridge case was a rimless design as opposed to the rimmed Lebel. A rimless design would be more desirable for feeding and use in machine guns. It came out with the J bullet which is 318 in diameter round nose weighing 227 grains while the later S bullet had a 323 diameter. The Commission rifle used a magazine with Mannlicher features while the bolt resembled the Mauser design with the two front locking lugs. The magazine needs a special clip in order to be a repeater. The clip is the same on both ends so it cannot be inserted the wrong way. This would be a desirable feature in combat. The clips are scarce now that they are long out of production. I consider detachable clips a liability when collecting because of the potential lack of availability. For target shooting using a clip fed rifle as a single shot is not really a big deal except in a few cases. One example, the 7.35 Carcano is a real pain to load without a clip.





The 1888 Commission rifle has a hand guard around the barrel which in theory gave it more accuracy but was difficult to produce and install. It also collected water inducing rust on the barrel. It was a well made product for its time but isn't as strong as the 98 Mauser which replaced it. We must remember that in 1888 smokeless powder was in its infancy and the gun makers did not fully understand the requirements for heat treating for the higher pressure powder. The workmanship appears to be typical for an early German arm, meaning that it was good with few or no tool marks. The extractor and ejector look puny as compared to the Mausers of that period but I didn't have any problems with my specimen which I shot between 200 and 300 times during my tests. There is a release on the side of the receiver to remove the bolt. The safety is a wing type located on the rear of the bolt and it works fairly well. The bolt handle doesn't touch the receiver when closed. You should not shoot the later military ammo in it as it is loaded too hot for this weapon and it may be corrosive not to mention the .323 diameter bullet which was adopted in 1903. If you stumble across some original military ammo I wouldn't shoot it as it would be very old and most likely will have some collector value as well. As a note if you attempt to shoot old ammo and it does not go off keep the bolt closed for at least three minutes. This is called a hang fire. Failure to follow proper hang fire procedures can cause a serious accident. Especially if the bolt is partially opened and it goes off there is no support for the round and hot gasses among other things can become missiles. I have run across old ammo that did not go off for several seconds after firing. If you encounter such ammo dispose of it in a safe manner as it is way too dangerous to shoot. In many cases the powder may be deteriorated and the ammo is very unstable.



The Commission rifle replaced the hard hitting 11 mm Mauser 71/84 rifle that was in service since 1871. For some reason a Mauser rifle wasn't adopted by Germany again until the 98 Mauser, which is the most successful design of all time for bolt action rifles. I imagine Paul Mauser wasn't happy about that but he went about his business making various Mauser rifles for many countries. The '88 saw service for some years and China among others purchased and used them as well. There was a carbine and rifle version of these with barrel lengths of 17.6 and 29.1" respectively. The Karabiner has a spoon type of bolt while the rifle carries the straight bolt handle. Another 8x57 to be careful of is the model 93's that were rebarreled to 8mm. The 93 has two locking lugs as opposed to the 3 that the 98 has. I know that a lot of them have been shot with hot ammo with no consequences but I really do not recommend it. Personally I consider the 93 action superior to the Commission Rifle in strength and function but it is no 98.

Shooting the model 88 rifle is no big problem. The standard 8mm cases should be used and 318 diameter bullets are fairly common. They can also be swaged down from 323 bullets without much effort. The swaging die that I use to reduce the diameter of the bullets comes from CH Die and it works with a standard press. The 318 loading dies are available from several makers and medium powders work the best. Common sense loads should be used as not only the action is not as strong as the 98 but it also does not have the ability to vent gas as well either. That is a good reason to wear safety glasses and ear protection when shooting these old guns. Cases seldom rupture but you never know.

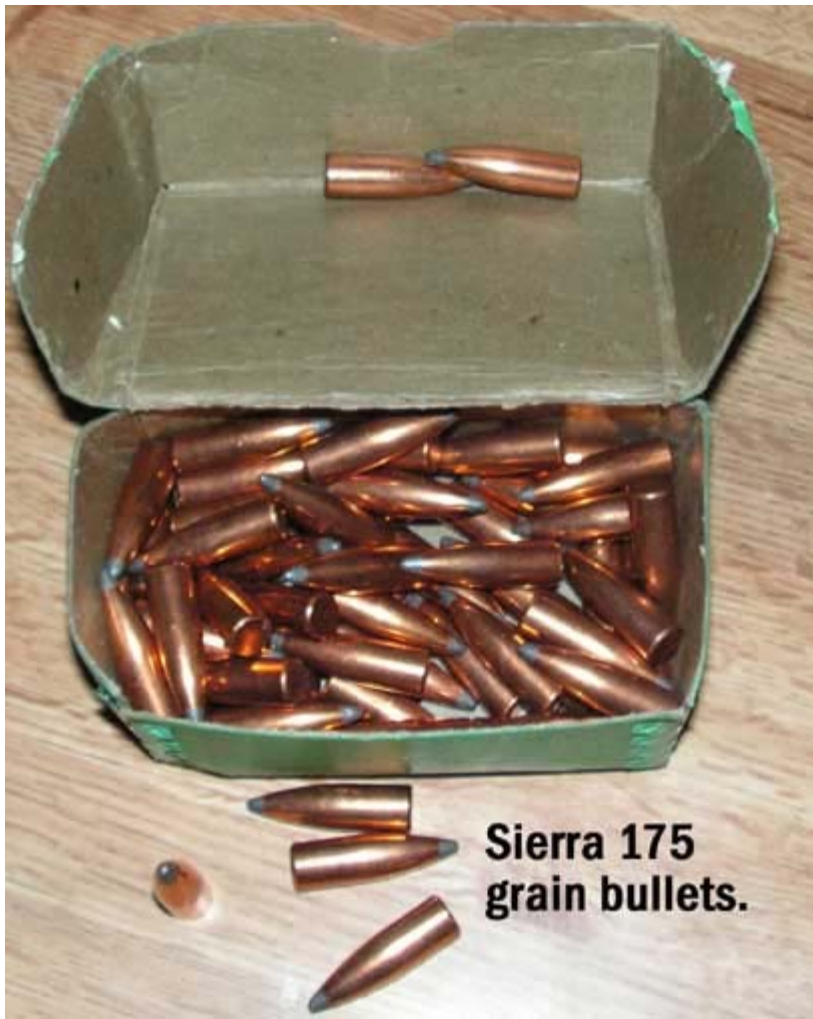
Accuracy is good for a military rifle with the original sights. With good eyes and a bench rest groups at 50 yards can be smaller than 2" with five shots. The 100 yard groups can be 3 to 4" with good ammo and a good shooter. The trigger is a typical military trigger. You will get used to it quickly if you shoot many military rifles.

I did work up some loads for this gun and I found that like most military rifles the 88 was

not fussy about what it took as a load. The rifling in my specimen is deep and sharp. I have noted some loads below that I used in my tests. I would approach the top loads starting a couple of grains below and then work up carefully. Since myself and the Surplusrifle.com does not have any control over how this data is used we can not be held liable if you decide to use it. Some of the velocities I recorded were higher then expected however the 29" barrel probably has something to do with that. All bullets were sized to 318 in keeping with proper loading practices. Round nose bullets may be required for feeding if you have one of the clips and want to use it as a repeater. Velocities were recorded 10' from the first screen using 7 shots. I did other loads but these are the most accurate.

LOAD	BULLET	VELOCITY	COMMENT
10 X Herco	125 grain Hornady	1402	ok
47 X H 4895	150 grain Sierra	2722	consistent
50 X IMR 4350	150 grain Hornady	2418	mild
10 X Unique	165 grain cast	1414	accurate
45 X H 4895	170 grain Hornady	2671	deer load
10 X Unique	170 grain Hornady	1166	quiet
45 X H 4895	175 grain Sierra	2641	accurate
44 X H 4895	185 grain Remington	2532	good load
50 X AA 4350	185 grain Remington	2466	mild









All these loads are pretty accurate with the 175 grain Sierra having a very slight edge at least in my rifle. Shooting these old guns is much more interesting than the new ones to me at least as you are shooting a part of history. Who knows where these guns were a hundred years ago or so. Were they in a trench fighting a war? Did they actually shoot anyone? What part did they play in history? Did my great grandfather use one? I don't know but it is nice to wonder.

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