EARLY MILITARY MAUSERS

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From 1959 through 1975, Browning Arms Company imported the High-Power bolt-action rifle. Based on the Mauser 98 action, it was manufactured in Belgium by Fabrique Nationale (FN). Three grades were offered, quality and reliability were high, and they were chambered for the most popular hunting cartridges of the period. Today, these rifles have achieved classic status and remain popular among hunters and collectors alike.

This story begins around 1897, when firearms designer John M. Browning contracted with Fabrique Nationale d’Armes de Guerre of Herstal, Belgium, to manufacture the Model 1899 pistol. Thus began a long relationship between the two outfits that would include their manufacturing of Browning patented pistol, shotgun and rifle designs.

Starting in 1947 FN began manufacturing and exporting to the U.S. market a Model 98 Mauser Sporter Deluxe rifle, with Presentation Grade and Supreme Magnum versions appearing a few years later. These were outstanding rifles with a high-tensile steel commercial action that was held to tight tolerances and showed fine machining. There were desirable changes that included a checkered bolt handle knob, trigger changed to a single pull (no slack or let-off), a new floorplate latch and release, and the thumb slot was eliminated, which helped the receiver become notably more rigid. Barrels were of chrome vanadium steel, and special care was taken to assure they were true and accurate.

Even the stock of the Sporter Deluxe was tastefully checkered with a border and was of classic configuration with a cheekpiece. The steel hinged floorplate and trigger guard were engraved, while the Model 1899 pistol.

The Browning High-Power (bottom) was manufactured by FN and features the same Mauser 98 action as used in its own line of rifles, including this Sporter Deluxe (top).
the Presentation Grade and Supreme Magnum versions had an upgrade in wood, checkering, carving and engraving. The blue finish was especially handsome and was similar to many vintage firearms that are so desirable today. Although the button sliding-type safety was located on the right side just below the bolt sleeve, it featured three positions, with the middle allowing removal of a cartridge from the chamber while preventing the gun from firing. These rifles were real beauties, and due to their overall quality, many custom gun builders found favor with the action.

Browning Arms recognized it needed to compete in the bolt-action rifle market against the Winchester Model 70, Remington Models 721, 722 and 725 and the relatively new Weatherby, and contracted with FN to build the Model 98 with the Browning name beginning in 1959. (By 1963 FN stopped exporting the rifle with its name.) The new Browning High-Power rifle had some changes that included a bolt stop with an external spring, Monte Carlo-style stock with a high-gloss finish, rubber recoil pad (on most models), and a barrel-mounted folding rear sight became standard. (The original FN rifles had receiver mounted aperture sights.) These new features were intended to help it appeal to the American shooter/hunter of that period. While the Monte Carlo stock design and white-line ventilated rubber recoil pad might seem rather gauche today, they were icons of that period.

The Browning High-Power rifle came in three grades, including Safari, Medallion and Olympian. The Safari was the basic model, but its floorplate was lightly engraved and highlighted in gold, and the walnut stock usually featured respectable figure and was checkered. The Medallion grade featured an upgraded select walnut stock with rosewood grip and forearm cap, scroll engraving and a ram's head engraved on the...
floorplate. The Olympian was the flagship of the line, and it seems Browning spared no expense in the production of this rifle. The stock was stunning high-figure walnut that was tastefully checkered and hand carved. The receiver, including floorplate and trigger guard, was finished in a French or satin silver finish. Each was fully engraved with appropriate animal scenes (depending on caliber) and mixed with scroll engraving. This was not limited to the receiver, floorplate and trigger guard but included a large portion of the barrel. The (master) engraver signed all the Olympian-grade versions I have examined.

The Browning High-Power rifle was built with quality, and thus it appealed to shooters and big game hunters from around the world. This was the bolt-action rifle that established such a great reputation for that brand name that still seems to be coasting along today.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, our family hosted a prominent group of California hunters, consisting of gentlemanly doctors and famous Hollywood types who frequently hunted our eastern Oregon ranch for antelope, mule deer and game birds. Winchester Model 70s were commonly used, but so were the Browning High-Power rifles. In studying magazines and books from that period, they became popular among knowledgeable shooters, particularly the discriminating and affluent.

The first Browning High-Power rifle I owned was a .300 Winchester Magnum that proved capable of fine accuracy, although it was a bit heavy. It accounted for a couple of elk, deer and many coyotes. Additional calibers I have put through the paces have included .222 and .22-250 Remingtons (both built on the Sako action), .270 Winchester, .30-06, .300 H&H Magnum, .338 Winchester Magnum, .375 H&H and .458 Winchester Magnum.

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From 1963 through 1974, many Browning High-Power rifles were built on Sako (of Finland) barreled actions, with stocks being produced by FN. These rifles had a rotating extractor and blade ejector but should not be confused with the FN Supreme action featuring a short extractor as described above. The Sako actions were primarily chambered for the .222 Remington and .222 Remington Magnum, .22-250 Remington and .243 Winchester. (It should also be noted that a few rifles chambered for .243 and .308 Winchester cartridges were built on small-ring Mauser actions from 1960 to 1963.)

Between 1966 and 1971, Browning/FN used a salt-curing process to decrease curing time of the wood used to make stocks. This was a poor decision, as it resulted in many firearms being badly rusted between the wood and the metal. Sometimes years went by before the damage was detected. High-Power rifles outfitted with salt wood stocks will usually exhibit damage where the wood and metal meet. If considering a purchase, the rifle should be carefully scrutinized. If there is evidence that it was fitted with a salt wood stock, the value should be cut by at least 50 percent – or better yet, wait for another rifle.

All High-Power grades are collectible, but the Safari was most common and least ornate. Clean examples today typically bring $1,000 to $1,800, depending on caliber. The Medallion grade jumps considerably in value, with high condition examples often bringing $2,200 to $3,000, and rare calibers will fetch notably more. The Olympian grade was not only the most costly but also is comparatively rare and very desirable. New, in-the-box examples only occasionally change hands but are reported to bring $6,000 to $8,000, depending on caliber. It is important to note that claw extractor, control-round feed versions will always bring a premium. Magnum calibers typically bring a 10 to 15 percent premium, as will rare versions such as the .284 Winchester and .257 Roberts.

The Browning High-Power was the last of a breed and represents the end of an era. It is unfortunate that it was not modernized with more efficient and cost effective manufacturing methods and put on a diet to better conform to what today’s shooter is looking for. Regardless, due to its quality and Mauser 98 action, it will always retain its classic status.
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Background photo by Vic Schenkel
Early Military Mausers

Models and Calibers

Peter Paul Mauser's first repeating rifle was the Model 71/84 (above) firing a black-powder 11mm cartridge. Mike enjoys the history behind his Mausers, like this German K98k 8mm.
Evidence of a firearm design’s greatness is that it supplied the basis for many following designs. In regard to rifles, Peter Paul Mauser’s Model of 1898 is a case in point. Few are the bolt-action sporting rifles even now in the twentieth-first century that do not rely on ideas and features he incorporated into his Model 1898 rifle action in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps Jerry Kuhnhausen says it best in his book *The Mauser Bolt Actions M91 Through M98: A Shop Manual*. On the last page, he wrote in regard to the M1898, “...most of the changes in spinoffs made by other manufacturers have been made to eliminate manufacturing steps, simplify production, and lower costs.”

As with all great designs, the Mauser Model 1898 did not arrive on the scene as a brand-new idea. It evolved gradually over years as improvements were made upon previous Mauser rifle models. Peter Paul Mauser actually began his firearms designing career in the 1860s as an ordinary employee at an arsenal owned by the Wurttemberg government before the various German-speaking states united into one country. A surprising fact in light of his later success is that he had difficulty in even getting superiors to review his ideas for improvements on the rifles being made by them.

Oddly enough, for a weapons inventor whose name became synonymous with magazine-fed, bolt-action rifles, Mauser’s first successful creation was a single-shot. It was the G71 (G standing for *Gewehr*) which was a bolt-action design at a time when most single-shot rifles still used one sort or another of a block-type action with exposed hammer (i.e., rolling block, falling block, tilting block, etc.). G71s were chambered for the 11mm Mauser, a bottlenecked, centerfire metallic cartridge using a lead alloy bullet and black powder.

Trying to follow the paths taken in Mauser rifle development after the G71 becomes a writer’s nightmare. (Also *Model* began to substitute for *Gewehr* for some Mauser variations.) For the next 70 odd years after Mauser’s first rifle, so many nations adopted so many Mauser-design rifles that nomenclature becomes almost mind-numbling. Here’s a for-instance: Belgium’s Model 1889, Turkey’s Model 1889 and Argentina’s Model 1891 are essentially the same action but each nation’s armed forces had their own ideas concerning details of stocks, sights and such.

Likewise, as to sites of manufacture. To modern riflemen the simple word Mauser has deep connections to Germany, and rightly so, but the number of countries in which Mauser-designed rifles were built is likewise mind-boggling. The list literally encircles the globe. Germany, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Argentina, Brazil, Iran, China, Japan, Turkey, England and even the United States are some of the nations in which military Mauser rifles were built. Someone has to be thinking, “Even in the United States?” The Hopkins and Allen Company of Norwich, Connecticut, produced Model 1889 Mausers for the Belgian army.

Because of the factors pointed out in the two preceding paragraphs, trying to cover all Mauser military rifle developments in a magazine article would be absurd. Instead, the focus herein will be some of the high points of design changes that most affected the rifles’ effectiveness.

In the 1880s some nations’ military forces began adopting repeating rifles, so in 1884 Mauser redesigned his single-shot bolt action. Ironically, its eight-round, tubular magazine was more like the type seen on American leverguns than the staggered box type most associated with the Mauser name. It was hung beneath the barrel but inside the stock. To load it the bolt was pulled back its full length, cartridges were dropped into the receiver and then pushed for-
Above, the Mauser Model 71/84 fed from a tubular, eight-round magazine inside the stock and beneath the barrel. Right, by 1893 Mauser had developed the staggered box, internal magazine for his bolt-action rifles. They were intended for feeding from the top by means of five-round stripper clips.

ward and down into the magazine. There was a magazine cut-off device so that a fully loaded magazine could be retained as the rifle was loaded and fired with single rounds. The new rifle designation was G71/84. Caliber remained the black-powder 11mm Mauser for Germany, but a variation of the G71/84 called the Model 1887 was bought in huge quantities by Turkey chambered for its 9.5x60mm.

The late 1880s saw the great transition of the world's armies from black powder powered cartridges to smokeless propellants. This change required stronger rifle actions but allowed them to be smaller in size. The first Mauser rifle built specifically for smokeless powder cartridges was the Model 1889, as adopted by the Belgian army. Its chambering was the 7.65x53mm and for it Mauser devised a second type of magazine. Obviously, the designer's mind was gravitating toward what was to be his final magazine form.

While the Model 1889 and then the very similar Argentine Model 1891 Mauser used the box magazine idea, the notion of cartridges being in a staggered formation hadn't arrived yet. Therefore a five-round magazine box had to extend below the rifle's receiver. At a quick glance the Mauser Model 1891 and the Mannlicher design of bolt actions, such as the Italian Carcano mind was gravitating toward what was to be his final magazine form.

By 1889 Mauser had developed magazine-fed bolt actions for smokeless powder cartridges. Mauser's first smokeless powder designs had cartridges in straight columns in magazines extending below the stock. This variation is a Model 1891 7.63mm Argentine cavalry carbine.

By 1893, Peter Paul Mauser was on a roll. Very quickly the world's military organizations bought into the bolt-action, box-magazine, smokeless powder cartridge concept. One such customer was Spain with the Model 1893, which was the first Mauser rifle in which its clip-fed, five-round box magazine was contained inside the stock. This was made possible because cartridges were held in staggered columns instead of straight stacks as with the Model 1889/1891. However, soldiers carried their ammunition in five-round stripper clips. The Model 1893's (and all following military Mauser bolt actions) rear receiver bridge had slots milled in it for clip guides. The soldier merely inserted the stripper clip into the slots and pressed down with his thumb, and all five cartridges quickly slid into the Mauser magazine. (More on that shortly.)

Between the Spanish Model 1893 and the final Mauser design, the Model 1898, there was a large array of military Mausers loosely based on the Spanish '93. Usually these differed slightly in the shape of the bolt face and/or safety arrange-
means in essence is that as a Mauser's bolt feeds a cartridge from the magazine, the extractor slips into the case's extractor groove as it chambers. Pull the bolt backward before fully chambering a round and the cartridge will come with it. This contributes to another military Mauser feature that many modern riflemen find very annoying. That is, in order for the bolt/extractor to pick up a cartridge properly, it must be pressed into the magazine. Just dropping it on top of the magazine follower and closing the bolt results in the cartridge being pushed into the chamber but without the extractor snapping over the rim.

Mauser's military models from the mid-1890s made great combat impressions on two English-speaking nations. When America and Spain engaged in a short war in 1898, U.S. soldiers armed with their Krag-design bolt actions were easily beat in regard to rate of fire by Spain's Mausers. To load a Krag's box magazine, the shooter had to flip it open and then drop rounds in one at a time. Spanish soldiers just popped their five cartridges in with a press of the thumb. Then in
1899 when the Brits decided to absorb the riches of the Orange Free State and caused the 2nd Boer War (1899-1902), they got a lesson about Mausers in the hands of the 
*Burgher* (farmer) Commandos.

It is no coincidence then that both nations began eyeing a Mauser type of rifle for their own armies. The United States actually did adopt one, and Great Britain started to but didn’t get the job done. The former rifle was the U.S. Model 1903 Springfield. It was such a copy of the new Mauser Model 1898 design that the United States government eventually had to pay Peter Paul Mauser for infringing on his patents. Prior to World War I, the Brits decided to modernize to a more powerful .276-caliber cartridge from their .303. That necessitated a stronger rifle than their SMLE, and so the Enfield facility designed the Pattern 1914, again a copy of Mauser’s ideas. As things played out, the Brits declared war on Germany in 1914 and so dropped the .276-caliber idea but not the Pattern 1914 design. They turned it over to American companies to produce in .303 caliber. That’s another story.

Also worthy of note is the fact that Japan’s Type 38 6.5mm adopted in 1905 and the later Type 99 7.7mm adopted in 1939 were adaptations of the basic Mauser design: bolt actions with clip-fed, five-round staggered box magazines.

Back to the Mauser Model 1898. Adopted by the German government in the spring of 1898 as chambered for its 8x57mm (also called 7.9x57mm and 7.92x57mm), the newest Mauser actually became the bolt-action rifle by which all others have been compared. With it there was a third safety lug on the bolt and better gas channeling in the event of a ruptured cartridge case. Whereas the earlier smokeless powder Mauser bolt actions are generally rated as being safe with ammunition generating
The preeminent user of military rifles based on the Mauser Model 1898 design of action was Germany. As detailed in Ball’s book, the variations of German ‘98s were immense, so once again we’ll only hit the high points. In World War I, the standard German infantry rifle was the G98 with a 29-inch barrel, 49-inch overall length and 9-pound weight. Sights were a simple V notch in a rear that could be elevated for 2,000 meters and an inverted V-blade front. Ball relates in his book that best estimates are that over 5,000,000 were made. Many variations were used ranging from carbines to sniper rifles to ones with 20-round extended box magazines.

By World War II, the German’s standard infantry rifle had evolved into the K98k. Here the K stands for karabiner or short rifle. Now the barrel length was 23.6 inches, overall length was 43.6 inches with 8.6-pound weight. Sights did not improve; still they were an open V-notch rear (still rated for 2,000 meters) with inverted V-blade for front. The K98k was the most produced Mauser model of all with over 11,500,000 made between 1935 and 1945 in no fewer than eight factories in Germany and Czechoslovakia. Many Mauser

about 45,000 copper units of pressure (CUP), the ‘98 raised the limit by about 5,000 more CUP.

There is one caveat, however. Until 1905 Germany used .318 inch as its barrel groove diameter for 8x57mm. After that it was opened to .323 inch. The first dimension is called the J bore and the latter the JS bore. Because of this, American ammunition companies put a pressure limit of 37,000 CUP on their 8x57mm loads just in case someone fired them in the smaller-sized Mauser barrels. Therefore, a shooter of any Mauser rifle chamber for 8x57mm must know exactly which version he has in hand before shooting anything in it.

A quick check of the book Mauser Military Rifles of the World 3rd Edition by Robert W.D. Ball shows that about 40 countries adopted the Mauser ‘98 as their standard infantry rifle at one time or another. Most nations that had adopted one of the weaker versions of Mausers from early in the 1890s gave them up in favor of stronger ‘98s. One significant exception to that was Sweden. That country’s military began its Mauser era with a Model 1894 carbine and then a Model 1896 rifle. One and all Sweden’s military Mausers were chambered for its 6.5x55mm. The Swedes hung onto their version of Mauser, mostly made at home but some in Germany, until the 1950s.

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Early Military Mausers

'98s appear similar, but one feature that helps to quickly identify a K98k is its turned-down bolt handle. Most other Model 98 variations have straight bolt handles.

Germany's K98ks of prewar vintage are beautifully crafted Mausers with commercial quality bluing and solid walnut stocks. One such in my collection is dated 1937 with a manufacturer's code of S/147. That means it was made by Sauer & Sohn of Suhl, Germany. Its quality surpasses most American factory-made sporting rifles of the twenty-first century.

However, with the pressures of fighting a war on several fronts against numerous enemies, cosmetic production quality of K98ks decreased. Another K98k in my racks is dated 42 with code of AR, meaning it was made by Mauser-Werke AG of Berlin. Its stock is laminated wood, and although metal finish is still blue, machining marks on the barrel have not been polished out. It is also an interesting variation of K98k in that it wears a ZF41 1.5x scope mounted over the rear sight – in other words it’s the “scout rifle” concept put to use about 40 years before it became popular in American gun magazines. The German Wehrmacht intended these as marksman's rifles rather than actual sniper rifles. Take that 1.5x scope off of my K98k and the size of groups I shoot effectively doubles.

Some weapons scholars believe that the total number of Mauser-designed rifles built worldwide number over 100,000,000. That makes them rival the Soviet AK47 for all-time most numerous military rifle. But there’s one fact that will keep the basic Mauser '98 action in front of sportsmen longer than any more modern military rifle. That is, it was so easily adapted to sporting use. Untold numbers brought home from both world wars ended up as sporterized hunting rifles ranging from a grade little above butchery to high-grade customized firearms worth thousands. Thusly for over a century, Mauser '98s became the model from which most other bolt-action sporting rifles were derived and by which they have been judged.