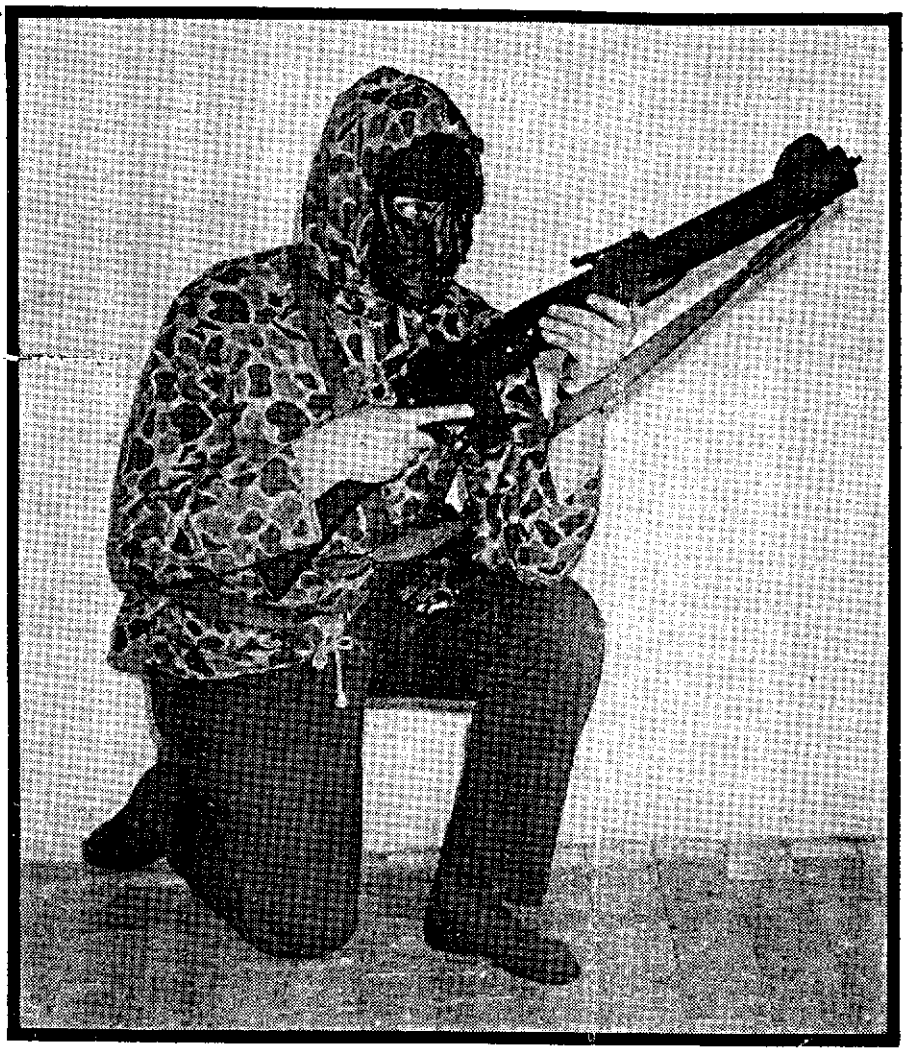
WW II Silent Killer Still Lives

the death-delivering DeLisle

by Robert T. Rome

William DeLisle, circa 1980, with his .22-caliber prototype.

John A. Minnery



Special-unit troop with a modified DeLisle.

When the British got blasted out of Europe in 1940, scrambling their ragged collection of survivors through the lethal funnel of Dunkirk, somebody in Whitehall finally reasoned that the time-saving tactics of terrorist warfare were now of use.

"Let the commandoes begin," someone ordered.

"Red Indian raids" is what the Germans called Britain's first quick 'n' dirty commando hits across the Channel. When the small boats and throttled-back Lysander aircraft began dropping more agents, saboteurs, and other commando nasties behind the lines in France, the German response changed shrilly to "gangsters and killers."

Amid all this deadly chaos we find a quiet, dignified professional engineer named William Godfrey DeLisle, a longtime British civil servant, who designed one of the most effective and efficient quiet killers of that war...a firearm so good it is still in use today, nearly a half-century later.

Ever hear of the DeLisle carbine? Unknown except to serious students of ordnance, the DeLisle carbine remains one of the most effective suppressed special-mission weapons ever designed.

The British commando need early in the war was for a firearm that would kill a man relatively quietly at 50 to 100 meters — beyond the range of a knife or garrotte. The design had to be accurate, lethal, compact, and quiet. The DeLisle was all of those.

The design and construction of the weapon was a modification of existing equipment with DeLisle's very effective suppressor built into the unit. Essentially, the DeLisle carbine consists of the action of an Enfield service rifle fitted with a .45 caliber Thompson SMG barrel, a 1911A1 Colt pistol magazine, and the DeLisle suppressor. The American .45 ACP round, which met the ballistic requirements for a silenced weapon, was already in the British supply system for lend-lease Thompson submachine guns, and also had the exact case diameter as the standard .303 round used by the Enfield.

The DeLisle approach was new in that the entire weapon was built around the suppressor mode, instead of the usual modification of an existing weapon to be used with a suppressor. What DeLisle did, basically, was to cut a standard Enfield service rifle where the barrel met the receiver, then bore out the receiver end to accept a turned-down Thompson submachine-gun barrel. He also shortened the bolt by 50mm. Additional machining of the barrel permitted a full seating of the cartridge and the use of the Enfield extractor. The charger bridge was removed, and the issue box magazine was replaced by a modified housing to accept the M1911A1 pistol magazine.

The suppressor itself was a modification of the basic Maxim design, with two expansion chambers and an ingeniously simple spiral diffusion system in which the 13 duraluminum baffles are mounted and spaced on two threaded rods running parallel to the barrel. This system created perfect alignment with the bore and served as a rigid support for the baffles. The outer casing for this suppressor is a large, excellent design which retained a high volume of gases inside the unit, thus permitting maximum quieting.

One of his improvements on the Maxim design is this baffling arrangement. DeLisle designed his suppressor so that the bullet path is above the center of the baffling system; this "tends to disturb the gases a lot less, making for more effective quieting," he says.

DeLisle designed his suppressor for minimal maintenance. Although it cannot be "shot out," as is the case with units using wipes or other designs involving packing materials, the DeLisle suppressor does need to be cleaned, and is easily disassembled for cleaning with an appropriate solvent.

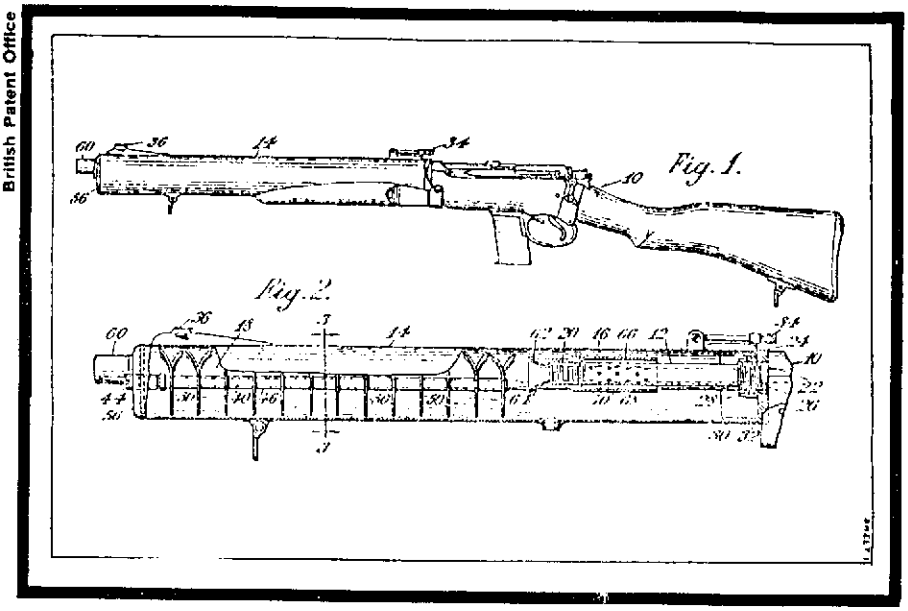
His experimental prototype carbine was a .22-caliber weapon, 29.3 inches long with a 7.5-inch barrel enclosed in the outer barrel casing. The muzzle flared into what DeLisle described as a "German Nozzle" to induce the escaping gases to circulate properly.

Equipped with a WWI-vintage telescopic sight, this prototype weapon was "field tested" mainly on such live targets as rabbits and other small game at his rural Berkshire Downs home. (According to DeLisle, "Food rationing was most extreme at the time, and the fresh meat on the dinner table was most welcome.")

In 1943, DeLisle was invited to bring his silenced autoloader to London for examination by Major Sir Malcolm Campbell of Combined Operations HQ. The first unofficial firing was done from the top of the Adelphi building into the Thames River.

According to DeLisle's biographer,

British Patent Office



A copy of original artwork filed by William G. DeLisle to patent his unique, suppressed .45-caliber carbine in 1943.

Ian Skennerton, Combined Operations officials were quite impressed and asked DeLisle to fabricate a 9mm version for special missions. Because of ballistic problems in quieting a 9mm cartridge, the engineer advised against this. The military insisted, however, and DeLisle did produce one abortive 9mm prototype which did not work well mechanically, ballistically, or audiologically. The 9mm project was quickly scrapped.

Sir Malcolm Campbell and DeLisle had several other meetings to discuss the needs and uses for the silencer-equipped carbine, and their talk turned to ammunition. Despite the 9mm prototype failure, Campbell still favored that cartridge and pointed out the excellence of the Sten MKIIS, a very effectively silenced 9mm submachine gun.

The stubborn yet innovative DeLisle stuck to his guns, too, and built a prototype .45 version of his suppressed carbine at the Bapty and Co. arms works in London. DeLisle reasoned that the .45 ACP cartridge was already subsonic and the heavier slug had remarkable stopping power at the short range of operations planned for this weapon.

It was soon apparent that commando interest was in the .45-caliber prototype. DeLisle submitted this prototype to Campbell for testing in May of 1943, and the first unofficial tests were carried out at the Atlantic seashore at a 50-yard range. According to DeLisle, "The sound was unlike that of a firearm being discharged and was paid scant attention. Even on a dark night no muzzle flash could be observed."

Thrilled with the new-weapon concept, Campbell sent DeLisle an official letter on 19 May 1943, asking for additional weapons for formal range tests "as soon as possible...with the least possible delay."

Campbell wrote, "The matter appears to be very urgent and therefore I do suggest that you complete these weapons and return to me the original rifle as soon as you can to enable me to pass them on to the interested parties with the least possible delay."

In the summer of 1943, DeLisle and his carbines were tried and tested by the members of the Ordnance Board.

DeLisle brought two weapons for testing: his .45 prototype and his original .22 caliber version.

In the tests, the officers reported an accuracy of a two-inch group at 50 yards for the .45-caliber weapon. They reported the flash was "nil" and that the sound level was "inaudible" at 50 yards.

One story (perhaps true, perhaps not) appears in at least one brief account of that testing series:

"The source states that he was ordered to accompany a senior officer of the Senior Service to perform the trials, which were to take place in the presence of the inventor and Sir Malcolm Campbell in the grounds of the Latter's estate.

"At the conclusion of a series of more or less orthodox firings, in which the weapon achieved the

Technical specifications of the major DeLisle carbine types developed and produced during WWII.

Cartridge:	.45 A.C.P.		
Muzzle Velocity:	830 ft./sec.		
Effective Range:	275 yds.		
	.45 Prototype	Commando Carbine	Airborne Model
Overall Length:	37.2 in.	35.3 in. approx.	25.7 in. folded 35.3 in. extended
Barrel Length:	7.25 in. approx.	7.25 in.	7.25 in.
Rifling & Twist:	6 groove, L.H.	6 groove, L.H.	6 groove, L.H.
Sight Radius:	13.6 in.	12.25 in.	12.25 in.
Backsight:	Notch, no graduations	50-200 yds.	50-200 yds.
Weight:	8 lb. 4¾ oz.	8 lb. 4 oz.	7 lb. 2½ oz.
Magazine Capacity:	7 rounds	7 rounds 11 rounds optional	7 rounds 11 rounds optional
Converted:	Ford Dagenham	Sterling Eng. Co.	Sterling Eng. Co.
Qty. Converted:	17	130	Prototype(s) only

necessary standards with some ease, the representatives of C.O.H.Q. were asked whether they wished to see any further tests, or to handle the weapon themselves. The senior officer of the Senior Service replied that he would. Upon receiving the piece in his hands he immediately brought it to his shoulder, presented it at one of a number of ducks which were feeding on the other side of the lake at a range estimated by the Source at 400 yds., and fired. The ducks, less one, thereupon became airborne and withdrew. A small boat was dispatched to recover the body of the victim, which was found on examination to have died from a large calibre gunshot wound in the neck. The senior officer of the Senior Service regarded it with enthusiasm for a minute or so and then remarked, 'I'm rather out of practice, so perhaps it's hardly fair to blame the gun. Actually, I aimed at the head.'

"In spite of this contretemps, the accuracy was considered adequate and the carbine was accepted for service."

After the successful range testing, both Campbell and DeLisle wanted to get some field testing under combat conditions. Combined Operations issued an order for DeLisle to turn out a small number of his .45 caliber carbines for use by commandoes in raids on the French coast.

Seventeen of these DeLisle carbines were produced at the Ford Dagenham factory in London (Campbell, incidentally, sat on the board of directors of that company). DeLisle was quickly ordered out of the Air Ministry "on loan for this special project" and was assisted by two factory foremen and a few machinists to turn out these "production prototypes."

According to Skennerton, the stocks and receivers were from used and rejected SMLE rifles and spare Thompson SMG barrels. There were many obvious differences between these early models and the later production runs produced at the Sterling plant, e.g., sights, muzzle, forestock wood, and magazine guide. In addition, the outer suppressor tubes in these first models were steel with a phosphated finish, while later production models were made from an alloy.

Each original weapon was 8 pounds, 4¾ ounces unloaded with an overall length of 37.2 inches. The sighting radius was 13.6 inches, and each weapon held 7 rounds of .45 ACP ammunition in an MI911AI pistol magazine. The suppressor unit was 15 inches long and 2½ inches in diameter.

These 17 handmade DeLisles were moved from London directly to specially-trained commando experts, where they were put into immediate combat use on what were termed at that time "recon and destruction raids" into occupied France.

On 12 January 1944, DeLisle was advised by the secretary of the Ordnance Board that "trials to date have shown promise for your design." The irony of this situation was that while 17 other DeLisle carbines were in action with the commandoes, spilling blood under hit 'n' run missions, sterile range tests were being properly conducted by properly starched officers.

The official report of the Trial Board shows that DeLisle carbine functioned correctly in all positions and test situations. Its accuracy was rated as "not up to standard," although this objection was quickly corrected with a change of sights. The penetration tests were well beyond what was anticipated, according to the official report.

However, the sound reduction of the DeLisle is where the weapon really came through in its trials. Firing tests were conducted comparing a Sten MkII, a Sten MkIIS, and a DeLisle. The results showed that the issue Sten was recorded by instruments at 125 dB, while the silencer-equipped Sten was fired semiauto at 89.5 dB. The DeLisle carbine tested at 85.5 even with the larger .45 ACP round being fired.

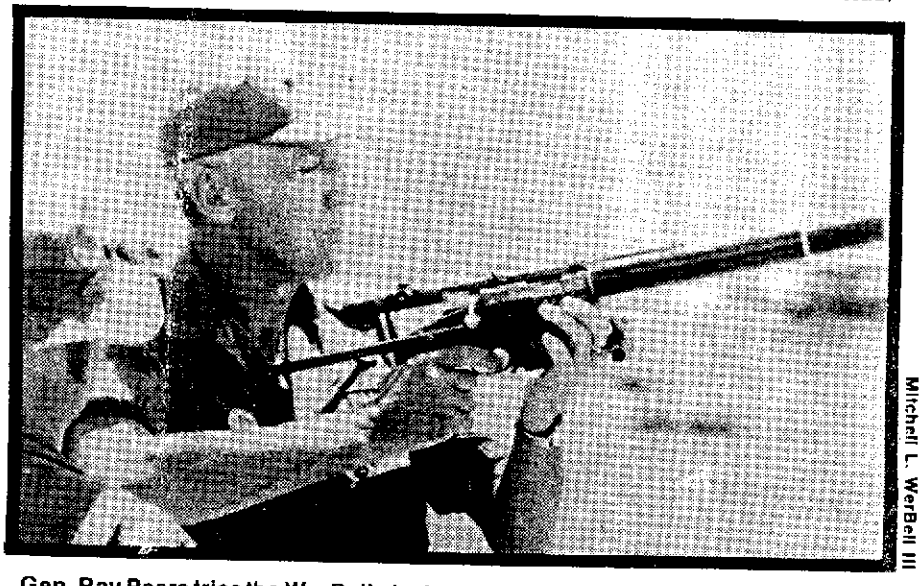
Even while the original 17 DeLisle carbines were in action in France, the ever-cautious British were still testing other hand-crafted DeLisle models. On 19 Feb. 1944, Combined Operations officers tested two DeLisles against two Stenll MkIIS SMGs. Not only was the DeLisle "far less noisy," according to the official report, "but, it is also the more accurate by a large degree and is much easier to clean."

In the same tests, scoring for endurance using 500-round test groups of ten repetitions for a total of 5000 rounds, the DeLisle again was tops. However, the suppressor became very dirty and nearly impossible to remove. This, of course, can also be interpreted as the unit doing its job. DeLisle said, "I told them the units would need to be cleaned within a few hundred rounds. I never claimed it would fire 5000 rounds and be spotless...no effective silencer will do that."

The Sten units were also "filthy and most difficult to remove for maintenance," according to the report. Today, of course, experts know that weapons using suppressors require cleaning after 200 to 800 rounds, depending upon design. That both the Sten MkIIS and the DeLisle still functioned even partly quietly after 5000 rounds is a remarkable testimonial to the designers of those units.

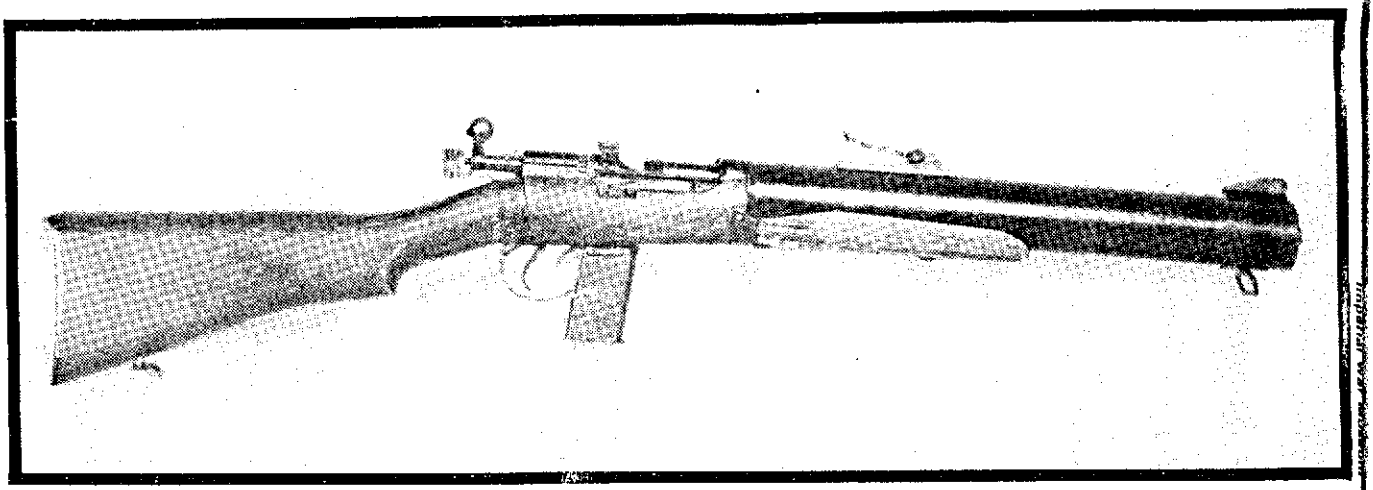
Following additional testing, and with official approval due to the confidential and classified nature of the weapon's development, DeLisle was allowed to patent his weapon domestically in March of 1944. DeLisle also patented his design in the United States and the USSR.

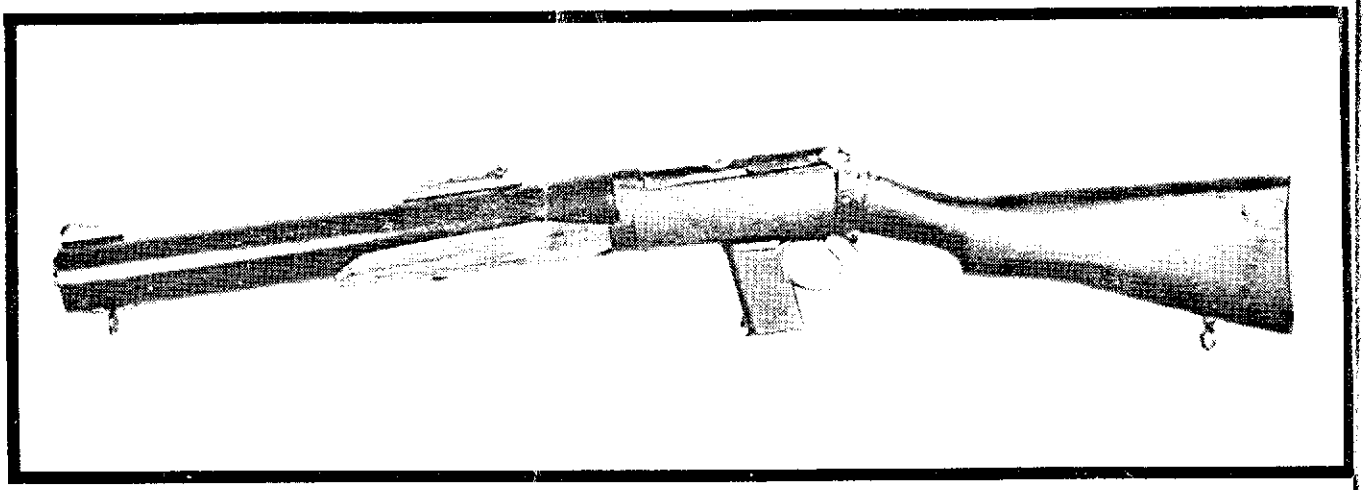
By August of 1944, the DeLisle was in production by Sterling Engineering Co. at Dagenham under a Combined Operations HQ contract that was outside the normal ordnance channels. Although this contract was for 500 weapons, the total production run was about 130, with 106 being



Mitchell L. WerBell III

Gen. Ray Peers tries the WerBell-designed 9mm Destroyer carbine in Vietnam. The weapon was an updated version of the DeLisle.





Right and left views of the Sterling production model of the DeLisle commando carbine in .45 caliber.

delivered to Combined Operations from the Sterling factory.

The Sterling production models differ from DeLisle's handmade Ford Dagenham models in exterior fashion, in that a sporting-type fore end is fitted under the suppressor's outer tube. The outer tube was made of aluminum alloy, while the original DeLisle model was made of steel. There is also no projection of the muzzle beyond the suppressor housing in the production models. Finally, a leaf back sight similar to the Sterling-produced Lanchester was added.

The Sterling model had an overall barrel length of 35.75 inches, weighed just over 8 pounds unloaded, and had a 7.25-inch barrel. The standard magazine held seven rounds of .45 ACP, although an 11-round model was produced as an accessory.

There are a number of interior technical and ballistic differences between the Ford and Sterling weapons, and I direct the serious researcher to Ian Skennerton's excellent book, *DeLisle's Commando Carbine* for those details.

In addition to the standard DeLisle, two Airborne prototypes were fabricated but never went into production, although 50 had been ordered. Basically, the Airborne model had a folding stock similar to the Sterling SMG and a pistol grip. With the stock folded, the weapon was 25.7 inches long; extended, it was 35.3.

By the spring of 1945, the Ordnance Board had decided to produce a suppressor-equipped version of the standard service rifle using down loaded ammunition, as the Germans had done with their Kar 98k. According to a classified Ordnance Board memo, issued early in 1945:

"This weapon, (the DeLisle) which is intended for silent sniping at short ranges, was produced as a private venture by the inventor, Mr. DeLisle, and Sir Malcolm Campbell. It was adopted

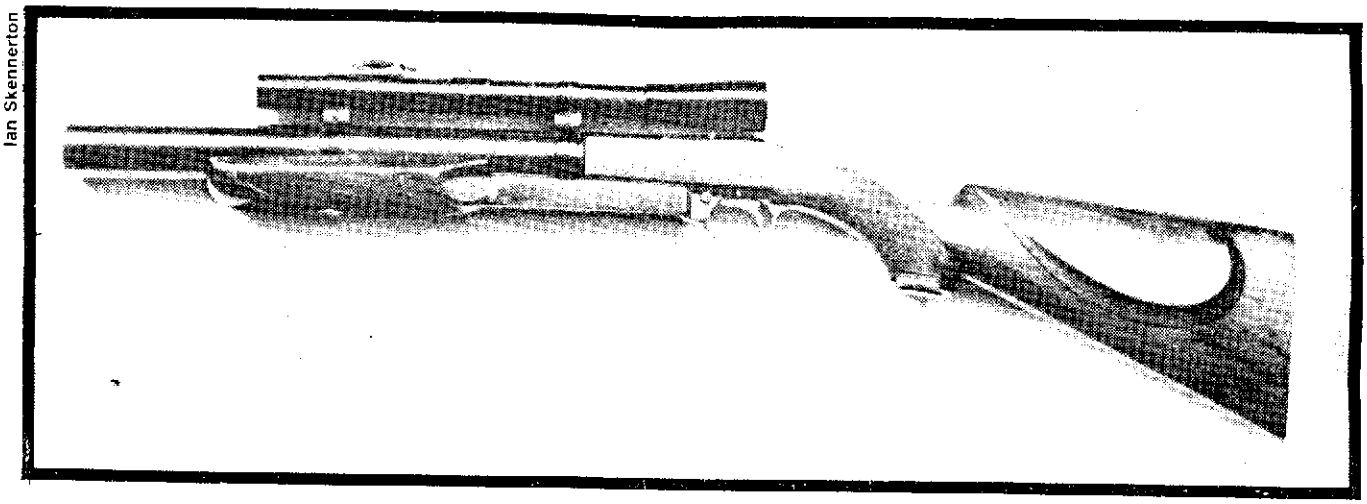
Quick to recognize the classic appeal of the DeLisle as a fine collector's item, the American gunsmith and machinist Gary Delsignore built a limited series of replica DeLisles in 1983. Basically, his weapons followed the originals except that the suppressor was a dummy rather than the real thing.

"There is just too much hassle and paperwork for a real suppressor, so I put a mock-up on the rest of the weapon, which is very authentic otherwise," Delsignore notes.

"I started to build a limited number of these 'DeLisle's' because of a real surge of interest in British military weapons. I worked for realism and economy."

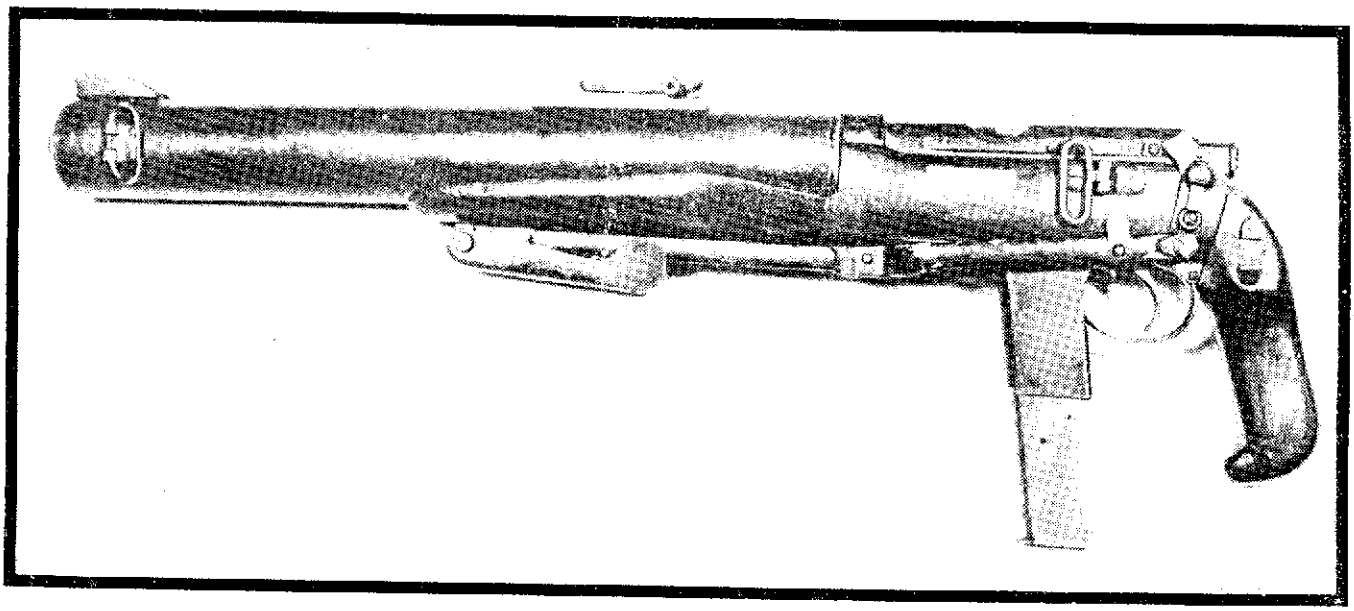
Delsignore's appeal to collectors outran his production, and for awhile he found himself short of authentic British parts. But he solved that problem and quickly filled his orders. Unhappily, the supply of real parts is not unlimited, and Delsignore says, "Not to push, but buy *now* if you want one."

Ian Skennerton



William DeLisle's experimental .22-caliber wartime carbine.

Ian Skennerton



One of the two rare prototype Airborne model DeLisle carbine.

by C.O.H.Q. and went into limited production. The weapon consists essentially of a No. 1 rifle action and butt, fitted with a .45 calibre barrel, a 1911 Colt magazine, and a Silencer.

"Though this carbine is manufactured largely from components of existing weapons, it is, in fact, less of an improvisation than other silent carbines which have been produced. It is fair to say that it represents a new class, in that it is designed fundamentally as a silent carbine and not a carbine fitted with a silencer."

However, a full ordnance report went on to present justification for the use of a "silencer attachment for the standard service rifle much the same as the Americans and Germans successfully demonstrated during recent actions...It being thought that enough of the DeLisle carbines are present in existing stocks or may be easily fabricated should such a need arise."

That, of course, was the official "good-bye" to further wartime production of the DeLisle carbine.

In addition to his famous weapon, the British inventor also suggested a .22-caliber machine carbine with suppressor to both the Ordnance Board and the Combined Operations people back in 1943.

William DeLisle was born in May of 1905 in South Africa. He returned to England for his education, graduating from Loughborough College in a five-year engineering course. A graduate electrical and mechanical engineer, DeLisle joined the firm of Sieman Brothers as a developmental engineer upon his graduation in 1926. He joined the Air Ministry in 1935.

In addition to his innovative and vital work in the area of clandestine special-operations ordnance, DeLisle contributed other work for the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Being a professional engineer, he contributed a number of design improvements in aircraft frame and engine design, for which he holds four major patents.

A true innovator, DeLisle also holds patents for such peacetime inventions as the Wandsworth "Bunnie" incinerator, an automatic garbage-disposal unit, and a self-opening ventilation fan.

"It would be of great value in jungle warfare where a large number of rounds may be required to spray an area. It is a light, quiet weapon with very light ammunition," DeLisle noted.

His unique idea was for a mechanism using a waxed-paper belt loaded at the factory with .22 ammunition to be used in a sealed plastic box attachment for the weapon..."perfect to defeat the muck, moisture and rot of the jungles" he noted.

No official action was taken to adopt this weapon, and according to most sources, DeLisle never went beyond sketches for the design stage and mocking up a few examples of ammunition packaging and feed. Viewed today, of course, it was a splendid idea.

With much of WWII history now in the open, we know that DeLisle carbines were used quite successfully for taking out sentries during commando raids and for assassination purposes by the SOE, operating behind the lines in France and Holland.

In fact, one DeLisle carbine was to be smuggled into Germany, according to the European journalist Allen Knorrs, to be used against high-ranking Nazi officials late in 1944.

"This was not one of those dramatic 'get Hitler' plots, but at least two of the silenced DeLisles were smuggled into Germany by deep cover couriers to be used by trained assassins against top level German officers and officials in an effort to shorten the war by killing the heads of the government and military," Knorrs reports.

There was a story of an OSS Jedburgh team in France falling heir to a DeLisle left by an SOE colleague who had been extracted because of wounds. According to former Jedburgh leader Mike Burke, this weapon was used in two hits against field-grade Nazi officers early in 1944.

However, the majority of the DeLisle's use in Europe was in commando raids prior to D Day. After that, almost all military operations were standard land warfare, and there were only a few operations for which the DeLisle was suited.

The war in the Pacific was another matter, and numbers of DeLisle carbines were airlifted to Burma for use against the Japanese in behind-the-line operations there in the middle of 1944.

In his book on DeLisle, Skennerton notes:

> "The war in the Far East provided more opportunities for the use of the silent carbine, where battle and contact ranges were usually much closer due to the jungle and rugged terrain. DeLisle carbines were used in Burma, mainly for infiltration and operations behind enemy lines.
>
> "An instance of such use, reported by a sniper, was when the carbine was used for picking off Japanese troops in open lorries behind the Japanese lines. The British snipers were laid up near the road, well camouflaged, and they silently dispatched a Japanese in each lorry that passed. In most cases the lorry would stop, but as no shot was heard, they found it hard to believe that they had been fired upon, or indeed, if they had, from whence it came. In the reported case, there were two or three such snipers operating along the road, and they bagged three or four in each lorry."

In another WWII account, former OSS Capt. Mitchell L. WerBell III, later to become one of the world's premier suppressor designers, remembered the use of the British DeLisle carbines in Burma, saying "We worked a couple against sentries before raids and they were something else...better than the stuff we were issued. Both our people and the British used them in Indochina...Merrill's boys used them to terrorize and scare the shit out of the Japs at night and in ambush."

WerBell thought so much of the DeLisle that years later, when he was head of SIONICS, his own special-weapons company, he tried to re-invent his version of the DeLisle, which he called the Destroyer carbine. He attempted to sell it to the U.S. military for use in Vietnam, but production problems stopped this venture.

With the Japanese capitulation in 1945, DeLisle carbines went into cosmoline. A few were unpacked for British commando-style operations in Korea, most notably some quiet pre-invasion clearing of key enemy personnel before the Inchon landings. However, the next and last major field use of these weapons was during the Emergency in Malaya, where the Gordon Highlanders made effective use of them against Communist terrorists during infiltration and interdiction operations against the guerrillas in the '50s.

In 1951, when terrorists were mucking about in Malaya, British authorities issued military weapons, including both automatic weapons and a few silenced DeLisles, to selected planters and other civilians.

"It was not uncommon to venture into a club in Kuala Lumpur and see our chaps with silenced Stens and the DeLisle here and there," Geoff Heath, a retired British journalist who covered the Far East, recalled.

Heath added that the more adventuresome plantation owners, men who had dirty war experience from just a few years back, went on evening ambush patrols. He noted, "Anywhere beyond your own fence and lights was terrorist country after dark. Our chaps used to stake out in those areas, like their old special missions days in the last war, and try to kill the terrorists with the silenced weapons — beat them at their own game of terror. Some of our people were SOE, you know, and had used the DeLisle before."

As the DeLisle carbine was a private venture, the administrative need for royalty payments came up in 1946, and DeLisle was awarded three shillings each for the projected order figure of 500 weapons. This was a grand total of 75 pounds, or about $300 in those days. He paid half of this back to his government in taxes, so his work on the DeLisle carbine was hardly done for profit.

Ian Skennerton notes that William DeLisle's real profit from the development of his carbine was "the satisfaction of contributing to the war effort in addition to his M.A.P. service."

Today, William DeLisle is, of course, long retired from government service. In somewhat frail health, he winters in the temperate climate of Spain, but resides in London the rest of the year.

And what of the DeLisle carbine today? Ian Skennerton says, "As far as I know from my research, few have ever come out of the system. That means the British military still carry them on the rolls and, I suspect, still use them."

One very good source in Ireland told a National News Service reporter there: "The Brit's SAS have some of those old WWII silenced sniper rifles here...the DeLizzills (sic) or whatever. I saw two of them on the streets here in the hands of SAS men coming out of a van."

Skennerton agreed, saying "Oh, I am sure the SAS has them in Ireland just as I'm certain the DeLisle was used in some of that commando activity in the Falklands as well. Some of those Falklands' missions were tailor-made for the DeLisle."

Of the DeLisle carbine itself, John Minnery writes, "Given the trusted Enfield basics, the stopping power of the .45, a smidgen of the almost sexual elan of the Thompson, all united with the pleasing anonymity of the silencer in combat...you come very close to the perfect special-mission weapon."