



COLT ARMY CONVERSIONS

Part 2 Thoughts about Ammo for Colt Army Conversions, the 1871-72 Open Top, and their Modern Clones

By Long Johns Wolf

Let's talk about the ammo for a minute. The diameter of the rebate section of an original model 1860 Army cylinder or one of her clones is smaller than its forward area. We know this is due to the Army's lineage from the 1851 Navy. That being the case, how can you load six .44 cal. cartridges into the chambers of an Army conversion cylinder?

.44 Colt CF Cartridge: The simple truth during the second half of the 1860s, the 1870s and 1880s, and today is this. If it is your objective to stick to the original dimensions of a Model 1860 type Army conversion, you need a .44 cal. cartridge with a rim smaller than what is used today from the venerable .44 Russian, the more modern .44 Special, or .44 Magnum, and surely smaller than the various .45 cal. revolver ammos available like .45 S&W or .45 Colt. This consideration led to the development and eventually the introduction of the good old .44 Colt center-fire cartridge.



.44 Henry .44 Colt

A comparison of the old Henry .44 caliber rimfire and the later .44 caliber Colt round (Picture liberated from CAS-City forum)



Centaure "Mystery" Conversion #11691, .44 Colt cal.: Converted 2010 by Austrian master Karl Nedbal. Originals were allegedly made circa 1875 in Mexico. The "Mystery" is a Model 1860 conversion cross between army barrel with barrel lug of 1861 Navy conversion profile, RM type ejector housing, cylinder and frame assembly, narrow "saddle"-type conversion ring, chambered for .44 Colt.

This round was officially adopted by the US military between 1871 and 1873 for their Colt Army breech loading conversions. Later, it was gradually replaced by the more powerful .45 Colt for the Colt Single Action Army. At the Western and Southwestern frontier of the United States, the old .44 Colt round was a trusted and respected revolver cartridge for decades, not only with the military, but also farmers, cowboys, and the men on both sides of the law.

During the early decades of the 20th century, Colt breech loading Army conversions and the .44 Colt were widely used again. They saw action in great numbers in the numerous skirmishes of the Mexican revolution between 1910 and 1929. As a result, the cartridge was manufactured until WW2 with blackpowder and smokeless loads.

.44 Henry RF/Stetson .44 Henry RF: Colt Army factory breech loading conversions and most Model



Like the originals, the Centaure Long Cylinder Conversion has no loading gate. That works fine as long as you are not cocking the pistol while aiming at the sun! Similar to the later Colt Open Top, a number of these Long Cylinder Conversions had their rear sight dove tailed on top of the barrel.

Army pistols altered to fire cartridges at the frontier were chambered for the .44 Colt center-fire rounds. The Long Cylinder Conversion of the Colt Army was allegedly fabricated sometime after the end of the Civil War south of the border, and the Colt Open Top Model 1871-72 were chambered for another .44 caliber round. These two breechloaders were chambered for the rim fire cartridge .44 Henry and its successor, the Stetson .44 Henry respectively.

Back in the days, this was very popular and readily available ammo thanks to the Henry rifle and the Winchester '66. Model 1860 type Long Cylinder Conversions and Open Tops could accommodate this ammo because they came with a specially made cylinder without the typical Army rebate. In other words, their cylinders were straight, with an identical diameter at the front and breech side.

Compared to the .44 Colt CF the .44 Henry RF is the more powerful round of the two when launched from a revolver with 7", 5", or 8" tube respectively. The .44 Henry deserves to be remembered for another important aspect, rarely mentioned in gun literature or books on the Wild, Wild West. Since you could load this round in the above mentioned pistols AND rifles, the concept "one type of ammo fits all" was in reality almost 10 years before the famous combo of Colt SAA Frontier Six-Shooter and

Cartridges .44 cal. (mm/in)	.44 Colt (traditional)	.44 Henry Stetson .44 Henry	.44 Colt (modern)
Cartridge length	38,00/1.50	34,20/1.345	38,10/1.50
Case			
- length	20,00/1.10	22,50/ .805	28,00/1.102
- diameter neck	11,40/ .450	11,00/ .434	11,60/ .457
- diameter head	11,60/ .466	11,20/ .441	11,60/ .467
Rim diameter	12,30/ .483	13,20/ .518	12,30/ .484
Bullet			
- type	heel outside lubed	heel outside lubed	inside lubed
- diameter	11,30/ .443	11,30/ .446	10,90/ .429
- weight	210 + 225 gr	200 + 216 gr	200 + 230 gr
Powder	BP 21 gr BP smokeless	26 - 28 gr BP	smokeless
Primer	center fire	rim fire	center fire

The modern .44 Colt cartridge, see right column in table, only has the name in common with the old one. Technically it is a .44 Special with the case shortened a mite and a smaller rim.



The War Department & best wifey of them all engages steel buffalo targets at the Bar H Ranch in Clarendon, TX using my Henry loaded with .44 Colt smokeless ammo



Repro cartridge box for modern .44 Colt rounds loaded with 200 grain inside lubed bullets over smokeless powder



Centaure Marshal #12089 converted in 2010 by German gunsmith Klaus Mumme into a Long Cylinder Conversion chambered for .44 Colt. Note straight cylinder. Originals chambered for .44 Henry rimfire were probably made by gunsmiths in Mexico about the same time Colt manufactured their Thuer conversions during the late 1860s.

such a standardized, and certainly not an automated, process as it is today. Hence, dimensions and power would differ between the various cartridge makers, but also from batch to batch.

One other observation regarding these two cartridges ought to be mentioned here. According to the research of the late conversion guru, R. Bruce McDowell, the nominal rifling groove diameter of the vintage Model 1860 tube was .451". This indicates the bullets of both the .44 Colt and the .44 Henry are undersized. This further implies neither the energy nor the accuracy potential of the rounds was fully used and gas leakage was significant, which is in contrast to our today's understanding a close fit of bullet, chamber mouth, and rifling groove diameter is desirable. What could have been the rationale back then?

Considering the latter, chamber mouth and rifling groove diameters of Model 1860 C&B pistols of all three Colt generations, Italian clones of Armi San Marco, Armi San Paolo/Euroarms, Pietta, Uberti and the FAUL Centaures were measured. Read some surprising results below.

A. Chamber mouth diameters of all Colt generations and most of the Italians are smaller than their respective rifling groove diameters. The exception are Piettas of more recent production. The Pietta people seem to strive for uniform diameters.

B. The remarkably wide range of rifling groove diameters around the magic .451 found in the Colts of all generations, but also in the Italians, was noteworthy.

C. The Centaures measured have a close fit of the diameters of chamber mouths and rifling groove diameters no matter if early 1960 or late 1972 production.

Reloaders from the Cowboy Action Shooting™ faction who are shooting by the thousands rather than by the hundreds particularly like this modern .44 Colt round. Not only can you use readily available 44 caliber components, but the straight cartridge case design lends itself to be reloaded in today's semi-automated multiple stations presses, without

messing up the equipment with the outside lubed bullets. Today's .44 caliber Colt Army conversions fabricated by replica makers are chambered for this modern round.

You can fire these .44 Colt rounds from pistols chambered for .44 Special or .44 Magnum, like a .38 Special will work in a .357 Magnum revolver ... but not the other way round, please.

Did you note my reluctance to comment on modern Army conversions in calibers other than .44 Colt? Admitting to my opportunistic semi-purism, I just don't feel they are right ... even if they happen to work ... and I love the .44 Colt rounds loaded with smokeless powder ... in my conversions, SAAs, and rifles! 🐘

Accuracy of this Centaure Long Cylinder Conversion belly gun is more than sufficient for Cowboy Action Shooting™ distances and beyond. Rapid fire accuracy test from 10 yards with Centaure Long Cylinder Conversion #12069 consisted of three strings of five rounds. The loading lever has no function.



The *Centaure "Mystery" Army Conversion* was executed by **Karl Nedbal**
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Converted the short-barrelled *Centaure Marshal* into a PC non-gated *Long Cylinder Conversion*.
 If you would like to know more about these Belgian cousins of the **Hartford Colt Army 1860** visit www.1960nma.org.

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Comparative view of modern .44 Colt (left) and .45 Colt (right)



Smaller rim of .44 Colt (left) compared to .45 Colt (right)

Winchester '73 in .44-40 cal. hit the market in 1878!

As you can see in the picture, these two traditional Western cartridges used outside lubed bullets of heel type. This implies that case and visible bullet diameter are more or less identical. Consequently boring through a C&B cylinder for such cartridges was a simple and cheap affair since no special chamber had to be cut. The latter is usually needed when you are dealing with a round with an inside lubed bullet instead like modern big bore cartridges. Without a chamber, you end up with a huge amount of "overbore" in the cylinder before such a bullet hits the forcing cone. You literally have no seal.

Specifications and data of the two old cartridges in the below table, left and center column shall serve as orientation only, because during the 19th century, their manufacturing was not