The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

In Praise of the .38 S&W Special

By: Glen E. Fryxell

The S&W K-frame Military & Police was introduced in 1899. This revolver was an extension of their Hand Ejector product line that had been started in 1896 with the smaller .32 Hand Ejector. The K-frame M&P was originally designed around the .38 Long Colt cartridge, and would ultimately become the icon by which S&W would be known world-wide. But in the guise of the .38 Long Colt, the icon was as yet incomplete. As reported in "History of Smith and Wesson" by Roy G. Jinks (p. 159).

> "*The revolver was originally designed to fire .38 United States Service cartridge (.38 Long Colt) but this cartridge had developed a reputation for lack of power. D. B. Wesson suggested the cartridge case be lengthened to allow the powder charge to be increased from 18 grains of black powder to 21 1/2 grains. The bullet weight was changed from 150 grains to 158 grains, this new cartridge was called the .38 S&W Special and the factory literature showed the improved cartridge had a penetration of eight and one-half pine boards, each seven-eights inch thick, a penetration two inches greater than that of the U.S. Service load.*"

The quote from S&W Historian Jinks cements several very important things in place -- that the .38 Special started off life as a black powder load (even though it was designed after smokeless powder had gained acceptance), that the original bullet weight was 158 grains, and that the .38 Special clearly out-performed the old .38 Long Colt. With the introduction of the .38 S&W Special the destiny of the K-frame M&P had been fulfilled.

The Model 1899, aka .38 Military & Police First Model. The first .38 Special. Note the lack of a lug on the bottom of the barrel.

The first gun that the .38 S&W Special was chambered in was the Model 1899 (aka .38 Military & Police First Model), which is readily identified by the lack of any attachment lug underneath the barrel for the ejector (they are also notable for the extremely fine sights, which are almost impossible for my middle-aged eyes to see). Some sources say that the M&P wasn't chambered for the .38 Special until 1902, but Jinks presents compelling data to show that the .38 Special was indeed chambered in the M&P in 1899, and when Roy Jinks (the official S&W Historian) speaks, I listen.

The .38 Long Colt's poor combat reputation came as a result of its 150 grain lead round-nosed bullet at a nominal velocity of about 750 fps. The .38 S&W Special could launch a similar 150 grain bullet at almost 900 fps, but the primary load that the .38

Special would become known for was a 158 grain bullet at about 850 fps. Not a huge improvement over the .38 Long Colt when viewed in the light of today's magnum cartridges and guns, but an improvement nonetheless. However, the main advantage that the .38 Special offered over the old .38 Long Colt was the much greater accuracy afforded by the newer guns and cartridge.

The K-38 has undergone a few mechanical changes over the years, but in many ways is still recognizable as the S&W icon from 1899. The name has changed a few times as well -- the Military & Police and the M&P Target had the tapered round barrel, and fixed sights and adjustable sights, respectively. After World War II, S&W changed the lock-work and hammer profile, and added a rib to the barrel and the K-38 Target Masterpiece (adj. sight, 6" barrel) and the K-38 Combat Masterpiece (adj. sight, 4" barrel) were born (the fixed sight guns were still called the M&P). The guns produced after 1905 and up through mid-1955 are affectionately known as "5-screws" because there are 5 screws holding the side plate and yoke in place. In 1955, the "bug-screw" just underneath the rear sight was dropped, and the guns produced from mid-'55 up through 1961 are known as "4-screws". The screw in front of the trigger guard was dropped in 1961, and the guns produced after this date are referred to as "3-screws". Partway through the 4-screw tenure (in 1957), those wonderful descriptive model names were dropped and the numerical designations were stamped into the frames, giving rise to the Model 10 (formerly the M&P), Model 14 (formerly the K-38 Target Masterpiece) and Model 15 (formerly the K-38 Combat Masterpiece) (there were other variations as well, but these are the ones you see most often). Stainless steel was added to the K-38 line in 1970 with the Model 64 (a stainless version of the M&P) and the Model 67 (a stainless version of the K-38 Target Masterpiece).

A family of 5-screw K-38s: the .38 M&P Model 1905 (1st change) (circa 1908); a K-38 Target Masterpiece (circa 1954); and a K-38 Combat Masterpiece (circa 1953)

The .38 Special was also a vital component of the J-frame and N-frame lines was well. When somebody says "snubnose", it is generally assumed that the topic under discussion is a .38 Special revolver. ".38 Snubbies" have short barrels (generally 2-3"), and have been made of blued steel (e.g. Model 36), stainless steel (e.g. Model 60), and aluminum alloy (e.g. Model 637 Air weight). S&W got their start making pocket revolvers way back in the 1850s, and they have made a LOT of snubbies in the century and a half that they've been in business.

And there 's the very important historical role that the .38 Heavy Duty (and Outdoorsman) played in the development of the .357 Magnum round. The added strength of the N-frame made magnum handguns possible, and it all started with the .38 Special.

The .38 Special has long been recognized as a very accurate cartridge, and one that is easily mastered by new shooters. Recoil is easily tolerated, and with suitable

hearing protection, muzzle blast is no problem. It should also be pointed out that the .38 Special is also easily mastered by new handloaders (some of my first handloads were .38 Specials), and over the last century it has become one of the most widely reloaded cartridges in the world.

The perennially popular .38 snub nose (in this case the S&W Model 637 Air weight.)

The .38 Special is a perennial favorite when it comes to instruction of new shooters and for personal protection. Oh yeah, the gun rags like to print lots of stories about the latest "X vs. Y Shoot-Out!" and "The Magical Miracle Tactical X" and such (and in the process tend to denigrate classics like the .38 Special), but while all that ink is getting spread (and all those color glossy ads being sold) another batch of .38 Special revolvers were quietly sold to law-abiding citizens to help insure their safety, as well as the safety of their loved ones. There is nothing magical about reliability. Quite simply, the .38 Special was born to serve.

Elmer Keith used the N-frame .38 Special to develop the .38/.44 loads that ultimately led to the .357 Magnum. This is the .38 Heavy Duty (circa 1950).

A .38 Special is an excellent way to introduce new shooters to the handgun.

It is easy to shoot, it is accurate, it is cheap to feed, it is fun to shoot, and it gives me the chance to introduce the new shooter to both double-action revolvers (e.g. a S&W K-38) and single-action revolvers (e.g. a Ruger Blackhawk), so they can learn first-hand the differences involved in loading and shooting these very different guns. On a somewhat more subtle level, it also gives me an excellent way to teach new shooters about the performance of different bullet types (LRN, SWC, WC, HP, etc.) in a very simple and dramatic way. First, I have the student shoot these various different bullet types through paper to show how the different bullet shapes go through a target. Next, I have them shoot the same kinds of ammo through a few water bottles. The .38 Special is a modestly powered handgun round, so an inefficient bullet design (like the lead round nose) doesn't make much of a splash when it hits a plastic bottle filled with water. On the other hand, when a .38 +P cast HP hits the water-bottle at 1000 fps, sprays water all over the place and leaves a gaping hole in the far side, the concept of terminal performance gels much more quickly for a new shooter than having an instructor recite tables full of kinetic energy numbers. A similar demonstration was given to me when I was 11, and I remember it like it was yesterday. A big splash makes a big impression on a new shooter.

One of the exercises that I like to set up for our NRA Women & Guns courses is, after they have completed the standard training course of fire, I lay out a series of .38 revolvers, starting with a 2" alloy air weight snubbie and moving up to a 8 3/8" full-lugged S&W 586 (typically a 2" S&W 637 Air weight, 3" S&W Model 60, 3" Ruger SP-101, 4" S&W Model 15, 6" S&W Model 14, 6" S&W Model 686 and a 8 3/8" S&W 586). I

ask the ladies which gun (s) appeal to them and why? Almost invariably, they tend to favor the S&W 637, "Because it's little. It would fit into my purse so easily."

Then I lay out ammunition at each station and have each shooter load and fire one round through each revolver, then move on to the next heavier gun and repeat the exercise. After they're all done, I remind them that all of the ammunition used in this test was identical, and then I ask them what their impression of the recoil was like from each gun. I usually get various statements of disbelief at this point ("You put different loads at the different guns!"), but pretty quickly everybody gets the message that handgun weight helps to moderate recoil. I ask the question again, which gun (s) appeal to them, and why. The answers are generally far more diverse the second time around! (and the 3" SP-101 is commonly very popular, both for its added weight, and also for its grip frame which works very well for many sizes of hands) I use this experience as a teaching tool, "This is why it's important to test-fire any gun that you're thinking about buying for personal protection or home defense. You can tell how well a grip frame fits your hand by just picking it up in the gun shop, but you can't tell how that gun is going to move in recoil until you shoot it. Regular practice is very important for good marksmanship skills, but if practice is unpleasant, you won't do it. It's that simple. A snubby that "bites" will intimidate a new shooter, and not get shot. And if you're not shooting, then you won't be generating the familiarity and confidence that can be so critically important in a moment of need. Buy a gun that will serve your needs, but buy one that is fun to shoot so you'll get that valuable practice in."

In one class a number of years ago, after I finished saying my piece after this demonstration, I had one gal blurt out, "I'm gonna need to get a bigger purse!" -- she really liked that 8 3/8" S&W 586 and wanted to buy it from me on the spot!

One of my favorite things to do is to strap on a K-38 with a suitable supply of ammo, and go for a summer hike in the mountains. Sometimes I'm hunting for varmints, sometimes I'm just out for a hike and some lazy summertime plinking. The .38 Special is pretty much a definitive plinker's round, and I have burnt an untold number of .38 rounds in pursuit of the wily pine cone (they're dangerous you know, you can never tell when those sneaky rascals are going to charge!). When plinking, pretty much anything that goes "bang!" works, but generally you'll find me shooting cast SWC's at 900+ fps during these forays, simply because that's what I have loaded for various other activities. When I'm out varmint hunting, I prefer to hunt with cast HP's for maximum effect. When shooting cast HP's in a .38 Special at standard (16,000 CUP) or +P (20,000 CUP) pressures, the cast HP's need to be cast fairly soft (BHN of 8 or less) in order to expand at these speeds (900-1000 fps). I generally used recycled range scrap to cast HPs for loads like this, but one can also use a 50/50 mixture of WW alloy and pure lead to get a mix suitable for these speeds. When I'm hunting for edible small game like cotton-tails, then my K-38 will be loaded with cast SWC's, which kill cleanly, without ruining a lot of meat (the cast HP's are just too destructive).

I have shot many, many different loads through the venerable old .38 Special. It is a very easy gun to load for, and there are a wide variety of excellent loads that can be assembled for it. I see no reason to load jacketed bullets in a gun that rarely breaks 1000 fps, so all of my .38 Special loads feature cast bullets. This is particularly

important for the older pre-WWI guns with soft barrel steel that would be more quickly eroded with jacketed bullets. For these older guns, I keep velocities down below 900 fps. This recipe generally involves something along the lines of 3.5 grains of Bullseye and 150-158 grain cast bullets for around 800 fps. These loads keep these old sixguns shooting just fine, and keep this sixgunner happy.

For my post WWII .38 Specials, I am willing to step the loads up a bit -- the cylinders have been heat-treated and the quality of the barrel steel is better. For general plinking and field use, my favorite .38 Special load is a 150 grain SWC over 5.4 grains of Unique for about 950 fps (6"). My preferred version of this load is built around the old 150 grain version of 358477 (the newer version of the 358477 weighs 158 grains and should have this powder charge reduced to 5.0 grains of Unique). The older 150 grain version of the 358477 isn't found all that often these days, but the RCBS 150 SWC shoots every bit as well as the old 150 grain 358477 and is much easier to find. This load is nicely accurate out of snubbies as well (although velocities will be down in the mid-to-low 800s).

When varmint hunting with the .38 Special, my favorite load is the Keith HP (Lyman/Ideal 358439) over 8.5 grains of HS-7. This load generates about 1050 fps out of a 6" revolver, and according to the Hodgdon Reloading Manual this combination operates at less than 19,000 CUP peak pressure (and so should be safe in any revolver rated for +P loads). I cast these 358439s nice and soft (BHN about 8) and they mushroom beautifully at this speed. I have used this load to take ground squirrels, prairie dogs and jack rabbits, from southern Arizona, up to Wyoming and Montana, and over through the Pacific Northwest. It is a fine, fine varmint load, and gives the sixgunner everything that can be reasonably expected from the .38 Special. This load also shoots well out of snubbies, but the HP's need to be cast very soft (e.g. 40-to-1, or softer) to expand much at snubby velocities.

The .38 Special has been serving society for well over a century -- teachers, trainers, law enforcement, competitive target shooters, informal plinkers, security guards, and private citizens of all shapes, sizes and colors have called upon the timeless .38 Special to serve their needs. Yes, I am a fan of the .38 Special. One of millions.

- Glen E. Fryxell

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