



STAND AND DELIVER... OR NOT

by Mark Thurtell

During Australia's goldrushes men made fortunes by simply digging, cradling or panning the soil. Our goldfields were the richest in the world and with reports of discoveries such as the largest gold nugget ever found (the Welcome Stranger, 2,284 ounces) and the largest quartz-gold specimen (the Holtermann-Beyers nugget) being published in the newspapers overseas, migrants from all over the world flocked here from the 1850s to 1880s.

But with the goldrushes came louts, thugs, thieves and bushrangers and people needed to protect themselves and their hard earned gold. Some gold seekers brought firearms with them from overseas while others purchased weapons from gunsmiths in the Colonies before setting off on the hazardous journey to the goldfields.

The sheer volume of weapons that were imported and brought to the goldfields means that some of the rarest pieces ever to surface in modern times have been found here in Australia. I have found some

Top: Circa 1845 English Unwin & Rodgers, single-shot percussion knife pistol. This firm advertised their 6-inch 'property and life preserver' as early as 1839 and claimed it could kill at a range of 50 yards. The trigger appeared when the hammer was cocked.
Bottom: Circa 1845 English box lock, single-shot percussion pistol. These cheap little pistols had a fold-down trigger that dropped down from underneath when the hammer was cocked to fire the weapon. The pistol could be easily concealed in a vest or coat pocket.



Top: The 1849 .31-calibre American Colt percussion revolver. These revolvers were known as the 'pocket model' and had a rifled barrel. They came in five or 6-shot and were made in barrel lengths of 4, 5 and 6 inches. These were single-action revolvers meaning that you had to cock the hammer each time you wanted to fire
Bottom: Circa 1850 English 6-barrel pepper box percussion revolver. These revolvers were self-cocking meaning that to fire all you had to do was pull the trigger. These revolvers sold for approximately 10 shillings

pieces myself and I'm always amazed at the number of bullets and the amount of melted lead from bullet moulds that are recovered during my own detecting trips.

Firearms used on the goldfields 1850 to 1860 were mostly muzzle-loading, percussion type. This means that if the weapon was a single-shot longarm or pistol, the powder charge and bullet was rammed down the muzzle-end of the barrel. In the case of a revolver, the charge and bullet were rammed down the front of each cylinder chamber. The user then positioned a copper cap that contained a small explosive charge on a nipple that, when struck by the hammer, made the spark from the cap go down a hole through the nipple and set the charge off.

As well as firearms, people also carried knives with the Bowie knife being the most popular. The Bowie could be used as an everyday tool on the diggings in that a miner could cut rope, slice canvas and make tent poles, as well as dig out small gold nuggets. The blades came in various lengths from six to 12 inches. Bowie knives were cheaper than revolvers and weren't prone to 'misfire' if needed during an attack.

The threat that bushrangers and the like posed is no better illustrated than the story which appeared in the Yass Courier in 1863. According to the report, the bushranger Johnny Gilbert, alias 'Happy Jack', and another identified as Fred Lowry, bailed up a gold miner named John McBride, at Duffer Gully near Young. McBride, who was armed with a .36 calibre, 6-shot 'Navy Colt' percussion revolver, refused to hand over his hard-earned money, drew his revolver and fired at his attackers. Gilbert and Lowry returned fire and as they moved in, McBride put his last bullet through one of the villains' hats. McBride suffered a bullet wound to his thigh during the battle. Gilbert and Lowry overpowered McBride and proceed to rob him as he lay bleeding on the ground. The two bushrangers reportedly rode off laughing.

Some people travelling along the road come across the wounded McBride and carried him to a nearby hut where he lingered in great pain. The next day it was decided to take him to Burrangong hospital but he lost his fight for life before he arrived.

The press reported that Johnny Gilbert was seen a week later at a local inn, showing off the Colt revolver he had stolen from McBride. Gilbert apparently thought McBride was an off duty policeman because he was armed with a Navy Colt revolver, which was the standard issue for police during this time.

Canadian-born Johnny Gilbert's short but exceedingly busy life of crime came to an end in May 1865 when, at the age of 25, he was shot dead by police. It is claimed Gilbert, who rode with Frank Gardiner's gang and then Ben Hall's gang, was involved in more than 630 armed hold-ups.



Top: Model 1851 American 'Navy Colt' 6-shot percussion revolver. These were .36-calibre and weighed 2.5 pounds and were manufactured with a 7.5-inch rifled barrel. They usually sold for between three and five pounds but could fetch up to 30 pounds on the gold diggings because of the high demand for firearms. These were a single-action revolver
Bottom: Circa 1860 English spear-point Bowie knife. The Bowie knife was an everyday tool for the gold miner in that he could use it to dig out small nuggets, cut damper and meat, make tent poles, cut rope, slice canvas and calico and protect himself if need be



The bushranger Johnny Gilbert circa 1862

John McBride was only one of many honest citizens murdered by the bushrangers who infested the goldfields during the period, called rather innocuously, 'the wild colonial days'.

The accompanying photographs show some of the weapons used in everyday life on the Australian goldfields during the 19th century.



Note: All the weapons illustrated are from the author's private collection.