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Author: R. W. Simms

THE BALLESTER-RIGAUD & BALLESTER-MOLINA PISTOLS:

A primitive guide for the collector and shooting enthusiast

Military semiautomatics in .45 ACP are the apex predators of the service sidearm world. For sheer knock-down power nothing else really even comes close. Those individuals looking for a good mil-surp .45 automatic will find that there is no shortage of options, so long as you're willing to pay \$500 and up. This is what makes the Argentine Ballester-Rigaud and Ballester-Molina pistols such a great value. Generally, for less than \$500 you can purchase a Ballester of either the Rigaud or Molina persuasion (they're mechanically identical) and get a well-made, full size service sidearm that functions and groups on par with a USGI M1911A1. There's much to like about the Ballester series of pistols, and some of its features would be nice to see on your basic M1911 (such as that nice wide grip tang that prevents hammer bite, for one).

Because it greatly resembles a 1911A1 pistol externally, many people just assume that it is a M1911A1 clone without a grip safety. It isn't. Internally the frame is much more closely akin to the Star Model P, although some of the slide assembly features do resemble those found on the M1911A1.

After the M1911 entered U.S. service in 1912, Argentina was quick to get on the .45 ACP band wagon. They ordered 10,000 M1911 pistols from Colt in Hartford and designated it the Modelo 1916. Later, in the mid-1920's the Argentine government ordered another 10,000 of Colt's new M1911A1 pistols, which they designated the Modelo 1927. It was at this point that money apparently became an issue because Argentina asked Colt about building the Modelo 1927 in Argentina. Colt obliged the Argentines with a licensing arrangement and even sent Hartford technicians to Argentina to train the workers and ensure a successful product launch. Argentina named their new native pistol the Modelo 1927 Sistema Colt or "Model 1927 Colt System" (recognizing Colt's design by putting this wording on the slide was a condition of the licensing agreement; hence, the Sistema designation). The Sistemas, as they are commonly referred to, are very much the equal of any WW2 USGI M1911A1 in terms of accuracy, dependability, metallurgy, and workmanship. USGI parts interchange readily. They are NOT a "cheap Spanish copy" as some individuals have derisively labeled them. There is also a persistent myth (untrue) that Sistemas, Ballester Rigauds, and Ballester-Molinas were made from steel salvaged from the sunken German battleship Graf Spree. In fact, much of the steel was imported from Sweden.

In 1929 two Spanish entrepreneurs named Arturo Ballester and Eugenio Molina went into business together and set up an automotive parts company in Buenos Aires to supply the Argentine automotive industry. They named their company Hispano Argentino Fabrica de Automoviles Sociedad Anonima, or **HAFDASA** for short. The English translation is "Spanish-Argentine Automobile Manufacturing Corporation". As it turned out, one of their biggest customers was the

Argentine government. HAFDASA won several contracts to supply trucks and engines to the Argentine military. As their fortunes prospered, they hired Rorice Rigaud, a French engineer, to head up their engineering department. They also hired a man by the name Carlos Ballester Molina, a member of both the Ballester and Molina families. In short order, Carlos Ballester Molina would become HAFDASA's CEO.

HAFDASA must have made a good impression on the Argentine government because in the 1930's they were asked to investigate the feasibility of designing and building a full-size .45 ACP service pistol resembling the Modelo 1927 Sistema Colt at a lower cost. There were several conditions that HAFDASA was required to meet. The pistol had to fit into the same holsters as were being used for the Modelo 1927 Sistema, and it needed to have accuracy and dependability on par with the Sistema. The Argentine government also wanted it to use barrels and magazines that could be interchanged with the Sistema to simplify parts logistics. Of course, it absolutely had to cost less to manufacture than the Sistema. Otherwise, HAFDASA were given a free hand to deviate from the M1911A1 design so long as the end result was a service pistol meeting the above specifications at a lower cost than the Sistema.

Being Spaniards, Ballester and Molina were well aware that Star Escheverria, the Spanish firearms company, had gone through this exact iteration in designing their 9mm Models A & B pistols. Star had even produced a 1911-size .45 auto pistol called the Model P, although there was virtually no parts interchangeability between it and the M1911 pistol.

However, Star's design made a great springboard for HAFDASA. Star had been able to cut costs and improve parts logistics on their pistols by eliminating the grip safety and simplifying the trigger and disconnect on the models A, B, and P. Also, the thumb safety on the Star A-B-P series blocks the hammer, not the sear as on the 1911.

Some M1911A1 features were retained on the HAFDASA design. An internal extractor was used and the slide was machined to accept M1911 barrels. The firing pin is captured by a firing pin stop plate, similar to (but not interchangeable with) that utilized on M1911 pistols.

The end result debuted in 1938 as the "Pistola Automatica Calibre .45 Ballester-Rigaud, Modelo DGME 1938", more commonly known as the Ballester-Rigaud. Although Rorice Rigaud had his day in the sun and 15 minutes of fame, by 1942 the decision was made to rename the pistol the "Ballester-Molina" (small wonder, as it was about this time that Carlos Ballester Molina became the CEO of the company). In any event, this explains why the occasional Ballester-Rigaud turns up. There are no functional differences between the Ballester-Rigaud and the Ballester-Molina pistols except for the markings on the slide (Ballester-Rigauds are designated as .45 caliber while the Ballester-Molinas are designated 11.25 mm, but the difference is purely semantic. They both shoot the .45 ACP round). The new pistol was an instant success. It proved as accurate and reliable as its cousin, the Sistema, and all the operating controls were located in the same place as on a M1911 so training logistics were basically the same. An obvious plus was that it was cheaper to manufacture, as well.

Pundits frequently advise that the only interchangeable parts between a Ballester-Molina and a M1911A1 are the barrel and the magazine. This is technically not true. In fact there are eight different parts that interchange perfectly. They are the barrel, barrel swinging link, link pin, magazine, barrel bushing, recoil spring, recoil spring guide, and recoil spring plug. In addition, aftermarket front and rear sights will generally install, although some slight fitting might be required as the rear dovetail is slightly different (.005" shim stock works well to hold the rear sight in place).



Figure 1: A formerly inoperable Ballester-Rigaud that was returned to serviceable condition by adding MMC sights (the rear sight is secured with .005" shim stock) and a shiny donor trigger/sear bar from a Star PD to replace the broken original. Although not visible, a M1911 barrel bushing, recoil plug, and recoil spring were also used to replace the missing originals. Note the late-style Argentine rubber grips that greatly resemble the old Bianchi Lightning grips once offered for the M1911 pistols. The finish is someone's poor attempt to duplicate a Suncorite or "stoving" finish as seen on many British military firearms. This old warhorse was purchased and repaired for less than \$200, making it an ideal truck gun.

All the parts that interchange with the M1911A1 (except the magazine) are part of the slide assembly which partially explains why many want to denote the Ballester a M1911A1 clone. The frame is almost pure Star Model P though. In fact, some parts from the Model P will work in a Ballester, although fitting may be required. One good example is the trigger assembly. It is almost impossible to find a factory Ballester trigger/sear bar assembly to replace a broken one. However, a trigger from a Star Model P or PD will work with just a bit of Dremel grinding to remove a little material from the upper rear portion of the trigger pad that comes in contact with the Ballester frame. The Star trigger pivot pin is even the same length and diameter as that used on Ballesters, and it is located in the same place on both pistols. Since Star triggers must be fitted (even to Star pistols), it is imperative to check for a correct sear bar /sear/disconnector relationship. Some small amount of filing on the sear bar may be necessary to prevent the hammer from following the slide home after the first shot. The point is that the Ballester frame is much more akin to a Star design than the M1911.

It is interesting to note that even though many more Ballester-Molina pistols were manufactured than its earlier Ballester-Rigaud counterpart, most collectors hold the Ballester-Molina version in higher

esteem. This is reflected in gun book price guides that generally give the Ballester-Molina version a 15% edge in value over their Rigaud counterparts.



Figure 2: A Ballester-Rigaud with about 90% of its original blued finish remaining. This particular specimen is still capable of 3-inch groups at 25 yards. Note the broad grip tang that prevents hammer bite. Despite occasional claims to the contrary, experts generally agree that no steel from the sunken German battleship Graf Spee was ever used for manufacturing Ballester-Rigaud or Ballester-Molina pistols.

Information concerning dates of manufacture is sparse. The chart below from Alex Gherovici's excellent book, *Military Pistols of Argentina* provides what little is generally known and the dates given should be considered approximations only:

Serial Number Range	Date Range
1-12,000	1938-1942 (mostly Ballester-Rigauds)
12,000-23,000	1942-1944
23,000-108,000	1944-1953

Early Ballester-Rigauds will have "Modelo 1938" stamped on the slide. They also have checkered grips, checkered backstraps, and twenty fine retraction grooves on the slide similar to those on the Sistema. Later Ballester-Rigauds have grips with vertical grooves, horizontally grooved backstraps, and interrupted retraction grooves on the slide as do all Ballester-Molinas. The early Ballester-Rigauds are seldom encountered.

It should be noted that the serial number on Ballesters is located in two places only. One location is the left side of the arched mainspring housing and the other is the underside of the slide. This is a

significant point of confusion because military issued Ballesters were assigned a “rack” or issue number in three places on the pistol. This would normally appear on the right side of the frame, top of the slide, and on the barrel hood, but they are *not* serial numbers. In fact, these three locations are where the serial numbers *are* generally located on the Sistema, but not on a Ballester-Rigaud or Ballester-Molina.

Some Ballesters were exported to other countries. After losing the bulk of their small arms in the 1940 Dunkirk disaster, the British government purchased weapons wherever they could get them. HAFDASA produced around 9,000 Ballester-Molina pistols for the British in 1942. These pistols occur in the serial number range 12,000-21,000 and were given a separate British government issue number with a “B.” prefix on the right side of the frame to denote the British contract. These pistols were used by British Special Operations Executive (SOE) troops operating behind enemy lines. As a result of this World War 2 heritage the British contract pistols command a premium price among collectors.

Other less notable Ballester pistols were produced for other countries and the civilian market. These can be identified by the lack of the Argentine crest on the right side of the slide. The remainder exhibits the crest and the name or abbreviation of the agency to which the pistol was issued. Some smaller Argentine police agencies received pistols that had just the crest without any agency markings on the slide. Just learning the nature of some of the arcane Argentine military agencies can be daunting (there are at least four with an Argentine naval connection alone). Although perhaps not all-inclusive, a list of agency markings commonly seen on Ballesters with translations believed to be accurately translated is listed below:

- AERONAUTICA ARGENTINA (AIR FORCE)
- ARMADA ARGENTINA (NAVY)
- ARMADA NACIONAL (NAVY)
- C.F.S. ("CONSEJO FEDERAL SEGURIDAD" OR FEDERAL INTERIOR SECURITY)
- DIRECCION GENERAL DE ADUANA--POLICIA ADUANERA (CUSTOMS OFFICER)
- DIRECCION SANTE FE POLICIA--(?)
- EJERCITO ARGENTINO (ARMY)
- GENDARMERIA ARGENTINO (BORDER PATROL)
- GENDARMERIA NACIONAL (NATIONAL SECURITY FORCE)
- INFANTERIA DE MARINA (MARINES)
- MARINA ARGENTINA (NAVY)
- MARINA DE GUERRA (NAVY)
- MINISTERIO DEL INTERIOR POLICIA DE LOS TERRITORIOS NACIONALES (POLICE FOR THE NATIONAL TERRITORIES OF THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR--?)
- POLICIA DE LA CAPITAL (BUENOS AIRES POLICE)
- POLICIA DE LA PROVINCIA DE BUENOS AIRES (POLICE FOR BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE)
- POLICIA DE LA PROVINCIA DE SANTE FE (POLICE FOR SANTA FE PROVINCE)
- POLICIA FEDERAL (FEDERAL POLICE)
- POLICIA MARITIMA (NAVY SHORE PATROL)
- PROVINCIA EVA PERON (POLICE FOR EVA PERON PROVINCE)
- PROVINCIA JUAN PERON (POLICE FOR JUAN PERON PROVINCE)

- REPUBLICA ARGENTINA ARMADA NACIONAL blank slide (CIVILIAN--OR BRITISH SOE PURCHASE IF "B" SERIAL NO.)

Air Force Ballesters marked "Aeronautica Argentina" will usually bring a little more on the collector market because there are fewer of them and they are generally found in better condition than some other agency-marked pistols. Ballesters marked "C.F.S." also have a cult following. The Consejo Federal Seguridad (CFS) agency allegedly consisted of bad news secret police that spirited people away in the middle of the night, never to be seen or heard from again.

Two other variations that compel interest are the "Provincia Juan Peron" and "Provincia Eva Peron" marked pistols. When Juan and Eva Peron ruled Argentina they renamed two provinces after themselves. Provincial police for these two districts carried Ballesters with these province markings. After the fall of the Perons the provinces reverted to their original titles and the Juan and Eva Peron markings were ground off the Ballester-Molinas carrying their names just prior to arsenal refinishing. Unaltered Juan/Eva Peron marked specimens are uncommonly encountered if not outright rare.

One side note to the Peron dynasty involves the clasping hands that are often found on Ballester-Rigauds and Ballester-Molina pistols. The Perons established a welfare foundation that apparently was mostly for the welfare of the Perons themselves. The foundation was in business from 1946-1955. Its logo was two clasped hands (as in helping hands). Police who "assisted" with the collection effort often carried Ballesters stamped with the clasped hands foundation markings. There is another clasped hand logo that appears on some 1909 Argentine Mauser rifles and, although it looks similar, has no connection with the Peron's regime.

Field stripping the Ballester-Rigaud or Ballester-Molina is pretty much identical to the process used on a M1911 pistol. If unsure though, here's the correct method...

Remove the magazine and cycle the slide to ensure that the gun is unloaded. Point the muzzle straight up and press the recoil plug under the barrel in about 1/8 inch. Keep the plug depressed while simultaneously rotating the barrel bushing clockwise 90 degrees as viewed from above. Slowly ease up on the recoil plug until no spring tension remains. Pull the recoil plug off the spring and set it aside. Retract the slide until the hold-open notch on the left side of the slide lines up with the slide stop. Press the visible end of the slide stop pivot on the right side of the slide. Pull the slide stop out from the left side of the slide and set it aside. Ease the slide forward until it comes off the frame. Rest the slide upside down on the sights. Grasp the recoil spring guide and spring and pull rearward to remove both parts. Rotate the barrel bushing 180 degrees while pulling the bushing forward until it separates from the slide. Flip the swinging link on the barrel forward and push the barrel out the front of the slide. Reassemble in reverse order.

When cleaning a Ballester for the first time, it's a good idea to clean out the firing pin and extractor channels, and it's easy to do. A tool to depress the firing pin will be required. Use something non-marring but stiff, like an old ink pen refill. A small punch can be used if care is taken, or a #0 Phillips screwdriver will work. It might be prudent to put the slide in a large clear Ziploc bag the first time to catch the firing pin and spring when it ejects itself (after one or two times it will be easy to do this without the bag and without losing the firing pin or spring).

In any event, press in on the firing pin with your tool of choice while sliding the firing pin retainer (the part surrounding the firing pin) down. Gently ease the retainer out and have your hand positioned to catch the firing pin when the retainer clears it. If the firing pin spring is not attached to the firing pin then it can be fished out of the firing pin channel with a small bent paper clip or similar tool. The extractor (the round part sticking out the back of the slide) should now pull easily rearward until it comes out. Swab out the firing pin hole and extractor channel using Q-tips wetted with bore cleaner. Let stand for 5 minutes. There will be lots of mung and drool in those holes. Use dry Q-tips to clean until they no longer come out dirty when swabbed. Then put a couple drops of BreakFree or machine oil in the holes and reassemble the extractor and firing pin to the gun using the reverse order of the instructions above.

Shooting the Ballester-Molina and Ballester Rigaud pistols will generally give results similar to USGI M1911A1's of the same era. One downside is that the Argentines seemed to have gone out of their way to put the most miniscule sights possible on their pistols. The earlier Ballester-Rigauds are even worse than the later Ballester-Molinas in this regard. Also, Ballester sights are typically regulated for a six o'clock hold at 25 yards using standard 230 grain FMJ ammunition. The net effect is that some shooters conclude that the pistol shoots high, when in fact a six o'clock hold should produce groups in the center of the target. The barrels of many Ballesters on the market these days look terrible with dark bores and shallow rifling. However, these barrels should be test-fired before considering a replacement as many still produce acceptable accuracy. It is also not uncommon to find slightly oversize chambers on original barrels. These will produce slight case bulges, but do not appear to adversely affect either accuracy or reliability. In any event, any M1911 replacement barrel can be used if the barrel in question does not meet expectations. One additional caution before replacing a barrel is to check the fit of the barrel bushing. Many bushings on these old pistols will be found to be excessively loose. Sometimes all that is needed to restore accuracy is to use a tighter or match-grade bushing, which is much less expensive than purchasing a new barrel.

While the Ballester Rigauds and Molinas were designed to use M1911-style magazines, it is not uncommon to find M1911 magazines that permit normal feeding and extraction, but do not hold the slide open after the last round. This has to do with the design of the magazine follower. The hold-open tab on Ballester-Rigaud and Ballester-Molina slide stops has a slightly different configuration than that on the M1911. Some M1911 magazine followers will fail to engage the hold-open tab properly after the last round is fired. Plastic followers seem to be more problematic in this regard than magazines that use steel followers. This is not much of an issue on a range pistol, but use of a Ballester as a self-defense weapon requires experimentation to find and use magazines that function perfectly. Mec-Gar brand magazines with steel followers work very well in Ballester pistols. Original Argentine magazines are often unreliable.

Some brief mention should probably be made of the thumb safety. The thumb safety blocks the hammer instead of the sear. Thus, a properly operating thumb safety will cam the hammer back slightly when the safety is applied. Some Ballesters that have seen a lot of use may have thumb safeties that refuse to engage when the hammer is cocked. On these guns it may be necessary to manually retract the hammer a tiny bit in order to engage the safety. This condition is more aggravating than dangerous, and it occasionally appears on older Star pistols that use the same design. Fortunately, the safety can be disengaged in the normal manner on Ballesters (and Stars) that exhibit this problem.

Little mention of holsters for Ballester pistols is ever made, but any M1911 holster will generally work with a Ballester pistol. Argentine issue holsters are typically of the military flap variety. Because Ballesters have no grip safety, and in deference to the "iffy" nature of the thumb safeties as outlined above, it is advisable to carry a Ballester with an empty chamber. One exception to this would be cocked-and-locked carry in a modern leather holster that incorporates a thumb break between the hammer and frame for an extra measure of safety.

Ballesters were issued with a blued finish. Many importers chose to have them phosphated before putting them out on the U.S. market. The refinished guns look much nicer than the originals with worn bluing. Of course, the Ballesters sporting whatever is left of the original finish can usually be obtained for less money. This situation will likely reverse itself if the Ballester series of pistols ever become truly collectible.

Due to the overwhelming dominance of the Colt-pattern M1911 and M1911A1 pistols, other .45 ACP military pistol designs like the Ballester-Molina and Ballester Rigaud pistols have assumed an unbecoming secondary status. This clearly should not be the case as Ballesters offer the budget collector the opportunity to own a first-class .45 automatic that can actually be taken to the range. It is likely that the last of the Argentine surplus Ballesters have been released on the U.S. market by now, so the timing is good to acquire one before they become yet another unaffordable military collectible.