

The Soley knife bayonet – a British prototype

Throughout the Great War the Short Magazine Lee Enfield rifle had generally served British and Allied forces well. During the years that followed, the War Department sought to address shortcomings. A variety of weapons with proposed modifications and improvements were submitted for consideration and trials held, cumulating in the adoption of the Lee Enfield No.4 rifle in 1939.

The search for an improved weapon was not confined to the rifle. Considerable thought and research went into bayonet design. The SMLE rifle had originally been equipped with a short knife bayonet, the P1903. This was fixed to the nosecap of the rifle with a specially designed stud and bayonet bar, not directly to the barrel itself. The 12 inch blade of the P1903 bayonet was deemed too short, and soon succeeded by the P1907 bayonet with it's 17 inch blade. This in turn proved totally unsuitable for the ensuing trench warfare.

Throughout the 1920s and into the 30s, a variety of bayonet designs were considered, each attempting to address perceived needs. A major objection had been the blade length. This led to a number of design submissions with considerably shorter blades, the final choice being the No. 4 Mkl 'spike' bayonet, which fixed directly to the rifle barrel.

During this search for a more appropriate bayonet the Soley Armament Company Ltd proposed an innovative and practical solution. They submitted a prototype to the Small Arms Committee (SAC) for evaluation.



The bayonet utilized the hilt of the P1907 bayonet, modified by eliminating the curve of the tang and grips, and lightened by enlarging the oil clearing hole and machining two deep grooves around the handle. The P1907 blade was considerably shortened and reshaped.



In July of 1937 The SAC authorized Soley to produce and deliver 200 bayonets complete with modified scabbards for trials at a unit cost of 6/6d. Soley were supplied with P1907 bayonets from stores.



One could conclude that this modified P'07 bayonet was very much in the running as the new Pattern bayonet. With the vast quantities of P1907 bayonets in store, it must have been tempting to prolong their service life at a considerable saving over cost of tooling up and producing the entirely new No. 4 bayonet.

Sufficient official interest was aroused for a photo image to be recorded with the bayonet suspended in a P1937 WE frog. The Pattern Room collection holds one 'Soley' example, illustrated in *British & Commonwealth Bayonets (B262)*, and at this time of writing, there are three other known examples held in private collections.

In the final analysis, the No. 4 rifle with its spike bayonet prevailed, and the 'Soley' relegated to a small footnote in the history of arms development.

