

# The Alpha and the Omega

## A Study of Two Japanese Type 99 Short Rifles

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The 7.7 mm. Japanese Type 99 Short Rifle was the Second World War mainstay of the Imperial Japanese Army. Brought home in great numbers by returning US servicemen, the Type 99 Short Rifle remains one of the more commonly encountered rifles of the Second World War. Until the 1980s, little US collector interest focused on Japanese military rifles. Because they were not seen as having value, many were sacrificed to sporterizing or suffered from neglectful storage. Many examples encountered today have been altered, are missing parts, or exhibit other condition issues.

This photo-essay provides a glimpse of what the Type 99 Short Rifle looked like, as it came off of the

production line; and provides a comparison of the original Type 99 design, with the crude Substitute-Standard Type 99 rifle in production at War's end.

The Type 99 design was notable in several respects. It was robust, one of the strongest bolt-actions ever made. Its chrome-plated bore was a cutting-edge innovation that is still used in many assault rifles today. Despite these noteworthy attributes, the Type 99 is most remembered for its bizarre appendages, including a folding monopod, anti-aircraft sights, and a noisy steel action cover. As the War progressed, manufacturing short-cuts reduced fit and finish to very crude levels, contributing further to a negative perception of the Type 99.



The original Type 99 example used in this study is from the 3rd Series produced at the Nagoya Army Arsenal, in approximately November–December 1941. This rifle represents the high-water mark of Japanese military success.



The Substitute-Standard Type 99 example presented is from the 25th Series produced at the Kokura Army Arsenal, in early 1945. It was one of the last 25,000 Type 99 Short Rifles made at Kokura Army Arsenal and illustrates the desperate circumstances in which the Japanese found themselves as the Allies closed in on Japan.

Type 99 Short Rifle production began in April 1940 at the Nagoya Army Arsenal, Toriimatsu Factory. The

fit and finish on early examples was quite impressive, comparable to the workmanship exhibited on many US military arms. All metal parts were deeply blued.

The stock was finished in a natural lacquer, called Uru-shi. Other than having the Imperial Chrysanthemums defaced, both of these rifles are in unissued and unaltered condition, looking as if they left their respective arsenals yesterday. Both rifles have all matching parts throughout. The 3rd Series example still has its action screws staked, indicating that it has never been disassembled since leaving the factory.

Creation of a Substitute-Standard began in 1943. Although we often refer to the Substitute-Standard Type 99 as if it was a specific design, the design underwent continual simplification from 1943 until production ceased in 1945. Simplifications were phased-in on a sporadic basis and each arsenal/subcontractor introduced their own variations. As the War progressed, the resulting product became increasingly crude.

Substitute-Standard Type 99 rifles are often referred to by collectors as “last-ditch” rifles. However, this is historically incorrect. True Japanese last-ditch rifles are those cobbled together in local workshops. True last-ditch rifles do not bear much resemblance to the Type 99.

## About Urushi

**The Japanese Urushi stock finish was made from the sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* tree, a Japanese sumac.**

**Many (if not most) Type 99 Short Rifles encountered today have had the stock sanded and refinished.**

**Many mysterious cases of dermatitis (skin rash) were documented in soldiers and sailors who refinished Japanese rifle stocks on the long voyage home from the Pacific Theatre. This was likely due to an allergic reaction to Urushi liberated during sanding.**



This view illustrates the fine machine work and high-polish blue found on early Type 99s. Even the dustcover is serialized to the rifle. The stock is well-made and nicely finished.



By war's end, little effort is given to metal finishing. The rough tool marks result in a blue that almost looks like Parkerizing. The stock is slender, requiring the use of a large crossbolt reinforcement. The stock is actually made of pretty, tiger-striped wood, but is left very rough.



One of the distinctive features of the original Type 99 design is the adjustable rear sight with anti-aircraft wings and lower band with the folding monopod. The stock has nicely-executed finger-grooves and everything fits just right.



By war's end, the rear sight is a fixed peep, zeroed to 300 meters. The monopod has been deleted. The wood is rough and ill-fitted. The fore stock, from the band forward, is a separate piece of wood. This is often mistaken for a duffle-cut, however, the stock was that way from the factory.





Early rifles had a full-length hand guard and a front sight protector. The nicely-contoured upper band/bayonet lug is secured by three screws. The 22.75-inch long cleaning rod is secured by a push-button catch in the fore stock.



Another view, showing the intricate anti-aircraft sight and the nice fit and finish of the early rifles.

By War's end, the full-length hand guard, front sight protector, and cleaning rod had been deleted. The bore was no longer chrome-plated. The upper band/bayonet lug was crudely welded together. The upper band/bayonet lug was the only part left, other than the bolt and receiver, to bear a serial number. Once they began permanently pinning the upper band to the barrel, they stopped serializing even that. The fact that this one is pinned and serialized, indicates that this rifle was produced during the time this simplification was in transition.



This view serves to highlight the careful wood-to-metal fit and the fine checkering on the safety knob.





By war's end, the rough machine work is evident. Although dust-cover grooves were still milled into the receiver, by this time the dustcover was no longer being produced.

The wrist looked like it was carved with a machete. The wood-to-metal fit had suffered and the safety knob was crudely welded in place.



Under wartime pressures, the once-advanced Type 99 Short Rifle devolved into a crude caricature of the original design. Albeit the ugly duckling of infantry rifles, the Substitute-Standard Type 99 was still a very serviceable rifle. Once seen as inferior by US collectors, Japanese arms have gained much respect in the collecting community. The hundreds of variations resulting from Japan's unique approach to the Substitute-Standard process is one aspect that makes the Type 99 so interesting to today's collectors.



The early butt plate was cupped steel and was well-fitted.

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By war's end, the butt plate was rough wood, secured by three nails. The edge isn't sanded to fit and, in some places, overhangs the butt stock.