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**8 NEW/PROVEN**

**9MM ROUNDUP**

# C&S COLT COMMANDER 45ACP

*A born-again 1911—  
an old dog learns new tricks!*

*By Denis Prisbrey*

I know what you're thinking, another one of those high-dollar 1911 articles that everybody's doing about a pistol nobody can afford to buy. We all know that John Browning woke up on a Monday morning full of vim, vigor and vitality, and whipped out the plans for the perfected Model 1911 pistol before lunch that day, so why bother to keep trying to improve on perfection, anyway? Obviously, if Browning was satisfied, what makes us think we can do any better with the classic pistol than the genius that created it?

Well, let's look at a couple of those things "we all know."

First, Browning did not produce the 1911 in final form overnight. It was an evolutionary process founded on several previous autopistol designs, with birthing, teething, and growing pains as he worked with Colt engineers and military trial boards to develop the pistol for government contracts first, and commercial sales second. Several changes were subsequently made to the original design over a period of many years after the 1911 was approved for service, and they came about through actual field use where gremlins unimagined at the drawing board inevitably turn up to toss a monkey wrench into the machinery. Genius he was, but there was certainly room for improvement. The sights were tiny and hard to pick up in a hurry. The spur hammer bit the web of the shooter's hand more often than not. When the "Modern School Of Thought" developed in the late '50s and early '60s, shooting with a two-handed, high thumbhold occasionally didn't get the grip safety fully depressed in some shooters' hands. The small thumb safety was uncomfortable to rest the strong-hand thumb on during firing sequences (to avoid accidentally activating it during fire), and could be "missed" in trying to wipe it off when drawing at speed. And so on. As more shooters holstered up for the 1911, refinements were made in several areas to make an already reliable pistol much more comfortable to shoot, and in many cases more accurate in the process, too. A stock pistol producing 4-inch groups may do for most of us, but there are situations where a custom that can do half that, or better, is a requirement. The end use should deter-

mine the quality of the equipment, and nobody tells Ferrari they should quit building all those high-powered cars just because most of us drive Toyotas.

Second, there actually happen to be a lot of people who can and do afford high-dollar 1911 variants. It's one of the most popular autos on the market, and aftermarket parts suppliers make a substantial part of their profits off those who customize it to various degrees. The 1911 can be built or modified to fit a broad spectrum of needs and hands, and if "nobody can afford those fancy pistols" it'd be news to several very successful custom shops.

Finally, even if you're not in the market for a brand new top-of-the-line 1911, you just might have an old clunker sitting around that could use a little facelift here and there. Which brings us to the subject at hand.

## Gun Details

Each year, Bill Laughridge's Cylinder & Slide shop does an annual custom project for me. None are inexpensive, but since each one was intended to be a working tool, we always emphasize function and durability first. Most of our C&S makeovers have involved new guns, but for 2006 it was time to haul out an older one.

In 1984, I stumbled across a 2-year-old new-in-box Series 70 satin nickel Colt Commander in .45ACP. With debate over the new Series 80 lockwork still running red-hot among die-hard traditionalists, it seemed like a good idea to pick up an unfired sample of the older design, without the firing pin safety modifications, as a possible carry gun someday, and I snapped it up. Subsequently, I found the insides had multiple machining marks (particularly inside the slide), the feedramp had horizontal striations under the nickel plating that couldn't be polished away without buffing through the plating entirely (which would









## C&S COLT COMMANDER

create a risk that the plating would begin to peel in that area), and, of course, the tiny silver sights were about useless for anything but slow fire. I still did the best I could with it back then, replacing the sights, grips, grip safety, barrel bushing, thumb safety, trigger and mainspring housing with parts in vogue 22 years ago. But, I didn't entirely trust that feedramp with hollowpoints, couldn't get around it without de-plating the frame, and as it turned out I never worked for an agency that would allow a 1911 either on or off-duty, so the Commander was ultimately relegated to the dark confines of the vault with exposure to sunlight maybe half a dozen times over the years. Since retiring from my last PD, the Commander had been in the back of my mind for renovation, and its turn rotated around this year. In looking it over, it was about time!

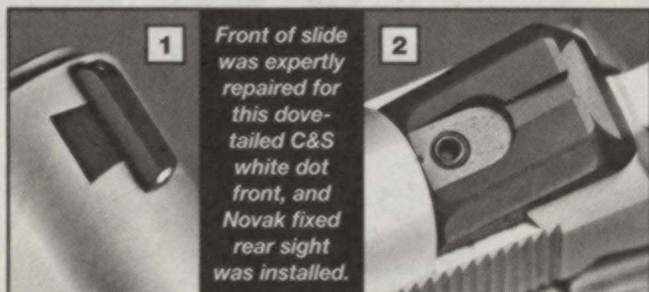
The Commander was a definite time capsule of 1980s thought with a limited budget and fewer options to work with at the time.

The original small Colt sights had been replaced by a Millet fixed rear and a Millet dual-crimp front blade. Both were black, not a problem with my eyes in 1984. The blue factory short steel trigger was

swapped for a three-hole lightweight aluminum Videki trigger with overtravel set-screw, an early Colt factory drop-in wide beavertail grip safety took the place of the short-tang Commander part, a flat checkered black rubber Pachmayr mainspring housing was substituted for the arched MSH that came on the pistol, the barrel was throated, and the feedramp lightly polished as far as the gunsmith thought was safe; a blued steel barrel bushing fitted to help tighten up the front end, the short thumb safety upgraded with an extended version, and the wood grips replaced by a one-piece Pachmayr wraparound black checkered grip. As it stood, the pistol was easier to sight with, more comfortable in the hand, more efficient to operate, and less likely to wander in the shooting grip under recoil and prolonged firing.

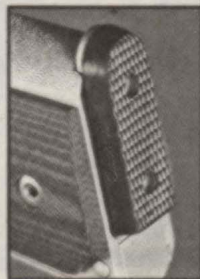
Altogether, markedly better as a shooter than the little Colt was when it left Hartford, but we can do much more to further refine the 1911 platform today.

Discussions with Ralph Gutekunst, the C&S master gunsmith who does our annual projects, followed along the usual lines. "Ralph, I'd like this...." "Okay, but if we do this I'd suggest doing that, and three others, too." "Ralph, can we....?" "Sure, but

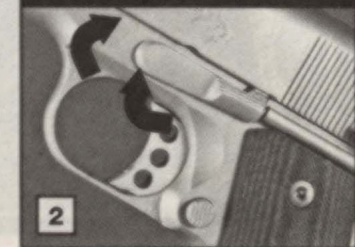


Thin textured VZ Micarta grip panels carry flat, reject moisture, and don't shift in hand.

Extra-power Wolff mag spring worked flawlessly, rubber Pachmayr bumper pad is thin and functional without bulk.



Carry bevel job removed traditional Colt sharp edges for painless handling. Note 11-degree barrel crown.



Extended C&S tactical thumb safety and skeletonized hammer improve comfort and shootability. Rear of slide was perfectly mated to rear of frame.



you'll want to include one of these and two of those, while we're at it." "Ralph, how about....?" "Done, but you're gonna need a few new parts along the way." "Ralph, would you mind....?" "Not at all, but we oughta clean up here, here, and there, too." I mention this to put a name to the man doing the work, and to give you a feeling, if you've never commissioned a custom gun before, of what the process should be. Your gun and money are both going out into the cold cruel world without you, and it's comforting to know that both will be received warmly at the other end. (Even if the money stays put when the gun comes home.) A custom smith should work closely with you to make sure he understands what you need, and you understand what he can do to meet those needs. That's what you get with C&S. Turnaround is not quick, so don't plan on seeing your pistol for a while. Competent work takes time and business is booming there, so you're in line with a number of other people.

I probably get just as tired of writing, "Couldn't hardly believe it was the same gun" as you do of reading it, so I won't. But, when the white delivery truck eventually dropped off one very nice Colt that was about 40% new, along with a bag of parts

that were definitely a bit dated, the difference was night and day. Ralph kept the slide, frame, trigger, slide lock, magazine button, miscellaneous pins and most of the magazine, but he pulled just about everything else out and bagged it.

There's really nothing wrong with Colt barrels, but we wanted a better fit; so a Bar-Sto stainless match barrel was installed, crowned to 11 degrees and throated. With a new link and pin, it's solid; there's no vertical play at all under pressure on the rear end through the ejection port. The Bar-Sto match bushing that came with the barrel was also fitted, and left just loose enough at my request to allow field-stripping without a wrench. Practical carry was the end goal for the Commander, not absolute target accuracy, and when I'm stripping in the field I don't always have a wrench along. The slide locking lugs were re-cut to improve lockup and longevity, toolmarks were addressed where possible, a C&S machined steel extractor was radiused, tensioned and installed for improved extraction and a Novak LoMount white dot rear sight was installed. Up front, some welding had to be done to fill in the Millet crimp holes and then a dovetail was milled for a white dot

C&S front sight. The combo is a great improvement over the all-black Millets for eyes that aren't as young as they were two decades ago, and much easier to pick up. We could have gone with tritiums, but I find nowadays that white dots are more visible in many lighting conditions for me than the smaller tritium dots. The ejection port was lowered slightly and flared at the rear to stop case mouth dents in empty brass on ejection, and a "bullet nose relief" was milled into the lower front of the port to facilitate ejecting a live round.

In the frame, a C&S 24/7 Professional five-piece set (hammer, sear, disconnect, mainspring, and sear spring) was installed. Except for the springs, obviously, these are high-grade tool steel parts; EDM and CNC fabricated, they're also tested for a specified Rockwell hardness at C&S. No cast parts and no MIM parts on this pistol. The short ejector was replaced by an extended ejector, which was the reason for the bullet nose relief in the ejection port. (The short factory ejector left enough clearance to kick out an unfired or dud round if necessary through an unaltered port, but with about 1/8-inch of extension, the new ejector didn't.) A Wolff 20-pound recoil spring, Wolff firing pin spring, and an Ed Brown flat



mainspring housing updated the older factory versions. The Colt drop-in wide beavertail grip safety was one of the factory's first attempts at offering a beavertail, but it never was comfortable to shoot and two sharp edges always left small cuts in the web of my hand. Ed Brown beavertails do me just fine, and Ralph accommodated by installing one and fitting the frame tang precisely to it. He offered an ambidextrous thumb safety, but I prefer a single-side lever with less risk of accidentally being knocked off-safe during carry. A C&S extended tactical thumb safety was duly fitted.

Externally, the Commander had left here looking pretty ratty. Colt's old satin nickel finish tends to scratch if you look at it hard with both eyes open, and even though the gun had never been carried, it looked like it had been around the block a couple times. Besides the well-used look of a pistol that had not been well used, there was also that feedramp problem. The nickel plating had to go, and go it did, which allowed Ralph to polish and de-burr inside the slide and frame, clean up and polish the feedramp, bevel the magazine well, do the sight and port work mentioned above, mill a higher grip area on the frontstrap at the rear of the triggerguard, remove the traditional sharp edges that Colt insists on leaving on their 1911s, do a carry bevel all the way around, and stipple the frontstrap and mainspring housing.

Since the Commander was being overhauled for carry, the new finish had to be appropriate. My main choice for an all-weather, all-condition, hard-use handgun finish for carbon steel nowadays is Metaloy's hard chrome. Metaloy starts with cleaning all parts of old finish, oil, and shooting residue by vapor honing, which is a high-pressure water blasting using an extremely fine abrasive. Parts have to be almost surgically clean for the plating step. After cleaning, parts are fine glass-bead-blasted, placed on a rack, lowered into the chrome bath tank, electric current is applied, chrome attaches to the surfaces of the parts to a specific depth, the parts are repositioned and plated again, then rinsed, dried, wrapped, bagged and returned to the shop that submitted them for assembly. This particular chrome plating attaches directly to the steel of the pistol without using a copper under-layer, will not crack, flake or chip off, can be left with a subdued satin finish roughly similar to the original nickel, attaches at a thickness of 0.002 of an inch, does not fill in engraving or roll-marks, does not affect the performance of tightly fitted parts, resists galling in sliding surfaces and provides a much harder and scratch-resistant finish at 70-73 RC than nickel. So, after a trigger job, the various parts were sent off to Metaloy for plating.

Match grade Bar-Sto barrel shows larger diameter at muzzle for custom fit to barrel bushing.



With original nickel plating removed, ejector port was lowered, flared, and "bullet nose relief" milled into lower front.



Frame tang was contoured for Ed Brown beavertail safety, a definite improvement over the old Colt wide beavertail.

Mag well was also beveled, a common upgrade.



## PERFORMANCE CYLINDER & SLIDE COLT COMMANDER .45ACP

Load	Accuracy
Speer Gold Dot 230 JHP	3.88
Black Hills 230 JHP	2.00
Winchester 230 BEB	2.63
Remington Golden Saber 230 JHP	1.63
Blazer 200 JHP	2.13
Winchester 185 FMJ	3.06
Speer Lawman 185 TMJ	1.75
Remington Golden Saber 185 JHP	2.00
Federal Personal Defense Hydra-Shok 165 JHP	1.88

Bullet weight measured in grains and accuracy in inches for best 5-shot groups from 25 yards. Temperature: Low 80s, Elevation: 4500 feet.

When C&S got them back, they were assembled, tested for fit and function, a set of thin VZ rough-textured canvas Micarta grip panels was installed, and the pistol was test-fired.

Back home again and out of the bubble-wrap, the Commander was impressive. The thin VZ panels combined with the upswept grip safety to sit much more naturally in the hand without digging into the web like the older wide beavertail did. The stippling that Ralph is usually so adamant about (achieving roughly the same high-grip-ability factor of checkering without the abrasion that sometimes comes with it, and costing much less) anchors the pistol with no discomfort, and he's making a believer out of me there. All sharp edges are gone, scratches likewise, I can actually pick up the sights now, the subdued silver finish looks infinitely better than the nickel did, the pistol still breaks down for cleaning easily, the trigger breaks at a consistent 4.5 pounds with no creep and zero overtravel, and the non-slip checkered rubber bumper pad installed on the baseplate of the factory magazine is thin enough to work fine without looking clunky, which I like.

At the range, after lubing the slide and frame rails with white Lubriplate lithium grease, using nine commercial loads in three different bullet profiles and four different bullet weights, the re-born Commander was fired for accuracy and function at 25 yards off an Outers Pistol Perch. Shooting 5-shot groups with each load, the only malfunction was a wide-cavity hollowpoint in an old box of CCI 200-grain Blazers, a feedramp failure on the fourth round of the first magazine fired. Eleven subsequent samples of the same load fed perfectly, and so did everything else I ran through the pistol, including 175 rounds of double-taps and speed drills using mixed leftovers from the catch-all coffee can that holds accumulated loose ammo from previous tests, gifts, and old handloads. That means just about every type of bullet profile and construction on the market, and the Colt ate them all up without a stutter. At the end of the 300+ shots fired, the slide was still cycling just as slick as it was at the beginning, even though the pistol was fairly dirty by then.

Accuracy in my hands was more than good enough for the intended purpose of the project. Sight regulation was perfect, there was no hand discomfort during the session, and the pistol was quite controllable. Ejection was slightly variable in that lower-powered rounds bounced an occasional empty off the forehead, but standard velocity loads tossed brass as far as 15 feet to the right. Ralph tells me he set up the extractor, ejector and 20-pound recoil spring for full-power loads, so expect that performance if you send your pistol in for



renovation. Grip screws loosened three times, (Loc-Tite recommended) and here I'd much prefer a slotted screw to the torx screws used. Those VZ grips, incidentally, will not snag on cloth like rubber; warp, crack, absorb moisture or promote rust underneath.

Quality steel needs quality leather, and the DeSantis 1CL Cocked & Locked Thumbbreak Scabbard carries this Commander nicely. A relatively lightweight, unlined pancake style with steel reinforced thumbbreak, the 1CL is available in black or tan, and the sample shown fits up to a 1-1/2-inch belt. Molding is well done and offers a secondary level of retention if the thumbstrap gets itself knocked un-snapped. Your choice of right- or left-handed models with a muzzle-rearward rake.

So, there's our annual custom C&S project for 2006. It was an ambitious one, and the total price, excluding the gun itself, was \$2,461.53. As always, this is the spot to mention that this is a buffet deal, you pick and choose what you want done to your own pistol, and you decide your own comfort level, budget-wise.

After 22 years, my updated Commander is finally ready for mud, blood, sand and sweat. Got a 1911 that's a little dated? If performance matters, give C&S a call.

### **For more information:**

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