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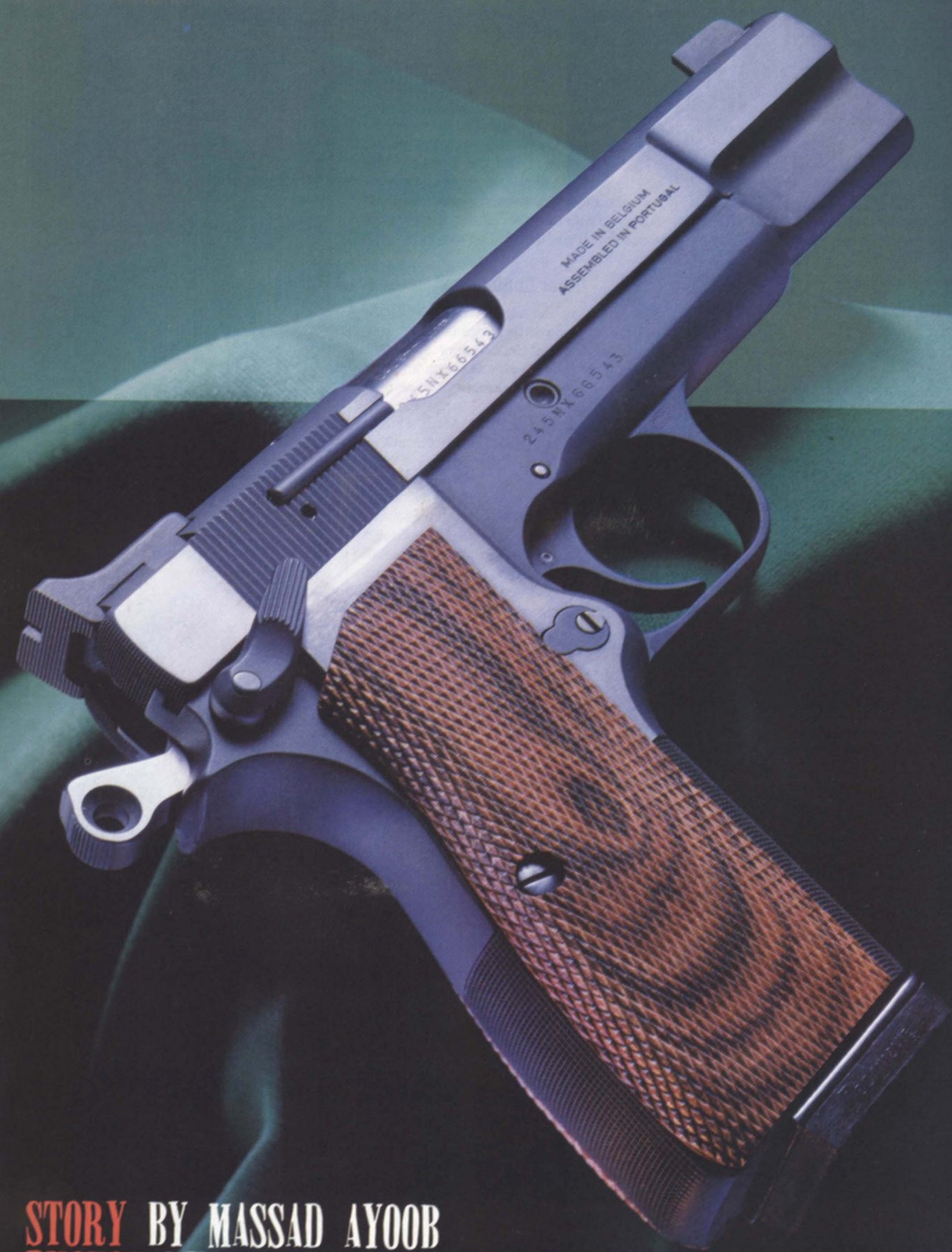
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STORY BY MASSAD AYOUB
PHOTOS BY ICHIRO NAGATA

eter. Browning brought out the Hi-Power in .40 S&W in the 1990s, and it can still be had. More on that shortly.

There is, however, one other shortcoming with the 9mm Browning. The P-35 is not the most rugged of 9mm pistols. It was designed back in the '20s, remember, before using submachine gun ammo in pistols became the military paradigm, and before today's high-pressure self-defense loads. The gun being slim, the parts are relatively small and therefore relatively fragile. In addition, many pistolsmiths consider the Browning's parts comparatively soft in virtually every incarnation of the gun.

From Venezuela to Great Britain, I've seen quantities of broken Brownings in government arsenals whose slides and frames were cracked by the brutal hammering of 9x19 NATO ammo. +P and +P+ loads also seem to be contraindicated. Listen to Bill Laughridge, who said to me, "Tell your readers in all caps, DON'T USE +P IN HI-POWERS! It's been my experience that even a few magazines of +P will upset the locking lugs."

Calibers

A .22 conversion unit for the Hi-Power was considered by FN, but never produced. (5) The vast majority were produced in 9mm Parabellum. A relative handful were made in .30 Luger. 9mm Para and the 7.65 mm Luger

round are normally "interchangeable calibers" in the sense that all you need to swap is the barrel.

The .30 being a necked down 9mm (or the 9mm being a blown-out .30, depending how you look at it, though the case dimensions are actually a bit more complicated than that), the same extractor and ejector will work for both cartridges.

While pistolsmith Laughridge has seen .30 Luger P-35s run with as little as 10 pounds of recoil spring weight, the two calibers will usually both work with a standard 17-pound recoil spring. Today, the .30's only purpose is to give you a good gun in countries where you can't have a 9mm; anything the .30 Luger cartridge can do, the 9mm Luger cartridge can do better.

In the 1990s, Browning announced a .40 S&W caliber version, but there was a long stutter between announcement and availability. The reason was that the very high pressure of the .40 cartridge and the high slide velocity it engendered gave reliability and durability problems. This writer had been dubious: if hot 9mm wrecked P-35s, what would .40 do to them?

It turns out that Browning did it right. The slide on the .40 version is much heavier, more like that of a Government .45 ACP. That plus a stronger recoil spring seem to allow the .40 Browning to stand the gaff. Indeed, Laughridge says that the trick set-up is to get a .40 Hi-Power and convert it to 9mm. Now it will take the hottest 9mm

without damage, have even less recoil than the original 9mm P-35, and be convertible to .40 S&W at will.

Bottom Line

Classics endure. The Browning Hi-Power is a classic. The ones made today by FN are better than ever. Throated to feed hollowpoints, "drop-safe" thanks to the Mark III passive firing pin safety, and still with those graceful lines and that perfect fit in the hand, they are proof in steel that quality is timeless. There was a time not long ago when it looked as if they would become extinct, and I for one am glad this did not become the case. Best of all, their current suggested retail makes these prestigious handguns proportionally more affordable than at any time in the last 30 or 40 years.



(1) Stevens, R. Blake, *The Browning High Power Automatic Pistol*, Couberg, Ontario: Collector Grade Publications, 1996, P.70.

(2) Cooper, Jeff, *Cooper on Handguns*, Los Angeles: Petersen Publishing, 1974, P. 186.

(3) Bady, Donald B., *Colt Automatic Pistols*, revised edition, Union City, TN: Pioneer Press, 2000, PP. 255-258.

(4) Stevens, op.cit., P. 53.

(5) Stevens, Ibid., P. 238.

THE BROWNING HI-POWER TODAY

**Dominant High-Capacity Pistol No Longer,
The Hi-Power Offers Other Virtues.**

In November of 1926, John Moses Browning dropped dead while working in his office at Fabrique Nationale headquarters in Herstal, Belgium. The project in front of him when he collapsed was the finalization of his Superposed shotgun, but if you ask most students of firearms what his last design was, they will most likely reply, "The Hi-Power pistol!"

Well, not exactly. Browning was certainly responsible for the Hi-Power's little known predecessor, the *Grand Rendement* (loosely translated, "High Capacity") pistol, developed for the French military and tested by them in 1922. When one looks at Browning's last patent, which bears U.S. Patent Office Number 1,618,510, and was filed on June 28, 1923 — it's clear that the pistol depicted is the *Grand Rendement*, complete with such features as a breech bolt running through the slide from the rear, which never made it to the pistol we know today as the Hi-Power.

The 16-shot *Grand Rendement* 9mm Parabellum was a large gun with an ungainly appearance and overly long grip-frame. The man who brought the pistol down to a manageable size was Dieudonne Saive. Two years away from becoming head of all small arms production for FN, Saive was the company's most gifted gun designer in the absence of Browning, and was up to the task.

Making Of A Masterpiece

He shortened the pistol at the front and at the butt, streamlining the gun and reducing weight. He brought the magazine down to 13 rounds in a reasonably compact size, and did away with the breech bolt design in favor of a system that would allow a similar takedown to John Browning's already-proven 1911 .45. The older 9mm's manual safety, an awkward thing at the grip tang area, was replaced with one that worked similar to that of the Colt pistol.

It would not be too simplistic to say that John Moses certainly did create the concept, but *Monsieur Saive* was the one who most assuredly shaped it into what became its classic form. Pretty much finalized by 1930, the *Grand Puissance* ("High Power", known to Europeans later as the "GP" for short) was not formally introduced until 1935, creating its other famous synonym, P-35.

The gun was delayed by sluggish market conditions caused by the world-wide depression. Once announced, however, it was an instant hit. The GP was available with plain fixed sights or a tangent adjustable which, with wild

optimism for a 9mm pistol, was graded for sighting distances up to 500 meters. It was also offered with wooden shoulder stock, a popular accessory among the military handgun purchasers of Europe.

Serial number 36,000 had been produced, says gun historian R. Blake Stevens, before Saive redesigned the barrel lug's cam slot to cure a spate of breakages that had occurred with early models after heavy shooting. (1)

.40 S&W version of the Hi-Power incorporates a beefed-up slide and heavy recoil spring.

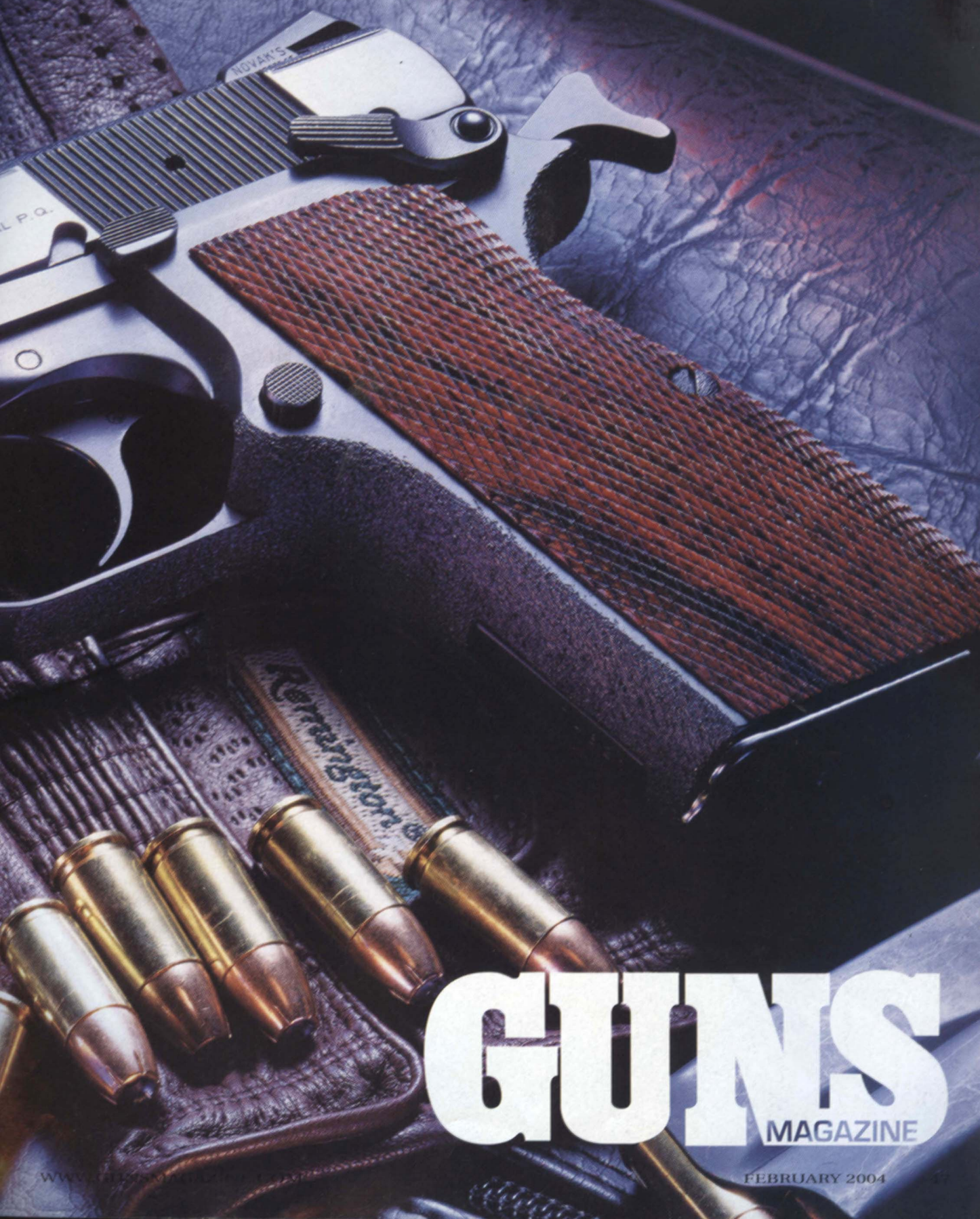


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Splendid custom P-35 from the shop of Wayne Novak(877-526-0980).



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.22 conversion unit for the P-35 from J.A. Ciener is in the final testing phase and should be available soon. Retail will be under \$200 for fixed sights, \$249 for adjustable sights. These should be just the ticket for fun, low cost practice. Count on an early report in these pages. Below: The Robar Companies are renown for some of the nicest custom Hi-Powers. (J.C. photo)

Into The Crucible

Then came Hitler's invasion of the Low Countries. Belgium was quickly conquered, and the FN factory annexed to the Third Reich's cause. Saive and some of his colleagues managed to flee to free countries. Saive was instrumental in founding a production line at the John Inglis Company in Canada, where the Hi-Power would be produced throughout World War II for Canada, England, China, and other Allied nations.

Meanwhile, some 319,000 Belgian Hi-Powers were manufactured by the Nazis during their occupation. By the time the Allies liberated Herstal, the German occupying forces had had to resort to forced labor, and the guns they were producing were the worst Brownings of all time, with ugly finishes and often poor fit.

Time marched on. In the second half of the 20th Century, the Browning Hi-Power became the overwhelming choice of service pistol for most of the NATO nations and virtually all of the British Commonwealth countries. It was said that the Hi-Power was the only firearm in common use on both Allied and Axis sides in World War II. Nor would this be the last time men with Brownings would face other men with Brownings in battle. The P-35 was the standard sidearm of both sides in the Falklands intervention, and many were used by both Israeli and Arab forces in the Middle East.

Copies would be licensed by FN from factories in Canada and Argentina. Unlicensed copies would emerge from Hungary, Israel, and even Indonesia. (An agreement was in place for England to build them at Enfield during the war years, but the project never got off the ground.) Hi-

Powers assembled in Portugal began earning a reputation for superior functionality in the 1980s. Stevens estimates that FN alone had produced 1.5 million of these pistols by the mid-1990s.

The P-35 has been produced in other calibers, notably .30 Luger and, in the 1990s, .40 S&W. Various double action models have been offered to the market, one designed by *Monsieur Saive* himself in 1952. The most mechanically intriguing of these options was the FA, or Fast Action design, which survives today as the SFS (Super Fast Safety) retrofit offered for both Hi-Powers and 1911s by Bill Laughridge's Cylinder & Slide Shop (800-448-1713; www.cylinder-slide.com). A lightweight aluminum alloy



R.B. PHOTO





Cylinder and Slide is another firm famous for custom P-35s, and they don't come more exotic than this "chopped and channeled" Pathfinder. Inset: Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith, (also Battle of Britain RAF fighter pilot) tries his hand with custom P-35 at '77 IPSC World Match.

frame, also designed by a then-aging Saive in the 1950s, was offered commercially but never caught on.

The quintessential Browning Hi-Power remains a steel-frame single action semiautomatic chambered for the 9mm Parabellum cartridge. It is today imported into the United States by FNUSA.

Beyond History: The P-35's Attributes

It is far more than a sense of history that drives the continued fascination of the shooting world with this oldest 9X19 pistol design currently in production. Some elements of the Browning's design make it irresistible to shooters.

"Aside from its less-than-optimum cartridge, it is an excellent weapon," Jeff Cooper said of the 9mm Browning. "If it is not quite right as issued, it is readily modified by a competent gunsmith into the best heavy-duty 9mm auto in existence." (2)

Ask a dozen Hi-Power enthusiasts to name three things they like about the gun, and one word will almost certainly be common to all of them: "feel." John Browning was a master of ergonomics long before the word was coined. His design work on the *Grand Rendement* would have been roughly concurrent with the U.S. Army Ordnance Department's review of Model 1911 features that could stand improvement, and would result in the updated Model 1911A1.

During a study that ran from December 11, 1920 through October 22, 1923, new features were discussed including a shorter trigger easier for small fingers to reach. These were set in stone in the "-A1" modifications made official on June 15, 1926, well before Browning's death, (3) and would have been well known to him while working on the large capacity 9mm pistol for FN. The trigger reach on the *Grand Rendement* appears to have been retained on the P-35, and in turn is functionally identical to that of the 1911A1.

This is probably why, in spite of its double stack magazine, the Browning Hi-Power seems to fit so well in even small hands, while still being comfortable in large hands. The glory for this must be shared with Saive, who did the final fine-tuning of the grip shape, which so many shooters with hands of all sizes describe as a perfect fit with natural pointability.

So much care was taken not to make the grip too fat that the trigger linkage of the P-35 actually extends up into the slide area. As we shall see, the Browning trigger pull is notoriously difficult to tune, largely because of this strange geometry of its design.

The Browning has an extremely slim slide, elegantly tapered toward the front, when compared to modern duty-type 9mm autos. This makes it extremely discreet to conceal and noticeably more comfortable to carry inside the waistband. The gracefully slim barrel combines with the light weight to enhance speed of draw and target acquisi-

tion. As a rule of thumb, the loaded Browning 9mm will be about the same weight as the unloaded 1911A1 .45 auto.

However, there is indeed no free lunch. The Browning Hi-Power, when seen in light of the way we use handguns today, was a flawed gem. Fortunately, most of those flaws can be polished away, so to speak, at the hands of an appropriate artisan.

Fixing the Flaws

Many of the Hi-Power's flaws were cured over time by the industry, and particularly by FN/Browning. Until 1962, the GP had an internal extractor that was very small, and prone to breakage. Notes master Hi-Power custom gunsmith Bill Laughridge of the Cylinder & Slide Shop, "The fastest way to break one of the old extractors is to lock the slide back, drop a cartridge into the chamber, and then slam the slide on top of it. Always cycle the first round into the chamber out of the magazine!" In '62, however, the Browning was strengthened by a much more durable outside-mounted extractor.

For most of its existence, the thumb safety of the Browning was a flat little thing so palpably mushy that your sense of touch literally couldn't tell you whether it was on or off safe. The lever was also extremely difficult to manipulate. Browning changed that in the 1980s, with a great leap forward. The new safety catch was just right in size, positive yet easy to operate both up or down, and — for the first time — ambidextrous. Another problem solved.

Restricted Diet

Most Hi-Powers, for most of the gun's epoch, were manufactured for military hardball. The tough jacketed, pointy nose rounds fed reliably, but hollowpoints were a different story. It was simply understood back then that if you wanted to carry your P-35 with effective ammunition, you would send it to a custom gunsmith to have it throated. Factory throating came with the Portuguese-assembled Brownings beginning in the Eighties. *Quel difference!* Now, they fed even wide-mouth JHP rounds out of the box, without a pistolsmith's attentions.

Serious shooters were never really satisfied with Hi-Power sights. The tiny front post and "U" notch rear were impossible to pick up in anything but the best light and conditions of calmness. Although the 500-meter tangent sight setting (listed as a thousand meters on the first few models, according to Stevens) was a joke, (4) shooters liked it if only because it gave a slightly larger, clearer sight picture than the fixed service sights. There were those who said that a 300 or 400 meter sight setting would actually put the 9mm bullets pretty close to correct for elevation at perhaps 200 meters.

In the latter 20th Century, the manufacturers had spotty results with the adjustable sights they installed as factory options. One

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in particular, made of sheet metal, caused pistolsmiths to grind their teeth. Those 'smiths did a land office business, though, installing BoMars for the serious marksmen. A BoMar sight rib attached to a Hi-Power was the ticket for David Westerhout of South Africa, the first man to ever win the IPSC World Championship with a 9mm, back about a quarter century ago.

Today's pistolsmiths usually install Novak or Heinie fixed night sights on custom Brownings. Frankly, many thought that Browning solved the problem nicely with the big, blocky fixed sights they began putting on the guns in the 1980s.

If FN was optimistic about thousand-meter sights, Saive may have been optimistic about the 13-round magazine capacity. Each generation rediscovers the fact that the P-35 is most reliable when its magazines are down-loaded by one round. Brit soldiers were taught to load only 12 per mag, and SAS troopies told me they were disciplined for having a thirteenth round in a magazine.

Less Than Refined Triggers

The Browning Hi-Power has always been infamous for a trigger pull that is mediocre at best. Sometimes creepy, sometimes "stagey," it is always heavy, though in the best examples it is heavy and smooth.

Today's pulls are not truly bad, they're just not as forgiving of a frisky trigger finger as are the lighter-pulling guns that shooters currently seem to favor.

Except for some of the Nazi Hi-Powers, in which the device was deleted as a cost-cutting measure, this gun has traditionally come with a magazine disconnect, which keeps the chambered round from firing if the magazine is not fully seated. This kept the magazine from falling free when the release button was pushed, a feature Americans like, and it also gets in the way of the trigger linkage and further worsens the trigger pull and makes it heavier. Much of this, too, has been fixed.

When Browning had to come up with a ten round magazine to satisfy the demands of Clinton's 1994 law, they put a little spring on the bottom. I don't mean to be uncompimentary when I say it resembles a rat-trap. It doesn't seem to slow down reloading, and when the mag release button is pushed, this spring ejects the magazine with vigor.

This feature constituted one small silver lining in an otherwise dark cloud. A ten round magazine is all you need in IDPA shooting, for example, and indeed, that's all the rounds you're allowed to have in the magazine in Enhanced Service Pistol class, the category in which a Hi-Power would compete in that sport.

Laughridge's Cylinder and Slide Shop can alter your pistol and high capacity magazines to drop free. It involves judicious pol-

ishing of the contact surfaces on both the disconnect and the front faces of the magazines. The price is reasonable, and it gives you the best of both worlds. I say that because the common solution — simply removing the disconnect — is unwise in today's times of unmeritorious lawsuits.

I know of one case in which the prosecutor made a big deal out of a Hi-Power with disconnect removed being proof that its owner was reckless with firearms. This despite the fact the Browning was not even the gun involved in the shooting in question.

The burr or rowel type hammer that was so long the Browning's trademark tended to bite the web of many shooters' hands. For some years now, FN has been using a more conventional spur hammer, which for most people seems to solve the problem. It's an easy retrofit to older guns.

Shortcomings One Must Live With

Col. Cooper said the only problem with the Browning was its caliber. That has been solved in a couple of ways. Today's 9mm defense ammo is not your father's 9mm Luger round. If modern 9mm +P+ ammo had been available in Jeff's formative years, handgun history might have changed, because 115 grain JHPs at 1,300 fps or so produce autopsy results with phrases like "macerated heart," something you'll never see with a subsonic .45 Auto bullet. If you must have larger bore diam-