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FIGHT OR FUN?



Sublime Sophisticates — Retro Colts by Heinie & Vickers.

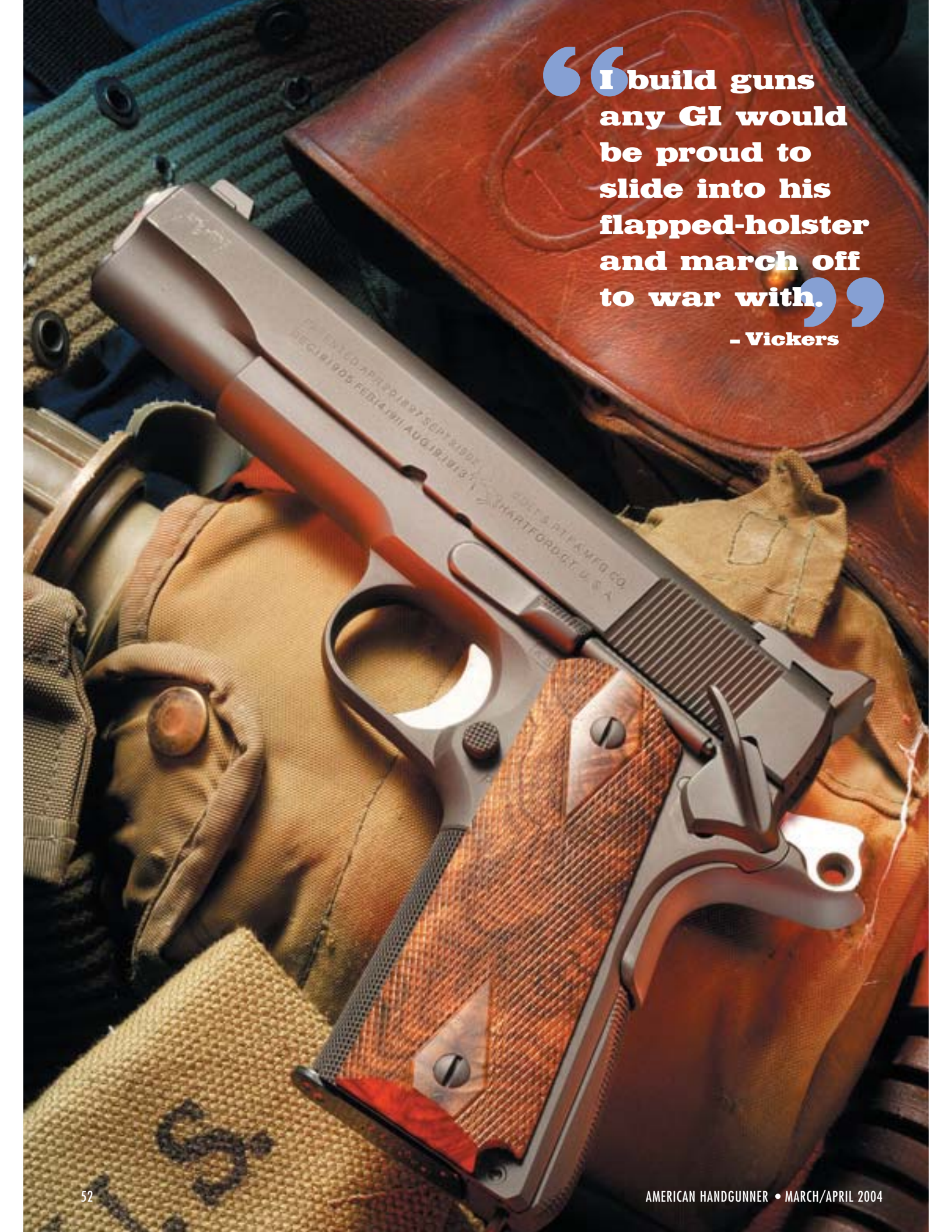
A bit of semi-sneaky conspiracy went on involving some nefarious characters recently. A trio with the last names of Heinie, Vickers (as in pistolsmiths) and Roberts (as in Colt) got together and, with no small amount of cunning, put together a plan. The goal was to coerce *American Handgunner* into doing something rarely attempted — com-

bine the talents of two disparate pistolsmiths in one article. Two basic guns, same basic assignment — and then see what happens.

Dick Heinie, of Heinie Specialty Products, Inc. probably needs no introduction, and Larry Vickers, his partner in crime for this bit of daring-do, is equally familiar to *Handgunner* readers. Dick phoned and said, “Larry and I have decided to build two guns, both based on new Series 70-

type Colts, and see what happens.” I said I thought it was a nice idea and I appreciated his sharing it with me.

“By the way,” Dick continued. “They’re for a feature in *Handgunner*.” “Oh,” I said, realizing resistance was futile. How does one say no to Dick Heinie, especially when it involves Colts and Larry Vickers. That’s when I found out Dick and Larry were old friends — sort of a “Mentor and mentee” arrangement, if



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- Vickers

you can forgive my own word there. But you get the drift, and of course my answer was, simply put, "Yes." And, by the way, thanks (I think ...) goes to Mark Roberts at Colt for being kind enough to trust these two with actual Colt 1911 pistols which they could have otherwise sold and gotten actual money for (a new Series 70 and a WWII Reproduction, by the way).

Time Passes

Lots of time passes. But not as much as you'd normally think when Dick's name is involved. Ichiro's photos are proof this project actually happened, and both Dick and Larry crafted their own idea of a simple concept in steel and wood. Basic guns turned into basic guns, as it were. But in this situation, that second level of "basic" belies the word.

Dick, who cut his teeth in, among other things, competition guns, had a very different idea than Larry, although they both wanted to celebrate the past. "I wanted to go sort of retro," said Dick on

the phone with me. "We all have those memories of taking a Series 70 gun in the early days of IPSC, and then cutting, grinding, filing and otherwise making something essentially from scratch. The guys these days have it so much easier with all the after-market parts I'm not sure they appreciate the fact we basically built everything before."

So, we have a retro-gun and what else? "After 20-some years of carrying a 1911, seeing some combat with it and probably seeing more hardball shot than anyone I've ever met, I had to do what I always do," said Larry Vickers. "I build guns any GI would be proud to slide into his flapped-holster and march off to war with. I took this classic WWII repro Colt and built a GI's gun," smiled Larry.

So we have the same basic gun and two very different but similar ideas. Both guns had to be reliable, both had to be accurate, both had to function in the real world, yet, each one is as different as the man who built it. One, proven on the

IPSC field, the other proven on the battlefield. Oddly enough, we'd imagine you could change their roles and find the results to be the same. Interesting thought, that. Perhaps another study some day?

But Why?

"What drives me?" asked Dick, in response to my question. "I simply love what I do and my wife always says I'm the only person she's ever met who actually loves his job. Metalwork is in my blood and when I started to build pistols I got to put my old toolmaker and design skills to good use and couldn't get enough of it — still can't." I could detect a smile on the other end of the phone when he said it.

"And how did you and Larry hook-up?" I asked. "Larry asked me to build a gun for him and, as time passed, he told me he was building guns too," Dick told me. "So I sent him a pistol to build for me. He work was good, and I actually took one of his guns to the Pistolsmiths Guild



Heinie.



Vickers.



meeting. Larry was later accepted as a guild member. Ever since our meeting, I've given him whatever help and advice I could, and unlike so many, he actually listens, and his work is first-class."

Larry fleshed-out the friendship some more. "Dick has been a real friend and has actually done some work for me when I didn't even own a milling machine. He's always been there with constructive comments, advice and just plain general guidance when I needed it. Dick was my mentor in the Guild and my best friend in pistolsmithing. I consider it an honor to be in *Handgunner* on the same pages as Dick."

Larry went on, "I think the thing attracting me to this work is the technical and engineering aspect of it. My experience in the real world heavily influences my guns and the modifications I make," he

said carefully. "My career in special operations means we were dedicated to excellence. You make sure whatever you do is right, because your buddies are relying on you. The same applies in my craft with the pistol. Somewhere, someplace, someone is going to rely on my work to survive. Sporting guns are fun, but my interest lies in the kinds of guns that have proven themselves in extreme situations."

So, two guys, two friends and two ideas come together on our pages. Let's see what happened.

Retro Vs. Today

While both guns celebrate the past, each one brings modern techniques and ideas into play. As Dick said, today's pistolsmiths have a wealth of after-market, high quality parts to choose from, a smorgasbord of non-edible delights to enhance

a plain-Jane pistol. But how those parts are fitted and massaged into a complete gun is what counts. A box of parts is still only a box of parts put-together — unless the right man does it. These are "right" men.

Larry's gun is given to the retro-concept in a few important ways. The Kings Beavertail, reminiscent of the Pachmayr Combat Special Beavertail safety, gives an immediate flavor. Kings was one of the first to produce after-market parts and Larry's pistol also has a Kings commander and thumb safety (currently made, but classically-styled). Larry feels a Bar-Sto barrel is the best of the readily-available barrels and accurate across the board with a wide cross-section of ammo.

The Heinie sights like the Slant-Pro "Are great," according to Larry, but Dick's original — the first-generation —

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FIGHT OR FUN?

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is a more classic look. A short Videki trigger is used to keep the 1911A1 theme and ditto for the arched mainspring housing with lanyard loop. Larry checked it and beveled the angles to give it a Swenson-esc touch and that classic feel. Slide-to-frame fit was done the old fashioned way of peening — the John Miller Army Marksmanship Unit method, but there was no squeezing of the slide.

Which brings up something about fit. What exactly does “hard fit” mean? Once a common term, it’s not heard as much today. “In my mind,” Larry says, “it means a gun that’s fit in a fashion that will maintain accuracy over many thousands of rounds. It doesn’t rely on gimmicks or doo-dads to maintain that fit. Think of a blue-printed racing engine, and you’ll get the drift.” We get the drift.

The ejection port was lowered slightly in the GI gun, and Larry made an interesting comment about that. “A standard port can use a bit of lowering to help eject a bit more reliably and to eject a loaded round more easily. But, if you take it down too far, you can allow sand and grit into the action below the barrel and foul the link area.” Larry said that may cause the barrel to be unable to unseat under recoil, locking-up the gun. We’ve seen that gap at the lower edge of a heavily-lowered port and the thought had never crossed our minds until now. As a matter of fact, you can actually see the link on some custom guns if you look in the port. Something to keep in mind.

A reliability package, trigger pull at around 4.5 pounds, replaced sear and disconnector (Wilson parts: “Tool steel rules!” as Larry said), a forged Colt slide release and fancy French walnut Hogue grips (one break from the business-like aura of this pistol) and the package was about complete. After a refinish with a dark grey mil-spec Parkerizing by Texas Armament, the final period was placed.

Does it shoot? One inch with the best ammo and about 1.5” across the board. The gun will field-strip without tools. The bushing is snug, but not un-cooperative in your hand. Tight, but manageable. We’d muse this pistol would be comfortable in the holster of any GI and a lucky fellow he’d be. The fighting lineage is self-evident.

IPSC '70s-Style

Take a series 70 Colt and do some of those classic, ‘70s fun things to start. “In the old days,” said Dick, “We’d bevel the mag well, put 20 LPI checkering on the front strap and mainspring housing, do a commander hammer, tighten frame-to-slide fit by peening, use a Colt or Bar-Sto barrel and definitely a solid bushing. A two-tone finish with some Armoloy and

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we were done.” Cutting edge, indeed.

But it's 2004 now Dick. “I thought we should take advantage of modern technology here, though,” said Dick. “Sort of like having a classic car with a modern engine.” Today's gun has 30 LPI checkering, a Brown beavertail grip safety, which means a corresponding upper cut on the front strap to allow the hand to ride high on the pistol. A flattened and serrated slide-top, beveled mag well, Cylinder and Slide hammer, sear and disconnect (Dick said the factory Colt sear appears to be a MIM part), an STI carbon-titanium lightweight black trigger looks as cool as it performs and an Ed Brown machined, heat-treated tool steel extractor rounds out the trip down memory lane. Those Hogue Cocobolo grips simply make it all easier on the eye. Dick said he used to use lots of Hogue and Pachmayrs in the “old” days.

“It doesn't rely on gimmicks or doo-dads to maintain that fit.”

That glint in your eye probably isn't from remembering your “Angel Flight” flared pants and those trips to the disco, it's from looking at this time-machine pistol. But, will it shoot like a 1970s gun? Of course not — it shoots like a 2004 gun. How about 1"-1.25" at 50 yards? That would be at 50 yards, not 25, just in case you didn't notice that small fact. Dick actually used an Irv Stone barrel from circa 1984 he had on-hand, proof some things from the old days still work wonders in the right hands. Come to think of it, a bit of Irv's legacy lives on in this gun, as well it should, considering his contributions to the custom 1911 league.

Harley as 1911

So why does this all matter anyway? It matters because it reminds us all of where we come from. A perspective from one new guy and one sorta “old” guy. One who lived the early years and one who reaps the benefits of the experience the other has.

Just as a graying Harley Davidson rider may have a modest, “classic” bike, he might just also have an electronic ignition fitted to it — smoother, faster, more reliable. The old guy likes classic — but understands the advantages of new technology. So why not enjoy both?

At times in this hectic, helter-skelter world, an unpretentious reminder of the obvious is in order, and Dick and Larry have done it here. Their understated, yet lucid look at both the old and the new, serves as a reminder that indeed, simple is still good — regardless of the technology involved.



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