

EXCLUSIVE

A FIRST LOOK AT HECKLER & KOCH'S New **HK45**

HK hopes to provide a new .45 for the U.S. Armed Forces, and SHOTGUN NEWS was the first magazine to get a look at it.

By
David M. Fortier

Could this be the 1911 of the 21st century? Let's hope we won't suffer the two world wars it would take to justify that moniker, but Heckler & Koch hopes the HK45 will have a long and honorable career in the service of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Glancing up from the new Heckler & Koch pistol I was examining, I cut Ken Hackathorn off, "Would you go on record with that?" I asked. Despite my playing the devil's advocate, Ken never missed a beat.

"Yes, the HK45 is going to be the 1911 of the 21st century," Ken replied without hesitation, staring me straight in the eye.

"That's quite a statement," I mumbled as I leaned back in my chair. Ordinarily this is where I would make a few comments, before politely excusing myself. However, today I simply went back to examining the polymer framed .45 ACP service pistol I held in my hands. There was a reason for this, sitting across from me were Larry Vickers and Ken Hackathorn. There are very few people on the face of this planet who know as much about fighting with a 1911 pistol as these two men.

The name Larry Allen Vickers will be instantly recognized by serious students of the 1911. He is known for building what many consider to be the finest custom 1911 pistols, bar none. As an example, when *American Handgunner* magazine published a list of the 10 most collectable custom built 1911s, Larry's topped the list. He is without question a master pistolsmith: he is a member of the prestigious American Pistolsmiths Guild and is also a founding member of IDPA.

However, what is not so well known is Larry's true profession. You see, Larry is not a gunsmith by trade. Hardly. Rather, he is a recently retired operator who spent his entire career, 21 years, in Special Operations. Of these, six years were spent in the U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) and 15 continuous years with our nation's most elite unit.

Positions here included Operator (assaulter), weapons research and development and primary combat marksmanship instructor. A combat veteran, he was also awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. Only a couple years older than



The U.S. Army wants to bring back the .45 ACP, and Heckler & Koch wants to provide the pistols for it. The HK45 is the German firm's candidate for the job.

myself, Larry is recognized by his peers as being one of the finest firearms instructors our great country has to offer. Few people in the mainstream know of his background simply due to the fact that he has never flaunted it.

Ken Hackathorn's name is readily recognizable as he has penned numerous firearm and self-defense related articles. A small arms trainer for over 25 years, he is a founding member of IPSC and IDPA and has served as a U.S. Army Special Forces Small Arms Instructor, Gunsite Instructor and SRT trainer, among many others. He has provided training to federal, state and local law enforcement agencies as well as foreign military and LE units. Like his good friend Larry Vickers, he is the real deal.

So what do these two well respected, blunt to a fault individuals have to do with our story? Quite a bit actually. You see, a number of years ago Larry and Ken approached the well respected German firm of Heckler & Koch about building a top of the line 1911 fighting pistol. They felt that although the 1911 was a truly great combat pistol, most custom 1911s being churned out were in reality "hobby guns". Meaning extraordinarily expensive custom pistols intended more to stroke a shooter's ego rather than defend his life.

Heckler & Koch seriously considered the idea, but it was eventually back-burnered due to military projects. By the time it was reconsidered Smith & Wesson and SIG had both introduced 1911s and the market was flooded with this design. So rather than doing the same 1911 dance as everyone else, Heckler & Koch decided to strike out into virgin territory.

Using direct input from both Larry and Ken, Heckler & Koch resolved to develop a modern .45 ACP service pistol specifically for self-defense. In doing so they would address problems inherent in the 1911 design. However, this new pistol was not intended to be a glitzy match pistol/status symbol. No, Heckler & Koch's new design would be for putting large diameter holes in very bad people, period.



Heckler & Koch relied on the real world experience of experts Larry Vickers (with HK45) and Ken Hackathorn (with HK45C) during the development of the HK45.



Don't put Fortier near the ammo stash if you want any left at the end of the day. The soot at the tip of the HK45 shows that plenty of test rounds went downrange.

Unlike the original 1911 project, this new pistol program, dubbed simply HK45, did indeed go forward. Cloaked in a veil of Teutonic secrecy, the pistol was developed over a period of approximately two years. Rather than simply being developed by German engineers, it was based directly on input and feedback from Larry and Ken. Then, from what I understand, the project simply stagnated. While the .45 ACP epitomizes everything a fighting pistol cartridge should be to Americans, the same is not true to Germans, or Europeans in general. Right or wrong, it makes no difference. It is simply fact.

Eventually someone at Heckler & Koch came to his senses, and it was decided to move forward with this project and offer it to the American shooter. Upon Larry's recommendation, I was contacted by Heckler & Koch about receiving a first look at this interesting new pistol. Although I have never been a fan of Heckler & Koch pistols, or what seemed to me to be its attitude towards the American consumer, I agreed. A short time later, I found myself sitting across from Larry and Ken listening to what they had to say as I examined a standard HK45 and a compact HK45C.

The HK45's lineage is unmistakable. Rather than designing an entirely new basic operating system, Heckler & Koch simply

based the HK45 on the proven USP45 and USP45 Compact pistol family. In doing so, they incorporated the refinements of the P2000 series as well. Why base it on the USP45? Simply because they felt it was a reliable design which had proven capable of functioning even when run without lubricant.

It's an unfortunate reality that many pistol shooters do not properly maintain or lubricate their firearms. HK finds its USP45 will still function reliably when run dry. Other designs, like the 1911, can have issues when run dry. This is why IPSC and Bullseye shooters competing with a 1911 often have oil literally running off the piece.

The heart of the pistol is Browning's well proven linkless recoil operated system. To enhance accuracy, the polygonal rifled barrel features an O-ring. In addition, Heckler & Koch states, "A unique internal mechanical recoil reduction system reduces the recoil forces imparted to the weapon and shooter by as much as 30%, improving shooter control during rapid firing and component service life." The barrel and recoil spring assembly are housed inside a nicely sculpted steel slide. This features grasping grooves on the front and rear of the slide and low profile drift adjustable three-dot sights.



Both the slide release and magazine release levers on the HK45 are ambidextrous, following the pattern set with the successful HK USP pistol design.



The HK45 uses Heckler & Koch's LEM fire control system that allows each pistol to be easily converted to SA, DA or DAO operation at the user's option.

The slide mates to a polymer frame which will be available in either black or a desert tan. One key point during the development of this pistol was designing the grip dimensions and angle. The 1911 is hard to beat in this regard and fits a diverse spectrum of hand sizes. So the HK45 features a slim grip profile which is close to a 1911's in dimension. It was also designed to move the hand as close to the boreline as possible to reduce muzzle flip.

In addition it features replaceable backstraps to adjust the size and feel to suit a shooter's individual taste. Housed inside the grip is a steel 10-round magazine that will fit in both the standard and compact models. A short eight-round magazine is also available for the HK45C.



HK's new pistol features the MIL STD 1913 rail on the dust cover that is all the rage these days, allowing easy mounting of accessories like flashlights and lasers.



If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The HK45's grip frame has been designed to feel much like the 1911's, and features backstraps interchangeable by the user.



Here's a very dirty HK45 stripped for routine maintenance. USP owners will immediately recognize the barrel and recoil guide assembly as similar to that pistol.

Controls are typical Heckler & Koch. Dual ambidextrous slide release levers are contoured and positioned to be easy to reach and depress.

At the rear of the extended trigger guard is an ambidextrous lever-type magazine release. Both Larry and Ken spent a good bit of time talking about the advantages of this system when depressed by the shooter's trigger finger. As they discussed it, they both ejected magazines faster than a MG42 can cycle. My initial reaction was fairly negative. However, after watching the two of them rapidly ejecting mag after mag, I changed my opinion to it simply being not for me. But more on this later.

At the rear of the frame is a safety and/or decocking lever. The HK45 is fitted with the modular trigger system first introduced on the HK USP, allowing each pistol to be easily configured into any of nine different variants simply by changing

parts. If a user so desires he can have a traditional single-action, single-action/double-action or double-action only system. Safety/decocking levers can be placed on the right, left or both sides of the frame. With the single-action model the safety operates like a 1911. Simply push it down and fire. The single-action/double-action model is similar, but if you push the safety down past the fire position the weapon will decock. The double-action only model features HK's LEM (Law Enforcement Modification) trigger system, a 'pre-cocked' hammer system which dramatically lightens the trigger pull. Working the slide, such as chambering a round, pre-cocks the action. While the hammer remains at rest, and you still have a long pull through, the pull weight is substantially lighter than a conventional double-action only design. Plus, the trigger pull remains consistent from first shot to last. If a round should fail to fire you

One of the most important pieces of gear for carrying a concealed handgun for defense is often the most overlooked, the belt. Think about it, everything (your holster, spare magazine and anything else you are carrying) is hung off your belt. Buy a cheap run-of-the-mill chain store belt and it will sag, stretch and start letting your sidearm flop all over the place in no time.

The solution? Buy a quality belt specifically designed for carrying a handgun. In this regard, I recommend considering a gun belt from Jim Speidel. Why Jim? Simply because all he makes are belts, and they are very good indeed. He uses two layers of bull-hide leather, and runs them with their grain running opposed to each other.

Only the outer layer of leather is submersion dyed, so no dye will transfer to your clothing. The edges are nicely rounded and he uses special buckles specifically chosen for the thickness of the belt.

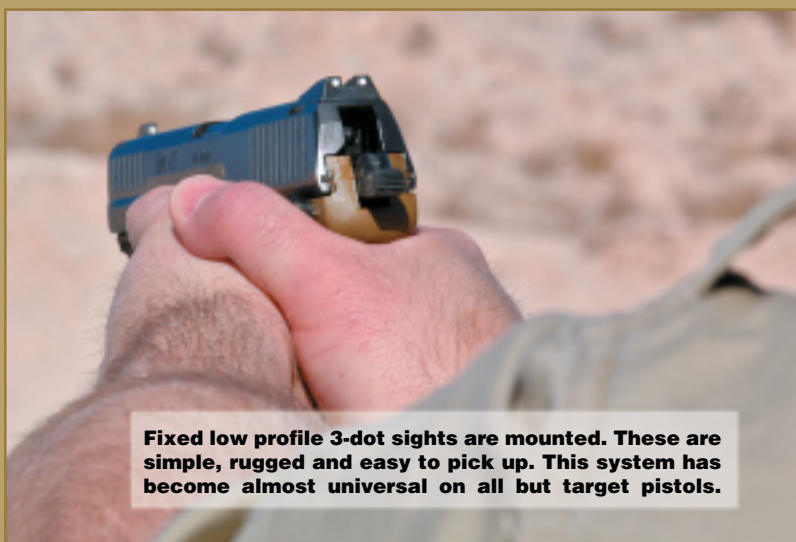
Plus all his keepers are stitched. The end result is a fine looking belt which won't stretch or sag. I've worn one of his belts for a year now, and am very pleased with his work. Belts are available in 1.25-, 1.5- and 1.75-inch widths in a variety of colors and he also offers horsehide as well as exotics like shark and elephant upon request.

A custom belt made for you only takes two to three weeks and runs \$69.95 for a standard 1.5-inch width. For more info contact Jim at 919-387-1997 or www.thebeltman.net.

can immediately try again, but the trigger pull will be like a conventional double-action as the system is no longer pre-cocked. Obviously Heckler & Koch's LEM system caters to the needs of a broad spectrum of individuals and LE departments. Basically you can pretty much have whatever you want.

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The double-action only model features a "pre-cocked" hammer system that dramatically lightens the trigger pull. Working the slide when chambering a round, pre-cocks the action. While the hammer remains at rest, and you still have a long pull-through, the pull weight is substantially lighter than a conven-



Fixed low profile 3-dot sights are mounted. These are simple, rugged and easy to pick up. This system has become almost universal on all but target pistols.



Accuracy? Four 5-shot groups fired offhand at 25 yards by Larry Vickers averaged 2.65 inches. This is better than many other brands will do from a rest.



Larry Vickers punches a empty magazine out during a drill. While Fortier's personal preference is for a push-button release, HK's design proved very fast.

Both models can also be fitted with threaded barrels for use with a sound suppressor. Finish on the metal work is a matte black protective coating.

I listened to what Larry and Ken had to say, and when they were done we piled into a SUV and headed to a range. Once there the fun began in earnest. First on my list was to simply see how well the HK45 would shoot. So I asked Larry to put four 5-round groups on paper at 25 yards while I took some pictures. The only ammunition available was Winchester 230-grain FMJ, so all testing was performed with this load.

To be honest, I expected Larry to shoot from a rest. Instead he mumbled something about this being a fighting pistol, damn gunwriter groups and something else I couldn't quite make out. He then proceeded to fire groups offhand. His first five rounds went into 3 inches, center to center. I guess he was just warming up. He backed this up with 2.75, 2.5 and 2.37 inch five-shot groups for an average of 2.65 inches. His last two groups each had four rounds inside 1.5 inches. The HK45 is more than accurate enough for defensive purposes.

Impressed, I took my place behind the HK45. While how a pistol feels is a very subjective matter, I found the HK45 to fit my hand fairly well. Although it's a large service pistol, it handled and pointed rather nicely. Rounds load easily into the magazine, until you get to the last two, where a bit of force is required. Magazines slide smoothly into the contoured mag well.

The model I shot was a single-action/double-action, so after I ran the slide I thumbed the safety up to the safe position. The safety is well placed and easy to manipulate. Thumb it down to fire, bring the HK45 up, index the front sight onto your target and squeeze. While the trigger is not match-grade it is just fine for a service pistol. Bang. The gun rolls back as it pounds a .451 inch hole into whatever you aimed at.

Shooting at paper and steel targets from 15 to 25 yards I found the sights easy to pick-up and recoil fairly mild. Reliability was flawless, despite my best efforts. I tried letting the slide go forward very slowly, but it still chambered a round just fine. So I tried limpwristing it, and then moved onto firing it with just two fingers. When this had no effect I fired it holding it on its side, and upside down, using just two fin-

gers. The HK45 didn't care what I did, and simply kept on functioning until I got bored.

I have to say that both Larry Vickers and Ken Hackathorn did a fine job advising Heckler & Koch on the new HK45. H&K is lucky to have men of this caliber advising them. The end result is a well-thought-out service pistol intended for both highly skilled professionals as well as the unwashed masses. It's produced from high quality components with very good human engineering.

Accurate and reliable, it's simple to use, maintain and deploy. It's also easily configured to meet the needs of a left or right hand dominant shooter. Plus it will accept modern accessories, like a light and/or laser and carries a total of 11 rounds of .45 ACP.

My thoughts? Keeping in mind that my place in life is as a writer, and the only time I will ever be called an operator is if SHOTGUN NEWS fires me and I get a job at the phone company, I'll share my view. A handgun is primarily intended to be a weapon of last resort, whether on the battlefield or on the street.

If you find yourself needing a handgun, then something obviously has gone wrong. Your primary weapon has failed, or you have found yourself in a position where you are being assaulted and you need to defend yourself.

Such an assault is likely to take place at extremely close range, from mere feet to perhaps several yards. You will have little time to react, and will perhaps face multiple opponents intent on killing you, and your family. In order to survive you will need to kill your attacker.

The majority of people do not shoot a handgun well. Your average soldier, cop or lawfully armed citizen tends to be a mediocre shot and practices only occasionally on a static range shooting at stationary targets. Throw in the adrenaline/fear of a honest to God life or death situation and rapidly moving targets and you can count on a lot of misses. To be truthful, your average person needs all the help they can get.

The HK45 was specifically developed with this in mind. It comes in one caliber, .45 ACP, to poke large holes in bad people so they will bleed out as quickly as possible. Its grip size and angle were specifically designed to make it comfortable in the hand, point naturally and easy to control in recoil. It's ambidextrous, so if your dominant hand is injured you can easily run the pistol with your non-dominant hand.

Basically, Larry and Ken scratched their heads to come up with a pistol design which would be very easy to deploy and make hits with under the most stressful of situations. Plus, if something should go wrong with it, replacement parts do not need to be carefully handfit. You simply swap out the failed part for a new one.

Is it perfect? No, at least not in my opinion. I simply can't contort my spindly trigger finger to quickly activate the magazine release like both Ken and Larry can. I would much prefer a good old fashioned push button release. Also, when shooting the single-action/double-action model I noted if I rested my thumb on the safety lever (like I do with a 1911) recoil could depress the lever and thus decock the pistol. This annoyance can be eliminated by converting the HK45 to a USP "variant 9" trigger mode (with no decocking function). Also, I wish the bore-line was a bit lower, but that's the extent of my gripes.

What the future holds for the HK45 I cannot say. It appears the batteries in my crystal ball are dead. While Larry and Ken both plan on hanging up their 1911s for HK45s when they become available, it will be interesting to see what others think. No doubt, the HK45 will face fierce competition in Springfield Armory's new 14-shot, and inexpensively priced, .45 ACP XD. If Heckler & Koch's HK45 interests you, production models should be available late this year or early in 2007.

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ON THE COVER



The U.S. Armed Services are planning a return to the .45 ACP cartridge, and Heckler & Koch wants to provide the pistol for it. The full-sized HK45 and compact HK45C are its offerings. David Fortier gets a first look at them in this issue. (HK photo).

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To allow a light and/or laser to be easily mounted, the front dustcover features a MIL STD 1913 rail. The HK45C model is basically identical to the standard model, being just shorter in the barrel and grip frame.

At the time of this writing Heckler & Koch had literally no specifications on these two models (almost no one at Heckler & Koch had even seen it), but I would estimate the standard model has a 5-inch barrel and the compact has a 4-inch barrel. Both models are designed to handle standard pressure and +P .45 ACP ammunition while having a 20,000 round minimum service life.