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AMERICAN

MARCH/APRIL 2004

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EXCLUSIVE:

MERC M11

GAS GUN!



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A CUSTOM
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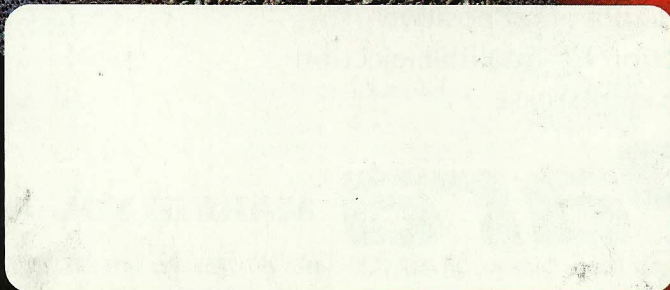
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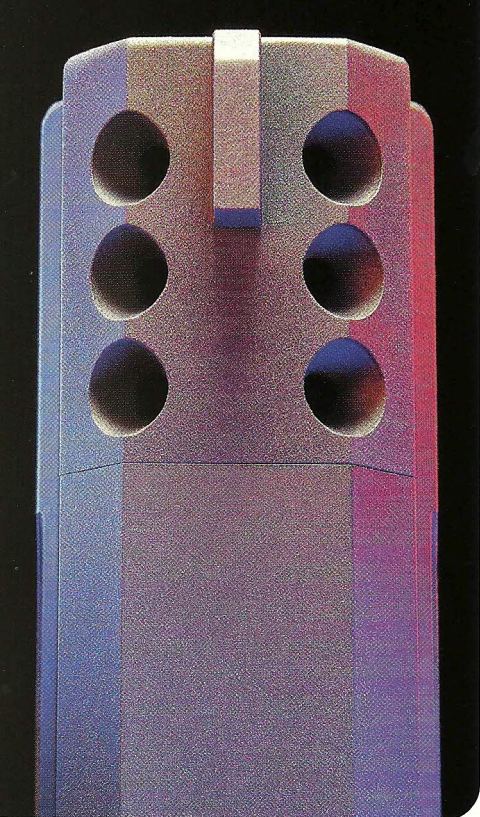
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GAS-GUN EXTRAORDINAIRE

Italian Sports Car Design
Meets the Terminator

Roy Huntington • Photos: Ichiro Nagata



It's not often in this age of injection molded plastic, MIM and CNC parts that a custom pistolsmith actually builds a pistol. Legions take bits and pieces, parts that others make, and file and bend and weld and cut, finally putting together a handsome, fine example of craftsmanship. But nonetheless, almost without fail, the frames, slides and most other bits and pieces are after-market and simply fitted together neatly.

All of which isn't intended to demean today's custom pistolsmiths. The examples of the art they create can take the breath away. Indeed, a small number can — and do — manufacture frames, barrels and other parts, all done the hard way on

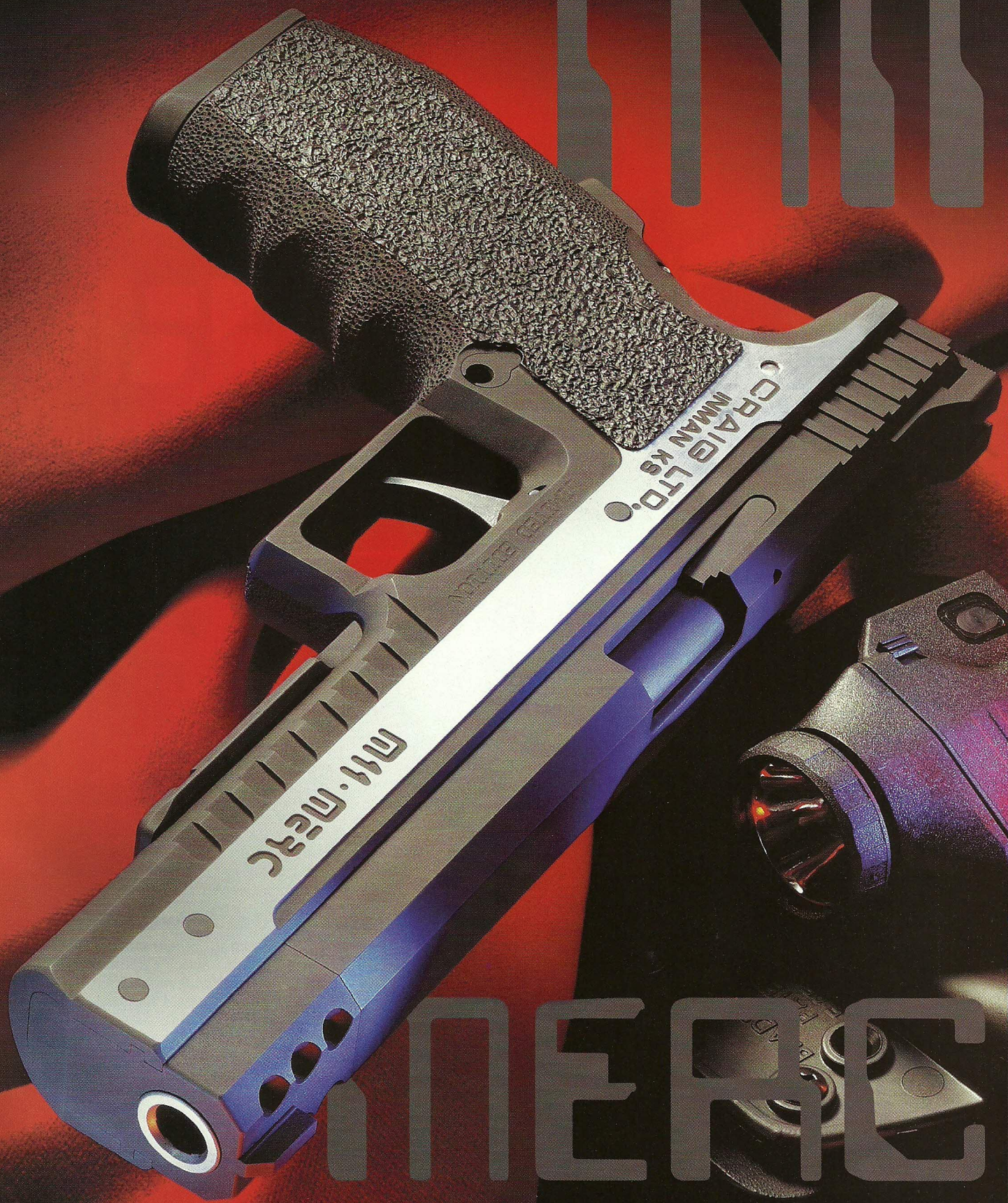
a milling machine and lathe in the shop.

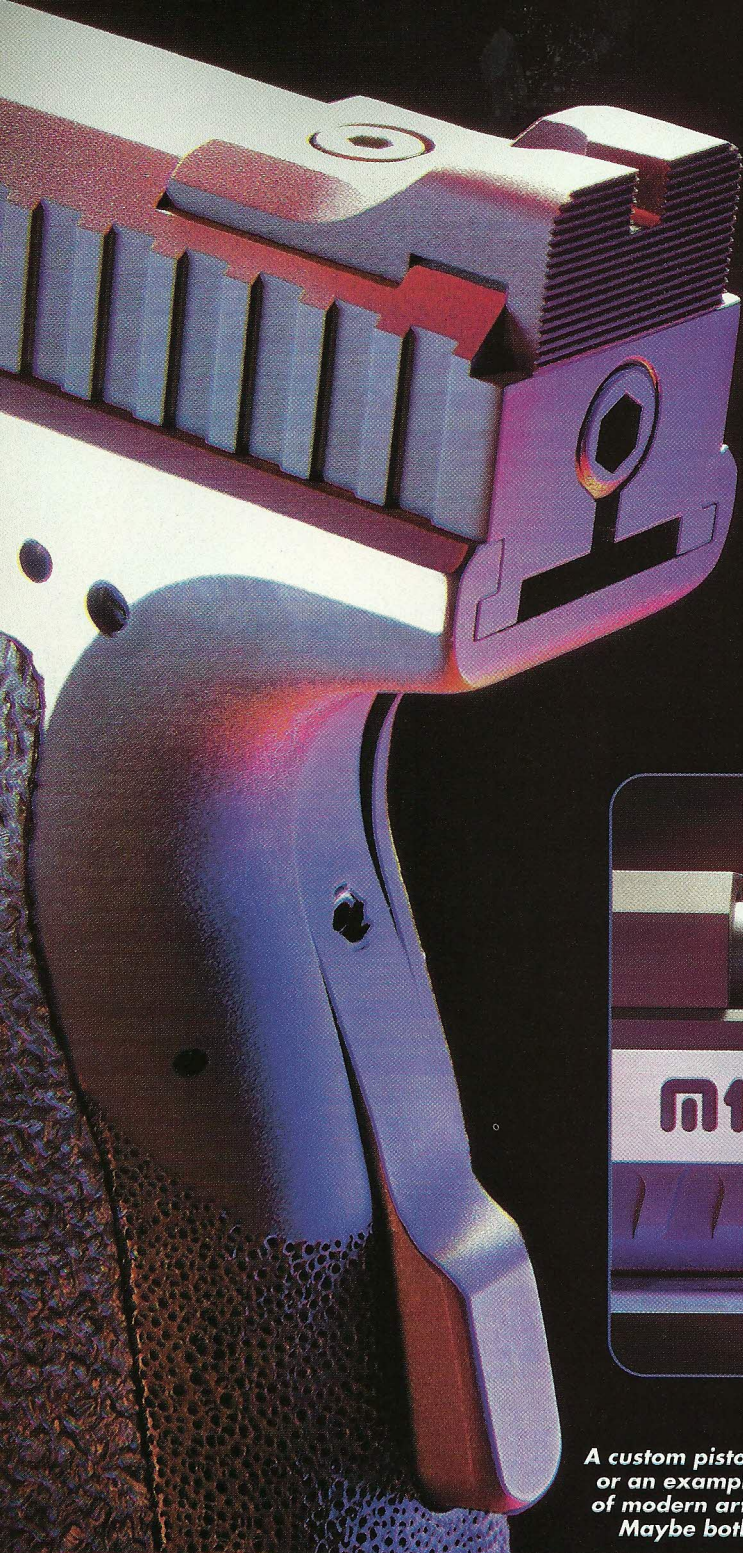
However, in the spirit of John Browning, only a rarified few — think the number of fingers on one hand — actually heft a block of metal in one hand while they prepare their mill with the other. Then they cut away everything that doesn't look like a pistol. One man's mind, one block of steel or aluminum, an assortment of cutters and broaches, all mixed with a generous dose of imagination can indeed, believe it or not, create a pistol where there once was none. Such a man is Fred Craig.

The Early Years

Fred laughed as he spoke, "I was fortunate to grow up in a time when guns

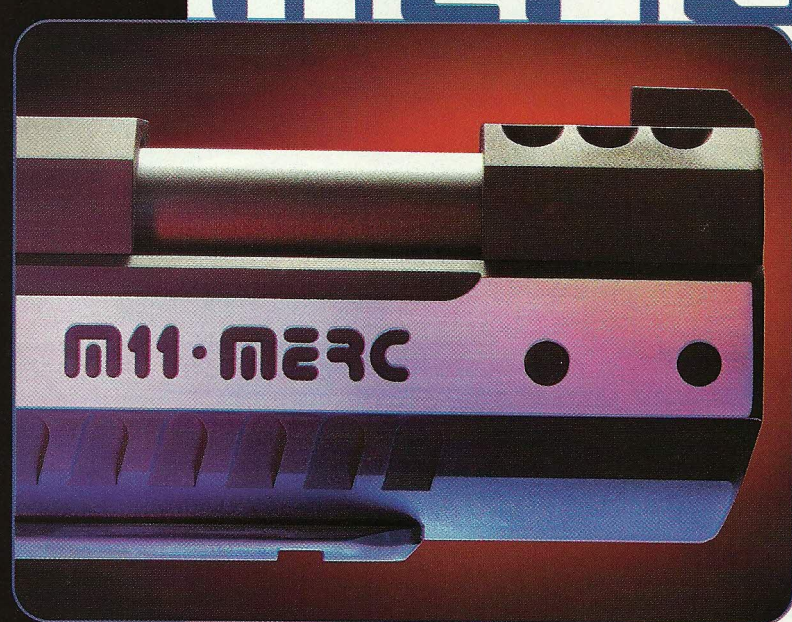
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Model	Caliber	Capacity	Weight	BBL	OAL
M11 Standard	9mm	15+1	30 oz.	4.6"	7.4"
M11 Recon	9/.357/.40	10/15+1	30 oz.	4.6"	7.4"
M11 Merc	9/.357/.40	10/15+1	33 oz.	5.2"	8"
X1 Spy	9mm	13+1	24 oz.	4"	6.8"

Options: Custom finishes, night sights, porting, stippling, etc.



*A custom pistol,
or an example
of modern art?
Maybe both.*

were simply a part of a boy's life. From the time I was 12 or so, I was always making things. From rockets to custom motorcycles, I always had machine oil on my hands."

As a world IPSC champion and multiple Bianchi Cup Stock Gun champ, Fred knows handguns. His personal knowledge of what makes a pistol have that intangible called "shootability" is vital to the process of his design work. A few years ago, Fred's skill-set was at an important junction. He found himself with both the mechanical and practical skills to take a

daring step — to design and build a handgun that incorporated his own ideas. Not a "make-do" of other ideas, but from the ground-up, something that sprang from Fred's own fertile mind.

The legacy Fred's mentors had provided demanded accountability. "I knew it was time. I thought about what was out there and wondered if the world was ready for a completely new idea. The trick was putting together the package. The bottom line was the fact I wasn't building a gun for the average street cop. The simple, almost crude final products

out there do the job just fine. This pistol was going to be for the connoisseur, the Porsche and Mercedes owners."

The Groundwork

Fred had designed handguns before. His "Fantom" series even made it onto the cover of *Handgunner*. Fred's custom pistolsmith business, Craig Limited, prospered. After selling the rights to the Fantom to Briley, Fred went on to his next brain-child, the gas-operated "Vortak" based upon a Caspian wide-body receiver.

"This new pistol," said Fred, "had a totally new gas-delay top end. The Caspian receivers were machined and altered to fit the new design. It was basically as 1911/P7/Steyr GB conglomeration, if you can imagine such a thing."

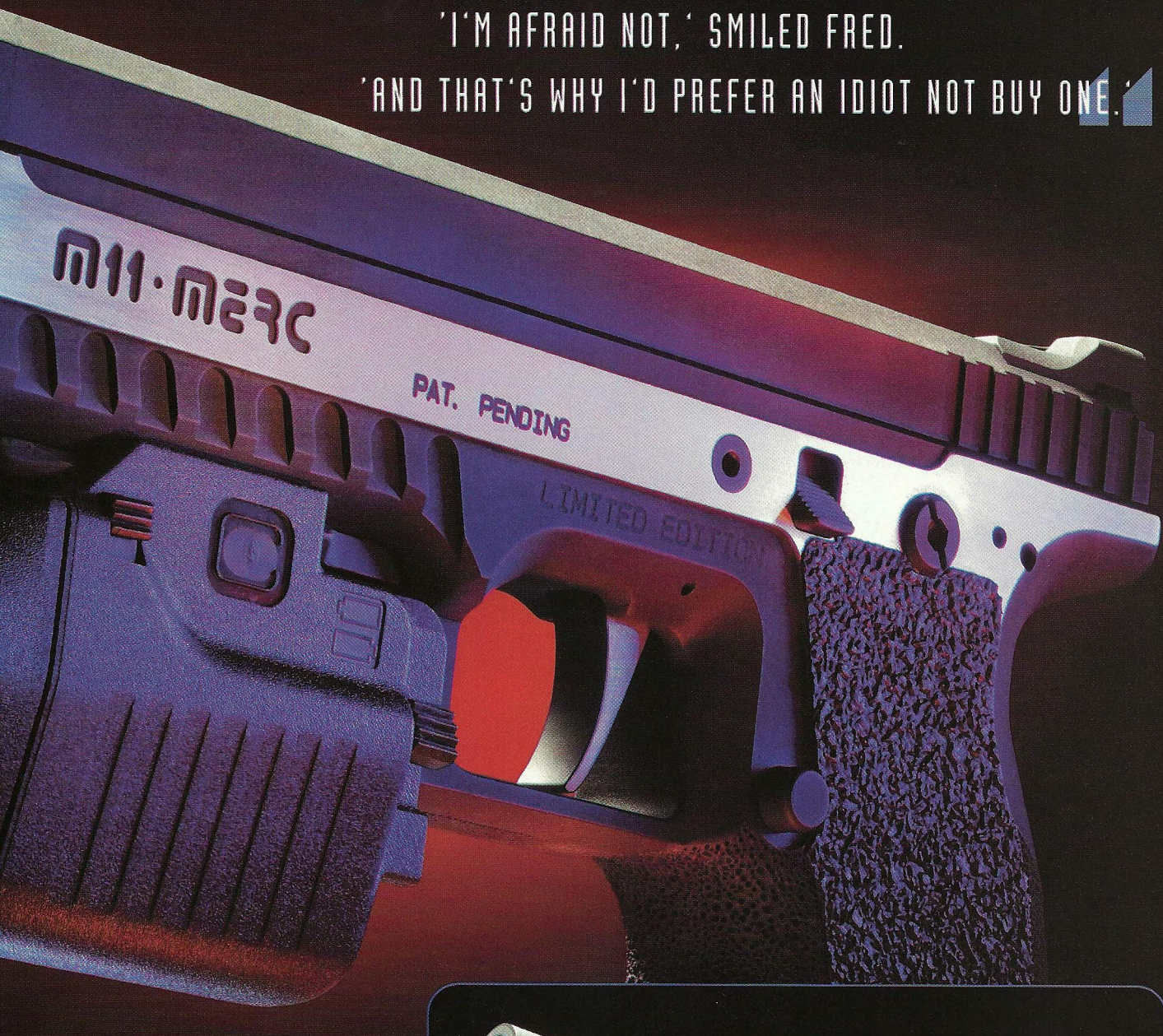
Featuring a fixed barrel, exceptional

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IS IT IDIOT-PROOF, WE ASKED?

'I'M AFRAID NOT,' SMILED FRED.

'AND THAT'S WHY I'D PREFER AN IDIOT NOT BUY ONE.'



style backstrap. A grip-less design no wider than 1.1" would keep it sleek and thin. Everything would need to be well-radiused and blended nicely to fit a variety of hand sizes.

The lowest bore line possible was paramount. "The gun had to have the lowest bore line ever made on a 9mm or larger pistol," said Fred. "This, along with various other performance features would make it the hands-down, lowest recoiling design ever and would contribute to limiting muzzle flip almost into nonexistence."

A fixed barrel design meant a gas-delay system. Straight blow-back wasn't an option here, and at the time, Fred's new gas system design wasn't finalized.

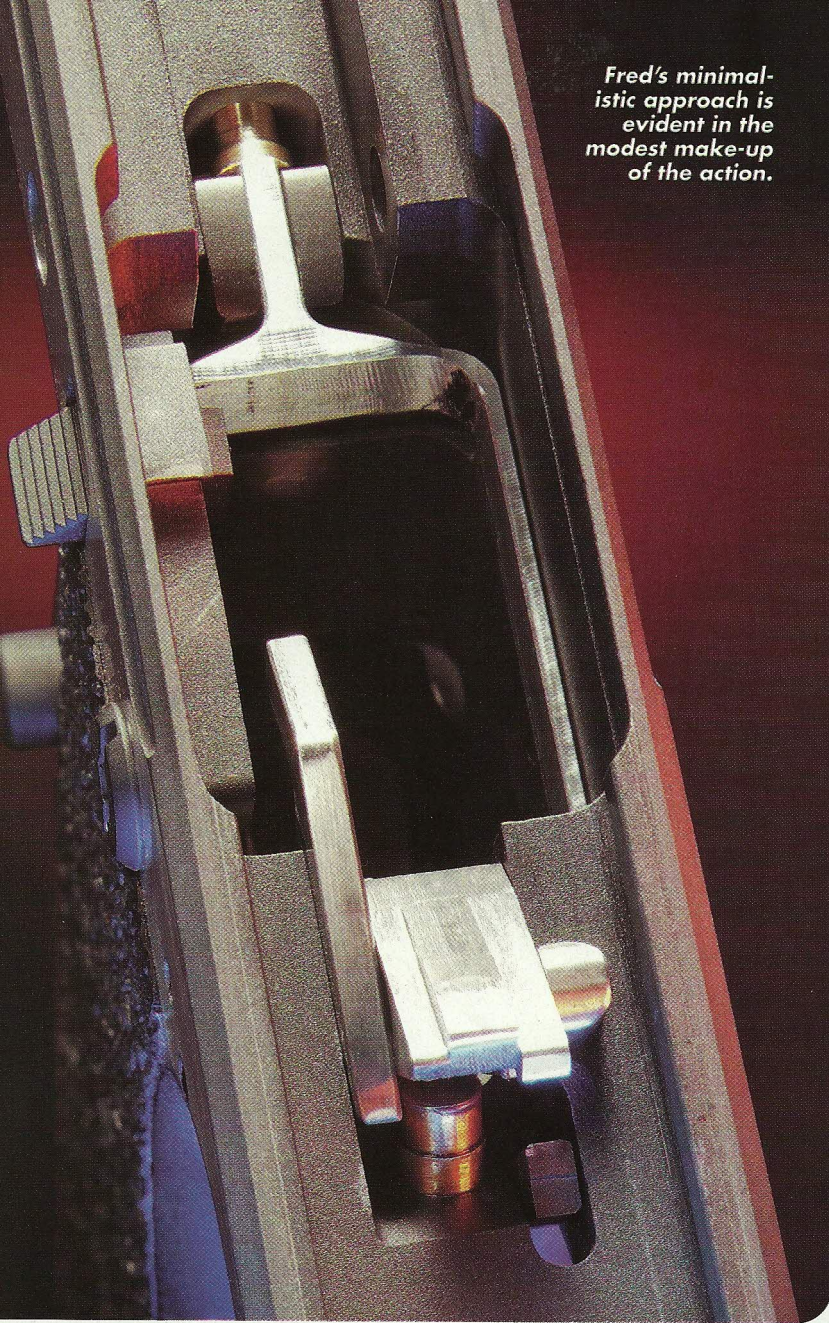
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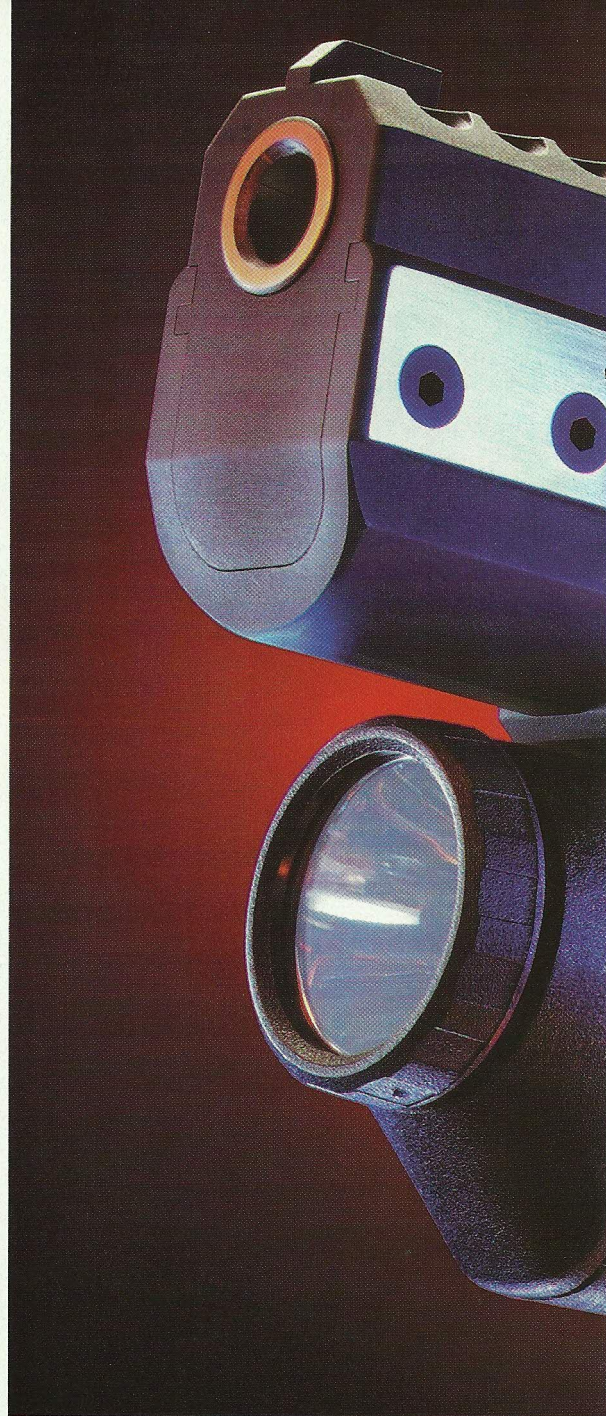
Here's a hint of what's going on, but we can't let you in on all the secrets ...

*Elegantly uncluttered — the
slide and mag releases are
where they belong.*





Fred's minimalist approach is evident in the modest make-up of the action.



feeding characteristics and an external extractor (before they were fashionable), the Vortak was extremely accurate, but simply too expensive to produce. Fred spent two years and thousands of dollars perfecting the system, and learned a great deal about the intricacies of a gas system. Fred's final design was completed, just to make sure it worked the way it was planned to, and then put to bed, never to see the light of day again.

"It's still resting quietly, waiting for its time," said Fred. "If someone wanted to produce an exceptional conversion system for a 1911, it exists," smiled Fred. "In my safe."

The Merc

Fred wanted something new. Something better, and something that would raise eyebrows. Once all those gears turning in his head clacked to a stop with a solution, Fred starting to machine.

"Style was going to be critical," he said. "A design basically takes its form based upon the features built into it. The only thing a designer can do is let the thing evolve the way it should. You can alter some cosmetics, maybe push a curve a little sharper or an angle a little steeper, but it still has to function within the design parameters," he noted.

It seems obvious once it's said out loud like that. The old "form follows function" rule personified. "I wanted it to remind the eye of a European sports car and I wanted to profile the cuts to keep it bold and authoritative," said Fred. "Since this was a fantasy project, I thought why not make visions of James Bond and secret missions a part of it all? It's about refinement, technology and the evolution

of a species. I wanted the M11 Merc to be something that would stop traffic!" laughed Fred.

Fred put some rules in stone before he began to cut steel and aluminum. The M11 was going to be 100-percent billet machined from premium materials. No castings, no MIM and no plastics would enter the picture. The equation was simple: 7075 aluminum for the frame and related parts, 4340 Chrome Moly for the slide, 416 stainless for the barrel and Wolff springs throughout (Walter Wolff has given freely to Craig of his time and design skills during Fred's many projects). First class all the way.

Great ergonomics meant a 14-15 degree grip angle with carefully designed subtle finger grooves and a Tanfoglio-

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M11 MERC

Continued from page 73

"Everything I had learned in two years of design work was about to become centered on this new platform," said Fred. "I had no restrictions as to how the system could transform itself inside of the parameters of this new framework. It wasn't like trying to retro-engineer a gas delay into a 1911! I had a blank slate here."

Prior to Fred's imagineering efforts, gas-delay systems simply used a basic blow-back design like you'd see on any .380 pistol, but simply added a chamber below the barrel, and a piston or ram, to cushion the recoil. The design can be weak since the barrel sleeve is usually pressed into the frame and the slide has to come off of the top of the frame, instead of sliding off the front, like most autos. "For a slide to come off the top, the rail contact is minimal and that means a loss of integrity to the recoil system," commented Fred.

Fred designed innovative solutions to some of these problems. The slide was made as short as possible to stay in focus with the low bore line strategy and the barrel had to be independent of the frame and slide. Thus, the system had to come apart in a conventional manner. This all meant no recoil spring over the barrel and, in turn, meant an almost conventional guide rod and spring, but sitting lower in the frame than ever before. It's virtually in-line with the center of the shooter's hand, which means less muzzle flip.

The barrel and piston design are revolutionary and allow for a virtual straight-in feed angle. After making the first pistol, Fred found the system buffers recoil so well that having a mechanically-locked barrel simply wouldn't compare. The M11's gas system also self-regulates, adapting to a wide-range of loads with no muss or fuss.

No Windows

The full-length internal slide rails are fit so well they generate a "suction" as the slide moves. Fred says the felt recoil is reduced by upwards of 25-percent due to this careful fit. We'll have to take his word for it, but the slide does roll like nothing we've ever felt before.

It seemed like a good idea if the stationary barrel could be affixed both at the rear and the front. So, Fred designed it that way. Pinned at the rear and affixed to a solid collar at the front, the set-up also helps to make the frame assembly rock-solid. The front sight, affixed to the top of the collar, stays put under recoil, so there's no chasing the front sight with your eye as the slide racks. That same slide will also not allow the slide to be knocked out of battery should it be

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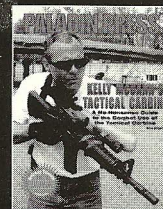
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slammed against something. Demons of Darkness take note.

Now the frame is where things get interesting. If you've ever handled a conventional frame (think 1911, Beretta 92, etc.) you'll note the cut-outs everywhere. These are there so the forged frame can be milled out to create a magazine channel and to fit the innards. Some grip designs look like Swiss cheese and are about as fragile. Not so the M11.

Fred figured, with some fancy machining no factory could ever afford, he could make a "window-less" frame, enhancing the strength by several levels. The bad part of the equation was the fact he had to design all the action parts to fit in through a very tiny window in the top of the frame. But he could — and he did. And, don't even talk about how much trouble it is to machine that mag well ...

Not Idiot Proof

The M11 is a striker-fired pistol, which, to some people, means the world just may end and life as we know it will become extinct. People will run screaming down the street, tearing at their hair and lawyers throughout the world will dance jigs of joy, while cavorting in circles, naked. Fred admits it's not necessarily the most politically-correct action to have on a pistol these days, but it's certainly one of the most effective in delivering a consistent, light, trigger pull. So, Fred went with the "most effective" decision.

Fred also did some magic on the action. Most guns share a leaf or torsion spring in the action. The M11 departs from convention yet again in this regard. All the parts involved, from the trigger, drawbar/bow, sear and the disconnector, have their own independent plunger and compression spring. "That way," says Fred, "The pull stays more uniform and reliable. It's simply a more reliable design. Although the trigger pull is light, there is a lot of engagement to make it safe."

Is it idiot-proof, we asked? "I'm afraid not," smiled Fred. "And that's why I'd prefer an idiot not buy one. If you point the pistol at something and pull the trigger, it will go off." Abhor the thought.

A grip safety seemed in order, to appease those who simply had to have "something" to make it "safe." Inside, the M11 looks like it should have more parts and, just like Mozart's opera, there are not "too many notes." The grip safety maintains the spirit of things. Locking the sear, striker, trigger and slide, the grip safety renders the M11 safe the instant the gun leaves the hand. Yet, once disengaged when grasped, does not interfere with the trigger pull in any manner. Nicely done, we'd say.

It takes an adult-sized hand to operate the safety on the M11 and when engaged, locks the slide. There is some small

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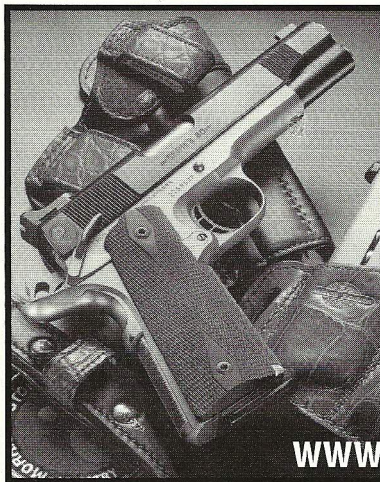
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margin of safety here should a child get their sticky hands on one. And, for those who despair over a grip safety, since it's a true custom gun, you can buy one without it. So there.

Cutting Steel

"It took three months, from the moment I put that first block of steel on the milling table, until the M11 was ready to test," said Fred. "The only part that failed was the trigger bow, which just wasn't hard enough, so I made a new design out of 7075 aluminum and that did the trick. Five thousand rounds later the pistol was still gobbling up ammo and I was still waiting for some catastrophic failure. It never came."

Some interesting things were at work here. With a gas-delay system, there are no locking lugs to wear out, and the slide doesn't have to be as hard, since there is no lug wear. That means the slide can be softer, which means it won't crack, like conventional autos often do. Also, in a gas system like this, the breech face doesn't get beat-up since the system unlocks in a very cushioned manner. Fred built the prototype with a slide that was not heat-treated in order to watch for wear. He found in actuality, the slide doesn't even need any hardening. On future guns, the slide will be slightly hardened, but will still be soft enough that cracking will never be a problem.

Fred was delighted with the final design and after wringing it out, rethought his career. He had a great, new design that broke the mold on many ideas, but the fun part was over now. The excitement and rush of the first build was over and Fred is not a "production" kind of a guy. His interests focus on design, engineering and innovation and feels his best work might be done for a major firearms or accessory manufacturer in helping them to hone existing designs and to create totally new products. So Fred elected to allow the M11 to be crafted by a small company, so he can pursue his real interest in designing new products.

Consequently, the M11 can be had, in very small numbers, from a company called I.C. Technologies that Fred has licensed to make his design. Fred assures us they are made under his direct guidance. Fred will continue to offer his, what he calls, "boutique-style" of pistol-smithing to those who are looking for truly one-off designs. "I think of myself more of an artist than a pistolsmith, and love the challenge of a new idea."

Shooting Impressions

We shot the gun featured, and while the luscious Ichiro Nagata photos help to give you a sense of the flavor of this unique pistol, shooting it rounds-out that picture nicely. Fred was right about the recoil impulse. It's directly back, straight into the hand and fore-arm and the ports take care of any residual muzzle flip that

finds its way out. After some 500 rounds (after the Ichi photos were taken!), we found the M11 Merc to be perfectly reliable with the wide cross-section of ammo we used. It especially liked full-power ball or high-performance ammo, yet never balked on even some lower-powered loads we tried. Fred warned us it might not like very low-powered loads, so if you reload, you'd want to keep that in mind.

**People will run
screaming down the
street, tearing at their
hair and lawyers
throughout the world
will dance jigs of joy.**

Like any gas gun, it's mandatory to use only jacketed bullets. Lead bullets are death to any gas system and as sterling as the M11 is, it too would suffer the wrath of lead if used. So just don't do it. Besides, if you can afford one of these, you can afford to shoot jacketed ammo. Don't be stingy.

Groups were boringly routine tight clusters that hovered around the 1.25" to 1.5" range. It was rip-roaringly easy to shoot the M11 and the ergonomics caused our hearts to soar. Think Browning Hi-Power, attached to an H&K P7 and you'll get an idea. But, unlike a conventional locked-breech design, that gas system makes the slide cycle so fast it's immediately noticeable. Shots are very controllable, and it's fast and easy to get back on target. Fred uses this design in competition and, as one observer said, "Kicks butt" with it. Now we know why. It's simply a terrific whale of a good time to shoot.

Yours?

Fred admitted he made the design because of his love of the project. But still, quality costs and if you keep your mind on the fact many "custom" 1911s out there can reach toward the \$5,000 mark, it puts the cost of an M11 into perspective. Models start at around the \$3,800 level for the Merc, and since these are true custom pistols, you should make your own inquiries for specifics.

I wonder if John Browning ever looked over Fred's shoulder while he was at his bench — and just maybe nudged some of Fred's file strokes in the right direction. I'll bet they could have shared an opinion or two about gun design if they'd ever had the chance.

For more information, contact Fred Craig; 819 E. 4th St., Hutchinson, KS 67501; phone (316) 650-7717.

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