

CLASSIC HANDGUNS: The Browning

By John Marshall

The Browning Model 1935 High Power pistol should rank very high on anyone's list of classic pistol designs. It's most notable because it was the last pistol design of the master, John M. Browning, and introduced a number of advanced features still used today. It was the first service pistol to incorporate a double-column magazine, enabling the user to have a then-unheard-of 13 rounds of 9mm ammunition ready to go. Counting one in the chamber, the Model 1935 had 14 rounds of ammo to expend before reloading. Its inclined-plane tilt-barrel design is still the modern standard for a locked-breech pistol. The feed ramp of the barrel was outside the chamber of the barrel, giving a fully supported chamber made to order for high-pressure ammunition. The action was simplicity itself, combining a trigger-to-sear lever in the slide with the disconnect function. The High Power pistol was considered quite an improvement over the still-honored 1911 pistol design, dispensing with the grip safety many considered superfluous. The pistol and its clones are still in production 72 years after its introduction, a testament to an enduring design.

The history of the pistol is fascinating. For many years, John Moses Browning had a working relationship not only with Winchester and Colt's, but also with Fabrique Nationale of Belgium, or "FN" for short. In the late 1880s, FN had approached Browning with interest in one of his shotgun designs, and also in a design for a pocket pistol. FN and Browning reached an agreement on the pocket pistol, and began production of that pistol in 1899. That pistol was a huge success, particularly in Europe, and this cemented the Browning-FN relationship, which lasted until Browning's death in 1926. Browning began working extensively in Belgium and it became his second home. He designed, and FN produced, many successful firearms.

Four years before his death, Browning began work on the pistol that was eventually to become the High Power. A very talented firearms designer, Dieudonne Saive of Belgium, understudied him. Browning and Saive collaborated on the new pistol, and Browning oversaw the making of several prototypes. Unfortunately, the design was still not considered complete when Browning died. FN immediately turned the project over to Saive, who gave the perfection of the pistol his full and complete attention. The final product of

these two great men's efforts was to be known as the Modele 1935 Pistolet Automatique Grand Puissance (GP), or in English-speaking countries as the Model 1935 High Power Pistol. It's notable that Saive later went on to design the FN-FAL rifle, another superb firearm.

While the High Power closely resembled the classic 1911 design, it was in fact a quite different and simplified revision of the 1911. It was also a locked-breech single-action semiautomatic, but instead of the swinging link utilized on the 1911, it used a simpler inclined-plane cam to drop the rear of the barrel out of engagement with the



This High Power is an Inglis-made WWII example, complete with lanyard ring and black "painted" finish.

slide. The external controls were similar to those of the 1911, but the High Power lacked the grip safety of the earlier design. Browning and Saive had incorporated a magazine-disconnect safety in the design, rendering the pistol incapable of firing when the magazine was removed. Fortunately for many people who disdain this concept, the magazine-disconnect safety is easily removable. A transfer bar in the slide connected the trigger and sear; the rearward motion of the slide disconnected those two parts for flawless semiautomatic firing. But perhaps the most notable feature of this pistol was the incorporation of a double-column magazine. This caused a sensation at the time, and sales of the new pistol soared. Besides Belgium, it was adopted by Estonia, Lithuania, China, Peru and Rumania (I once had a Lithuanian High Power, which I now regret selling). When the Germans overran Belgium during WWII, FN's management refused to cooperate with them. The Nazis then confiscated the FN plant and ran it with German management. Over 300,000 High Powers were made for the German military, which christened it the Pistolet 640(b). High Powers with German military markings are quite collectable today.