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The Case for

By Duane Thomas

A recent trend in police weaponry is toward double-action-only auto pistols. On most DAO autos the hammer follows the slide down and decocks itself after each shot, rather than staying to the rear as on a single-action or conventional double-action auto; therefore with the DAO auto you have a long trigger pull every time, just like a DA revolver. While DAO autos are very popular among police agencies they have been slow to catch on with the general gun buying public. And that's really too bad, because they have much to recommend them.

Simplicity of operation is a DAO auto plus: shooters so armed don't face the training problem of learning to switch from the long, hammer-cocking stroke of a conventional DA auto to the short, light SA trigger pull for succeeding shots, the so-called "crunch-tick" phenomenon.

Also in the DAO autos' favor, with such guns you don't have to worry about forgetting to flip off a thumb safety, as on an SA auto, before the piece can be fired. Instead it's just "pull gun, pull trigger." Since the vast majority of DAO autos do not possess external safety levers this streamlines the manual of operations. There are a minimum of "weird" buttons and levers over which to fumble. As a matter of fact, on most DAO autos the only three controls are the slide stop, magazine release button and trigger. For those of you who like guns such as the Beretta 92FS or the various Smith & Wesson autos but have never cared for their slide-mounted safety levers, the DAO versions of these fine auto pistols give you an attractive alternative. Now you can have all the nice features of such guns without the slide-mounted safeties.

Compared to the revolver, DAO autos give you greater in-gun firepower, as well as faster and easier reloads. They're also easier to shoot. The autos tend to have lower bore axes than the revolvers, which means they have less leverage to flip their muzzles on you than revolvers of similar power levels. DAO autos like the Berettas and Smith & Wessons give you double-action trigger pulls lighter and smoother than anything to be had outside of a very well-tuned revolver.

I've been struck by the way many people refer to DAO autos as "high-firepower revolvers" or somesuch. The idea here is that if you know how to operate a DA revolver you can transition over to a DAO auto with a minimum of retraining. While there is a certain amount of truth to this, I think it would be a mistake not to recognize that any auto pistol, even a DAO, still requires a higher level of training to load, unload, check condition of readiness, and generally operate safely than do revolvers. With a revolver, to check that the gun is loaded or unloaded, all you have to do is swing out the cylinder. With an auto it's a bit more complicated because a cartridge can hide in the gun's chamber to trap the unwary. As the old saying goes,

"You've got to be incredibly stupid to have an accidental discharge with a double-action revolver; however, you've only got to be a little stupid to have an accidental discharge with an auto pistol." A shooter armed with a DAO auto still needs to know that you remove the magazine first, THEN rack the action to clear the round out of the chamber, THEN lock the slide back to visually check the condition of readiness.

We pause for a moment to debate semantics. Many semi-educated shooters criticize the term "double action only" as a contradiction in terms. They argue that "double action" means a gun can be fired two different ways, either by a long, heavy, hammer cocking pull on the trigger, or by being thumb cocked for a short, light SA pull. Since DAO guns can only be fired one way, they therefore can't be "double action" anything, right? Wrong. The words "double action" do NOT mean a gun can be fired two different ways. They mean that pulling the trigger accomplishes two things: it cocks the gun's hammer and then releases it to go forward. It's quite correct to refer to a gun that can only be fired by squeezing the trigger to cock and release the hammer as a "double action only" firearm.

There is an unfortunate, widespread perception among armchair commando types that DAO auto pistols just aren't "cool." These worthies tend to be devotees of the SA auto, who point out with derision that having a DA trigger pull for every shot makes these guns harder to shoot well than, say, a cocked-and-locked Colt .45 auto. I've observed in print before that for some reason the cocked-and-locked crowd seems to attract a disproportionate number of folks only too willing to criticize any weapons design other than "The One True Gun."

I have to wonder if the reason so many people pooh-pooh DAO autos is simply because they've never given them a fair shot (pun intended). Once the DAO trigger mechanism is mastered such guns can be fired fairly swiftly and very accurately. As on DA revolvers, the long, rolling double action trigger stroke gives you a very rhythmic trigger pull, and a surprise trigger break that can allow a shooter to fire more accurately.

Jim Cirillo – survivor of many life-and-death shootouts during his years with the legendary New York City Police Stakeout Unit – is a big fan of DAO autos. The last time I saw Jim his carry gun was a standard Smith & Wesson 4506 that had been custom converted to DAO. Evan Marshall, himself the victor in several shootouts during his time as a Detroit cop, is also a major fan of DAO autos. I think it's an interesting comment that while some "experts" are down on the DAO auto pistols, these two men, both of whom have actually "been there and done it" on numerous occasions (and both of whom have extensive experience as police trainers) are highly in favor of such guns. This tells us something. 