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The Guns of STI

The gun that began life as a totally radical competition spacegun has evolved into a thoroughly practical self-defense weapon.



by Massad Ayoob - Photos by Ichiro Nagata Pg 66-70, 113-118

High-capacity, large-bore semi-automatics seemed to many an idea whose time had come. The fat mag .45 seemed to give the best of both worlds, and not merely a compromise.

The 9mm has lots of rounds, but seems feeble; the .45 has lots of power but too few rounds. So, you bought a .40 S&W instead.

Going with a high capacity .45 isn't a compromise - it's getting both power and firepower.

However, there are some logistical drawbacks to the high-capacity, large-bore pistol. It is not for nothing that the frames of such handguns are known as "wide bodies." Perhaps even more difficult, in terms of comfortable and discreet concealment, is the hugeness of the spare magazines.

On the other hand, there is no question that increased magazine capacity can spell the difference between life and death on the street. There are numerous documented cases to prove the lifesaving value of extra rounds - beyond seven.

For those who would rather learn from history than repeat it, there is logic in a powerful gun that carries lots of rounds, a logic that goes beyond competitive action shooting matches. The list of such guns has been slowly growing.

First, there were the Para-Ordnance series and the Glock 21. Today there is the Megastar for those who



want double-action and the Caspian for those who want another choice in a 1911 style pistol. Now the list is expanded with a new offering, the STI 2011. Two versions were tested in this article, the full-size Eagle and the compact Falcon.

Basic Chassis

Both pistols are built around the frame concept called the Modular Competition System. The polymer/steel frame was originally built for competition, and this shows in the light triggers. An STI spokesman told us that the guns can be ordered with any pull weight the customer likes, though they won't go below three pounds.

The test guns were definitely on the light side of the trigger pull scale for street guns. The full-size pistol was 3 1/4 lbs. in pull weight, and the compact had about a 3 1/2 lb. trigger.

The Eagle, also known as the "5.1" for its barrel length, had a little bit of take-up in the trigger before the shot broke. The Falcon, or "3.9" for its barrel, had somewhat less.



Magazine Considerations

The Falcon will take an Eagle magazine but not, of course, vice versa. The same is true of compact versus full-size Colts and Paras. Having different dimensions from the Para-Ordnance, the STI magazines take fewer rounds. For 14 rounds total, you'll need the magazine with the reservoir extended into the long base pad. The sharp rear edges of that pad dig mercilessly into you when carried in an inside the waistband concealment mag pouch, and for that matter, will do the same on the other side of the body if you carry one in your pistol and the gun is holstered tight to your hip.

The extended base pad also compromises concealment.

Lose one round of capacity in the full-size gun and you can get by with a lower profile mag with a less pronounced extrusion at the bottom. The gun is now distinctly more concealable, and won't dig into you whether it's in the pistol or in the mag pouch.

The mags worked well when loaded all the way up, and snapped smoothly into the Eagle 5.1 with its slide forward. However, the Falcon 3.9 required gargantuan effort to get a fully loaded magazine in place with its slide forward.

When carrying the Falcon 3.9, I made a point of downloading the spare magazines by one round. One extra cartridge is a false economy if it compromises the reliability of your reloading technique or forces you to take more time to reload.

Eleven .45 ACP's would fit in the Falcons magazine when it was first designed. It's down to 10, of course, with the Crime Bill. The new magazines are indented and the mag body has been weakened so it will break if the owner tries to drill it out to hold more.

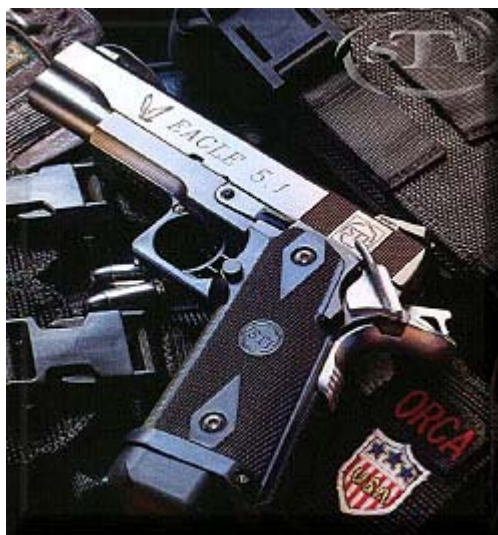
One is not a lot, but it's still galling to those who resent having their freedoms impinged upon. It's hard for me to determine which is more offensive: that "break if you expand it" 10-round mag, or the full capacity one that's stamped on the back, "For Law Enforcement and Government Use Only." Of course, none of this is STI's fault.

Pistol Features

The Eagle 5.1 is fitted with sharp-edged Bo-Mar adjustable sights, well buried into the slide; the little Falcon 3.9 has the fixed Novak Lo-Mount. Both were black and free of dots, bars and other encumbrances.

Each had a beavertail grip safety with "speed bump" at the bottom to make sure the hand would activate it even with a poor hold. The Falcon had a low-profile Colt style thumb safety on the left side of the frame only; the Eagle sported a contrasty extended ambi.

Each can be spotted as an STI from a considerable distance, not only due to the unique profile but also the use of polished, white metal screw heads at the front of the trigger guard and in the grips. This gives an incongruous appearance and lends an unfortunate "Mattel flavor" to an otherwise very professional looking pistol rendered in black synthetic, blue steel and flat gray stainless.



Holster Hassles

Your first problem with carrying an STI is finding gun leather for it. At this writing, custom leathersmith Mitchell Rosen has just gotten in a sample to work from. STI admits that none of the major manufacturers have yet come on line with standard holsters built for their pistols.

Conventional 1911 leather won't fit. The trigger guard is too long and square, and dust cover (forward part of the frame) is much bulkier than on the

standard 1911 auto.

By trial and error, I found that holsters for a 4506 S&W double-action auto would fit the Eagle 5.1, and a holster for a 4516 would do for the Falcon 3.9, although there was a little bit of back and forth slop in the scabbard.

A Bianchi Pinch outside-the-belt scabbard, and a Ted Blocker LFI Concealment Rig - both for the 4506 - were used for this two week test.

It's important to note that both holsters were open top. The safety strap on a thumb-break holster for a double-action pistol like the 4506 won't be placed right for a cocked-and-locked gun like the STI 2011. There is a possibility that the strap could wipe off the safety catch, creating a hazardous situation.

The fat magazines are likewise a problem: they're too portly amidst hips to fit even the pouch for a double-stack Wondernine or .40 magazine. The solution is the extra-large pouch made for the large frame Glocks and Paras.

For this test, I used an inside-the-waistband LFI-style Blocker pouch cut for the Glock 21, and an outside-the-belt Greg Kramer pouch originally made for a Para-Ordnance magazine. They worked fine, except with the 13-shot magazine whose sharp edges would dig into the body.

Pistol Packin'

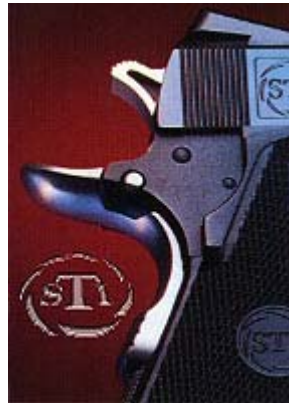
Once a cartridge was sacrificed and the round-bottom magazine was loaded in, the Eagle 5.1 worked fine in concealed carry except that the sharp edge of the Bo-Mar sight was hard on both skin and clothing (skin with the IWB holster and jacket lining with the Pinch scabbard).

The smaller Falcon 3.9 was sharp-edge free, and much more comfortable. More concealable, too. Its height is about the same as a standard Colt Government, but still shorter by far than the overlength grip of the Eagle 5.1. This pistol concealed discreetly in the LFI rig, along with a spare mag on the opposite side, beneath an untucked polo shirt.

Concealing the full-size STI pistol required a jacket no matter which holster was used.

For many users, the defensive rationale of the high capacity .45 lies in uniform wear or as a home defense weapon that will be secured in a drawer, quick release gun vault, or holster strategically in place. In those cases, size will be no problem.

The 5.1 weighs 46 ozs. loaded with 13, 185 gr. cartridges, the 3.9 tipped the scales at 41 ozs. with 11 rounds in place.



Shooting Performance

Accuracy testing was done from the bench at 25 yards. Protocol was as follows: to allow for the fact that autoloading pistols often send their first shot (hand cycled into battery) to a slightly different point of impact than the rest that are cycled into the chamber by recoil, the first shot of each gun load was fired into a separate target.

Four more followed, into a second target. The best three of these generally give a fair assessment of the gun's potential mechanical accuracy; throwing out the worst shot allows for human error.

I began with the sleek carry gun, Falcon 3.9. With Federal 230 gr. FMJ Match hardball, it put two shots within 5/8" of one another, and the best three in a 2 5/16" group. A called flyer extended the fourth shot out to 3 9/16".

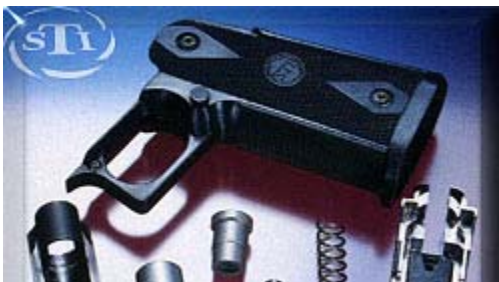
The smaller pistol did its best shooting, however, with a Pro-Load+P 230 gr. round that sends a Hornady XTP hollow-point out of a 5" gun's muzzle at about 950 fps. It delivered a three-shot group that measured 1 1/8", and even keeping the throwaway shot the cluster only measured 2 1/16".

Unfortunately, the groups in question were 4" low and almost 2" right at 25 yards. One expects registered sights with a pistol in this price class.

Kyle Claitor of STI advised that the pistol was rushed out for photography, and apologized for not having sighted it in first. I've seen this sort of thing happen before, and I doubt that a pistol that shoots around corners is anything that STI is likely to ship to a customer or dealer. The Eagle 5.1 was more fun. Its precision adjustable sights didn't need the touch of a screwdriver; they came out of the box pretty much on for 25 yard shooting. Pro-Load 230 gr. +P did a 2" group (best three), that was still under 3" even with the farthest shot.

The 185 gr. Cor-Bon, also a +P loading, delivered 1 5/16" for the best three shots, and 2 1/8" for all four. Interestingly, both of these +P rounds had a snappy recoil that resulted in the slide-stop inadvertently

locking open the slide before the last round was fired. This did not occur in the smaller STI .45.



Top Honors

A standard pressure .45 round seemed indicated. CCI Blazers 200 gr. JHP had 2 1/4" for the best three out of four shots at 25 yards, but the one cartridge that caused feed failures in the Eagle, apparently due to its wide "flying ashtray" mouth profile. Remington standard velocity 185 gr. JHP did better: 1 1/4" for the best three, and just under 1 3/4" including the shot I threw out.

Top honors for accuracy, however, went to Winchester's plain vanilla 230 gr. JHP. This load seems to have

proven itself well in the street, and here it gave a splendid 7/8" group for the best three of four shots, with the fourth still within 2".

Interestingly, all the hand-chambered first shots stayed within the eighth ring of the NRA 25 yard slow-fire pistol target, centered in the bull. The tendency of many autoloaders to plant the first shot someplace other than the follow-ups was not present in this pistol, something anyone who takes accuracy seriously will appreciate.

A group of bullets ranging from 185 to 230 grains in weight and 830 to 1,150 fps, measured 3 1/8". (The bull of the target in question is 5 1/2" in diameter).

Clearly, the guns shot well enough to win any IPSC Limited match or similar task they might be put to.

Reliability Factors

Reliability was excellent. With the exception of the Eagle 5.1's adamant refusal to feed wide-mouth 200 gr. JHPs, the guns digested everything else without a burp, and probably a little over a couple of hundred went through the Falcon 3.9.

Shootability under pressure was also impressive. I shot the Eagle 5.1 in front of a class of 28 students to set the pace for their qualification. With me was Marty Hayes, a former Montana state stock gun champion in IPSC.

He used a Springfield Armory 1911 A1 tuned by Mark Morris, one of the best in the country. When the proverbial smoke had cleared, we tied with 300 out of 300 scores; we had to measure the groups to break the tie. Marty's gun, in which he figured he had about \$1,550 invested, had put 60 rounds of Black Hills 230 gr. .45 hardball into a 3 7/8" group, beating me for a side bet by 1/16" with the STI and the same ammo.

Four days later, shooting double speed on the same qualification course with the same guns, I was able to edge Marty by a single point with the STI putting 60 Black Hills rounds into a 4 5/8" group in the A-zone of an IPSC target. Here was clear proof that the STI pistol is, indeed, "race ready" out of the box and fully capable of competing with the best of the custom 1911s in Limited Class configuration.

Personal Views

A few weeks in which over a thousand rounds were fired, and a couple of weeks of daily carry, left some strong likes and dislikes with the STI.

These guns recoil very softly. Kyle Claitor believes that, as with the Glock, the polymer frame absorbs shock.

The "speed bump" design of the grip safety allows positive release, with any grasp, including the high thumb position that forces so many shooters to disconnect standard grip safeties.

The relatively light weight makes this gun a joy to carry all day.

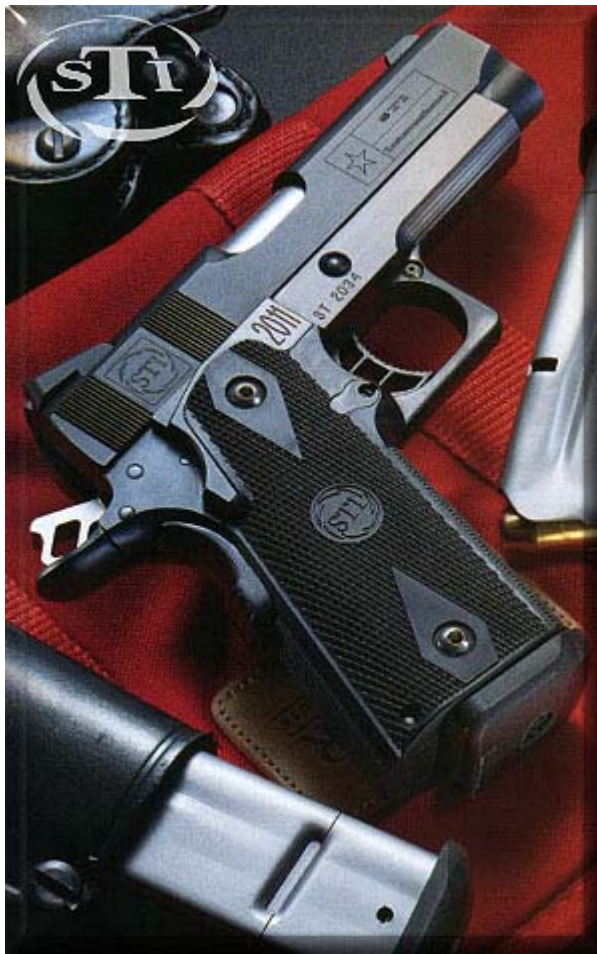
During the test period, it went on as soon as I showered in the morning and was set aside only when I undressed for bed. The weight was never a problem.

The advertised "CNC and EDM machining with Superior Craftsmanship" proved to be no exaggeration. Operation of the guns was satisfyingly smooth, and both delivered extremely consistent trigger pulls shot to shot. I was impressed by the fact that the Eagle 5.1 was one of the few centerfire autoloaders I've worked with that put its first hand-cycled round to the same point of impact as follow-up shots. Ejection was consistent, practically piling up the brass for you. This is always an indicator of an extremely well-made and well-balanced autoloading mechanism.

The triggers on both of these guns are, in my opinion, too *light* for the street. I would want them with 4 1/2 to 5 lb. pulls. Fortunately, they can be ordered that way.

I did see some real manipulation problems with these guns. The slide is smooth in the middle of where the grasping grooves should be, to make room for that distinctive "STI" logo. Unfortunately, this is exactly where the hand needs some grooves for traction. It made quick manipulation of the slide tenuous and awkward, especially given the lusty recoil springs these guns come with. Picture working the slide from the back on a custom 1911 that has a thumb shield on either side, and you'll have an idea of what I'm talking about.

This is a triumph of form over function, of appearance over substance, and it cries out to be changed. The last time I saw a human engineering error like this one was on the old ASP conversion of the Model 39 S&W 9mm, where the slide grooves were milled off "so they wouldn't snag."



The STI factory guns have all the options, features and

quality one normally finds only on custom guns.

Slide Stop Question

Everyone who looked at the screw-together slide stop predicted it would come loose. It didn't. Claitor explains that this part (available from STI for other 1911's) allows fitting slide stops of different diameters, the better to optimize accuracy with reliability, without tedious milling of a stop. They are available in diameters from .193" to .202".

Two slide stop problems did crop up, however. The one on the 3.9 failed to lock the slide back on an empty magazine. It also pushed loose too easily. Fortunately, this is easily rectified.

A bigger problem is the manner in which the slide stop is recessed into the wide-bodied frame. It forces the shooter into awkward manipulations to lock the slide open manually on the range or during inspection. This the the first 1911 pistol I've seen on which an oversize slide release lever would make sense. Claitor tells me it can be ordered with a Wilson aftermarket part.

On the Eagle 5.1, there was an annoying tendency for the slide to lock itself open toward the end of the magazine when firing snappy-kicking +P rounds, both the 230 gr. Pro-Load and the Cor-Bon 185 gr. However, Claitor says the gun is rated for +P ammo. A slight factory adjustment would probably solve this problem.

As mentioned, the edges of the Bo-Mar sight on the Eagle need to be rounded, as do edges on the butt pad of the longer magazines.

From a subjective standpoint of aesthetics, I didn't care for the silvery screws in the grips and the trigger guard. The latter secures

a cutout of the steel drop loop into the frame, and the upper grip bushings also perform an anchoring function, though the lower grip screws are strictly cosmetic. These would look better rendered in black oxide.



Bottom Line

My main concern is that I see no firing pin safety in the design. Enough "dropped gun AD" cases with pistols in this category have been brought to my attention as an expert witness that I prefer to carry a gun with a passive firing pin safety, such as the Colt Series 80 or the Para-Ordnance. However, some don't like a 1911 with a firing pin safety; if you belong to that group, the STI is your choice. Taking a safety device out of a gun that has it, like the Para-Ordnance, would make you look reckless in court if you had to use the gun for self-defense. It's no problem if the gun didn't have that device to begin with.

STI wanted to bring you a top-quality 1911 that would hold lots of rounds and allow you to compete on a level playing field in IPSC Limited class, *and* to enable you to protect your life in a worst case scenario. With a "factory custom" gun that's light, easy shooting and conducive to fast center hits under extreme pressure, they have achieved this.

There are features and changes, mentioned above, that I'd like to see before making the STI in any size my regular daily carry gun, but the fact is that this is an extremely well-made and well-executed pistol that is an excellent value at its' suggested retail price of \$1,549.

With some 50 guns a week leaving the shop, you can expect a bit of a back order situation, but if STI's features are the features you want in a defensive pistol, you'll find the quality worth the wait.

STI - Designed to Perform

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