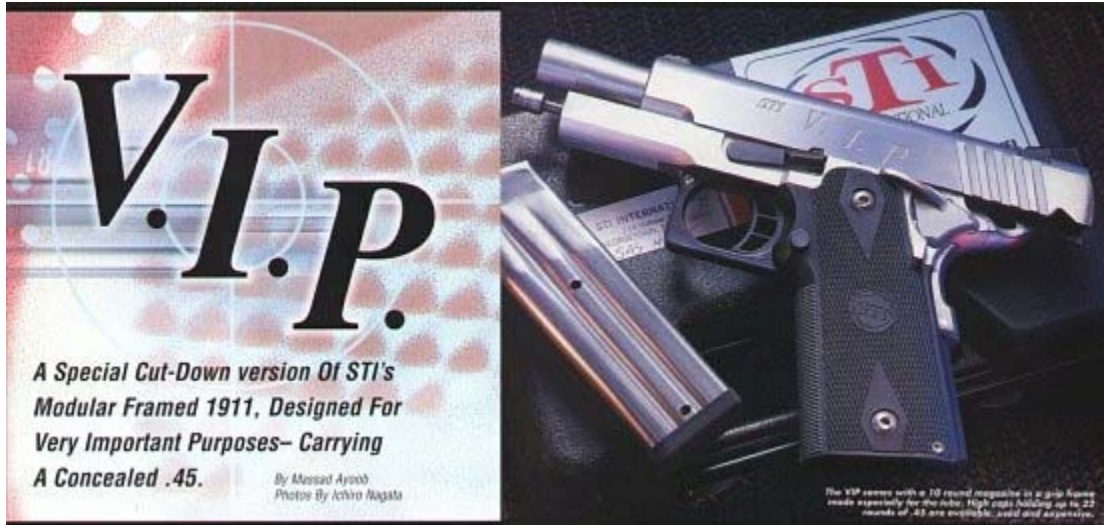




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For several years now, the wide-body 1911 pioneered by Fred and Virgil Tripp and Sandy Strayer have been the hot ticket in IPSC circles. When the Strayer-Tripp partnership broke up in 1994, Strayer formed Strayer-Voigt and Virgil took over what was then STI. Enter Dave Skinner, who today is the owner STI. In the May/June 1998 *American Handgunner*, Cameron Hopkins explained what happened:

"Before purchasing STI from company founder Virgil Tripp, Skinner and his wife Shirley were the owners of an electronics company named Tessco, Inc., which had seven plants in four cities in two states with over 430 employees.

He retired in 1990 but, as Dave put it, 'Got bored as hell.' Having been IPSC shooters with strong interests in firearms, the Skinners met Tripp at a match and the rest is history.

I had met Virgil on the range and seen his little Chip McCormick demo tape when he first came out with the polymer grip. I liked him and we both got along line. Both being old farts, we shot against each other. Then in '94, he and Strayer split up and Virgil needed help. So I went over to STI to help Virgil. We just pumped in time and money until got here", the affable Texan explained.

Shortly after coming on board with STI, Skinner had tried to market compact versions of the firm's successful IPSC guns. "We had the Falcon and the Hawk", he remembers. One had a 4.3" barrel and the other a 3.9". We sold maybe 50 a year and after three years, I discontinued them. After that, of course, everyone said 'I wanted to buy one'. So I reintroduced the small .45 a year after that. And still none bought it."

Skinner pauses to chuckle and adds. "Then came the assault weapon bill and the Brady Bill. Soon. Only 10 round magazines could be manufactured. Meanwhile, more and more states were adopting shall-issue concealed carry laws. Together, this created a huge market for compact, powerful handguns that could take ten round magazines. We came up with the narrow .45 Ranger model and looking at it one day, it clicked in my head that we could use Hawk and Falcon grips to make a hi-cap compact."



Dave continues. "We got to playing with it some. The grip length of the Hawk and Falcon lent themselves perfectly to a 10-round .45 magazine. We put a couple together. They were as tight and reliable as any modular STI we'd ever built. We decided to call it the VIP and give the concept of a compact carry .45 one more try."

The third time, it turned out, was the charm. The VIP has struck a responsive chord with the upside, "serious gun enthusiast" segment of the concealed carry market. "The VIP has caught on very well," says Dave Skinner. Though the VIP has only been available a short while, 266 units had been sold by the time of this writing. By contrast, the entire previous production of the Falcon and Hawk combined was only between 200 and 300 pistols.

At this writing, VIP's are in stock and ready to ship. An ingenious STI service is the posting on their website of current inventory, so a prospective customer can immediately tell what's in stock. You'll find the site at www.stiguns.com.

Carry Gun Supreme

The VIP's 3.9" barrel splits the difference between a traditional Officers-size 3.5" barrel and the 4.25" tube of a Commander. The stainless steel slide rides on the modular frame that STI made famous. They define the upper portion of this unit as the "frame" per se, made in this Case of 7070-T7 structural aircraft aluminum. The bottom portion is the polymer grip-frame. In other words, the dual-personality "frame" unit meets the slide with metal and interfaces the shooting hand with plastic.

The magazine is a little bit hard to load all the way up. Though listed by the factory as "a butt-flush dual stack magazine only 120mm long," the one on our sample protruded enough to show almost .10" of magazine body.

The gun will take longer, pre-ban STI magazines, which, according to Skinner, have been produced to hold up to 22 (!) .45 rounds. The trick, of course, is finding those grandfathered magazines, and then coming up with the lofty prices once you do locate one.

Mercifully, the VIP lacks forward slide serrations. These tend to draw the hand too far forward toward the muzzle when chamber-checking a loaded pistol in my opinion.

There are five wide, easily grasped serrations at the traditional location at the rear of the slide, cut at the classic National Match angle but broader, affording the support hand a very firm grasp at the rear of the slide.

There's an interesting story behind those grooves. "When you tested the Falcon and the Hawk a few years ago. Skinner reminded me, "You loved the guns but panned the cute serrations we used to have. Well, okay, we have real serrations now. It dictated a change to the logo though." Hey, all I know is, it works way better this way. Thanks, Dave.

Accuracy Testing

The gun was tested in hand-held mode from a bench rest at 25 yards. Each five-shot group was measured twice, once overall and once again for the best three shots. I've found over the years that the latter measurement helps factor out human error, and will reasonably approximate what a machine rest would have given me for all five. It's a quick "short-hand" method for testing for intrinsic accuracy that is handy when a Ransom Rest is not available.

V.I.P. Accuracy Results



Load	5-Shot Group	Best 3 Shots	Impact Point*
Black Hills 230 gr JHP	2.85"	1.65"	+4.9"
CCI Blazer 230 gr FMJ	2.85"	0.95"	+4.8"
Pro-Load Tactical +P 230 gr JHP	2.25"	0.40"	+3.85"
Remington 230 gr FMJ	1.65"	1.10"	+4.5"
Golden Saber +P 185 gr JHP	2.70"	0.85"	+5.4"
Sellier & Bellot 230 gr FMJ	3.05"	1.50"	+4.8"
Winchester Non-Toxic 170 gr LFSP	3.10"	1.05"	+5.3"

*The VIP shot consistently high above the point-of-aim. These figures represent the distance above the point-of-aim at 25 yards.

A recent double-blind test, with me using this method and Handloading Editor Charlie Petty testing the same guns and loads in a Ransom Rest, validated the concept. Look for a story on our double-blind test in the next issue. In any case, the conventional wisdom is that polymer frame guns like this one don't show their true accuracy in machine rests. All groups were measured to the nearest 0.05", center-to-center.

This particular gun shot everything dramatically high. A point-of-impact measurement was included with each load tested, encompassing the distance between the center of each group and the point-of-aim. Seven different rounds were tried, comprising six manufacturers and four bullet weights with low to +P pressures.

Some observations are worth making. The group measurements on the cheap, generic Remington ball are not a misprint. Every now and then, some generic ammo comes through that shoots like match-grade stuff. This has happened before with Remington hardball. The same ammo gave me a 1.25" five-shot group at the same 25-yard distance with my department-issue service pistol, a Ruger P90.

This test reminded me of why we need something to allow for human error when we don't have a machine rest. With the Pro-Load Tactical 200 grain +P, the pistol had put four shots in 0.70" center-to-center before I blew the last one all by myself, stretching the total group to 2.25". The Golden Saber +P had pumped four shots into a 1.9" cluster before I jerked the last one and opened the group to nearly 3".

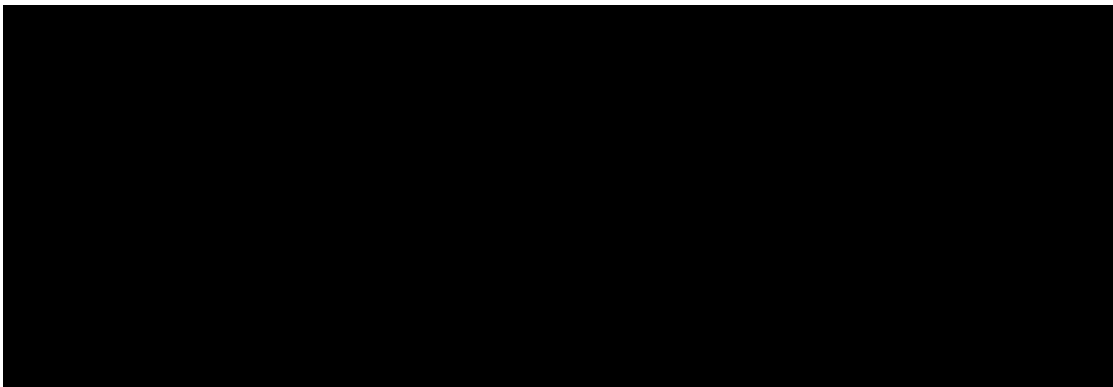
STI is famous for accurate guns, and the VIP is clearly no exception. The "best three" measurements indicate superb mechanical accuracy potential. Note that none of the seven loads tested exhibited the "4+1 syndrome," in which the first hand-chambered round goes to a different point-of-aim than subsequent rounds that are automatically cycled into battery. The way this gun shot, indicates the perfect alignment of parts that you pay for in high-dollar performance-oriented 1911 style pistols like this one.

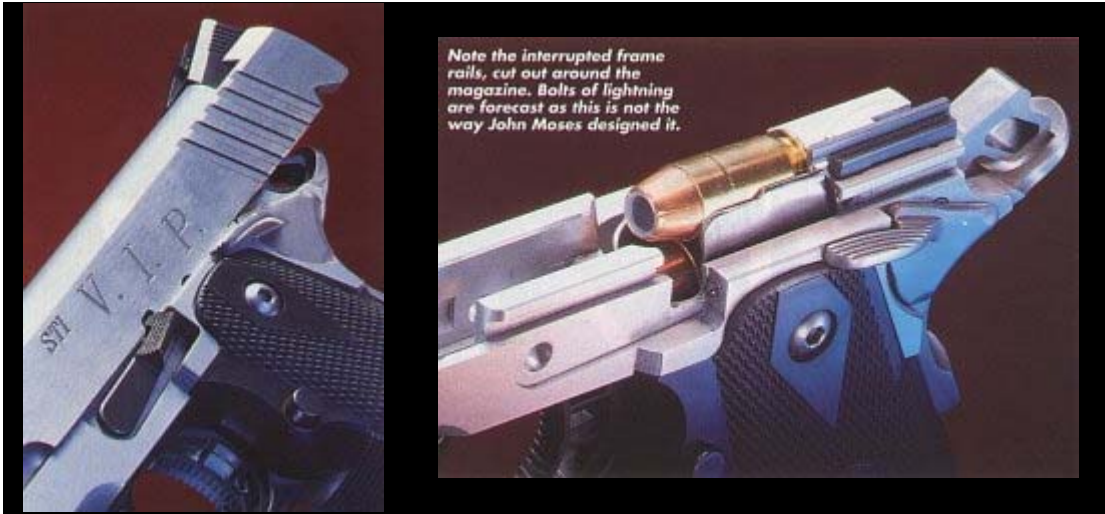
Yes, the fixed sights not being regulated for proper point-of-aim was disappointing indeed. I backed off to 50 yards and tried it again. Five rounds of Sellier & Bellot still impacted an average of 2.5" high of point of aim. The group measured 5.0" for all five shots, with the best three in a startlingly tight cluster measuring 0.95".

STI advised me that they expect 1.5" to 2.5" accuracy from this pistol at 25 yards, a high standard for a compact .45 auto. This test indicates that their expectations are conservative. The VIP's accuracy potential gets five stars out of five, if you overlook where those accurate shots went due to how this concealment pistol's sights were regulated.

Trigger Issue

You carry a gun like the VIP to defend yourself and those you love from human monsters. Once you've done so, not everyone will see you as a Dr. Van Helsing who put the stake through the heart of Dracula. In one case I did, a woman was in the process of divorcing her abusive husband and had a restraining order against him. When he attacked a physician who was forced to shoot him in self-defense, she became the grieving widow who instituted a massive lawsuit.





In another, the monster was a vicious junkie whose own mother kicked him out of the house after he savagely beat his crippled, retarded, baby sister. He subsequently attacked a stranger with a club. The intended victim drew a .38 revolver to ward him off, cocking the hammer as he did so. The gun unintentionally discharged as the junkie longed forward, and the fatal shot was accidentally fired at about the same time you or I would have fired it deliberately. But once this particular monster was dead, it was safe to be his mother again, and the mother helped the media bring the pressure that resulted in the armed citizen being tried for murder.

The VIP we tested has a light trigger pull. Don Ellison, a gunsmith with Lewis Arms at Riley's in Hooksett, NH weighed its trigger at between 2 lbs. 14 oz. to 3 lb. 1 oz. That's about what the cocked .38 would have been in the hands of the defendant mentioned above.

I've done multiple cases where the allegation of "accidental discharge due to hair trigger" was the cornerstone of the attack against the defendant. This is becoming a cottage industry among plaintiff's bar. They know that negligence is the key ingredient to winning a wrongful death lawsuit, and for winning a manslaughter conviction. They know, too, that it's awfully easy to convince a jury that a gun with a light trigger pull "went off by mistake."

This is why most gun experts who've been through the mill in court won't recommend anything lighter than a 4 lb. trigger for a defensive firearm, and often feel 5 lbs. or more is even better. By that standard, the VIP's trigger is simply too light to make the cut. With light trigger pulls, the good news is that they're easy to shoot, and the bad news is they're easy to shoot.

In some shooting circles, when talk turns to pull weight; you'll hear the phrase, "Three pounds, crisp." Three pounds crisp is indeed what our VIP delivered. But "three pounds crisp" is the answer to a couple of different questions. One is, "What's a good trigger to have on a target pistol?" The other is, "What is plaintiff's counsel's guaranteed employment act?"

If I were ordering a VIP pistol, I would specifically order it with a minimum 4 lb. pull. I know they could do it. I have in my possession a full size STI that has a 4 lb. trigger and delivers the same delicious accuracy as this little VIP .45, if not better.

Parts Problems

Many shooters have found their STI pistols absolutely perfect out of the box. I have such a one now. Unfortunately, it's not this one. As noted earlier, a gun in this price range- the suggested retail is \$1699- should not shoot 4" or 5" high at 25 yards. Even at 4 to 7 yards, the unacceptably high point-of-impact should have been spotted during final test firing before leaving the factory.

Also noted earlier was the fact that the magazine appeared to protrude from the butt in a way that made it look as if it was short of being fully seated. That could distract someone into thinking their pistol wasn't properly locked and loaded when it was. It's not just an aesthetic thing.

During the first 50 or so rounds, the trigger would occasionally hang up. The pull increased from 3 lbs. to what felt like more than 10. The problem resolved itself. This is generally an indication of an internal burr that became smoothed out in firing.

Finally, the pistol consistently locked its slide open when there was one cartridge left in the magazine.

It was readily apparent upon inspection that the part of the slide stop, that is intended to be contacted by the follower was instead being contacted by the bullet of the last round in the mag. This happened with every type of cartridge tested except the 200 gr. Pro-Load, whose Speer bullet apparently didn't hit the internal slide stop stud.

This is not a huge problem. The quick fix is to do as I did, and treat your 10+1 pistol as a 9+1 that will give you a bonus shot if you thumb-down the slide release lever as soon as the pistol locks open. The long-term fix is to replace the slide stop or have it filed down on its internal protuberance by someone who knows exactly how to do it without taking so much off that it fails to lock the slide open on an empty magazine follower. Still, it should not be happening on a \$1,700 pistol that comes from a house famous for guns that win national championships.

Except for this, there were no malfunctions of any kind, even when firing short, wide .45 hollow points.

In Perspective

Subjectively, the VIP felt awfully good in my hand. You'd think that flat, wide grip-front would be awkward, but for me it lined up perfectly with the median phalanges, the middle bones of the fingers, and automatically pointed where I wanted. I like a pistol with an ergonomic manual safety like the VIP's. The gun was free of sharp edges, and overall created a beautiful interface between operator and machine.

Yes, I was disappointed with the flaws mentioned. but it's nothing that one trip back to the factory can't fix. The initially uneven trigger pull is not a common thing with STI pistols, and you shouldn't expect it on yours. Nor should you suspect sights 5" off or a slide stop that's too long- especially after this article hits print.

In the end, the STI is like a Jaguar. It is prized by those who appreciate maximum performance and see cost as no object to attaining pride of ownership. It is about comfort while that performance is delivered. It is about style and elan. These are all things that STI delivers, even though they are not separately itemized on the bill of sale, and that is why STI is a going and healthy concern.

Skinner tells me that in the past year he and STI's 30 employees have seen gun sales up 40 percent and parts sales up 22 percent at a time when most other manufacturers are in the doldrums Frankly, all things considered, that's not surprising.



STI - Designed to Perform

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