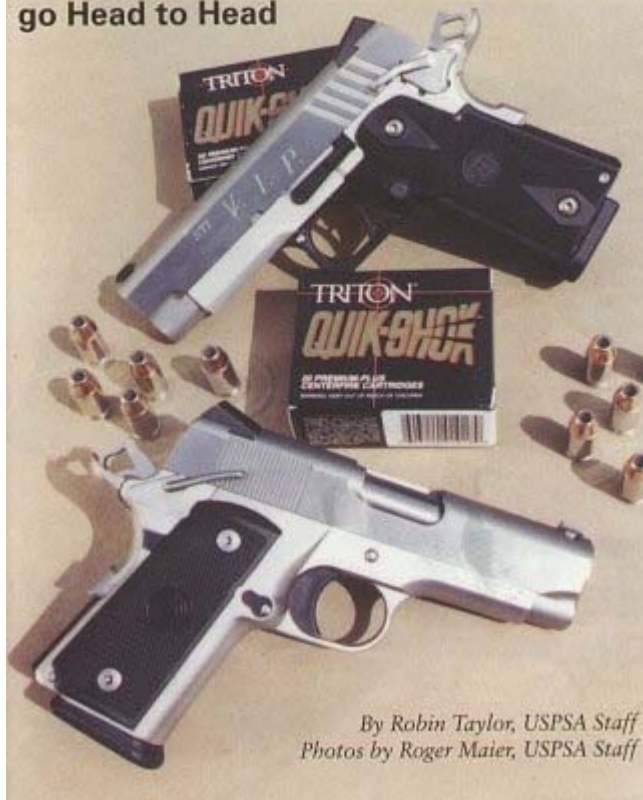




Front Sight - July / August 2001

Your .45 Understudy:

STI VIP and Para-Ordnance P-12
go Head to Head



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Call it splitting the baby. USPSA's martial purists tell us all to "shoot what we carry, and carry what we shoot." Typically that involves giving up a few competitive options and/or carrying around a lot of extra weight and bulk. The weight and bulk in particular prompts many USPSA members to carry defense guns that bear almost no resemblance to their competition platforms. For many it's a necessary evil, but it's one that comes with a big training cost.

In recent years, Kimber, Para-Ordnance, and STI have all launched compact .45 caliber handguns build around dual-column 10-round magazines. They're powerful highly concealable handguns whose controls mimic the full-size high-capacity gun USPSA shooters use every day.

Purchasing one of the guns allows you to drop the bulk and poundage, but still "carry what you shoot" in terms of sights, controls, and general handling. If you shoot the right .45, your full-size competition magazines can ride along as back-up in appropriate leather. Instead of splitting the baby, you have two that act a lot alike.

For our project, we solicited Kimber, STI, and Para-Ordnance for their latest 10-shooter. Kimber's new Ultra-10 hadn't gone into full-scale production yet, but STI and Para promptly shipped us examples of their

"VIP" and the Para "P12."

TALE OF THE TAPE:

When I first launched this project, I was expecting to get very similar pistols. I could not have been more wrong. The VIP and the P12 are both compact 1911's, but they have very different personalities.

WEIGHT - Despite being much shorter in the grip, the P12 weighs a strapping 35 ounces - a full six ounces heavier than the larger 29-ounce VIP. Everywhere you look the frame is full-thickness, giving it plenty of strength. It's solid.

The VIP, in contrast, is the first compact pistol built on the STI/SV modular frame concept. Not only is the grip section all polymer, but the metal frame-rail-and-trigger module is made from a lightweight alloy. Take the top end off this gun, and there's not much weight in the frame at all.

SIGHTS - Both guns come with excellent low-profile, low-snap sights modeled on the Novak concept. The Para sights employ a standard front, teamed with a curved rear sight blade. It looks a little strange, but it wasn't an issue once we started shooting the gun.

TRIGGER - Both guns had good carry- weight triggers, but the STI gun had the better of the two. The smiths at STI made effective use of their ultralight trigger parts, setting up a trigger (and trigger job) that was noticeably crisper than the somewhat creepy Para.

SAFETIES - Safeties on a 1911 are a very personal thing. The Para gun comes with a narrow ambi safety. The VIP's single-side safety was slightly wider and could be used as a thumbrest. We wondered at the absence of an ambi safety, but to STI's credit, the VIP frame comes pre-milled to accept an ambi safety, so adding one would be relatively simple.

The beavertail grip safeties on both guns were broad, hi-grip models with bulges to ensure positive disengagement. Aside from some minor profiling, they were practically the same part.

GRIP LENGTH - Here's where the personality differences between the two guns became most apparent. The STI gun is a full half-inch taller than the Para, and its grip is checkered for a full 360 degrees. The mag well opening is neatly beveled, and the grip geometry stays square all the way down to the magazine. It's only half an inch, but the feeling of control given by that grip was head and shoulders above the Para - even in my relatively narrow hands.

For reasons that will become apparent, the Para seems built around the theory that this gun will probably not be speed-reloaded (a legitimate theory, given its purpose). The magazine has a protruding lip that helps secure the hand in firing, but to unload the pistol, the shooter must let go with their pinky, leaving the gun teetering in a two-fingered grip. The Para's smaller grip and rounded corners certainly make it easier to hide than the VIP but those features tend to let the flesh of the hand roll around the bottom of the run (see photo at right). Getting a new magazine into the non-beveled magazine well quickly without pinching your flesh involves splaying your pinky and ring finger out in a truly fragile one-fingered grip. Again, this isn't necessarily a bad thing: it's a difference in philosophy and design.

During the course of this project, I bumped into seasoned USPSA shooter Gary Roessel. In the course of the conversation, Roessel took out his carry gun - a lightly modified P12 carried in an ankle holster. He'd added a magazine well and some skate tape, dramatically improving the little gun's feeling of control while reducing its tendency to pinch your hand when reloading. Were I to carry one, my first phone call would be to Smith & Alexander, purchasing an effective (hand-protecting) magazine guide.

OFF TO THE RANGE:

Short 1911's can be finicky about ammo, so we decided to throw a handful of curves at our two test subjects. Ernest Langdon at Triton ammo was kind enough to send us a supply of 165- and 230-grain Quik-Shok defense loads. I threw in a hodgepodge of IPSC target ammo, and Roger Maier and I set to work, firing across a wide range of power and bullet profiles.

Despite being heavier, the Para's short grip just didn't provide the solid purchase we were looking for. When Roger fired the first shot, the first words out of his mouth were "That is NOT comfortable."

Within a few rounds of Triton's barn-burning 230-grain fodder, Roger had had all he wanted. When my turn came around, I immediately switched to 200-grain IPSC major loads. This brought the Para into its own, neatly hammering its shots into the upper panel at 15 yards.

Switching back to Triton's high-energy +P stuff was not pleasant. I'm impressed with the sheer power and recoil generated by the Triton +P line. Switching from .45 IPSC to .45 TRITON +P was like changing from .38 Special to .357 Magnum - it's dazzling, to say the least. Here again, the Para performed well, but after a few dozen rounds, I'd had all the punishment from the lightweight gun I cared to endure.

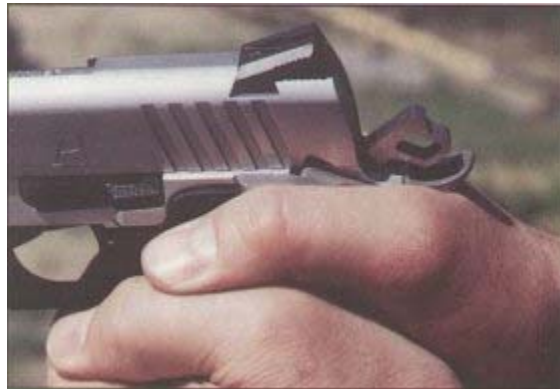
After being pounded by the Para, Roger and I looked at the VIP with a certain level of anxiety. Six ounces less weight? Same super-potent ammo? Do we have to?

Thankfully the VIP has a recoil control system built into the guide rod. I'm not usually a fan of such gadgetry, but between the recoil buffer and the bigger grip, the STI was much better behaved than the Para.

We expected the STI to be easier to hold onto thanks to the grip, but the degree to which it was easier to control surprised us both.

When Roger touched off his first 230-grain Triton, he burst out "Much better!"

Unfortunately, our mission of discovery was not



When good guns go bad. Is the safety on or off? In this case, it's neither -- touching the safety fires the gun! A defective safety (quickly replaced by STI) make their excellent pistol dangerous until it could be repaired (see text). Once repaired, we loved the ultralight VIP.



Ouch! "Speed" reloading the stock Para need to be done carefully. The Para is a lot easier to conceal, but it's harder to work with. It's more of a "deep cover" gun.

yet at an end.

On round number three (out of five loaded), the VIP's slide locked back. On round four, the slide locked back again. Roger reloaded, and started his next string.

A few shots later, Roger squeezed the trigger, felt a click, and nothing happened. Peering over his shoulder, I watched Roger lower the gun, take his finger out of the trigger guard and say: "I wonder if I bumped the safe. ."



Smooth. That "deep cover" mindset shows in the P-12's rounded sight profile. Once we started shooting, the round profile worked quite well.

BOOM!

As he touched the safety, the gun fired, sending it recoiling sharply up toward his face.

Now thoroughly rattled, we started firing the VIP with great care. No matter which loads we used, the slide would lock back on the next-to-last round, leaving one round trapped in the magazine. On numerous occasions, the trigger would click, but the gun would not fire. Pressing the safety after that click caused the hammer to fall - sometimes firing the gun.

Deeply surprised to find such a serious defect, I set about trying to identify the problem. On close examination (with an empty gun) we discovered a defect in the thumb safety. 1911 safeties have a spring-loaded post that holds them in the "On" or "Off" position. If you push the safety partway up, the post shoves it back down. Push it past the halfway point, and the safety snaps all the way "On."

The angled surfaces of the VIP's safety had been bead-blasted, leaving one surface rough enough to drag on the post. When Roger's hands bumped the safety, that drag caused the safety to stick partway between "On" and "Off."

Front Sight contacted Don Kemble at STI and explained the problem. Mortified that his pistol was misbehaving, he quickly put us on the phone with STI's quality control representative, Chris Schirmer. After a detailed conversation, we packed the pistol off to STI for repair. A few days later, Yeager's Sporting Goods called (USPSA's FFL receiver). Our pistol had arrived, could we come pick it up?

The repaired pistol behaved with the good-natured reliability that USPSA shooters have come to expect of STI products. My subsequent range tour raised no problems, and in fact showed the STI VIP in a very good light.

STI had cranked over 100 rounds through the gun after replacing the safety and magazine. We added another hundred-plus.

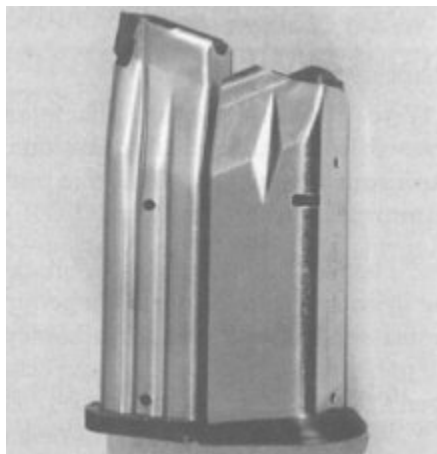
"We've got people raving about these guns," says Kemble.

After enjoying the gun's lightweight, positive control, good sights and excellent trigger, we can certainly see why.

SUMMARY:

For the Para- or STI-shooting competitor, these guns make effective understudies to full-size competition pistols. Both offer major weight and bulk savings over their full-size counter- parts, yet offer nearly identical controls.

The STI VIP and Para-Ordnance P12 follow different design themes: the Para to minimize size and round the profile for easy concealment, the VIP to minimize weight while retaining the grip feel of the full-size gun. For the competitor looking for a carry pistol that maximizes his IPSC gun handling skills, we like the VIP. But if concealment is the main issue, Gary Roessel's custom P12 in an ankle holster gets the nod. Both of these guns would be an excellent choice. As to design philosophy, that choice is up to you.



More size, fewer bullets. The STI 10-round magazine is both longer and heavier than the 12-round Para.

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