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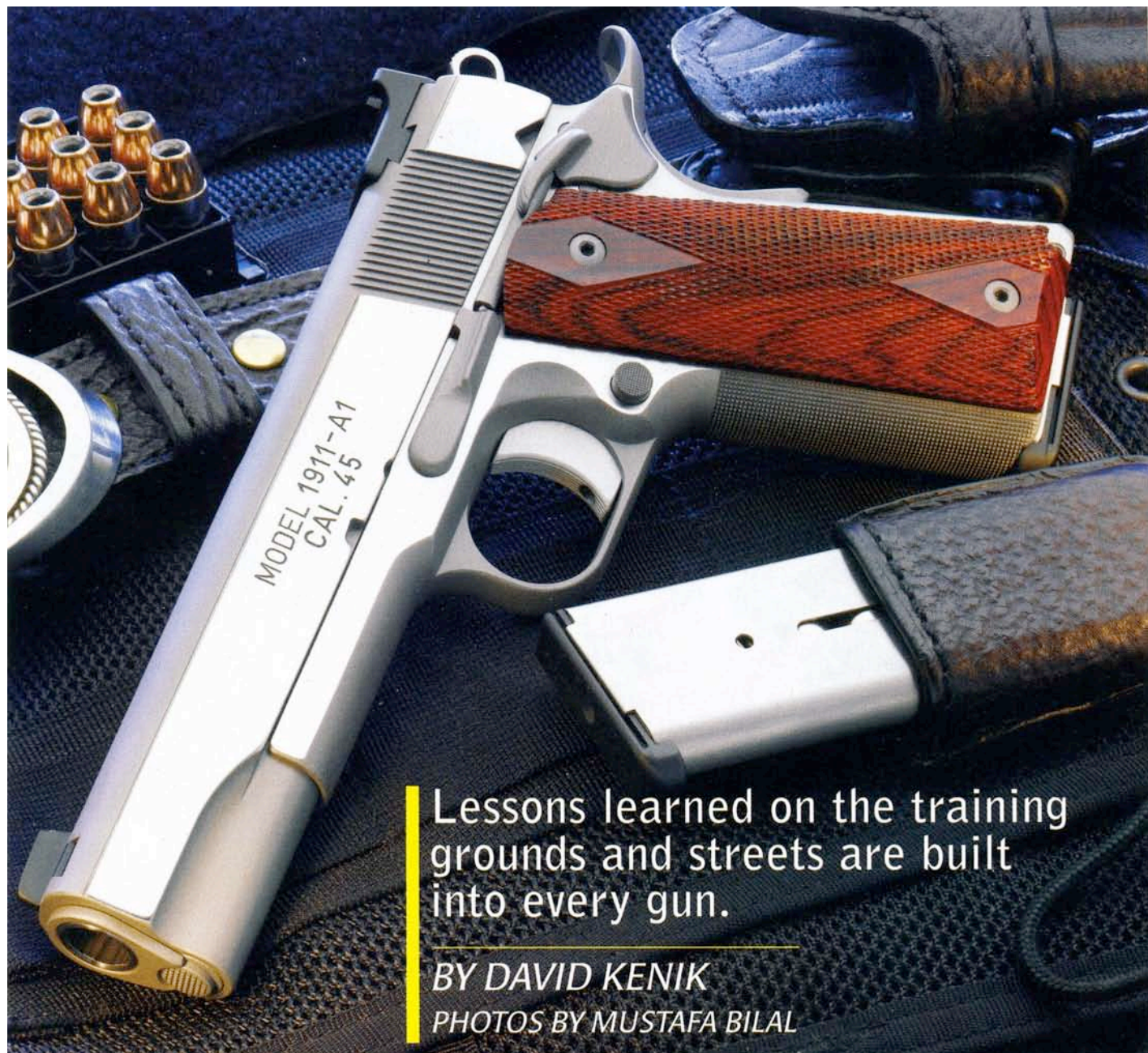
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Lessons learned on the training grounds and streets are built into every gun.

BY DAVID KENIK

PHOTOS BY MUSTAFA BILAL

*While the gun may look like a typical Springfield Armory pistol, Jim Garthwaite turned it into a masterpiece of function and accuracy. Wilson seven-round magazines are his choice for reliability.*

# The GUNS of Garthwaite

## The Guns of Garthwaite



*The barrel bushing was reamed and precision fit, and the barrel was recrowned. The workmanship and beauty of Jim's work are quite evident in this photo.*

**W**hile many people can build and customize 1911s, it takes a master pistolsmith to achieve a perfect balance of art, accuracy and reliability. Jim Garthwaite is such a 'smith. However, Jim is not just a gunsmith, he is a practicing tactician. The benefit of combining the two is that his practical training greatly influences his work.

Jim started IPSC shooting in 1978, back when it was still the practical sport Col. Jeff Cooper

envisioned. When the competition turned into an arms race, Jim helped form the American Tactical Shooting Association (ATSA), which is widely known for its annual National Tactical Invitational (NTI) training event. I first met Jim and had an opportunity to handle his wares at this year's NTI.

In addition to his own progression of training, being involved in the ATSA affords Jim the opportunity to work with, test and build guns for a wide spectrum of peo-

ple in varying walks of life, each with different tactical needs, not to mention all their different hand shapes and sizes.

Jim has been doing custom work for himself and his friends since 1978. He opened his shop in 1981 with a specialty in 1911s and Browning Hi-Powers. He's a one-man show, and every gun he works on is treated like his own. Customers especially like talking directly to the person who will be doing their work. As a self-taught 'smith, he takes special pride in

his selection as American Pistol Smith Guild 2004 Pistol Smith of the Year.

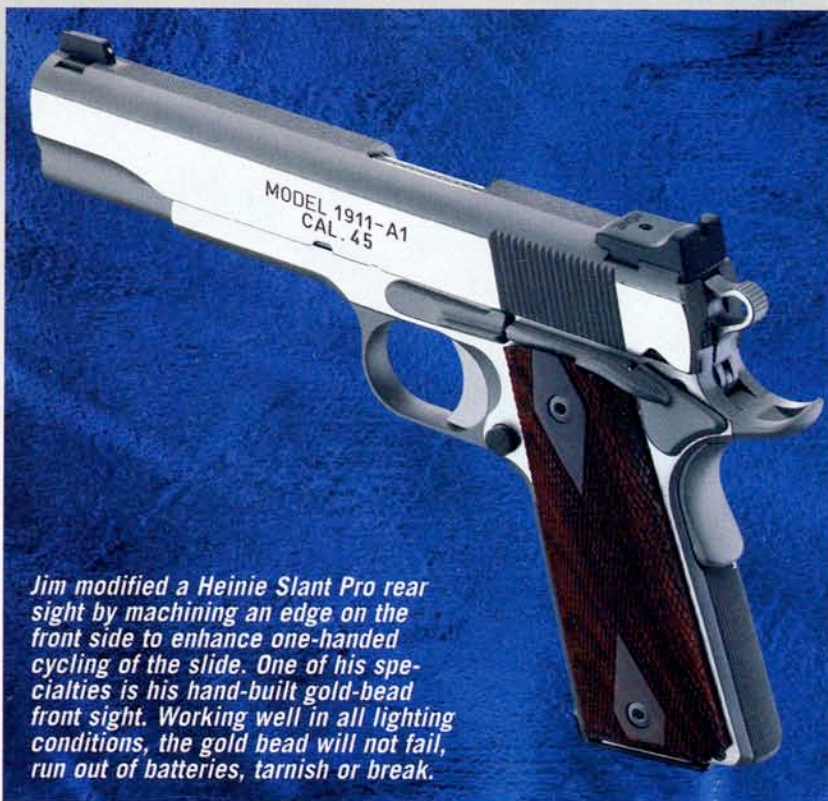
As with most new builds, Jim started off the gun for this article with a Springfield Armory base pistol. One of the first steps was to tighten the slide-to-frame fit, which he did through various processes. He prefers working with Springfield Armory products because of the company's use of top-quality steel, very good heat treating and the products' dimensional soundness.

Component parts are chosen from EGW, Greider, Brown, McCormick and Wilson. For long-term durability and reliability, Jim selects only parts made from tool steel, never MIM (Metal Injection Molding). Each part is oversize and hand fit to perfection.

A Bar-Sto match barrel was installed, with exquisite care taken to lap-fit it to the frame and slide. The barrel bushing was reamed and precision fit and the barrel recrowned. The locking lugs on the top of barrel, barrel feet and head-space extension were machined within a few thousandths of an inch, then lapped by hand to a proper in-battery fit.

Extra care is taken in these areas, as the vast majority of a pistol's accuracy is in the barrel-to-slide fit. The quality of barrel is of high importance. The bullet must enter the rifling straight, go down the bore straight and exit through the crown straight. Anything along the way that upsets the path of the bullet will disturb its flight. To help ensure accuracy, Jim orders his barrels with a short chamber and precision headspaces each one to the barrel and slide.

Jim flattened and serrated the top of the slide to reduce glare and lower its profile, which gives the effect of increasing the height of the front sight by approximate-



*Jim modified a Heinie Slant Pro rear sight by machining an edge on the front side to enhance one-handed cycling of the slide. One of his specialties is his hand-built gold-bead front sight. Working well in all lighting conditions, the gold bead will not fail, run out of batteries, tarnish or break.*

ly .030 of an inch. This is especially important on slides less than five inches in length that use a shorter front-sight height to obtain proper point of aim/point of impact.

The frontstrap was hand-checked in a 30-lpi pattern. Jim found that in the past, 20 lpi was too coarse and became abrasive on the hand after long practice sessions. Concealment garments also tended to catch rather than drape over the butt of the gun. The 30-lpi pattern offers good purchase without tearing up skin and clothing.

An oversize mainspring housing was fitted and draw-filed into the frame, then hand-checked at 30, lpi. By inletting both the housing and the profile of the checkering, it is less likely to snag on clothing and helps reduce calluses on the hand.

A Wilson's high-ride grip safety was installed, and the magazine release was shortened and fitted. The shortening is a critical step,

as the magazine may be unintentionally released if the magazine release is accidentally depressed.

A Swenson speed thumb safety was fitted and installed, and Jim increased the indent of the safety to make more positive engagement, reducing the possibility of accidental disengagement.

For ease of reloading, the magazine well was beveled. The frame was finished with a pair of cocobolo grip panels, with special care taken to fit the panels to the frame to keep them from interfering with the controls and to ensure comfort.

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## Sources

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### Jim Garthwaite

12130 State Route 405  
Watsonstown, PA 17777  
570/538-1566  
www.garthwaite.com

### Springfield Armory

800/680-6866  
www.springfield-armory.com

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## The Guns of Garthwaite



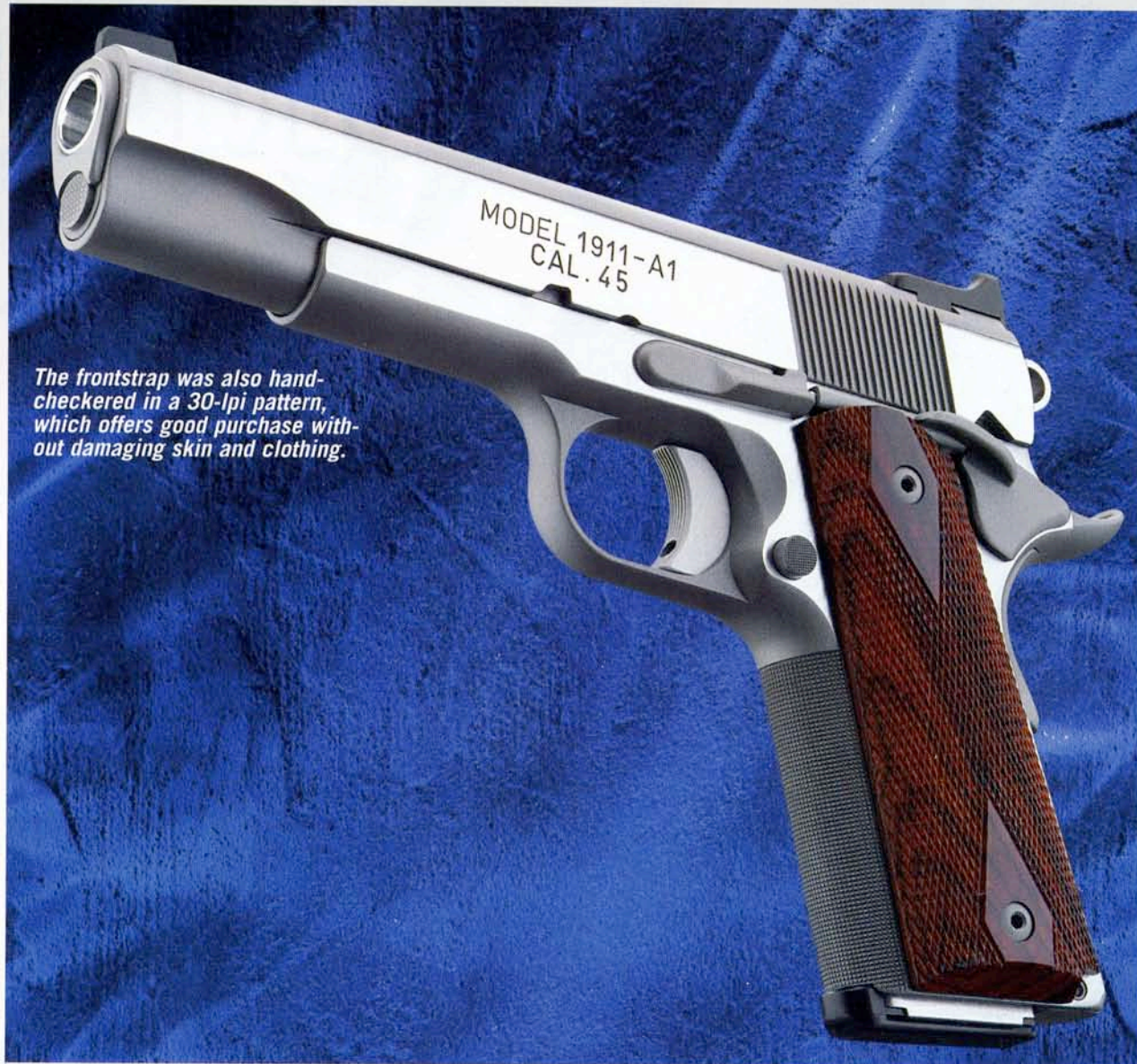
*An oversize mainspring housing was fitted and draw-filed into the frame and hand-checked at 30 lpi. By inletting the housing and the profile of the checkering, it is less likely to snag clothing and helps to reduce calluses on the shooting hand.*

Jim's choice of rear sight was a Heinie Slant Pro. Before installation, the sight was machined to put an edge on the front side to enhance one-handed cycling of the slide—an important capability if the pistol is destined for defensive duties.

Being a custom gunsmith, Jim will work with any customer preferences, but given the choice, he

recommends his hand-built gold-bead front sight. Having served several customers with aging eyes, he experimented with just about every sight system available—colored sights, night sights and fiber optic sights. In all cases, his customers found that the gold-bead sight was the best choice in both low- and bright-light conditions.

Before fitting the gold bead to the sight, Jim custom-tests each pistol at the range with the specific type of carry ammunition the customer carries. If there is no preference, various types of Cor-Bon ammo are used. The front sight is intentionally sized to be extra tall so that Jim can file it down right there on the test range to zero the gun to shoot one inch high at 25



*The frontstrap was also hand-checked in a 30-lpi pattern, which offers good purchase without damaging skin and clothing.*

yards. This is Jim's preference because it offers practical accuracy from zero to 50 yards. Once the sight is filed to the proper height, it is removed from the gun, finished, then the gold bead that Jim forms from gold wire is press-fit.

The gold-bead sight can be used in both target-focused shooting (point shooting) or precision shooting, as its main purpose is to quickly guide the eye to the front sight. In addition to working well in all lighting conditions, unlike some more "technically advanced" options, a gold bead won't fail, run out of batter-

ies, tarnish or break.

Much of the work Jim put into this pistol to increase its reliability and accuracy has gone unmentioned, as I have, unfortunately, not been afforded the space to write about every detail that was done, but suffice to say, the gun received a full-house treatment.

The value of Jim's work is as visible on the inside as on the outside. It is the quality of the component parts that gives his guns long-term reliability and his extraordinary hand-fitting that offers the superb accuracy inherent in all his work. When handling

his guns—which he refers to as his "labors of love"—you can both see and feel the quality. If you are looking for a 1911 made from the best components available and fit to perfection, or you are in need of a repair or upgrade for your gun, Jim Garthwaite is one of the best gunsmiths to call. ©

*David Kenik is the author of Armed Response: A Comprehensive Guide to Using Firearms for Self-Defense and is president of the Police Officers Safety Association. [www.armedresponsetips.blogspot.com](http://www.armedresponsetips.blogspot.com)*