



Colt Quartet

by Greg Derr



While waiting for the slides to arrive, I machine checked each front strap at 30 LPI. I also made matching mainspring housings. The internals are all new bar stock, hand fit, and mated to the WWI steel triggers and thumb safeties. Some of the parts needed welding or soldering to function correctly.

The oversized slides arrived after a few months and had to be fit to the frames using the surface grinder and mill, then hand-lapped to a glass smooth fit.

The oversized barrels had to be fit to each slide. The Officer barrel was welded on the lower "feet" and the "hood" to compensate for some looseness from the factory. Once the frames and slides were mated, headspace was cut on the lathe. Next, each slide was fitted with oversized extractors and the frames with oversized ejectors to make for a gap-free rear of the slide.

I test-fired each gun to ensure everything ran right before moving forward. Only minor tuning was needed after the first test – the

second was 100%. Ball cuts on the front end of the slide could only be made after the barrels were fit and fired to ensure cut terminated at the front edge of the dust cover. Sight dovetails were cut in the rear of the slide, and mortices were cut to take the front sights. I initially thought a modern "retro" rear sight would look good, but I changed my mind when I realized Doug Turnbull had made vintage reproductions.

I made the fronts custom from blanks, setting in a gold inlay and serrating at 70 LPI.

With so many contours, polishing was just a little beyond me. I typically polish flats only on 1911s by hand on a flat surface with sandpaper. The late Terry Wolford of Ocala, Florida, had been my hard chrome provider for over ten years, and he was a master at



For the pistolsmith, coming up with fresh ideas for the century-old king of custom pistols, the Colt 1911, is a real challenge. But sometimes, the client comes up with a new idea. In this case, the client wanted a four-gun set with each in a different length – a 3.5-inch Officer Model, a 4.25-inch Commander, a 5-inch Government, and a 6-inch "Long Slide." He wanted them fully engraved, charcoal blued, and with special vintage roll marks.

I began by sourcing four Colt frames – one for each factory length plus an extra Government model for the long slide, which the factory never produced. I went with "blank slides" from Caspian in Vermont for the slides. This eliminated the need to go old school on the long gun by welding two slides together. It also meant not having to grind off the old markings in preparation for the new "vintage" markings.

Getting the vintage look, my client was after, called for some vintage parts like WWI triggers, hammers, slide stops, and thumb safeties. Most were found through the internet and other gunsmiths, while some were in my cache of "take-off" parts. Oversized barrels were ordered for three of the guns from my barrel "go to" Fred Kart. These barrels are the first choice for custom pistolsmiths. Fred, however, does not offer the short Officers Model barrel, so a Colt factory barrel was used with some micro welding to allow for a more precise fit.



polishing. He did an outstanding job on the slides and frame, keeping all the edges sharp. It was the last project Terry did for me before he died, a tragic loss for the trade.

Joon Orione-Kim at Turnbull Restoration was able to locate the roll dies for the vintage markings my client wanted, so they pressed the sides.

Professional Member Brian Powley has been my engraver of choice for several projects. Since the client was also a fan of Brian's work, we gave Brian lots of freedom on the engraving. The only direction was that it to be "traditional." Brian worked his magic on all four slides, making them look like a set despite having different roll marks and sizes.

Once back from Brian, all the parts were numbered and prepped for charcoal blue at Turnbull Restoration. I hot salt blue, but this project would look better with the brighter hues of charcoal. A few parts did not take the charcoal bluing correctly, so I had to fit or make a few small parts again which looked perfect on the second go-round. I used a combination of torch and niter blue salts for the pins, screws, and triggers. The tips of the thumb safety and slide stop pin, which had been charcoal blued, were buffed white, and I placed just the tip in the niter salts. Heating them with a torch would have risked discoloring the charcoal bluing.

For the grips, there could be no other choice but ivory. Scott Kolar in Pennsylvania supplies excellent mammoth ivory with a lovely built-in aged patina. Each grip was set on the frame, and screws slots were regulated vertically.

For most of us, the most painstaking process is the final assembly. With this level of polish, making sure that each part is correct and, most of all, not scratched is a white glove affair.

The final step was installing the front sights. I normally make sights and test fire for regulation, but in this case, I went with my experience and made



the sights from scratch. Once set in the mortice, the tenon was swaged with JB Weld added as a second measure. The tenon was trimmed internally and ground smooth.

Since we had shot the guns a few times in the build process, there was no reason to get them dirty; each was bench tested for function and safety. The owner had mentioned they would not be shot but added to his extensive collection.

After four years, I delivered the set to our thrilled client. In the end, I realized how special things can only be done by special people. I try to do as much work in-house as possible, but a project like this requires specialized, high-quality work. Members of the ACGG like Brian Powley and Doug Turnbull – with his team – are prime examples of this. Since joining in January, I've made good connections and learned new things from other members. I'm honored that I'm now an American Custom Gunmakers Guild Professional Member. ■

