

ROY HUNTINGTON  
PHOTOS: COURTESY BRADY MILLER

# PRE-WAR COLT NATIONAL MATCH

## A BEATER BECOMES BEAUTIFUL

**O**kay, I'll just say it out loud: Many of you will be upset to see what was done to this old gun. Cries of "foul!" will ring, no doubt. But keep in mind, this gun belongs to an experienced collector, shooter and custom gunsmith in his own right, Larry Vickers. And, since it's Larry's gun, it was up to him to do what he wanted with it. And what he wanted to do was have Jason Burton, of Heirloom Precision of Tempe, Arizona, bring this old gun back to life — but in a unique way.

While holding onto the feeling of what a pre-war Colt is — and was — Larry asked Jason to update some performance items, restore the cosmetics and create what is essentially, if you ask me, what Colt *might* have done had they had today's technology, metals and parts available to them 80 or more years ago. So keep an open mind and see how Jason resurrected this magical gun.

### **The Decision**

After talking the build over with

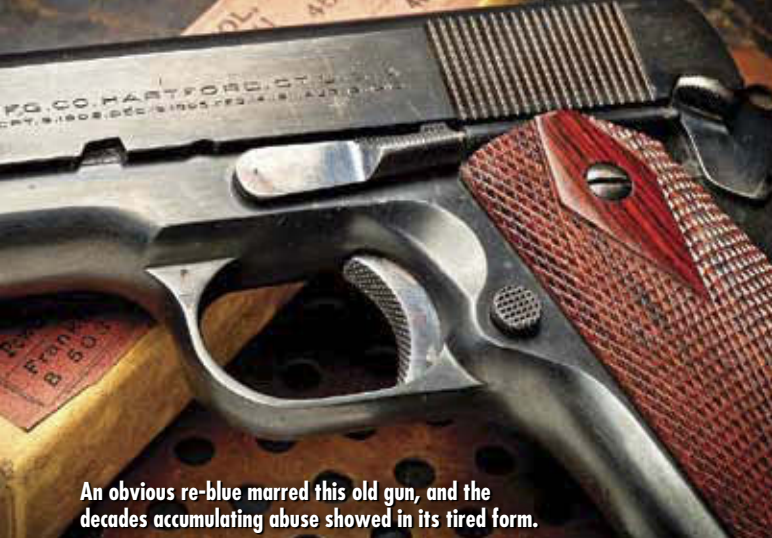
Jason, Vickers agreed all the modifications would have to stand the test of time, honoring the tradition of the 1911 and the pre-war Colt pistols. And that's why there are no mag wells, night sights or other bits detracting from the classic look. It's not a clone of a pre-war Colt National Match, nor is it a textbook restoration of one. It's more of a tribute, but unlike a kit-car made of fiberglass, for instance — this gun is built on the original.

According to Jason, building on a pistol like this is a "gut-check" —

The raw material was this pre-war Colt National Match. It was far from elegant, but both Jason and Larry saw the potential.

Afterward, Jason's touch is evident in the straight lines, flat polish and remarkable attention to detail.





An obvious re-blue marred this old gun, and the decades accumulating abuse showed in its tired form.



A flawless finish and some modern parts still adhered to the spirit of the original.

his words. First, according to Jason, “Larry is a discerning shooter with an extensive collection of custom pistols.” Second, was the base gun itself.

“I think it’s fair to say this is a rare gun and one which would be hard to replace even given the condition before the build,” explained Jason. And he’s right, since nice examples of pre-war National Match Colts are currently in the \$5,000 to \$7,000 range.

With many things a custom gun builder does there’s no room for error, but when you start-in with a file on a base gun like this, it can be game-changing. “It almost feels like putting it all on the line, and then some,” Jason told me. “Truth is, I’m flattered when any customer wants me to build a gun for them, so getting a chance to build a project like this on a pre-war National Match base gun, for a knowledgeable collector and shooter, is not something I took lightly.”

While Jason thought about the implications of changing the gun from its original condition, he and Larry seemed to be on the same page. “I know some folks would rather this gun have stayed original,” said Jason. “I think it’s pretty clear we’re both not part of that club. The base gun was less than perfect by far. It was heavily pitted under the stock panels and had many dents, dings and pits throughout the entire gun. It was also missing some of the original parts,

like the barrel, and it had even been re-blued at one time.

“So I guess it staying original was kind of out of the question. For me it was a cool base gun and one, which I may never get the prospect to build on again. I certainly wasn’t going to waste this chance, and should I ever get an opportunity to build on another pre-war National Match I likely won’t hesitate any longer than I did on this gun. A project like this, with its uniqueness and intricacies, is part of what makes building one-off customs so much fun and rewarding. And at the end, the guy who owns it is happier than when he bought it.”

## A Theme

Vickers wanted a traditionally styled gun doing justice to the heritage of the pre-war Colts. He wanted a full-house effort, and he and Jason agreed the gun should have traditional looks mixed in with the best modern modifications and parts, all done without taking away from the classic and distinctive quality the gun already possessed.

In addition to the modifications, the gun needed a good bit of cosmetic clean up. The dents, dings, pits, etc. all had to be draw-filed and blended out. Some of these dents and dings were “conveniently” intermingled with the roll-marks. Fortunately, the roll-marks could be restored and re-engraved by master

engraver J.R. French (who’s also done many other projects with Heirloom Precision). More cosmetic clean up came in the form of line straightening. The cut for the existing rear sight also had to be repaired before the new sight dovetail could be machined and the sight installed. The cocking serrations were also re-cut. Jason was meticulous, and no part was left untouched. If it wasn’t perfect — it wasn’t finished.

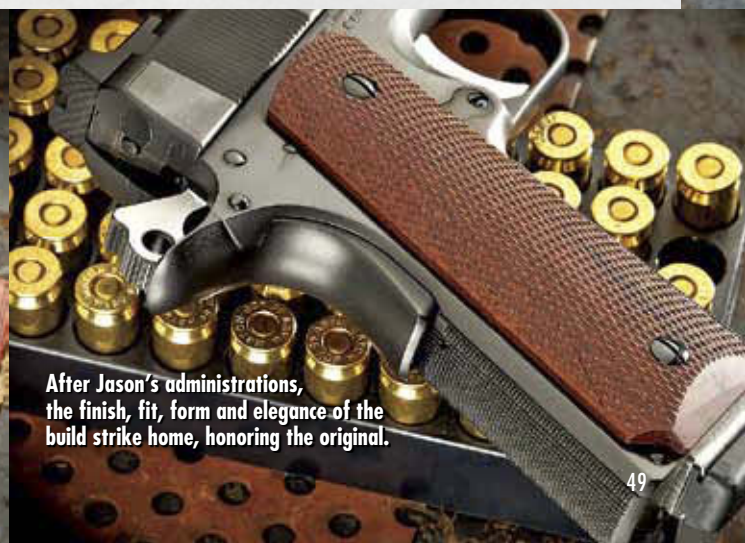
A military NM barrel and bushing were fit to the gun, and the standard reliability modifications were performed, along with the installation of a bar-stock extractor, EGW firing pin stop and slide stop and Wilson extended ejector. Vickers requested a traditional Colt Commander style hammer, and I think it works very well with the theme of this gun. The grip safety is one of the new EGW machined parts, having been significantly re-profiled to give it an overall smaller size, while still looking like it belongs on the gun.

The thumb safety mimics the look and “feel” of a Colt Commercial part, while being slightly larger and more user friendly for most shooters. Vickers wanted 30-lpi checkering on the gun, since, according to Jason, “We both felt 30 lpi has long been a standard of custom 1911s, so after high-cutting under the triggerguard, the frontstrap and

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In this “before” image, note the deep scar on the side of the frame, rough parts fit and a finish worn thin.



After Jason’s administrations, the finish, fit, form and elegance of the build strike home, honoring the original.



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## PRE-WAR COLT

*Continued from page 49*

the mainspring housing were both checked in the traditional manner, by hand."

Keeping with the classically styled theme of the gun, the slide top was left round and fit with a modified Professional Grade rear sight and black serrated front sight. Also machined into the slide were ball cuts, which help to accentuate the retro look of the gun. Just like the checkering on the gun, the de-horn was also performed by hand with a file. The slide was bordered, which is another old school custom touch, and after all the heavy work was completed the gun was finished in a traditional polished blue. The grips are from the talented maker John Van-Zyck at VZ Grips, and they are a one-off set of walnut done in the pre-war NM tradition.

### The Result?

"Larry had a good vision of what we wanted this gun to look and feel like, right down to the grips and the polished finish," said Jason. "He had seen quite a few examples of my work and had pointed out things he liked from a few different guns I had built. When it came time to spec-out the gun, Larry noted one of my guns in particular and basically said to build it like that one, with some small changes. So it actually gave me a good bit of leeway to take things a step further on his gun, and stretch out a bit on some of the modifications I wanted to do."

Regardless of your school of thought, this is the kind of custom work we all dream about. Whether or not this should have been the base gun is something you probably have an opinion about. But I challenge *anyone* to argue the quality of the build itself. It is, simply, the sort of stuff we love best here at *Handgunner* — uncompromising hand craftsmanship, executed as near perfectly as humans can accomplish. The final result is not only a work of art, but a highly functional tool as well. Marvelous, if you ask me.

"I received the completed pistol in early August 2011," said Vickers. "In my opinion, this Burton pre-war Colt is the finest 1911 I have ever received from another gunsmith. And to be honest, it's nicer than I would have been able to do myself in terms of fit and finish. The pistol is absolutely stunning, and a tribute to Jason's workmanship. I rarely acquire custom pistols anymore, but if this is the last one I ever get, it was a fitting end to a long line of custom 1911 pistols."



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