

TARHighPower  
By Massad Ayooob

## THE BROWNING HIGH POWER

*This enduring classic sometimes needs help for the shooter to get the most from its famously superior human engineering.*

We're sneaking up on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the all-time great handguns, the Browning High Power. Some spell it Hi-Power; the spellings are functionally interchangeable. It's also known as the P-35, for Pistol of 1935, the year of its official introduction. Europeans call it the GP for *Grand Puissance*, French for High Power. For several years when it occupied Belgium and suborned this fine weapon, Nazi Germany called it "Pistole 640 (b)." It is a military handgun that still defends many nations, and remains popular with both gun enthusiasts and armed citizens.

### *Pedigree*

No handgun has been so universally accepted by the free world, though the Glock is closing fast on the P-35 in that regard. The authoritative text "Small Arms of the World" lists Belgium, Lithuania, Denmark, the Netherlands, Nationalist China, Canada, the United Kingdom, Romania, and other countries" (1) as currently issuing the High Power to their armed services. Add to that a large number of South American countries. Add to it as well our own Central Intelligence Agency, which for decades has issued this pistol to its armed operatives, often with serial numbers that would not track back to the United States.

Individually as well as collectively, America's good guys have appreciated the P-35. John Wayne carried one, if only in a movie. Charles "Skeeter" Skelton told me he often tucked one in his waistband off duty, and occasionally carried it to work as a peace officer. Retired Sheriff Jim Wilson, Skelton's spiritual heir in the firearms press today, has never had a bad word to say about the 9mm Browning. Leroy Thompson, who has written widely on executive protection, once used the High Power exclusively and still considers it among his favorites. Dave Westerhout of South Africa, the only man to my knowledge ever to win the world championship of the International Practical Shooting Confederation with a 9mm, did so with a Browning that was stock save for a BoMar target sight rib. Even Jeff Cooper, the high priest of the 1911 .45, has publicly admitted that no pistol ever fit his hand better than the P-35. He said it was a shame it wasn't made in a more consequential caliber than 9mm. That criticism that has since been answered with the introduction of the High Power in .40 S&W.

"The Browning is an excellent pistol," writes gun expert Wiley Clapp, adding, "In an age of heavy and rather bulky double-action semiautomatics, the Browning is a delight

to handle. The slide is slim and graceful, the barrel and sighting plane are low and close to the hand, and the grip, while somewhat chunky, is manageable in most hands. Most of the reason for this is the design genius of John Browning and the fact that the Hi-Powers are made the old way – milled steel forgings.”(2) My friend and colleague Chuck Taylor, who is reported to have used the High Power in combat, says “During the recent ASAA (American Small Arms Academy) cold weather tests, in which the major types of self-loaders were tested at sub-zero temperatures, the P-35 was one of only four handguns that successfully completed the 750 round program without a single malfunction. In conclusion, I find the P-35 to be a fine pistol, well worthy of its reputation. It’s one of the best large-capacity 9mm autos, certainly the best 9mm SA (single action) auto available, and ranks among the very best of the service autos.” (3)

The British SAS made the High Power their trademark sidearm, and it was through their influence that the FBI adopted it as standard for their Hostage Rescue Team. SAS would later switch to the SIG P226, and HRT to the ParaOrdnance P-14 .45, but by then the P-35 had already established a niche as “the counter-terrorist pistol.” While SAS’s guns were pretty much stock, all of the FBI’s were customized by Wayne Novak of West Virginia.

Unfortunately, bad guys also figure out where the best hardware is, and if a book is ever written called “When Bad People Happen to Good Guns,” there will have to be a chapter on the Browning GP. In addition to the Nazis, the Browning was picked up on by assorted terrorists, one of whom was photographed hanging out of an airplane window with a P-35 to a hostage pilot’s head. The pedophile mass child murderer in Dunblane, Scotland, whose action gave Tony Blair the hook to take all modern handguns away from law-abiding British subjects, used a 9mm High Power in addition to a .357 Magnum revolver in his crime. The would-be assassin Agca shot the Pope with one. A few months before he was deposed, Saddam Hussein was photographed waving a Browning 9mm. In the United States, Donald DeFreeze (a.k.a. “Cinque”) chose a P-35 as his personal weapon and made it the standard handgun of his small terrorist gang, the Symbionese Liberation Army. Twyman Myers, the last un-captured survivor of the initial core of BLA, the cop-killing Black Liberation Army, died with a Browning High Power in his hand when a police task force cut him down on a sidewalk in New York City.

In the end, though, the overwhelming majority of High Powers have been used by the Free World good guys. The pistol’s history is one of distinction.

### *A Brief History*

The High Power actually evolved from a much larger pistol that John Moses Browning developed to answer a French government bid for a high-capacity 9mm Parabellum military pistol. Notes firearms historian R. Blake Stevens in his authoritative text on the High Power, “FN chose one of the two Browning designs, and, pursuant to their usual agreement with Browning, contracted to assume functional ownership. A few examples of this pistol were produced by FN as the sixteen-shot *Grand Rendement* (literally, “Great Yield”, or High Capacity”) following John Browning’s death...”(4)

The *Grand Rendement* was a huge, ugly, ungainly thing, but it had in it the core of two elements that would make the later High Power a great firearm. One was of course the first functioning double-stack pistol magazine, and the other was the trigger reach dimension, which from then to now has been remarkably adaptable to hands of all sizes. Old John Moses had designed the 1911 pistol for Colt, and after the Great War, had undoubtedly been privy to feedback from the doughboys, which had included the fact that the trigger reach tended to be too long. The 1911A1 modifications of the '20s "nicked out" the 1911's frame behind the trigger and shortened the distance between the trigger face and the frame. These dimensions appear to have been faithfully replicated in the *Grand Rendement*, and would remain in the updated *Grand Puissance*.

The finalization of the High Power's design fell to Dieudonne Saive at FN. *Fabrique Nationale d'Armes de Guerre*, whose company name literally translated to "national manufacturer of weapons of war," took their title seriously. They knew that their increasing dominance in the international military small arms market depended on two things: high quality, and superb performance. Saive, two years out from being named head of small arms production at FN, was already on the fast track as the in-house designer whose genius seemed second only to that of Browning himself. When John Browning was mortally stricken in the mid-20s (at his office in the FN complex in Herstal, Belgium), Dieudonne Saive was instantly appointed the designated heir to this particular project.

Saive shortened the butt and restructured the magazine to a 13-shot format. He scrapped a safety catch at the rear of the grip tang, in a position unnatural for human hands, and installed a thumb safety similar to the one on Browning's own classically successful 1911 .45 automatic. A bushing similar to the 1911's was erased from the blueprint by Saive, replaced by a simpler system in which the barrel bushing was soldered permanently into the front of the slide. John M.'s own design had revolved around a complicated breechblock assembly that entered the slide from the rear; Saive replaced it with a simplified version of the 1911's takedown system. He lowered and shortened the slide, shortened the butt, and left the trigger reach pretty much as John Browning had designed it, tweaking only the curvature of the grip-frame.

Though, ironically, the French who had started the whole concept never did adopt it, the gun was adopted by FN's native Belgium as soon as it was formally introduced in 1935. International interest in the new pistol was great, but the Nazi invasion of the Low Countries quickly brought Belgium into the German orbit, where more than a quarter million High Powers would be produced for the Nazis, many by slave labor. Saive and some other key designers escaped to Allied countries, where Saive (who had the only workable set of High Power blueprints the Germans hadn't captured) was instrumental in setting up the Inglis plant in Canada. That factory produced High Powers for the British Commonwealth countries for the duration of the conflict. An attempt to set up an English production line in Enfield came to naught, with only a single prototype pistol produced there according to one account.

In the immediate post-WWII years, the High Power became the predominant Free World 9mm pistol. Another factory was licensed in Argentina. Years later, *cognoscenti* of the handgun would sneer at Argentine and Canadian Brownings, but FN and Saive had done their work well in setting up the satellite factories. While neither the Canadian nor Argentine Brownings generally have the exquisite smoothness of action or handsome finishes of the commercial Belgian product, all were rugged guns that worked.

Over the decades that followed, certain improvements were instituted. In the same sense that no battle plan survives initial contact with the enemy, no firearm design ever perfectly survives intensive testing on the battlefield. Before WWII, FN discovered a weakness in the barrel lug design, and rectified it before the hostilities commenced. In the postwar years, it was noted that the small extractor mounted inside the slide *a la'* the 1911 was not so robust as that of the Colt .45; in 1962, FN redesigned the High Power with an externally mounted extractor that was much stronger and more reliable.

As the years went on, FN concentrated more on making fancier High Powers than making more efficient ones. The Renaissance guns put handsomely-engraved pistols into more affordable pricing than would be expected, but they didn't shoot better. It took FN/Browning longer to realize that the burred hammer spur chewed up a lot of people's hands. They finally made a spur hammer that was less likely to do so.

The thumb safety of the original P-35 was not nearly as ergonomic or as positive as that on Browning's 1911. The movement of the lever was not readily palpable, and the lever itself was too small and flat to be readily accessible to the human thumb in stressful situations. Not until the 1980s would FN cure the problem with an excellent, positive ambidextrous safety of functional dimensions, but that part is now standard.

Built to feed "GI ball," most High Powers were notorious for jamming on flat-nose or hollow point ammunition. The exception was Remington's 115 grain jacketed hollow point introduced in the '70s, with an ogive similar to that of a full metal jacket military round. An FN upgrade in the '80s changed that, with the guns being factory "throated" to feed even those hollow points with wide cavity mouths.

To catalogue all the High Power modifications – at least three double action variants, numerous sight options, the "fast action" variation, target models, etc. – one needs Stevens' excellent book. FN was as much on top of the aluminum alloy frame thing circa 1950 as Colt was with the Commander and S&W with the Model 39, and they even got Saive himself to do the design work. Unfortunately, while it is true that "If you make a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door," FN missed something on that. What they missed was, the world needs to be notified that you *have* a better mousetrap, and then you give the world directions to your door. Never loudly announced, the lightweight P-35 option came and went, and what should have been a truly fine concealed carry defense gun disappeared from the market because FN perceived a lack of interest.

*Shooting the P-35*

The forgiving trigger reach of the GP adapts the gun to small hands and large ones alike. Petite Lyn Bates won her first National Tactical Invitational with a High Power. As a firearms instructor, I've kept a Browning on hand for the last 20 years as an "orthopedic gun" for students whose fingers were too short to reach the triggers of other pistols. For the recoil sensitive, the low bore axis of the High Power and light 9mm recoil make the gun extraordinarily easy to shoot. As controllable as a .22 for the seasoned shooter, and easily manageable by the novice, the GP is truly a gun for all skill levels so long as the trigger finger discipline demanded by any cocked-and-locked design is observed.

Good sights, a palpable thumb safety, and a throated chamber were all the P-35 needed to come into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of shootability, and FN/Browning put all those features into the factory-produced guns before 1990. Yes, the magazine disconnect safety prevents the full-capacity magazine from falling free when you hit the release button. However, following the conventional wisdom and deactivating the disconnect can hang you in court. Deactivating a safety device on something construable as a lethal weapon is all but an admission of recklessness, and that will do you no good if you ever have to use a High Power for its intended defensive purpose and then answer for that action in a court of law.

Fortunately, this is not an insurmountable problem. At least three solutions exist. Send your gun and magazines to Bill Laughridge at the Cylinder & Slide Shop in Nebraska (800-448-1713 by toll free phone, [www.cylinder-slide.com](http://www.cylinder-slide.com) on the net), and for a reasonable price he'll make those mags drop free from that gun without deactivating the disconnect mechanism. (Please don't say "disconnect *safety*" when you talk to Bill; he hates that...)

Or, you can invest in some ten-round "Clinton magazines." The 10-rounders Browning came up with after Bill Clinton's ban come with little springs which don't get in the way of fast insertion, but which kick them out of the gun with alacrity as soon as you push the eject button.

Or, you can do what they teach you at Glock School and simply rip the empty magazine out of the gun with your free hand and *then* grab a fresh mag and proceed with your reload.

The High Power is not famous for quality of trigger pull. Bill Laughridge, Wayne Novak, and a handful of other practitioners of the gunsmith's art can give you a four to five pound pull that will be clean and smooth, with a little bit of palpable roll as the trigger comes back. Don't go below that. You can't fool Mother Nature, and the simple fact is that the Browning High Power just wasn't designed around the kind of trigger pull target shooters want. It was designed to be a fighting pistol in the hands of men who would be in high-stress circumstances where they might reflexively point a gun at someone they didn't actually want to shoot just yet: a "friendly in the darkness of the

trenches”at the time of its design, or an innocent bystander in the course of a building search when in the hands of an American good guy today.

Shooting tips? *Don't load a full capacity magazine with more than 12 rounds.* These guns are notorious for jamming on the second shot when loaded all the way up. SAS operators told me that they were docked a day's pay for every magazine they were found carrying with the forbidden “13<sup>th</sup> round.” With SAS's trademark 20-round magazines, load only 18. •

If you shoot IDPA or IPSC or some concealed carry license qualification classes with a P-35, you'll be expected to drop the hammer on an empty chamber when you're done. How do you do that without inserting a magazine to deal with the disconnecter, and how do you convince the range officer the gun is empty after you just inserted a magazine? If you disassemble your P-35, you'll find that the disconnecter is located behind the trigger, intruding into the magazine well. Insert the middle finger of your free hand until you feel a round, flat disk, and press toward the trigger. Now pull the trigger. You've just activated the disconnecter and allowed the hammer to drop. If you can't reach it with your longest finger, fashion another suitable object to do the job.

Trust only Browning and MecGar magazines. Remember that only the latest Mark III design with internal firing pin safety is truly “drop-safe”, and if you carry any other variation with a round in the chamber, at least carry it in a holster with a safety strap.

### *Personal Experience*

As a young boy reading the gun magazines, I was intrigued with the Browning High Power. As a young man shooting it, I was bitterly disappointed. Jams on hollowpoints, hammer bite, crappy sights, safety catch you couldn't work by feel, all of that. Over the years, between the custom gunsmiths and the evolving awareness of FN, those problems were solved, and I learned to appreciate this great-feeling, easy-to-carry pistol.

Over the years I developed a preference for the Brownings whose parts were made in Belgium and assembled in Portugal. *Connoisseurs* of the Browning prefer purely Belgian guns, the way collectors of fine crystal insist on Waterford. No longer a *connoisseur* and now simply a workman, I want what works best, and the “Portuguese Brownings” deliver that. Maybe it's Black & Decker instead of Waterford, but I want workability instead of *elan*.

In the '80s and '90s, teaching in South America and Europe and South Africa, I carried the Browning High Power because that's what most of my students carried. Mine were crafted by Laughridge and Novak. Like Cooper, no handgun ever fit me so well, either. I loaded then and now with hot ammo, 115 grain JHPs at 1350 fps. These loads tear up Brownings, which have historically been made with soft metal and which have small component parts designed before the 9mm ammo went as hot as it did in the last

