

# HERE COMES THE THUG

By Darryl Bolke

Photos by Ichiro Nagata

**F**inding the right balance in a fighting pistol between a custom built work of functional art and a level of ruggedness and reliability is a tough requirement. Too often there are compromises on one side or the other of the equation. The gun might look great with fine French borders and exquisite polishing, but it won't reliably feed. Or it might gobble up the grungiest reloads but looks like someone who had a few too many did the checkering.

Every now and then you get lucky and find a pistolsmith who can build a 1911 with just the right mojo. The result is a hard-use general carry 1911 that can stand up cosmetically and aesthetically with the big boys. One such pistol is the "Thug" built by pistolsmith Steve Morrison out of Lindon, Utah.

I've known Steve for several years via the internet, phone conversations and various forums. I first met him in person in early 2005 at the SHOT Show. Steve introduced himself and he was a great guy with whom to talk 1911s and other topics of mutual interest. It turned out that I had known of Steve from a previous shop where he had worked.

Now, Steve explained, he was in business for himself in his own shop. I told Steve that I was on the eternal quest for a good 1911 that had simple reliability and ease of maintenance, like my trusty Glock 17, but that also boasted the slick handling, good looks and confidence that only a well-

Down  
and dirty  
Colt  
Government  
Model  
for  
hard use.



made 1911 embodies. Without batting an eye, Steve said "You need a THUG."

Okay, I'll bite. "What the heck is a THUG," I replied.

"It's the Twight Hard Use Gun," Steve smiled. I was familiar with legendary alpine climber Mark Twight, a highly respected trainer within the most elite Tier 1 military Special Operations units. (And no, I'm not going to say which ones in a newsstand magazine).

I had read Mark's book *Extreme Alpinism* on the advice of some pretty prominent trainers, and had been very impressed with both the man and his work. Mark is a true subject-matter expert on high altitude and cold weather training and survival, crisis nutrition, and climbing in extreme environments. He is also an accomplished shooter. It should be obvious why he is in demand from certain elite units for his unique background.


Steve told me that he worked with Mark on the THUG in order to rectify some problems Mark was having with a very expensive custom 1911 he was carrying and using. The problem started when Mark bent a firing pin while training on a U.S. military base, and was unable to get his pistol up and running because the firing pin was not a standard size. You can imagine the frustration, not to mention embarrassment, of being on a military base with a unit that issues the 1911 and has tons of logistical support for the system, and you can't get your gun fixed.

Mark also disliked the target sights that were great for long range precision work, but weren't fast enough for close work with fast moving targets. The gun needed tools to strip it, and the beautiful checkering on the front strap and mainspring housing was tearing up his hands after shooting high round-counts in his training classes. Mark wanted something simple that would also hold up to the demands of a full-time training gig. This is what Mark wanted, in his own words:

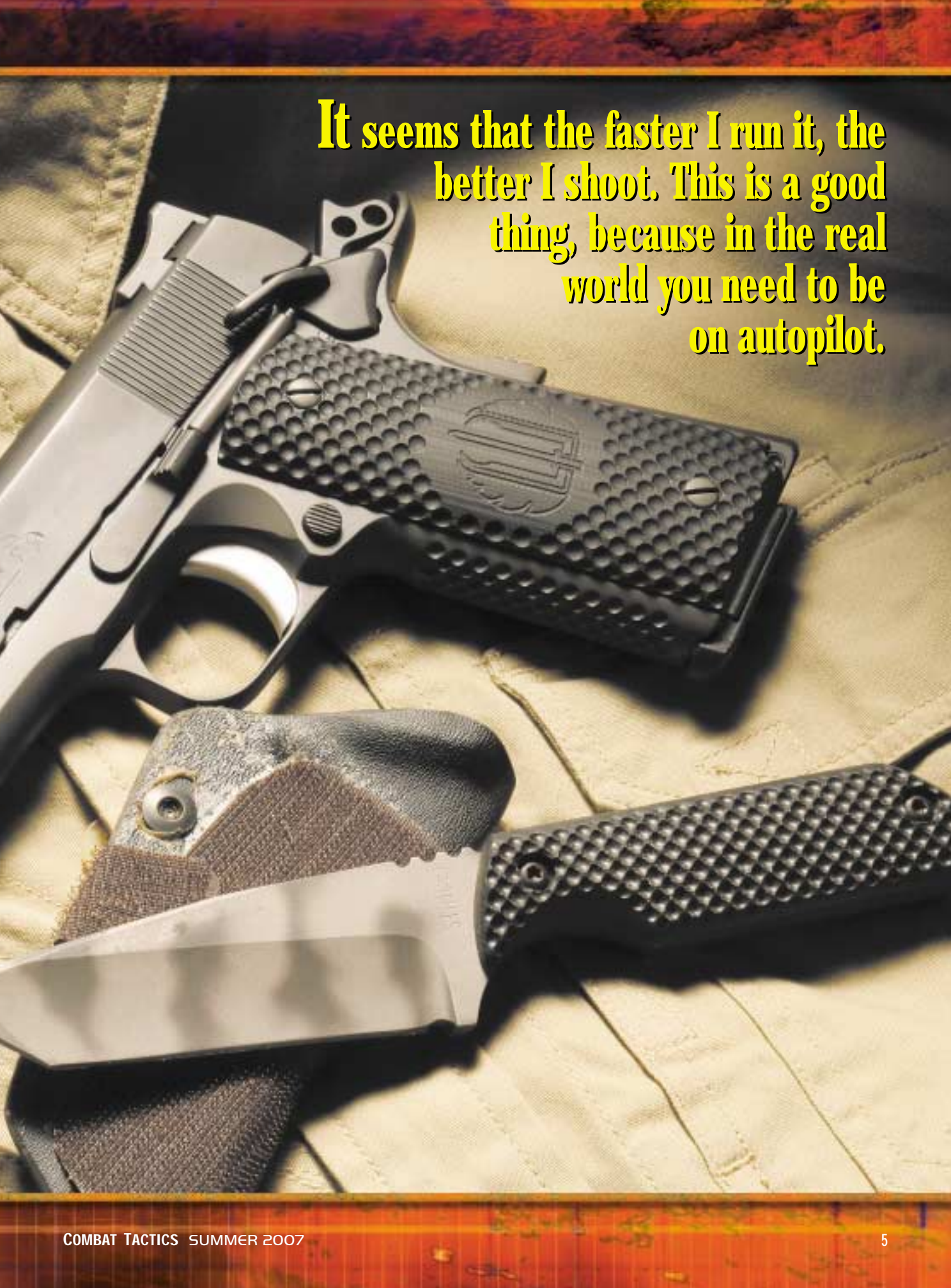
*"A pistol is a 25 yard weapon, maximum. It must be idiot-proof, tough, able to be dropped, used to beat someone with. It doesn't need babying. It should go a couple of thousand rounds without maintenance and it should be easily cleaned in the field with no tools and without costing too much psychic energy.*

*"A pistol should have a coating that resists my acidic sweat and any other noxious substances that might contact the gun. That coating should reduce the quantity of lubricant needed, which means less goeey stuff to attract grit.*

*"The grips should be made from something extremely tough so if I, or the factory, double-charge a case, I won't*

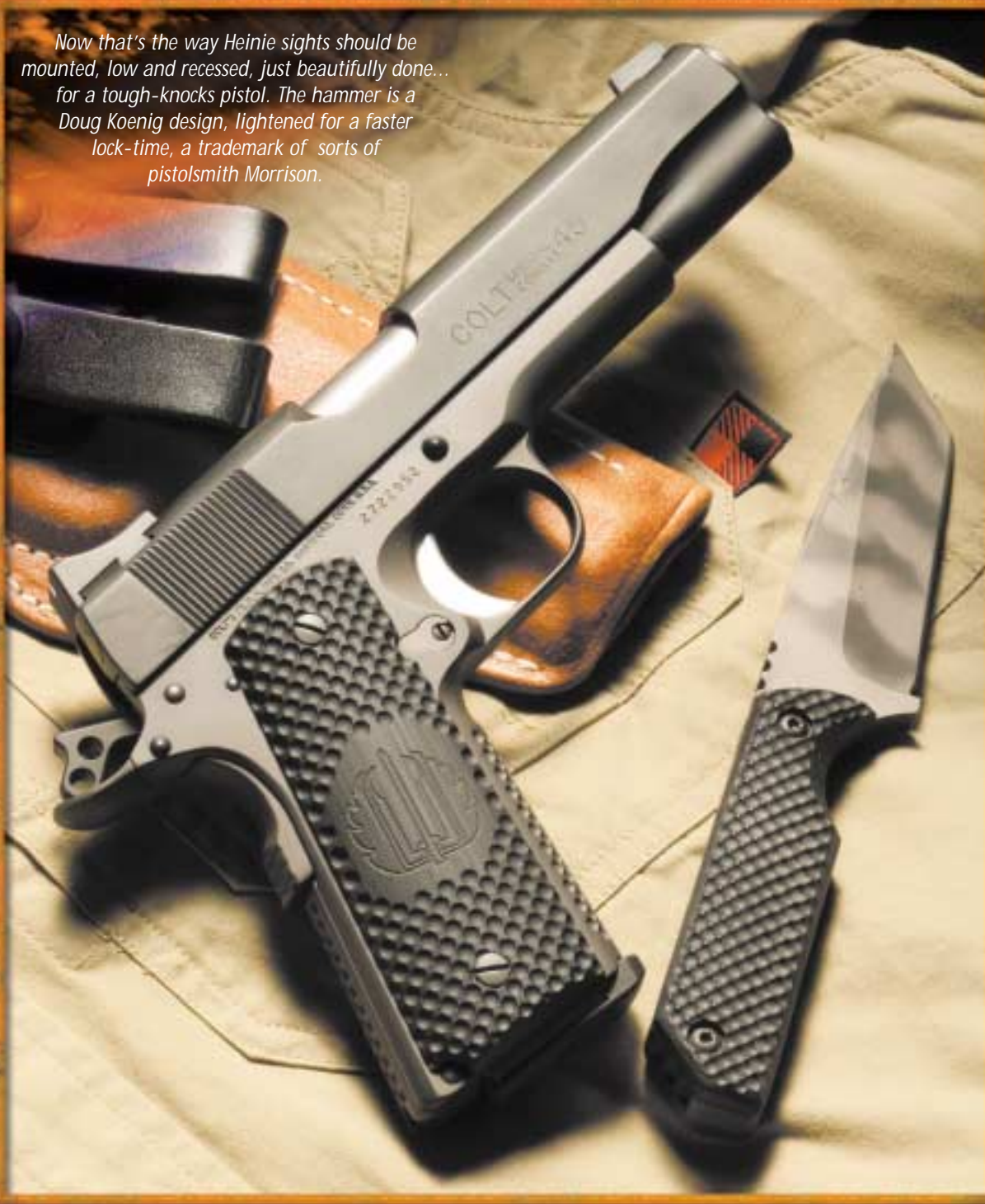


*A hard-use gun pairs up with a hard-use knife, and they don't get any harder than this Strider Model DB. The Rob Simonich-designed Gunner Grips on the pistol match the knife scales with a golf ball-like pebbling for a sure grip with wet, bloody or muddy hands. Note the matching golf ball "checkering" on the front strap and mainspring housing.*

A close-up photograph of a handgun and a combat knife resting on a tan canvas bag. The handgun is a semi-automatic pistol with a black frame and a silver slide, featuring a textured grip. The knife has a silver blade and a black handle with a diamond-patterned texture. The background is a textured tan fabric.

**It seems that the faster I run it, the better I shoot. This is a good thing, because in the real world you need to be on autopilot.**

*Now that's the way Heinie sights should be mounted, low and recessed, just beautifully done... for a tough-knocks pistol. The hammer is a Doug Koenig design, lightened for a faster lock-time, a trademark of sorts of pistolsmith Morrison.*



*lose a finger. I still have pieces of a Glock 21 in my hand from just such an experience.*

*"The sight picture should be 'open' so that I can see around the front blade when the sights are aligned, but the front sight should be thick enough that dropping it won't bend or break it. It should be pinned and brazed in place.*

*"The plunger tube should also be brazed in*

*place. And I want a full-size firing pin! I don't want any checkering or scallops, just some grooves on the back of the main spring housing. I like a smooth gun, even in a sweaty hand.*

*"Basically I want a gun that isn't finicky or high strung, that has the highest quality internals and I can treat as I please knowing that it won't let me down. It should be built on a prole-*

*ariat frame. It should definitely not cost an arm and a leg and it should not take two years to build. The gun needn't look like a trophy won on the golf course.*

*"To summarize in 25 words or less, I want the performance of a 1911 combined with the idiot-proof personality of a Glock."*

This really hit home, as it sounded like Mark and I wanted many of the same things. Steve turned out to be just as interesting to work with as the project itself. During the process of my ordering a THUG of my own, I found that he has come to terms with a problem that plagues all custom pistolsmiths— doing what the customer wants, not what the pistolsmith "knows" is best.

It is with this customer-knows-best attitude that Steve has made some very good inroads with building personal fighting pistols for many high speed guys from the SOCOM community.

Steve does all the work himself except the finish. He stocks all of the necessary parts to maintain the THUG in his shop. This makes it possible, to outfit professional folks headed into harms way in weeks rather than months. Or, more likely with some of the more in-demand pistolsmiths, years.

THUG pistols are built to have maximum compatibility with off-the-shelf-parts. In a pinch, a user can make do with stock parts if something is lost or broken in the field. It won't be perfect, but it's better than nothing.

## My Own THUG

I had a good feeling about all this. The mojo was starting to come together and I decided to send Steve a gun to be THUGed. My original plan was to send a brand new Springfield Mil Spec, but the deal to acquire the gun didn't work out.

I called Steve with my dilemma. I had an interesting 1911 built for me years ago, but it was a parts gun, all Colt, but built so it could basically pass an agency armory review if I used it in a shooting at work, so it was pretty close to stock with all Colt parts. It had a 1991A1 frame and a Special Combat slide. It was a jumble of parts, and had had a bad accident when the zipper of a cheap gun rug let loose and it got dropped on the rear of the slide, causing a bent rear sight and some serious cosmetic damage. It was several different colors, but I had a strange connection to this gun. Ugly is as ugly does.

Steve knew the drill. He has had to learn the hard way about working on guns that other 'smiths have hacked over. Sometimes stuff gets done by a prior pistolsmith that cannot be undone, and it is

less than a happy conclusion for all involved.

With this in mind Steve usually demands a new stock gun, but he said he would make an exception for me, as most of the internals were going in the ash heap anyway. He was very upfront about his concerns, but he agreed to take the cobbled up Colt.

There were several things I wanted on my gun that differed from a standard THUG. I wanted golf ball type indentations on the front strap and mainspring housing to match my Strider Gunner Grips. I also wanted a single tritium dot in the front sight only. I also optioned for sand cuts in the slide rails.

Steve also made me a Goldilocks (just right) trigger and safety that are a length and size that I like, sort of medium all the way around. This is the beauty of a guy like Steve who will build a gun to suit the customer.

The plan was for this pistol to be carried both concealed and to be used in a tactical environment. Two mainspring housings were done, both with unique integral lanyard attachment points that are unobtrusive. One was a standard size, the other with a mag-well. All I have to do is punch a single exposed pin out and swap them.

I have a fairly smooth set of Strider Gunner Grips that are tapered on the bottom for concealed carry, and a sharper set that are flat on the bottom for use with the mag-well and for shooting in gloves. The housing with the mag-well has a lanyard attached to it, as this is one gun I do not want to lose.

I went with a simple Parkerized finish that has a nice two-tone effect because of the different textures of the slide and frame, again per my request, as I like how it looks. The dehorning was done to the whole gun as well, but not the "bar of soap" type. I wanted this THUG to have a true general purpose feel to it.

We discussed forward cocking serrations; I like them on a dedicated "light gun" with a SureFire X200, but not on this one. I preferred to keep it stock on the front portion of the slide and maintain its original Colt factory markings. This kept the gun true to THUG form, and Steve got it perfect for me.

Steve and I corresponded extensively on the grip treatment. Steve thinned the front and rear of the grip, and undercut the trigger guard for a higher hold. He did a beautiful bordered golf ball texture that blends perfectly with the Gunner Grips. The way this gun feels in the hand is its best attribute. In the future Steve will donate a portion of the proceeds on pistols with the golf ball treatment to Rob Simonich's widow. Rob, the originator of the Gunner Grip, was tragically killed in a car

accident which was a huge loss to all of us. For those who prefer grips with a smooth or different texture, Steve does some of the best glass epoxy grips out there.

Other than the golf ball texture and tritium front sight arrangement, my gun is pure THUG. The hammer is the distinctive Koenig hammer machined from hardened O1 tool steel, which has become a trademark of sorts on Morrison's pistols. The ejection port was opened, flared, and relieved on the inside to enable ready ejection of a live round. The recoil spring plug was given a GI spec dimple to retain the recoil spring.

The gun was provided with both 18 and 16 lb. recoil springs. I use the 18 lb. spring exclusively. All of the other springs are custom made from stainless steel (sear spring, plunger detent spring, mainspring, and firing pin spring). The plunger tube is staked and bonded to the frame and the spring bent to GI specs, so it remains captive to the frame upon disassembly.

The stock Colt barrel is accurate enough for me. I can consistently shoot top scores on my agency's qualification course, which is my general guide to how accurate I need a fighting gun to be. Some folks want a match barrel, and those are certainly available from Steve as well.

The barrel was polished, throated, and deep crowned. It was cut flush with the custom bar stock bushing that was fitted, yet hand removable. Custom touches and attention to detail were apparent throughout. The trigger featured a fixed over-travel stop, the slide was blended to match the frame and extractor, and many other subtle signs of quality workmanship were evident.

When my THUG arrived I was really awed. Not only was the gun wonderful, but also it came with a selection of spare fitted parts. There was a spare extractor, an oversized firing pin stop, spare recoil spring, and the complete spare mainspring housing with the extended mag well. It may not be perfection to everyone's taste, but it was perfect for me.

The editor told me to not shoot it until Ichiro Nagata photographed it. Sorry, boss. I was enroute to the range with 500 rounds of Winchester SXT in about five minutes. Break in went well, and the THUG ran like a machine. I had to "un-Glock" myself and try to get used to a good trigger, set at 4.5 lbs. per my request.

The only failure was traced to a magazine that is advertised as used by every wiz-bang ninja unit in history. With stock Colt magazines, and CMC Powermags, the THUG functioned flawlessly. So much for the famous magazines.

I found that with the sights set up with a wide notched Heinie Slant Pro rear and a wide front sight with a lot of space around it, my poor eyes had to work to shoot precisely at 25 yards. But, when I started to work on speed drills at more realistic pistol ranges, shooting movers, and shooting on the move, they worked great.

I have spent a bunch of time in the last few years shooting difficult moving targets at ITTS with Scott Reitz, and having a sight with which I can track an unpredictable mover is really important.

Ever since Ichiro finished taking his photos, I have shot my THUG extensively, and I am very pleased during every range session. It seems that the faster I run it, the better I shoot. This is really a good thing, because in the real world you need to be on autopilot.

I carry my THUG in a Sparks Summer Special with a SureFire handheld light and a custom Strider knife. All are simple, tough, combat proven, and offer a great sense of confidence. The only downside is it's getting harder and harder to give my beloved Glock 17 any quality time.



*Morrison is a stickler for reliability and to that end he uses his own firing pin and firing pin retainer in his THUGs. He did a great job of golf balling the mag funnel/mainspring housing too.*

Steve Morrison's website is [www.marsguns.com](http://www.marsguns.com).