

## 20 Ahern Under the Gun: The basic SIG Classic

By Jerry Ahern, Photos by Sharon Ahern

One handgun I have always respected is the SIG-Sauer P-220 ([www.sigsauer.com](http://www.sigsauer.com)). It is inherently accurate and sits well in the hand, its grip shape very close to that of the 1911. Along with one of my Detonics .45s – either the Detonics USA Model 9-11-01 or the Detonics USA CombatMaster – a SIG 220 is one of the .45s I would trust the most. With either of the two Detonics USA models or the SIG 220, you have a ruggedly built firearm that is pleasant to shoot and ridiculously reliable.

From 1973 until 1975, I was Associate Editor of *Guns Magazine* and its trade publication, *The Shooting Industry*. The SIG-Sauer pistols were announced to the American market in 1975, so I was probably among a handful of Americans to know the guns even existed. Soon after, the P-220, still with European-style heel-of-the-butt magazine release in those days, appeared in the United States as under the SIG name, marketed by Hawes Firearms. This was a marketing arrangement of short duration. The 220 was then sold in the USA as the BDA .45, “BDA” standing for “Browning Double Action.” Excellent pistol that the BDA .45 was, it didn’t sell well for Browning Arms and the pistol was dropped from the line.

The BDA .45 was also available in 9x19mm and – rarely seen – in .38 Super. As I understand it, Hawes even offered the gun in .30 Luger.

The SIG-Sauer P-220 didn’t start out as a .45, but as a 9mm Parabellum. The

Swiss Army was in need of a pistol that would function and perform with the same superb reliability as the SIG P-210. By comparison to today’s price for the Korth semi-automatics (approximately \$15,000; extra magazines are approximately \$150), the P-210 was terrifically inexpensive. But, by comparison to almost any other handgun one could name that was available in 1975, the SIG P-210, excellent though it was, was on the seriously pricey side. SIG developed the pistol that would replace its P-210. The pistol became known as the “P-75,” after the year of its adoption by the Swiss military, and was a single-column-magazine, eight-plus-one capacity 9x19mm traditional double action. It would become known here as the P-220, and most famously in .45 ACP.

The P-220 in 9mm became the basis for one of

Europe’s most popular police service pistols, the P-6, known here as the P-225. A physically smaller, eight-plus-one 9mm, the P-225 was adopted initially by several German police units, its popularity spreading rapidly. The P-6 is said to have seen service as one of the handguns used by the Vatican’s Swiss Guard and SIG-Sauer and H&K weapons are standard for this small and highly trained standing army of 134 dedicated soldiers.

The world famous P-226 was derived from the P-220, as well, the P-226 SIG’s large capacity 9mm Pistol that competed so effectively against the Beretta Model 92 for the U.S. military service contract. The Beretta, of course, became the M9 U.S. Service pistol, the SIG 226 seeing service all over the world as well, the 226 in service with the U.S. Navy SEALs and the Texas Rangers. The SIG 226 was the basis for the slightly smaller SIG 228,

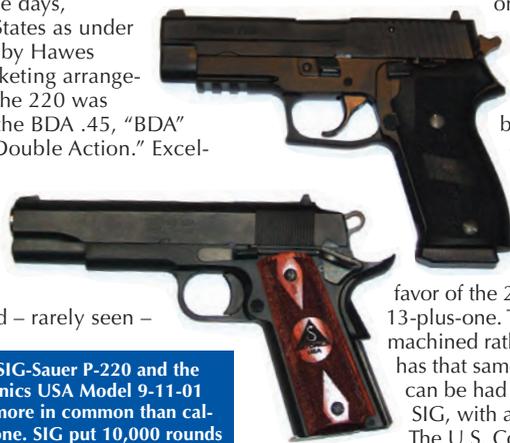
one of my favorite handguns of some years back, which was acquired by the United States military for use by pilots and in other specialized carry situations.

It was designated the M11. The 226 has a capacity of 15-plus-one, while the 228, since discontinued in favor of the 229, had a capacity of 13-plus-one. The 229, with a machined rather than stamped slide, has that same capacity in 9mm, but can be had in .40 S&W and .357 SIG, with a 12-plus-one capacity.

The U.S. Coast Guard, Homeland Security and ICE use it.

The pistol that started the entire SIG Classic Line is the SIG-Sauer P-220. The P-220 is available in various ways today, of course – double action only, steel frame, etc. I chose to borrow the most basic version of the pistol, with stainless steel “Nitron” finished slide, alloy frame, Picatinny Rail and standard, traditional double action, meaning that the first shot can be fired double action or single action, subsequent shots single action. Magazine capacity is eight rounds. One P-220 .45, the SIG-Sauer website relates, was fired 10,000 rounds in one day, without a single malfunction.

We borrowed a number of handguns from various manufacturers in association with *The Gun Digest Buyer’s Guide to Concealed Carry Handguns*, which is out in November of 2010, but the SIG 220 wasn’t one of them, although it would conceal as well as any full-sized .45 automatic. But, for some reason – not related to a book project – I just got the bug in me to re-visit this pistol that I hadn’t actually interacted with for well over 30 years. Sharon thought it was a great idea. All I needed was another borrowed gun to write about,



The SIG-Sauer P-220 and the Detonics USA Model 9-11-01 have more in common than caliber alone. SIG put 10,000 rounds through a P-220 in one day, without a failure. Detonics USA put 31,000 rounds through a Model 9-11-01 over the course of five days, without a failure. Both are capable of taking more use/abuse than most pistols will ever see.