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F.I.E.'S SIZZLING SPAS-12

by Larry Sterett



ABOVE LEFT: Carrying safety blocks the trigger; rotates 180 degrees to the fire position. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Aperture rear sight also retains the folding stock. Letters AA and MM serve as an operating-mode reference by their relation to the rear of the handguard.

INTIMIDATING! It's the only word to describe the new Franchi SPAS-12 shotgun, imported by F.I.E. Weighing 9¾ pounds empty, the SPAS-12 is a rugged blend of metal and modern synthetics. Viewed from the side, it looks like it could stop a tank, and if the muzzle swings toward you, it's guaranteed to get your attention. Although the black anodized receiver and the gray trigger guard are constructed of non-ferrous metals, the barrel, breech bolt, sights, perforated handguard assembly, folding stock, magazine assembly, pins and all moving action parts are steel with a non-glare finish. The grooved forearm and comfortable pistol grip are constructed of a black synthetic material — probably fiberglass-reinforced nylon — the modern trend for police and military weapons.

Unlike many shotguns currently used by the police and military, the SPAS-12 appears to have been designed for maximum durability. Instead of taking a conventional sporting shotgun, giving it a different metal finish, a non-glare hardwood stock and forearm and sling swivels and calling it a riot gun or police-military

shotgun, the SPAS-12 has some added features not found in the game fields or on trap and skeet ranges.

The SPAS-12 measures 31½" long with the stock folded back along the top of the receiver, and 41½" with it extended. It has a threaded muzzle sleeve which can be replaced with screw-on choke tubes, if desired, when they become available. A neoprene "O" ring keeps the muzzle sleeve snug, and the sleeve's exterior is grooved for improved purchase, in addition to having three evenly spaced recesses for a spanner wrench to aid choke-tube installation. (Choke tubes are not currently available, but you can bet some enterprising firm will soon make them as an accessory. Grenade launchers and other related accessories also will probably become available from some firms, although such items are not available from F.I.E.) The chrome-moly barrel of the SPAS-12 measures 21½" long, including the sleeve, and is chambered for all standard-length (2¾") 12-gauge cartridges — shot, rifled slug, tear gas, buck, flechette and grenade launcher.

A massive 0.130" wide-blade front sight

graces the barrel directly to the rear of the muzzle sleeve, while an L-shaped rear sight with 0.278" aperture is located just forward of the receiver, providing a sight radius of 17½". The rear sight attaches via a single flat-head screw to a block silver-soldered to the barrel. This combination retains the perforated handguard assembly, in addition to the aperture of the sight, serving as the locking recess for the buttstock assembly in the folded position; thus, the sights are not usable when the buttstock is in the folded position.

The folding buttstock is constructed of stamped steel, perforated to reduce weight and strengthened with ribs. A hardened-steel pin, with rounded head, locks the stock in the extended position, while a smaller pin locks the butt portion in position. Pushing in on the pins will allow the butt and the stock to be folded; the stock pin is easy to operate, but the butt pin is too small for easy operation, especially when wearing gloves. (The buttstock assembly will snap into the folded position under its own weight because the top surface of the rear sight is beveled, but the assembly will not lock into the extended position without the stop or lock pin being pushed in enough for the stock arms to slip past.) The European version of the SPAS-12 has a detachable buttstock, with solid and tubular buttstock assemblies available as options. The stock pin on the U.S. version is riveted in place, due to BATF length regulations. (Look for some firm to come out with a takedown pin and a synthetic stock.) A butt hook to aid one-hand firing was also a part of the original SPAS-12 design, but was removed at the BATF's request; the hook is available separately.

As with most police-military shotguns of current manufacture, the SPAS-12 has an extended tubular magazine. The capacity is eight rounds, plus one in the chamber, which should be enough for most situations. A cut-off button located near the lower edge of the receiver, on the right side, can be pressed down to prevent rounds feeding from the magazine, thus permitting the exchange of the chambered round without bothering the rounds in the magazine. Of heavier construction than usual, the maga-

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Road, Golden, CO 80403). The binding is simple, durable, easily repairable with a few tools and spare parts and has an adjustable release mechanism. It's also less expensive than many other alpine-touring bindings. One point is critical: Ramer bindings must be greased regularly to maintain their release function.

No binding, whether alpine-touring or Nordic, can be regarded as fail-safe. Skiing within your ability is the key to avoiding injury in the backcountry.

Poles are made from Tonkin cane (a relative of bamboo), fiberglass or aluminum. Cost generally goes up in that order. Tonkin poles have the advantage of not becoming brittle in the cold, unlike aluminum. They can also be repaired to some extent with tape and makeshift splint. I skied 50 miles with a patched-up bamboo pole on the way to Mt. Foraker, Alaska. Tonkin poles can crack in storage, however.

Fiberglass poles, despite their high-tech look, can actually be weaker than Tonkin. They are particularly vulnerable once they are nicked, for example, on a ski edge. They are also often heavier than aluminum. Many different construction techniques exist, with quality roughly comparable to price.

Aluminum poles are made using about six different alloys. Higher prices mean stronger alloys, which means lighter poles of equivalent strength. High-strength aluminum poles tend to break cleanly if they break. A Pole Patch, sold by Alpine Research, Inc. for \$6, permits a strong repair of any aluminum pole by clamping a spring-steel sleeve around the break. Poles should reach to your armpit when standing upright. Circular baskets are best for untracked snow.

Waxing cross-country skis for maximum performance is a subtle art, but the basics are simple. Wax canisters contain instructions on the snow conditions for which they are appropriate. If you're slipping, apply a softer wax. If you're sticking too much, apply a harder wax. Soft waxes can be applied over hard, but not vice versa; you must scrape off the soft first.

Climbing skins are an excellent alternative to waxes for a sustained uphill grind or for carrying a heavy load. They work like the inlaid hair strips on waxless skis, except that they provide much better grip and much less glide. The skins are normally removed for downhill runs. The glue-on kind are much more convenient than the clamp-on kind.

When dealing with heavy loads, consider buying a sled. On gentle terrain I have been able to move in excess of 100 pounds divided between my sled and my pack. I'd never have been able to carry that weight on my back alone. Sleds connected to your waist harness by rigid traces are expensive but much less hassle than using a children's sled connected with rope.

You can learn to ski simply by doing it,

but it helps to have some coaching from an experienced instructor or friend. There are also a number of books on the market that can point you in the right direction. *Mountain Skiing*, by Vic Bein (The Mountaineers, 1982), and *Backcountry Skiing*, by Lito Tejada-Flores (The Sierra Club, 1981), are two of the best. If you're serious about learning, buy some lift tickets and take your cross-country gear out on the bunny slopes. You can spend all your time working on technique rather than struggling uphill for hours to get a half-hour downhill run. Such concentrated practice will do wonders for your ability. Skiing then becomes a skill not only potentially valuable in emergencies, but an excellent form of recreation and conditioning as well. □

SPAS-12

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zine has a rotating swivel plate just forward of the knurled area on the tube; the swivel plate will accept the snap-on sling swivel with which the accessory sling is equipped.

The SPAS-12 has two safeties — a carrying safety on the right side of the trigger guard near the forward edge, and a "quick employment" safety behind it on the left side. The carrying safety blocks the trigger when the SPAS-12 is cocked, and operation requires a full 180-degree turn from the rear forward. The safety lever is large, the positions plainly marked and the movement is similar to the safety on the old Krag, Springfield and Mauser rifles, except for its location and direction of movement.

Unlike the carrying safety, operation of the "quick employment" safety requires only a forward movement of the trigger finger, as the safety lever projects into the guard area when in the "on" position. This safety automatically goes "off" when the breech bolt moves forward; unless the SPAS-12 has just been fired, the safety will have to be moved back to the "on" position if the breech bolt is to be retracted since, otherwise, the bolt is locked securely into the barrel extension.

The trigger guard on the SPAS-12 is large, for use with the gloved finger, and the construction provides plenty of protection. The trigger is well-shaped, with a slightly convex smooth face, but the pull on the test gun was heavy: 9¾ pounds. Under the conditions in which the SPAS-12 will normally be used, the heavy pull will not be noticed, although it could have an effect on the accuracy obtained using rifled slugs.

The most outstanding feature of the SPAS-12 is its dual method of operation — user-selected pump action or gas-operated semiautomatic. Mode-of-fire selection is accomplished by moving the forearm assembly approximately ⅞". The black-synthetic forearm is uniquely shaped, with molded-in grooves, a depth of just under

2¾" and a maximum width of slightly less than 2½" at the rear edge. Centered on the underside of the forearm, along the rear slope of the deepest portion, is the auto/manual fire selector. Pushing in on the grooved portion of the selector with a finger releases the selector, permitting movement of the forearm to the desired setting. The settings are indicated by the marks AA and MM on the topside of the perforated handguard, just forward of the rear sight. In the forward position, the rear of the forearm is aligned with the AA on the handguard, indicating semiautomatic fire, while moving the forearm rearward to align it with the MM places the SPAS-12 in the manual or pump-action mode. (Movement of the forearm cams a valve, bleeding gas from two holes in the barrel to the piston mechanism for semiautomatic operation, or shuts off the gas from the piston, bleeding any excess outside.)

The test gun functioned perfectly in both firing modes. However, pump-action operation is not as smooth and easy as on a conventional pump gun, due to the strength required to move the gas mechanism and compress the main spring. It is possible that some people will not be able to operate the slide mechanism effectively from the shoulder, although it should not be a major problem when firing from waist level, due to superior leverage. Retracting the mechanism using the charging handle on the breech bolt is even more difficult, when the SPAS-12 is in the pump-action mode. Hence, this is something which should be considered if the shotgun is to be purchased for home protection.

Although the SPAS-12 could do the job, it was not designed for quail hunting, so it was patterned first at 25 yards using heavier loads, with five rounds per load being fired to obtain an average. First checked was the Winchester maximum Mark 5 Super-Speed 00-Buck load, containing 12 pellets. This load produced 100% patterns, with the 12 pellets always contained within the 30" circle, and an average of just over seven pellets within a 15" circle. Using this load, the SPAS-12 shot slightly high, with an average of only three pellets falling below the point-of-aim.

Remington's ¾-dram equivalent Express load containing nine 00-Buck pellets was patterned second. Again, the 30" circle contained all the pellets, with seven of the nine pellets grouping within a 15" circle, and an average of two pellets falling below point-of-aim.

The final buck load to be patterned was Federal's new maximum Hi-Power load containing eight buffered 000 buckshot. All eight 000 Buck stayed within the 30" circle for all rounds, with an average of just over five pellets grouping within the 15" circle, and only two pellets falling below point-of-aim at the 25-yard distance.

Following the buckshot loads, the SPAS-

12 was patterned using another buffered load containing 1 1/2 ounces of No. 2 shot. At 25 yards this Remington Nitro Mag load averaged 83.7% for the five shots, with 38.9% of this total located inside the 15" center circle. Centered 2 1/2" high and just under 2 1/2" to the right of the point-of-aim, the patterns had center fields that were well distributed, nearly 1 1/2 times as dense as the individual outer fields. That's not bad.

No firing was done with rifled slugs, due to the lack of time. However, the SPAS-12 should provide better-than-average accuracy with most rifled slugs, and even better accuracy with the BRI sabot load. (The BRI slug is a .50-caliber design with a wasp-waist design, and it tends to be more accurate than other slug loads.)

Additional test firing of the SPAS-12 was done on clay targets and LS-Police Silhouette targets. Although the open choke is definitely not designed for trap shooting, it does a satisfactory job of hitting clay targets if the shooter gets on them fast enough. In fact, the pointability of the SPAS-12 is so good that it is possible to break targets firing from waist level with a bit of practice, and for police or military use on two-legged moving targets, that's good news.

No functioning problems were encountered during the firing of nearly 300 assorted rounds of ammunition through the SPAS-12. Feeding from the magazine was perfect, and ejection of fired casings was with authority, from one to four paces to the right, depending on the shell brand being used. In the pump-action mode, the SPAS-12 will handle any 12-gauge shell of standard length (2 3/4" overall), since feeding and extraction operations are performed manually. However, when the SPAS-12 is set for semiautomatic operation, it is necessary to use shells loaded with at least 1 1/4 ounces of shot, and a 3/4-dram equivalent of powder. Lesser loads, such as a 3-dram equivalent load containing 1 1/8 ounces of shot, are not capable of functioning in the mechanism with reliability. All buckshot and rifled slug loads generate the necessary pressure, as do the short magnum and heavier field loads; just remember that the SPAS-12 is not a skeet or trap gun, but a specialized 12-gauge shotgun designed for serious social work, so load it accordingly.

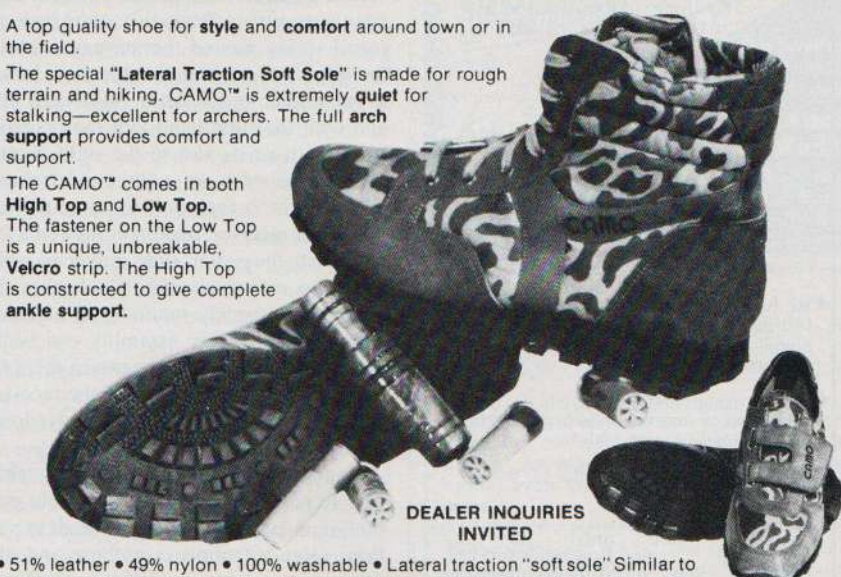
Disassembly of the SPAS-12 is conventional for an autoloader. With the magazine and chamber empty, set the auto-manual fire selector to the semiautomatic position (AA), and retract the breech bolt by pulling rearward on the operating handle. Rest the butt on a solid surface — the buttstock assembly must be in the extended position — and unscrew and remove the magazine extension and magazine spring. Pull the barrel and handguard/forearm assembly away from the receiver and slowly forward off the magazine tube, and lay aside. Holding onto the charging handle, press the car-

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