

Hold that Forend!

By Nathan Foster.

Please note that this article is a primer which has been provided as a part of our free services. The full body of information can be found in *The Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting* by Nathan Foster. This step by step book is ideal for beginners through to seasoned marksmen.

[Click here to view the Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting.](#)

After many years of research and having had many clients take advantage of our services, I have been fortunate enough to be in a position to observe which shooting techniques work and which techniques can be counterproductive to precision shooting.

Of the many factors that determine successful shooting habits, perhaps one of *the* greatest influences on accurate shooting is associated with rifle forend control and forehand tension. Many hunters, snipers and police marksmen have gradually shifted to the now fashionable crossed arm shooting position. This method has one hand on the grip/ trigger, the other arm is crossed over the chest to support the butt of the rifle, leaving the rifle forend resting free. In my experience this shooting style is not only detrimental to accurate shooting but when attempted in the field, is the single greatest cause of shot failure – even when employing a very accurate rifle. My clients come from all backgrounds, civilian, military, police and many are highly experienced riflemen. Unfortunately, the gradual trend towards the omission of forend control has produced undesirable results. These results may range from minor errors through to complete misses. Please note that I am not talking about using a heavy rifle and weak cartridge to make a hit on a gong, but instead I speak in reference to game killing under real world field conditions using every day hunting rifles.

Military trends

To gain an insight into the current trends in prone shooting, it is perhaps best if we go back to the beginning of the twentieth century and study what came before. In this instance, I would like to begin with the shooting technique of the military marksmen of the early 1900s, of which there are many great photos to reflect on.



USMC marksman with the 1903 Springfield rifle.

In the above, a USMC marksman poses for a photo while in the prone shooting position. He is using his sling, double wrapped and the sling is set to optimum tension. The marksman's fore hand is supporting the forend of the 1903 Springfield rifle as far forwards as he can comfortably hold it. The forehand will also be locked in place once he settles for his shot. In this example, the marksman is actually cycling the bolt and not fully locked into position. One last and important aspect to note is that the marksman does not use any rest/aid under the forend. Although he could have used a rest, marksmen around the world were trained to shoot off their elbows, demanding an incredibly high level of skill and discipline.



Another US soldier from the early 1900s demonstrates shooting from the sitting position. Note his forehand hold. His fingers are in an optimal position of control.



A British sniper in Italy during WW2.

Marksman during this time period did not use a front rest for two reasons. The first was that of tactics, it was considered imperative that the soldier be able to advance forwards at a run, then drop to the prone

position and be able to shoot quickly- as quickly as possible. There was no time for making use of front rests within this training doctrine. In practice however, soldiers did make use of rests wherever possible, mostly in the form of natural terrain such as high spots in the ground. Sand bagged trench tops were also used, all of which greatly aided precision shooting as well as offering cover to the soldier.

By the Second World War, shooting from the elbows as seen in the picture of the British sniper above, was regarded as a necessary skill. However, soldiers continued to make use of makeshift field rests (as they do today). Rifles of this era, as well as those used in the First World War, were very heavy and did not produce substantial recoil. The fully wooded designs also enabled these rifles to be fired from a variety of shooting positions and grip tensions, without undue effect on the point of impact. Toward the end of the Second World War the rifle sling was beginning to be used more for carrying the rifle than as a shooting aid. Close observation of old photos also reveals that marksmen were no longer holding the forend well forward but instead, simply cupping the forend at the front of the magazine well. The British sniper pictured above appears to be one of the few marksmen that maintained early doctrine.



Canadian sniper during the Second World War. Note the relaxed position, more in line with the common practices of the day.

Following the Second World War- for whatever reasons- military marksmanship and more especially sniper training took a turn for the worse. British snipers seemed to fair the best, maintaining organized training. However, British snipers were let down by poor rifle development. Rather than re-opening the P14 rifle project with a goal toward creating a more appropriate rifle, the British ordnance department withheld funds and instead the SMLE was re-modelled to house the T65 7.62 cartridge (.308 Win). It was many years before the British finally upgraded. Today, the British sniper is armed with the Accuracy International rifle.

Sometime after the Second World War the U.S military abandoned sniper training altogether. U.S marksmanship is probably the most relevant topic to this article due to the wider media that surrounds the U.S military. Current trends, tactics and weapons of the U.S military influence all other Allied military organizations to one degree or another as well as influencing hunters, both in an active and passive manner.

When the U.S began their campaign to halt the spread of Communism, drawing the line across South East Asia, their military had no snipers and no sniper weapons. USMC Captain Jim Land (distinguished Marksman) was tasked with organizing a sniper school, candidates and weapons - all on the fly. Although Land was able to pull a few WW2 military rifles out of retirement, the main source of sniper weapons came from factory sporting rifles, primarily the Winchester M70 followed by Remington rifles - all chambered for the .30-06 cartridge. These rifles were accurized in country and issued to sniper teams. One of these snipers, Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock, became legendary for his tremendous feats.

Below is an excerpt from the book 'Marine Sniper' written by Charles Henderson. This gives a description of legendary sniper Carlos Hathcock's preparation during his victorious 1965 Wimbledon cup match. Hathcock was using a .300 Winchester Magnum...

He laid his rifle on its side and began counting clicks as he turned the windage knob on the side of his rifle's telescopic sight. After noting the change in his data book, he checked his leather sling, making sure that it was adjusted to the proper length and wrapped around his upper arm at the exact spot where he had looped it each time he fired. With the sling making a half twist around his forearm, he slid his left hand, shielded by a thick leather shooting glove, up the hand guard of his rifle's stock and jammed it tightly against the D-ring and swivel that held the sling to the rifle.

Slowly, Hathcock leaned his weight on his left elbow and began working the rifle's butt tightly into his right shoulder. "Got to be tight. No room for it to slip, not here." As the sling tightened and stretched to accommodate the tight fit of the rifle into his shoulder, he felt the strap bite painfully into his upper arm and trap the blood in his left hand and fingers. He looked at their tips protruding from the shooting glove and watched them turn red and deepen to purple.

The use of hunting configuration rifles marked a major change from the former full wood captured barrel rifle designs. As the Vietnam War continued, the U.S military finally obtained a dedicated sniper rifle, the Remington M40A1 7.62. This rifle was very much in line with the modern bolt action heavy barreled varmint hunting rifle. Due to the long fat barrel, recoil of the 7.62mm cartridge was relatively mild. Shooting habits were also changing. While Captain Jim Land and instructors like Hathcock encouraged optimum shooting habits, away from their units for months at a time, many snipers developed relaxed techniques which would eventually become integrated into normal shooting practices.



A young sniper team in Vietnam.

Pictured above is a two man sniper team during the Vietnam War. The young soldier is holding his rifle in a casual manner, a sign of very little time allocated to training due to the demands of this conflict combined with no ongoing support structure. The rifle is rested on the soldier's helmet, an adequate but unstable platform. His fore hand is under the magazine well, the sling is not in use.

Following the Vietnam War and mostly through the hard work and persistence of people like Major Jim Land, the U.S military continued to develop a dedicated sniper organization and training school. However fifty years on, it is my personal belief that shooting habits have seriously declined within all allied military organizations combined with an unfortunate over-reliance on technology.

Competitive shooting (specifically F class) has also had a huge influence on the current prone shooting position used by allied snipers. The crossed arm hand hold is popular in various competitive disciplines due to the steadiness the shooter can obtain from this position. Extremely heavy rifles and low recoiling cartridges enable the crossed arm hand hold to be used with acceptable results at a rifle range. These methods do not however work so well when one is shooting a high powered magnum rifle in rough field conditions.



The crossed arm hold.

Civilian trends

Traditionally, military shooting techniques have influenced civilian / hunter shooting techniques. In earlier days, a great majority of our male civilian population either underwent cadet training or full military service. Many of these shooting habits were then passed from hunter to son. In recent years, as people work longer hours and have less access to shooting ranges, this particular method of passing on information has deteriorated. Instead, people, both military and civilian are more likely to be influenced by youtube or Hollywood movies.

A proportion of civilian shooters have stayed with the traditional hand hold methods, however the crossed arm hold is now unfortunately the norm. The combination of modern hunting rifles producing high recoil and the cross armed hold, is very detrimental to precision shooting. More so in the field where conditions are not as controlled as they are at the range.

High recoil and the crossed arm hold

When an accurate but high recoiling rifle is fired using the crossed arm hold the rifle reacts violently, kicking rearwards, upwards and to the right or left. While many shooters assume that the bullet has left the bore well before the rifle recoils, this simply isn't true. The force of opposites is always equal. Any minor changes in shooter position affect these forces and any lack of control allows a degree of random

results. Using the crossed arm hold, groups at 100 yards tend to be oval, strung slightly to either 11 o'clock or 1 o'clock. A rifle capable of grouping .75" at 100 yards will often produce a 1.5" group or in other cases, the group will appear optimal, but with the occasional flier over a succession of for example, three test groups. A low recoiling rifle will quite often shoot to a similar level of accuracy regardless of differences in technique.

A high recoiling rifle does not necessarily have to mean magnum power. A light weight 7mm-08 or .308 Winchester sporting rifle generates significant recoil inertia, as does a medium to heavy weight magnum chambering. Muzzle brakes or suppressors do help minimize recoil and therefore may have a positive effect on recoil related accuracy. Nevertheless, good habits should always come first.

High energy cartridges like the .300 Winchester Magnum, .300 Norma, .300 PRC, .338 Lapua and the .50BMG can each produce significant recoil. Some recoil may be mitigated via recoil taming devices, but these should never be used as a substitute for good shooting technique. The crossed arm hand hold, regardless of military acceptance, can be counterproductive to magnum rifle shooting, especially away from the rifle range and out in the field.

Personally, I find the crossed arm versus magnum recoil issue to be very frustrating. In many instances I have had greater success teaching new hunters to shoot accurately at long range, than I have had with experienced shooters carrying ingrained shooting techniques.

Some of you will be wondering -"Isn't there a level of repeatability involved when leaving the forend to free recoil?" Yes there is. In the best case scenario it is consistently average performance.

Hold that forend

Many years of experience have taught me that one of the keys to precision shooting is adequate forend control. This is easily demonstrated by shooting a group using the crossed arm hold versus a group shot using the traditional forend hold utilizing a front rest (sand bag or pack). The differences are not subtle, they are obvious.

The crossed arm hand hold was not adopted because it was better; it was adopted because it was easier. Easier doesn't mean better, if anything, it means lazier. Humans are good at avoiding any form of discomfort. The traditional forend hold on the other hand requires effort, a level of discipline and practice. The payoff is the creation of transferable skills that will enable one to shoot all manner of rifles and cartridges comfortably and consistently - including those used by African hunters.

By developing and practicing methods of optimum forend control, the marksman becomes much more attuned to the rifle and able to understand how the rifle is likely to shoot from a variety of positions. Eventually, the shooter can advance to being able to utilize two or three different prone position hand hold techniques with an understanding of potential errors.

As suggested, this article is a primer to inspire readers to purchase my book – The Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting. Yes folks, this is all a big sales pitch. However, I believe that within the course of my life I have given enough to the shooting community for free. Those who wish to support my research (to not do this is known as mooching) will be happy to hear that the book – The Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting can help the reader achieve major accuracy improvements and is by default, a partial antidote to being a pussy in life (not that I am judging if you want to be a pussy - I quite like tabby cats but that's a completely different topic).

The Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting is the distillation of many years personal research into this subject, helping clients to achieve major success in the field.

[Click here to view the Practical Guide To Long Range Shooting.](#)

Mr. Nathan Foster,

My name is ..., and I'm writing from ..., ... in the USA. I recently bought your book on long range shooting, and I'd like to drop you a note and congratulate you on your work. I finished the book quickly and have started it again, this time with a highlighter.

I'd like to offer my bona fides. I'm a retired US Army sniper with combat tours, prior to that I was a sniper on two different police swat teams, and prior to that I was a competitor on the US Marine Corps shooting team. I have completed five sniper schools and have written books on the subject. I will be the first to say that I don't have all the experience, but I do have some.

And... I have struggled for years with some things that you cleared up in less than 500 pages. For years I wondered if what I was being taught was bullshit, or if I should just work harder and concentrate more. The fact is, you can concentrate harder until you actually shit yourself, and some of this stuff will never get any better because its bullshit and we're doing it wrong just and as exactly as you said.

I have grown tired of arguing about wind formulas and other things that I know are wrong. It was SO refreshing to read your work that validated things I learned through discovery, along the way.

Thanks again for your willingness to share your knowledge.

...,
SGM (Retired), USA.

The Long Range Hunting Series

The Practical Guide To
Long Range Shooting

The art of a clean kill



Nathan Foster