

# Patrol Rifle Application and Training for Wildlife Enforcement Officers

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*Abstract:* Wildlife enforcement trainers must be constantly on the lookout for better equipment for enforcement personnel and more effective methods of training individuals in the use of that equipment. For the past 15 years, the Law Enforcement Division of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has issued to its officers the patrol rifle, a piece of equipment which has only recently received serious national consideration as a viable alternative to more traditional weapons in the law enforcement defense arsenal. The relative virtues of the compact semi-automatic rifle versus the handgun and/or the police shotgun are discussed here, along with an innovative method of training field personnel of agencies that have to deal with logistical and budgetary considerations. Training issues and methods are explained, and a video used for this block of instruction is reviewed, followed by a discussion of the pro's and con's of this method of administering firearms instruction.

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Modern-day law enforcement agencies all across the country are taking a second look at the type of shoulder weapons issued to their uniformed officers. Whereas the police shotgun still has its place in an officer's patrol vehicle, there is considerable attention being given to suitability of the rifle as the all-purpose shoulder weapon complement to the officer's duty sidearm. This is especially applicable for wildlife enforcement officers who could at any time be forced to engage targets at ranges or under other conditions not normally encountered by their more urban counterparts.

While the term "rifle" when used in law enforcement circles tends to conjure up images of scope sights and long, heavy barrels of the counter-sniper variety, the patrol rifle is altogether different. The patrol rifle should be short enough to maneuver inside and quickly extract from a patrol vehicle. It should be light enough in weight to facilitate manipulation and firing with one hand or carrying over long distances and over or through obstructions like fences or heavily wooded areas. The most popular of these carbine-style weapons are usually chambered for the 5.56 mm (.223) cartridge, the 7.62 × 39 mm, or the 7.62 × 51 (.308). Carbines firing traditional pistol cartridges can be acceptable alternatives for some applications but are not considered

in this study due to their range limitations relative to rifle rounds (Hall 1997). On the lower end of the power spectrum is the M-1 .30 caliber carbine of World War II vintage, but these should be considered only when loaded with modern softpoint or hollowpoint bullets. While .308 rifles offer superior distance and armor-piercing capabilities, they are usually longer, heavier, and sometimes considered a bit cumbersome for close quarter situations. The "perfect" police rifle should have minimum recoil, moderate penetration with maximum terminal performance, a high-capacity magazine, and should be compact, reliable, semi-automatic, and easy to operate. Many officers are viewing these patrol rifles as a more versatile option than a shotgun, considering the variety of deadly force scenarios facing today's law enforcement officer. However, with the introduction of new weaponry comes the responsibility of sufficient training in type.

While most Texas game wardens traditionally carried in their vehicles and qualified with their own personally-owned shotguns, in 1982 they were issued the Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic caliber .223 rifle. Other than a minimal amount of initial orientation to the new rifle, the extent of training consisted of an annual, marksmanship-oriented, untimed qualification course of fire. The Training Section of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Law Enforcement Division recognized a need for more practical training in the use of this weapon, and in 1996 developed an instructional block to train officers in the use of the semi-automatic rifle as a short- to intermediate-range weapon in lieu of a shotgun. The core training course gave our officers an opportunity to develop the basic skills needed to safely and effectively utilize this weapon to its full potential. This discussion examines the rationale behind the suitability of this type of patrol rifle for law enforcement work and the basic training needed to qualify officers for duty issue.

## Rifle Application

Law enforcement officers have recognized for many years that they can be extremely effective in dealing with a deadly force situation when armed with a shoulder-fired weapon. Shooters know that a person firing under stress is more likely to make good effective hits on the intended target when armed with a long gun, mainly because a shoulder weapon has 4 points of stable contact with the shooter's body. The butt of the weapon against the shoulder, the weapon hand on the pistol grip, the reaction hand supporting the forearm, and the cheek against the stock, all work together to "lock" the weapon into the firing position. It is also widely recognized that a hit from a high powered centerfire rifle round is generally regarded by experts as being much more likely than a handgun round to immediately incapacitate the assailant. As a possible added benefit, the intimidation factor of an officer armed with a long gun could possibly cause a potential assailant to cease his threat and surrender without a shot ever being fired.

Having established that a shoulder weapon has inherent advantages over a handgun, the question arises of which shoulder weapon is best for patrol duty. Traditionally, officers have answered that question by opting for the pump shotgun. In some

situations this would be the appropriate answer, but an increasing number of agencies are now starting to consider the semi-automatic rifle as the more versatile of the 2 types of shoulder weapons. Reasons for these conclusions include the patrol rifle's more manageable recoil and consequent higher propensity for hits, broader effective range and power factor, faster rate of effective fire, and ease of reloading.

Most law enforcement firearms instructors will probably agree that the greatest single factor affecting an officer's ability to accurately and effectively fire his/her duty weapon is recoil. Shooters who are intimidated by the recoil of their weapons commonly have difficulty with effective rapid fire. Simply put, shooters who flinch generally miss their specific target. Experience shows that shooters who are relatively small in stature and/or inept at firing heavily recoiling weapons have some degree of difficulty handling full power 12 gauge shotgun loads, especially for quick follow-up shots. These same shooters have no such problem with centerfire rifles like the .223. Like any other weapon, shotguns must be fired with accuracy, and most officers simply do not practice sufficiently with shotguns to maintain an acceptable level of proficiency. More regular and extensive practice with rifles is understandably more attractive to shooters. Also, most officers firing rifles are more likely to make the extra effort to place each shot where it is supposed to be placed, and they can obviously hit better at extended ranges with a good rifle than with shotgun buckshot or slugs. Though not necessarily intended for extended long range shooting, good quality patrol rifles with iron sights are quite capable of delivering 3 to 5 inch groups on targets up to 100 yards away. If the shooter does his/her part, this equates to hits well within the critical hit zone on a man-sized target. Due to the inherent accuracy advantage and mild recoil, officers will logically place more shots on target with the patrol rifle than with a shotgun loaded with buckshot or shotgun slugs. Undoubtedly, when forced to engage a threat beyond 25 yards away, a nominally trained rifleman will fire fewer shots per hit, and those hits will be more likely to stop the threat than if the officer is limited to the more traditional law enforcement patrol weapons (Black 1997).

Most forensics experts agree that a hit with a rifle bullet traveling at 91,400 cm/s, at practically any distance, will have a greater disabling effect on an assailant than 2 or 3 scattered shotgun pellets hitting the bad guy at 1/3 the speed, unless one of those pellets coincidentally finds a central nervous system target.

In the shotgun's favor, everyone recognizes that a well-placed hit on an assailant with buckshot can be very devastating, but not everyone knows that the range for such a shot is realistically limited to about 16.5 cm or less. Beyond that distance the pattern of a full-powered 00 buckshot load fired from an 46-50 cm cylinder bore barrel tends to quickly spread, with half or more of the pellets striking outside of the critical hit zone on the target (Hall 1997). Since a shotgun's effectiveness is dependent on a hit pattern about the size of a dinner plate, this limits effective range to little more than the distance between the police and suspect vehicles in a high-risk traffic stop. The longer effective range of the rifle makes it possible for an officer to assume a defensive position at a much greater distance from a threat when that officer is armed with a rifle rather than a handgun or shotgun, thus affording an added margin of officer safety (Black 1997).

A valid point of concern for today's law enforcement officers is the possibility that their opponent(s) could be wearing personal body armor. The recent shooting that occurred during the bank holdup in North Hollywood, California, is a prime example of the risks of dealing with body armor-clad assailants with handguns and shotguns. Most soft body armor available today is rated to stop most handgun rounds and conventional buckshot, and there is at least 1 documented case where a shotgun slug failed to penetrate body armor rated for a minimal level of protection (Davis 1992). Very few types of body armor are rated to stop rifle rounds.

An additional consideration for all types of law enforcement officers is bullet penetration through automobile bodies. In April of this year, 2 of our own game wardens experienced first-hand the need for engaging an armed and assaultive suspect inside a vehicle. Though it was never determined which round actually downed the gunman, having the .223 rifle definitely gave our officers the tactical advantage in this shootout.

Secondary in importance to officer safety, but nonetheless worthy of consideration for wildlife enforcement officers, is the issue of the use of the rifle to deal with problem wildlife. One officer in Alaska reported using his patrol rifle to remove at least 30 moose that were creating a public safety hazard, and each was quickly and safely dispatched with a single, well-placed .223 round (Hall 1997). Though head/neck shots at stationary animals at 48 m or less do not necessarily require heavy calibers, the fact that a 570-kg moose can be dropped with 1 shot attests to the potential effectiveness of the "light" rifle. No doubt, a shotgun could have handled the task, but for a concern for overpenetration and/or stray buckshot in a populated area.

Rate of fire and speed of reloading definitely are factors in comparing the relative virtues of the rifle versus the shotgun for patrol duty. Most shotguns used for law enforcement purposes have a 4-shell capacity magazine, or up to 6- or 7-shell capacity with a magazine extension. Add on a sidesaddle or buttstock shell carrier and the weapon can have a maximum of 10 to 15 rounds available, but only if the shooter is thoroughly practiced in reloading procedures. This compares to 40 to 60 rounds in the semi-auto rifle with a couple of magazines and only 1 pause for a reload, and this equates to a considerable increase in firepower for the rifleman. While an accomplished shotgunner can fire quite rapidly, the lighter recoil of the patrol rifle generally gives the average officer a much shorter recovery time for second and subsequent effective shots during rapid fire strings. We have also observed that shooters who are familiar with the increasingly popular semi-automatic duty pistol have a much easier time mastering reloading and immediate action procedures with a magazine-fed semi-auto rifle than with a pump shotgun.

### **Training Issues and Methods**

The training module, entitled Short Range Rifle Training, is comprised of a lesson plan and instructional video and is provided to field supervisors who are trained and certified as firearms instructors for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The first half of the video contains the theories and concepts previously described in

this paper, and instructors are required to show this segment to their students. The second part of the video, containing drills for skills development, can be viewed by the students for techniques demonstration and instruction, or the firearms instructor has the option of using this portion to familiarize himself with the techniques and teach the skills portion himself. Regardless of the method used, the instructor is required to teach the techniques as they appear in the instructional video to assure uniformity of training across the state. It is recommended that instructors review students in proper rifle disassembly and maintenance, then perform a function check and weapon inspection before doing live-fire drills at the firing range.

In keeping with the intended purpose of this weapon, our training course is fired from ranges of 23, 14, and in to about 6 m. While 23 m doesn't seem like a challenging range for a rifle, the course was set up this way because most of our districts around the state must use law enforcement handgun ranges for training and qualification. This distance also helps to instill in officers the idea that their rifles are effective at any range and encourages the speed of deployment that is necessary for defensive combat. All firing sequences in the final evaluation course of fire are timed in an attempt to simulate some of the stress common to deadly force confrontations.

The training also reviews concepts of firing from the 3 different positions that are commonly used in law enforcement shooting situations . . . prone, kneeling, and standing. Speed is also emphasized while transitioning from one firing position to another.

We also incorporate drills in firing from behind cover, to maintain consistency with other firearms training when responding to deadly threats, where we advocate that any time an officer is faced with a deadly threat he/she should immediately make effective use of cover whenever it is available. Shooters are taught to stand far enough behind cover to allow the muzzle of the rifle to be raised to a firing position while still behind cover, then leaning out to engage the target through their rifle's sights. Using this procedure, as opposed to using cover for support with the muzzle extending beyond the cover, facilitates quickly getting back behind cover after the shot is fired.

During this training, shooters are given instruction in the proper procedure for executing a reload when their weapon is empty. In the interest of safety, reloading procedures, like other aspects of this course, are practiced first with inert ammunition before loading and firing live ammo. We intentionally exclude stoppage removal techniques, since we advocate that an officer with a disabled shoulder weapon should immediately transition to a backup weapon, which in most cases is the sidearm, to keep up his/her defense.

Rapid fire drills are taught for close quarter firing situations, but never to the extent of sacrificing practical accuracy. All shots, including those fired in rapid fire strings, are scored and evaluated. We constantly remind shooters that "you can't miss fast enough to win a gunfight." Our experience shows that shooters will usually develop acceptable speed if rapid fire sequences are fired from a moving, rather than static firing line. However, this drill is used only after establishing that shooters are thoroughly familiar with the concept. When advancing on an adversary is unavoidable,

shooters are trained to move forward with the rifle at their shoulder in a low ready position, then stop their advance to set and fire. In the drills training this technique, shooters advance and fire only as commanded by the range officer, then repeat the procedure until all rifle ammo has been expended. This movement of the firing line requires scanning right and left while advancing to stay in line with other shooters and reinforces the concept of remaining aware of surroundings and other possible threats.

The last technique drill is dedicated to teaching shooters to make a quick, safe, and effective transition from an empty or disabled shoulder weapon to their sidearms so they can terminate the threat with the sidearm when necessary. In this drill, shooters are required to maintain control of their shoulder weapon, whether or not it is equipped with a sling. We emphasize that shooters must take all precautions to keep their weapons out of the hands of unauthorized persons and to be prepared to clear stoppages and/or reload magazines when the opportunity presents itself, such as after withdrawing to their vehicle and/or adequate cover.

One of the misconceptions of the patrol rifle that trainers must overcome with their officer-students is the idea that all rifles are made for long range, precision shooting and that the rifles must be equipped with scoped sights. From the initial issuance, some of our officers who were accustomed to minute-of-angle accuracy from their scoped hunting rifles were somewhat disappointed in their Mini-14 rifles, complaining that they were not accurate. However, a short semi-automatic .223 of this type is designed for reliability and rapid fire capability at intermediate and short range, as opposed to a counter-sniper, heavy-barreled, scoped rifle intended for extended range, surgical shooting. This training encourages officers to view the patrol rifle as a primary defensive tool when escalation to deadly force is anticipated, to be backed up by the officer's sidearm.

As with all core firearms training, shooters must exhibit an acceptable level of competency to get credit for their training. Firearms instructors are given the option of measuring student performance by requiring a minimum score of 90% on the evaluation course of fire or by checking shooters' ability to perform the various skills taught in the course. A checklist for skills is provided in the training package for this purpose.

## **Results**

One of the fringe benefits of training of this type is evaluation and upgrading of rifles and related equipment. As a result of this program, most officers were issued slings for their rifles and identified and were able to identify and replace unserviceable magazines. Most after-market magazines, originally bought for higher capacity or lower cost, were replaced with those produced by the rifles' manufacturer. Probably for the first time since these rifles were issued, officers began to realize the need for proper maintenance and lubrication in rifles that could be required to be used for sustained rapid fire. Finally, the need for ready accessibility of extra rifle magazines for reloading has prompted some districts to provide spare magazine pouches for their officers' rifles.

The use of multi-media as a method of training was motivated primarily by economic considerations. As a result of distributing the instructional video and lesson plan to firearms instructors throughout the state, the agency avoided the cost of bringing personnel to the training academy; a trip of up to 965 km, one way, for some of our officers. The structured training module assured uniform training administered state-wide in a relatively short period of time. This type of training provides a see-hear-do system for maximum motor skill retention. The students watch the techniques demonstrated on the video, hear explanations of correct and incorrect procedure, then perform the drills in the various firing sequences. The course of fire at the completion of the course gives the instructor and students a mechanism for evaluating the skill level attained by individual shooters and identifies those in need of additional training.

Ultimately, the purpose of any firearms training for law enforcement officers is to enhance skills in the use of their duty weapons. Officers trained using this module were observed to develop more familiarity and better techniques with their patrol rifles, a clearer understanding of the application of the rifle for patrol use, and a greater confidence in their own abilities to use this weapon as an effective law enforcement tool.

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