

A Hindsight on Guns

Persistence led to the ownership of my first gun. I was fourteen. The weapon was a .22 Coey single shot, and it was Christmas. Either my parents couldn't think of anything else, or they simply caved in to shut me up.

My father never owned a gun, though he was certainly trained to use one. He spent more than five years in the British army in WWII, which is possibly why he never acquired a gun of his own. Following a half decade of soldiering, he probably figured he'd had enough.

My father never fired a weapon at the enemy. A staff sergeant in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, it wasn't a major part of his job description. He was never shot at either, not on a personal basis, only in a general way when he took part in the Sicily and Italy landings. His closest call was in Italy: a bomb. He heard it coming and ducked under a railway car. It landed not ten steps away, and failed to explode. He claimed that after that, he stopped worrying about getting killed.

I was trained to fire a "gun" by the Canadian Armed Forces (Reserve), only they didn't call it a gun. It was a rifle, and if a soldier ever forgot that, he found himself doing fifty pushups while chanting a rather naughty ditty explaining the difference.

We were taught to use a range of guns (pun intended), from nine millimeter pistols, to fifty caliber machine guns. Our transport company never deployed in battle. The closest I came to being shot was self inflicted. On my own time I fired at a tin can with my .303 Lee Enfield. The bullet ricocheted off a steel dozer blade hidden in the shrubbery behind. It clipped my left

ear lobe, leaving a red welt. I never gave it a second thought. At twenty years old you don't dwell on what could have happened.

The above summary is given to establish a fair knowledge of "guns". I own four, which have not been used for decades. They sit in a locked, concealed, steel cabinet: a shotgun and three rifles (a twelve gauge pump, the Cooney .22, a .303 Lee Enfield, and a 30.30 Remington). They are unloaded and oiled. I will probably never shoot them again, yet I am loath to part with a single one. I'll mention why later.

My intent in this essay is to use a personal perspective to comment on firearm violence, a problem which seems to have grown over the last half century, particularly in the US. I figured the best way to form a comparison is to describe the wonderful way of life experienced back when I extorted that .22 Cooney from my parents, then compare it to the dreadful conditions that exist today. In other words, what was it like in Mayberry before the onslaught of "America's gun culture"? Like most people discussing this topic, I *may* be slightly biased.

As I began, however, I realized that everyone, including myself, has read or written their personal opinions and past experiences, so it seemed pointless to start from scratch. Besides, a few months back I wrote an article titled *Pride and Pretext*, a nonfiction short story submitted to CBC broadcasting. The first few pages, surprising enough, do precisely the same thing, so I used them instead:

Excerpt from Pride and Pretext, a short story, but true...

There is a certain pride in a man that from time to time requires a wee boost. This is particularly true when he is failing in his endeavor of choice, the more so if it's not from the lack of trying. Take hunting for example, an acquired skill, despite some who claim killing wild

animals is programmed into a man's DNA. Hunting was how our male ancestors fed their families, clothed their children, and won the admiration of their women folk. In the olden days, and it's a true fact, hunting prowess was the key factor in attracting the most desirable women in the tribe.

Today, alas, far different standards abound than in the time of caves and bearskins. Spears are gone and arrows have become elitist, both replaced by rifles (aka guns). These rifles come in all shapes and sizes: multi-calibers; prices from cheap to obscene; and firing mechanisms ranging from flintlock to fully automatic. And hunting in Canada? Courses are required; competence tests are mandatory; firearms acquisition certificates a must; photo IDs a necessity (2 kinds); and of course, 'administrative' fees at every step. Ah, today's young! They will never know what their grandparents meant when bragging how free life was at their age!

For example...in 1959 I was sixteen years old. A three year immigrant, I wanted to go big game hunting. I needed three items: rifle, ammunition, and big game tag. Oh yes, I also needed to borrow the family car (teen insurance \$25 extra). And so...

...it was down to the Army & Navy Store on Whyte Avenue by bus (family car unavailable). Once inside it was straight to the rifle rack: three dozen Lee Enfield .303 rifles out in the open, their long wooden grips modified for hunting. The price: \$14.88, a figure I will remember post dementia.

I had been told by a World War II veteran how to check the weapon, using two easy tests:

- open the bolt and peer down the muzzle to ensure the barrel is straight;*
- once satisfied, take a .303 cartridge and try poking the bullet down the muzzle.*

Should it fit, the rifling is worn out. Discard the rifle. Should the cartridge

require a hammer to ram said bullet down the muzzle (not recommended), then purchase the rifle.

So there I was, sixteen years old, hefting rifles to one eye in the Army & Navy, looking for the straightest barrel; then, taking a cartridge from a box of .303 rounds (1917 vintage), trying to jam the bullet into the muzzle.

Nobody in the store found that odd. In fact, one of the clerks glanced over, saw I was managing, and went back to doing what he was doing. I paid \$2 extra for a box of cartridges (no tax then), said no, I couldn't afford a hunting tag, hopped on a bus and took my Lee Enfield home. Nobody on the bus seemed bothered either. You see, crime rates were low in those days, and if anyone got shot it was invariably by accident, not design. Everybody understood that a high powered rifle had but one purpose: shooting big game.

Alas, my Lee Enfield shot nothing larger than rabbits and partridge; a shameful admission that now leads me to unburden a conscience shredded by a single, ignoble action as a deer hunter.

Grade ten brought with it a friend called Ken, who also purchased this \$14.88 symbol of manhood. Our first hunting expedition was basic: drive East from Edmonton; find a large expanse of bush; tromp all day searching for deer; shoot a couple of rabbits, or a partridge or two; retain the deer tag until Christmas; hang the tag on the Xmas tree. This latter gesture became an annual ritual lasting four years. Kind of silvery and forming a loop, the tags actually looked good on the tree.

This fable of failure went on to describe how we kept upping the hunting ante every year, shooting nothing but a few scrawny partridge, and the breeze. Finally, following yet another

barren hunt, we took our borrowed horse trailer to the Calgary stock yards and purchased a six hundred pound heifer (twenty cents per). We slaughtered the poor creature in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and successfully passed her off as a female elk (heifers, like elk-esses, lack antlers). Ignoble is as ignoble does. That was the last time I went hunting. Moral: quit while you're ahead.

One earlier anecdote before moving on, a small occurrence that truly nails down those "good old days". Like me, Ken had previously pestered his parents for a Cooney. We frequently hunted rabbits in a sizeable stretch of forest east of town. To get there, we walked a mile to the outskirts and thumbed a ride: two fifteen year olds, shouldering knapsacks and rifles. We were never short of transport. Often as not it was a housewife with a couple of kids. Imagine that today. Within minutes there'd be two police cars, if not an entire SWAT team.

That was Canada sixty years ago. It was a good life; a life as free as we'll ever see (an opinion doubtless exclusive to my age group). I would guess conditions back then were little different in the USA. So what has happened since?

The media reports gun violence as out of control, and growing worse every day. It certainly feels that way. However, when a person writes a nonfiction essay, he can't just say that. Statistics are necessary. And since the US media claims to have greater gun problems than Canada, then the US seemed the best place to focus. Consider it just one more field of endeavor in which Americans are a world leader. A modicum of delay is required for research though, so time out.....

Er, something's really, really wrong here.

The logical place to start is with statistics on how many people are killed by guns every year. There are tons of folk, yes, but surprise: not at all of the order expected! (And yea, I did break here to research statistics.)

Take 1968 to 2015 (the earliest data readily found on the net). US deaths from guns totaled 1,547,020. The site: *Snope.com*. This total was divided into three periods: 1968-1991: 764,124; 1992-1998: 249,017; and 1999-2015: 533,879. The average number of deaths per year, respectively, was: 31,839; 35,573; and 31,405. And the surprise?

The numbers didn't go up at all! In fact, over the last fifteen years they'd fallen to what they were thirty to fifty years ago. Who'd a thunk? Then it struck me: *the population of the US has been soaring*. That means the gun death rate, *per capita*, must have actually dropped, perhaps significantly. If so, how much?

Well, we have the average death numbers per year, so the average population is needed. The central year in each time span should provide a fairly close figure. According to *multpl.com*, that was: 1980: 227.22 million; 1995: 266.28; and 2007: 301.23. When each year's population is divided by the average gun deaths, the deaths per 100,000 people show a dramatic decline: 14.0; 13.4; and 10.4 respectively (2015 was actually 10.2),

Wow! The death rate by guns went down 35%! And yikes, the *most numerous* time span included some of *my* good old days!

I kept digging, but the trouble is other stuff pops up—in this case road deaths. It's amazing how vehicle deaths follow gun deaths. In 1960 and 2015 respectively, vehicle deaths were 36,399 and 35,485—just about the same as guns! A callous reader might observe that in the USA a person is as like to die from being shot, as in a car crash!

Hmmm... I digress... The real question: are that many people really gun-murdered each year?

You see, when the media reports gun death totals it's often assumed they're people who are purposely, or even accidentally killed. I'd certainly thought so. But right after that vehicle death distraction, I found a chart in *2010 CBS News stats* that included figures for suicide. That 10.2 per 100,000 deaths in 2015 included suicides! 6.4 per 100,000, in fact. I didn't know that. Nearly twice as many Americans shoot themselves instead of other people! That isn't good, of course; in fact, it's shocking, but...

...when suicide statistics are factored in, they shed a different light on the numbers; one that severely disrupted my preconceived conceptions. I hate it when facts do that!

Continuing with the "per 100,000" measure, when *non-firearm* murders/suicides are added to gun deaths, and the total compared with 21 other high income western nations, the US figure of 10.2 gun deaths rises to 18 for *all violent deaths* per 100,000. The USA is no longer leading! This violent death number is exceeded by three countries: Hungary, Finland, and Belgium, at 26.4, 19.7 and 19.5 per 100,000 respectively. Canada jumps to 13.2. Only four countries number less than 9; and most others are 13-16 per 100,000.

The reason(s) seem obvious: the huge difference comparing international suicide stats is that Americans prefer to kill themselves with guns vs. other means: 6.4 out of a 12.4 total suicides per 100,000. No other nation does this, not even next door's armed neighbor Canada, with a ratio of 1.7/11.6. This doesn't excuse the US from having the highest *murder* rate in the West; it's just not as far ahead of the pack as I thought (5.3 per 100,000, compared to about 1.0 elsewhere). As to where the USA stands in *total* suicides, that 12.4 per 100,000 is in the middle

of the 22 countries listed: 4 are significantly higher, 4 significantly lower, and 8 of the other 14 are clustered in the middle.

This seems to indicate that when violent death is by suicide, the US total is around average, with an unmatched preference for guns. As for murder, that 5.3 figure per 100,000 comparison with others countries of 1.0 (see previous paragraph) could also be expressed this way: compared to other countries, US murder by guns is 10 to 1, while murder by other means is (only?) 2 to 1. Or one more way: the USA murders 430% *more* people than other high income western countries, with an unmatched preference for guns.

All of which means these statistics have modified my beliefs that the US has a problem with guns, but only to the extent that it's not *quite* as drastic as I thought. Why is this? Media figures often do not separate suicides, an area where the US actually ranks as average.

As to those mass shootings getting so much coverage, the highest year of mass shooting deaths was 2017, at 112. That was .3 of one percent of total gun deaths. That leaves 99.7% for all others. It's odd how the public's attention focuses on dramatic events. It's also odd how the public has become almost inured to a 6,000 monthly death toll from guns and vehicle accidents.

This is, however, an essay where personal insight is sought. I'll close with a couple of incidents that may give pause: one from family, another as a Canadian citizen.

My oldest son was an EMT, and also a sergeant in the Loyal Edmonton Regiment's airborne company. In later life he worked in Iraq (twelve years) for several British security

companies. I once asked him what he considered to be his greatest threat in Iraq. Without hesitation, he said, "The Americans."

I was quite shocked. He explained. "With the Iraqis, you know where you stand. You can't trust them, and act accordingly. The Americans don't trust anyone, and are jittery about it, too. It's a training/discipline thing. I've stared down the barrels of far more American M16s, than I have Arab AK47s."

This conversation came about the time an Italian agent rescued a female reporter from captivity, and was returning her to Basra. An American unit opened fire on their vehicle, killing the Italian and wounding the reporter. My son's comment was pragmatic. "Probably driving too fast; should have known better. Nobody does that. That road is controlled by the Americans. They'll just open fire."

The Canada story? Canada deployed troops to Afghanistan. Our first dozen casualties were from American fire. It was night. Two F16s were returning to base and spotted flashes of ground fire. The pilots sought permission to investigate, but were ordered to hold off while control determined the situation. One of the airmen was newly arrived and itchy for action. He ignored the senior pilot's instruction to wait, and attacked ten seconds before his controller informed him the gunfire flashes were a Canadian field exercise. Four infantrymen were killed, and eight wounded.

The board of inquiry reprimanded the pilot in a letter that included the words: "You used (*sic* claimed) the inherent right of self-defense to wage your own war." End of story. No accountability. The pilot, from a home guard unit, was allowed to retire from the USAF. He

later sued the USAF for releasing his name, thus ruining his reputation. The suit was unsuccessful.

I sense that these two instances are a major part of the problem: simply extrapolate them. They reveal one element of truth in the adage: it's not the guns, it's the people behind them. (*And yet, private ownership of automatic weapons that are mini-machine guns? 30 round magazines? Really! That's a long way from the right to keep a muzzle loading musket!*)

Life works best when there is a reasonable balance. For me, that includes a rifle requiring a separate action to slip each cartridge into the breach. It makes you stop and think. Which in turn raises a final matter: how many US police, and only *US* police, simply pull their hand guns and shoot, rather than truly assess the situation...*and they seem to shoot with little repercussion, and even less compunction!*

That last sentence may hit a nail on the head. I mean, how can cops do that? I've seen them on TV news firing at human beings who were not armed! In turn, the "felon" is likely resisting and fighting, often taunting a cop who is pointing a *loaded gun!* The problems are on both sides: quick tempers, poor training, poor (job) education, little or no appreciation of human life, and a desensitized attitude toward someone who is, after all, a fellow American.

As to my own "guns", I'll keep them. I've read (and written), a lot of history. I never want to be left helpless, even at 75...