

Military Skills

The ABCs of marksmanship

By J. Scott Olmsted, Editor in Chief

I missed the first big-game animal I ever shot at: for the record, let me say I was exactly 15 years old and I aimed at a huge black bear. The situation bore no resemblance to what I imagined when we trudged up the mountain. There were dogs barking, men yelling. The bear wasn't sticking around. I fired and pulled up before the slug left the barrel. We chased that animal across the better part of Maine the rest of the day, and my second chance was the last I needed.

I heard about that miss all day, heard how we could have had it easy if only I'd shot straight. To be fair, I'm sure the barrel, and thus the shot, was straight. My thinking was not. I should have followed through, should have kept my head down and seen the slug hit the bear through the scope. Today, 25 years later, I can attribute most of my misses in the field to the same problem.

Of all the things I learned in the Marine Corps, one of the most important was a simple, six-letter acronym: BRASSF. Each letter stands for the last six actions I take before I shoot. I learned about them on the rifle range in boot camp. Here's what they mean:

BREATHE—When you shoulder the gun take a deep breath (competition shooters will take two or three, but sometimes hunters don't have that kind of time), then let out half of it and hold.

RELAX—You won't accomplish anything when you're tense. Keep a firm hold on your rifle, but don't clench it in a death grip. You just took a deep breath, so loosen up and think about the next step.

AIM—Check your point of aim and sight alignment. If you're using open sights, line up the front and rear sights, then

focus on the front sight post. If you're using a scope, it's easy. Be sure the crosshairs are on the precise area of the target you wish to shoot. Is the target uphill or downhill? You might need to adjust your point of aim.

STOP—Quickly re-check everything in your mind. Also check what's beyond your target. Hold steady.

SQUEEZE—You're not slapping the trigger like on a scattergun. Squeeze it. Your shot should come as a surprise.

FOLLOW THROUGH—You should see the animal's reaction to the shot in your sights, not above your rifle's barrel. If you follow through you'll know whether your shot placement was as intended.

Today, I whisper each of these steps to myself during a hunt. It keeps me focused when I'm sweating up hills and seeing nothing. I've even been known to tell guides to remind me of the last two steps when I bear down on an animal. The point is a quick, humane, one-shot kill, not ill-gotten glory at the bottom of a magazine. To that end I ask for coaching. When the moment of truth comes I don't need my guide urging, "Quick, he's moving ... he's not gonna stand around much longer ... he's getting away." I know all that. What I need is a gentle reminder: "Squeeze and follow through."

To get to this stage, "snap in" (get into field shooting positions) everytime you go to the range, because those muscles need reminders. Dry-fire until every single break of the trigger is, literally, a surprise (it won't harm your rifle, but failing to do so will harm your marksmanship). Shoot a lot. As you do so, repeat to yourself, "Breathe. Relax. Aim. Stop. Squeeze. Follow Through." Then chant it the next time Big Boy walks into your life.

for Hunters

Focus on the less-than-obvious

By Michael D. Faw

One of the most important hunting skills is the ability to spot game. If you can't see it, you won't shoot it and tag it. Just as you can improve your marksmanship, you also can improve your ability to spot game. The U.S. Army has provided vision-enhancement and target-recognition training courses to soldiers for years. Hunters everywhere can benefit from a quick course in this arena.

Recognize Shapes—You can become above-average at quickly spotting wild animals by glancing for shapes. During vision-enhancement training, the blurry images and outlines of enemy men and machines are flashed on a large screen and slowly brought into focus while U.S. soldiers observe. The military teaches soldiers to look at the basic outlines of helicopters, tanks and other vehicles. When soldiers or groups of people are spotted, U.S. troops are taught to quickly look at hats, patches and firearms to make a snap judgment. My training at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., also taught me to look for egg-shaped objects near ground level—what could be the face of an enemy soldier lying in wait. This exercise in shape recognition also works in the fields and forests for hunters. Alert hunters should look for ovals or egg shapes that reveal a deer's face or head when it looks directly at them. Additionally, the oblong ears of deer and elk look much like Christmas ornaments from a distance. Next, short, vertical lines near the ground could be a bedded deer's back. Remember that trees and vegetation grow vertically and are generally spaced far apart. Any multiple, short vertical lines spotted in the brush could transform into the legs of a standing big game animal that's concealed.

Key on Movement and Color—Another key military vision-enhancement technique focuses on movement. Soldiers are taught to spot the movement of arms and legs; sudden movement often can be spotted at long distances even when

the subject is wearing camouflaged clothing. A leaping deer is easy for most hunters to spot, but they fail to see a deer moving its head because they do not focus on details. Movement is also much easier to notice when you stand motionless. And while the hair on most wild animals blends well into their surroundings, it is not always a perfect color match. You must learn to look into the maze of leaves and limbs and see odd colors.

It's All in the Details—Most soldiers—and hunters—fail to closely focus on a point; they waste precious time scanning too large an area. Learn to seek details. Here's a great way to become more focused on a smaller area: After scanning a scene from left to right, as if reading a book, train yourself to focus on a specific spot that caught your eye. For added practice, walk to that spot and see if it is as you imagined. For example, look at a tree, then focus your attention where a limb attaches or a knot protrudes. This trains you to intently look for details and odd shapes, and before long you can spot an elk's eye or antler tip. Using binoculars also will help you narrow your field of view and focus more closely on an area. Along with all this, spend more time outdoors in natural daylight observing wildlife. Humans who work under fluorescent office light often have trouble determining natural colors outdoors.

We must also learn to forgo seeing animals broadside and in the open like we see on the pages of hunting magazines. Wily game animals rarely stand around in the open, especially if they spot you first.

