

Carbine vs. Shotgun vs. Pistol for home defense

by Larry Correia

Posted on September 20, 2007 by correia45

This post is in response to a request from pax of www.corneredcat.com. She is an excellent firearms instructor out of Washington state. She knew that I was a big proponent of shoulder fired long guns, either carbines or shotguns for home defense, whereas she primarily favors the pistol. She asked me to write up a little bit about my opinions for her. So here goes.

All three types of weapon have their pros and cons.

Now when I teach CCW (actually it is a CFP, Concealed Firearms Permit, in Utah) when I get to the portion of the class about wound ballistics I always tell the class that I'm about to tell them a profound truth, and the sooner they realize it, the better off they're going to be. Then I write the following:

ALL HANDGUNS SUCK!

General nervous laughter from the class...

Now let me explain. I love handguns. I teach people to shoot handguns. I carry a handgun on my person constantly. I just spent a fat chunk of money on a fancy new STI 9mm so I could have a better hoser gun for 3gun. Even with that information, every time I say handguns suck, it manages to offend the heck out of somebody on the internet, because the internet exists primarily to let random strangers get offended. So let me rephrase, handguns suck *relative* to long guns.

Let me break it down for you. There is only one reason we use handguns, and that is because they are convenient. They're small, light, and you can conceal them on a person. I would look a little goofy with an AK47 under my shirt.

But in comparison to a long gun, they lack power, and they are much more difficult to learn to shoot well. Anything you can mount on your shoulder is going to be a far easier platform to get fast, accurate hits with.

To put this in perspective, when you shoot somebody in self defense, the goal isn't necessarily to kill them, it is to stop them. You want the bad guy to stop doing whatever it is they are doing that caused you to pull a gun in the first place. Live or die is really irrelevant. You want them to leave you alone. Sadly, the best way to make somebody leave you alone is to shoot them in their vital organs, and that often results in the bad guy's death. But that's his problem, not yours.

So to stop somebody, there are two main ways to do it, psychologically or physiologically. Now when I say psychologically, that means the bad guy quits because he decides to, as in "OH CRAP! He's got a gun! Run!" Or if you shoot them with a non-fatal wound, and they say "Damn, that hurt. I'm done."

But you don't control the brain waves of the critter attacking you. You might get lucky and get a bad guy that will just quit, the kind of guy that if he wanted to work hard for a living, would get a job. Victim with gun = work. On the other hand, you might get some really crazy, evil, whackadoo, who ain't gonna stop, no matter what. And that guy, you're going to have to shoot. A lot.

So that brings us to the physical stoppage of another person. Now when you are legally justified in shooting somebody, it is normally in a situation where you want them to stop RIGHT NOW. So you want to hit them with something that will do as much damage to them as possible. If the guy bleeds to death in 30 minutes, that doesn't do you much good, because in

that time he killed you and raped your family to death. You want to inflict enough trauma on their body that they have no choice but to quit immediately.

The problem with this is that most of America's knowledge about guns comes from watching movies. Where if I shoot somebody with a .45, they fly backwards out the window, do a flip, roll fifty feet, and burst into flames. Now as much as I like Bruce Willis in *Last Man Standing*, that doesn't actually happen in real life.

So what do bullets do to you? Now Internet Wound Ballisticians, whether you're a morgue monster or a jello junkie, don't jump my case. I'm no scientist. I'm a guy that has to take a very complex topic and break it down into a manner that a person whose entire firearms experience is based on shooting a .22 at scout camp once, can understand in about a 15 minute block of instruction in a 5 hour CFP class.

Handguns poke a hole in you. That is basically what they do. If you're using good hollow point ammo, the bullet may expand, and you will make a bigger hole. That hole is going to go through stuff that pumps blood. The bigger and deeper hole you make, through the more important stuff, the more blood is going to go outside, and not to its destination, which tends to be very bad for the guy getting shot.

The body is an amazing creation. Your body will automatically adjust for trauma as much as possible. The more holes you put, the more trauma you inflict, the more the body has to adjust for, the greater the chance that the body is going to say "Screw this. I'm done." And shut down. Now you can shoot somebody once with a feeble handgun round, and instantly incapacitate them. Great. You won. But on the same token, we've got people that have been shot a dozen times with duty ammo who walk under their own power into the ambulance. Humans are amazing.

So if people can be so amazing, and I want to stop them right now, then I want to maximize the amount of trauma I inflict on them. This is where rifle caliber carbines and shotguns rule. Not only can I hit the guy more accurately and faster, I can do a lot more trauma. Plus we're talking about home defense in this post, not carrying in public, so I'm not worried about concealment.

On shotguns, if poking one hole is good, poking a dozen at one time, is a whole lot better. And at the range that shotguns are used defensively, there really isn't that much spread. At across room distance, your pattern is usually about the size of a soft ball, and if you've got a big house, a basketball. So you still have to aim. (Man, I hate that myth that shotguns throw this boulder of death that can't miss, usually perpetuated by some dude on the internet that doesn't ever actually shoot anything). You can still miss, but man when you hit, it does make a mess on the carpet.

Rifle bullets are going a whole lot faster and do a lot more damage than a pistol, (and keep in mind I'm keeping this simple, and not going into ten pages of argument about AP and SS109 and other esoteric information that will make a newbie's head explode). When you shoot something with most rifles, you aren't just poking a hole, but you are actually causing trauma in the tissue surrounding the hole, and most defensive bullets are designed to fragment or tumble and make even bigger, nastier holes in people.

Here in Utah, where a very large portion of our population has been deer hunting, everybody is at least familiar with the following kind of story. Most of my students have either shot a deer, or know somebody who has shot a deer.

So you shoot a deer with a 30-06 (or some other decently powerful rifle bullet). The wound is fatal, damaging the heart or lungs, and the 150-200 pound deer still manages to take off in a full sprint for 100 meters before it falls over dead. Pretty common right? Sometimes the shot isn't as perfect, and the deer will make it even further.

So why then do I expect to take a human that is bigger than that deer, and possibly high on goofballs and horse tranquilizer, and shoot them with a handgun that has a fraction of the power of that deer rifle, and expect them to stop immediately?

Ahh... The light bulb clicks on.

So if you're going to get into a gunfight, bring a rifle. Heck, bring friends with rifles.

Now another concern that always pops up is over penetration. People are worried that the more powerful guns are going to poke through more walls of their house, and potentially endanger their neighborhoods.

Here's the thing. Remember good old Safety Rule #4. Be aware of your target and its environment? It still applies. You are responsible for where your bullets go, even in a gunfight. And since you're trying to stop somebody, any round powerful enough to poke a deep enough hole to reliably damage a person, is powerful enough to penetrate a bunch of building materials. TANSTAAFL. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.

But this is one benefit of using a rifle for home defense. Loaded with PROPER ammunition, the more powerful rifle bullet will often penetrate less than a pistol bullet. A proper defensive rifle bullet is going really fast, and is designed to fragment, which causes more damage to people, but also tends to cause the bullet to break in drywall and 2x4s faster than a slow moving, solidly-constructed pistol bullet. Either one will still penetrate, but with the correct ammo, the rifle bullet can give you the best of both worlds.

The other concern about long guns usually some how deals with maneuverability, and how if they have to clear their house, the long gun will be awkward.

First off, clearing your house by yourself is usually a bad idea. Don't do it unless you have to. To illustrate, play this game with your kids or your spouse. Have them be the bad guy somewhere in your house. Now, you go find them. Who sees who first? Right, usually they see you coming.

So if possible, take up a defensive position that covers the entrance to your room and your kid's rooms and call 911. In this scenario long gun totally wins.

But if you have to move through your house (kids on a different floor, something of that nature) you can still move with the more effective weapon, it just takes practice and training. And if you don't have the patience to get effective moving with a long gun, I doubt you've got the patience to become an effective pistol shot under stress.

As for maneuverability, look at somebody pointing a carbine or an 18" barreled home defense shotgun, side by side with somebody pointing a pistol in a Weaver or Isosceles shooting stance. Interestingly enough, the long guns don't poke out that much further in real life.

So my personal opinion? Rule number one of a gunfight is to have a gun. A .25 Lorcin beats a pointy stick. If your personal situation only allows you to have a handgun at home, great. Learn to use it. Learn its limitations (in the case of the Lorcin, that is when it inevitably breaks into three pieces when you look at it funny), and go practice under stress.

If possible, get yourself a long gun.

Now on shotgun vs. carbine, that is all personal preference. Which one do you shoot better?

If you've got a billion rounds through a 30" 870 Wingmaster dusting clays and are a veritable pheasant holocaust, then if you want to keep an 18" barreled shotgun stoked with buckshot next to the bed, I'm not going to fault you one bit, and I'm not going to try to invade your home at 3:00 in the morning either.

If you shoot your AK or AR better, do a little reading about what ammo is available, pick a good load, and you're good to go.

If you are new to both types, the carbine is a little bit easier to learn to shoot and has less recoil. Plus when the zombies come, (oh mark my words, it is just a matter of time) it does have more ammunition capacity, and far greater effective range.

Really, they've all got their pros and cons. I don't care what you learn to use, just learn to use something, and then go practice. A lot.