

# Blunders I'd As Soon Forget

WAYNE C.  
VAN ZWOLL

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER  
Photos Courtesy of Author

*For all its perils, confession  
cleanses the soul. If only  
it could erase memory!*



Wait. Wait. Then  
wait some more.  
Meantime, think  
about why you  
decided to wait  
here, now.

In an era of slams and super slams, of deer antlers bigger than the elk bone on my shed, I've come to accept my lot as reporter. Lest you think this a maudlin preamble to a list of excuses, I'll hasten to say that verily, work in the shadows has become comfortable. It absolves me of any responsibility to excel.

Not that such burden ever weighed heavily on me. When I lost my shoe in a pond on a third-grade field trip and had to hitch a ride with the teacher while the other pupils hiked the rail line back to school, I had to re-think my aspirations. Trailing man-eating tigers behind Jim Corbett in India and dropping pairs of truculent elephants with a quick right-and-left beside John Hunter in Kenya, I'd earned my pith helmet as a reader. The shoe incident called my field acumen into question.

A fiberglass bow that drew 18 pounds came my way via several books of green stamps. Arrows cost 25 cents—at least those bristling from the bargain box at the local hardware. Saturday mornings I'd paw through the lot to pick the straightest shaft. It would last a couple of days before shattering on rocks behind a target chipmunk, or submerging forever in cottontail cover.

My parents thought firearms had as much place in the home as Soviet missiles in Cuba. They held out courageously before pestered to distraction, they loaned me \$5.95 for a lever-action Daisy. It smelled deliciously of gun oil, hurled BBs in mortar-steep arcs, and staggered sparrows. It seldom brought them to earth, however, and I regret shooting so many.

A neighbor whose stylish Irish Setter I'd ruined beyond redemption with treks into suburban lots after rabbits

took pity one day and ushered me onto the school softball diamond. He set a soup can on the pitcher's mound and handed me a Model 12 Winchester. "You might as well fire a real gun," he said. The 12 bore hit me hard. The can flew violently into right field—I was hooked.

Ogling surplus infantry arms cataloged by Montgomery Ward, I despaired in junior high of ever owning a rifle. Even the .22 Winchester single-shot hanging under the dusty moose head at the hardware store cost \$16. A 1903 Springfield, mail-ordered, was twice that.

For cleaning his chicken house and picking rocks in southern Michigan dirt, a farmer loaned me a Remington 121 Pump and furnished a box of .22 Shorts to shoot rats. When the thick, hairy crosswire in the 3/4-inch Weaver J4 hopped, a brain-shot rat would leap lifelessly about in the sheep dung, striking the barn boards. Headly stuff.

Harvey also had a long-barreled Krag. One summer evening he set a can in a fallow field and handed me an enormous .30-40 cartridge. The heavy rifle wobbled, though I tried mightily to steady it; then *Pow!* The steel butt-plate hammered my clavicle. The can stood unscathed. I'd not thought it possible that my first shot with a centerfire rifle would miss; the shame lingers still.

Some time later I bought my own war trophy, a Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE). Half of the .303 cases separated on firing—a headspace problem, someone said. Headspace meant nothing to me, but the rifle had set me back \$15. I battled fiercely for a refund and got it. Months later I shelled out \$30 for another SMLE, restocked it, and installed Williams open sights. With it I tumbled my first deer, breaking its neck as it dashed through poplars 90 yards off—a shot that lives vividly in memory as lesser performances fade. There have been many lesser performances.

I once missed a mule deer at 14 feet, my bullet blasting shards of rock into both of us because the muzzle didn't quite clear the ledge. I missed a bull elk with vitals the size of a microwave when

Viewing fine country from ridgetop is a pleasant pastime, but seldom shows you much game.



*Not making the most of my time actually hunting pains me in retrospect. Why didn't I commit a few additional steps, look harder into cover, and wait just a few more minutes on stand?*

my hand slipped against a tree just as the trigger broke. I missed a black bear from prone after a summer of drilling half-inch X-rings in prone matches. Indeed, I've missed more easy shots than will fit in this issue of *Fair Chase*. I deserve absolution for very few of them.

Nor would I get absolution from the law. One November day 50 years ago, as my pal Ron drove us from one woodlot to another, a game warden lit us up from behind. "Just checking," said the uniformed fellow at Ron's window. We showed our deer tags, then got out to pull rifles from the back. As Ron levered six rounds from his Winchester, I could have tripped the catch to dump the box from my SMLE. But it didn't occur to me before the officer cited us both for loaded magazines. Empty chambers earned us no leniency. "If that's the worst they do, I'll live with it," said Ron's father to mine exiting the courthouse. Clearly his sentiment wasn't shared. That \$17.50 fine reminded me for decades to double-check hunting regulations.

Such ineptness has forever kept me from the ranks of criminals who prefer clever company. It has also put me on a cautious path. I've declined shots for want of a confirming look at antler; stopped firing on the closing minute as ducks pitched into the decoys; turned back at invisible property lines instead of killing across them. Once, as dawn's promise brightened Junipers, a huge bull elk eased from shadows in easy range and stopped. Crosswire on rib, I heard my guide whisper: "Close enough." To legal time, he meant. But firing would be cheating. I demurred; the elk left. Hewing to rules, you're penalty-free; and more importantly, memories need no apology in the telling.

Alas, I can't lay all my failures to virtue. Once in steady drizzle, I slumped to rest under a Doug-fir. Freeing a bagel from my pack, I was suddenly aware of a presence. A sweep with my B&L showed only dripping conifers—until I picked up the eye. Not 20 steps away, it glinted from the gloom under an impossibly thick, gnarled antler. I diverted my gaze, lowered the binocular, and eased my .270 to cheek. The forest was empty. I've never seen a heavier deer antler afield.

I failed to see soon enough a tremendous elk that my partner had spotted because he was looking afar and I much closer. It remains the biggest bull ever in my rifle sight. I stared right past an exceptional mule deer when, after a half-day's tracking, it hooked below me in a squall. The buck stood until too late; I caught only the ghost-like image of its great rack.

I've quit hunts too early, once walking 17 miles from a drop camp, convinced no elk were nearby. At trail head, I found the outfitter had stowed my pickup keys. So I hot-wired my '66 International to get home. To his credit, the fellow mailed the keys and offered another hunt. But it wasn't his fault I'd come for an elk, not an elk hunt. Persistence would have served me on another mountain as well, when backpacking in, I found little deer sign. A hunter chatted me up on the trail, said he was staying a week. After the season he mailed me a photo of the 200-point typical mule deer he'd killed after I left.

Not making the most of my time actually hunting pains me in retrospect. Why didn't I commit a few additional steps, look harder into cover, and wait just a few more minutes on stand?

And I'd like to have accepted defeat more gracefully.

Once, a friend and I hunted parallel into a pocket where I expected to see a buck. My pal saw the deer but hesitated, as he felt I should get the shot. From my angle, the buck was darned near invisible, but I followed my amigo's sightline. He fired and missed just as I got on the trigger. The deer moved at the report, just as my bullet left. Two muffed shots! I moped all day. My companion, who owed me nothing, deserved better company.

Hardware too often gets the blame for human shortcomings. After these many decades, I can't recall more than three honest-to-gosh scope failures. I've had a few misfires from faulty ammo and light striker hits. Barrel fouling and heating can

affect accuracy but shouldn't scuttle your hunt, because you'll have a clean or lightly fouled barrel and you won't heat it up firing at game. Faulty bedding, loose guard screws, and other common culprits rarely cause you to miss big game vitals. In one trial I removed the rear guard screw. The next group was a dime-size knot, dead-center.

A gremlin that can ruin your hunt is a loose sight screw. In Namibia hunting eland, I ambushed a bull at dusk. The roll of the earth permitted a prone shot. To my amazement, the eland ran off paunched. At camp next morning I fired to confirm zero. The bullet struck true. Puzzled, I fired again, and that shot landed six inches to three



Very few deer enter the records books. Any mature buck cleanly taken is a memory worth savoring.




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# Blunders I'd As Soon Forget



**TOP TO BOTTOM:** Factory ammunition won't cause you to miss. Misfires have become as rare as streets with hitch-rails. Blame the scope? Not unless it's like this one. Since the 1960s, optics have become very reliable. One of Wayne's early hunts put him on an ice-clogged Arctic Ocean. No blunders permitted here.

o'clock! It prompted me to check what I should have earlier: the single dovetail scope base. A windage screw had come free. Recoil was bouncing the rear of the scope back and forth against the windage screws. Every other shot hit; every other strayed. A tracker and I dogged the wounded eland. I killed it offhand at 80 yards as it lunged from its bed.

Mechanical faults don't become problems until you fail to see and correct them. Flawed judgment is harder to spot in time. And you can't ensure good decisions will beget others. Sometimes, sound judgment denies you a shot. Once, coming off a mountain at dusk, I spied an outstanding buck below. Alas, a farmhouse window glowed beyond, far away but in perfect line. With no way to change the angle, I demurred, and a pal killed that buck the next week—a Boone and Crockett deer.

Another time, in tight cover, I still-hunted to within short steps of a bull before I saw its ear flick. Alerted, the elk was unwilling to move. I could see enough for a brain shot through a web of twigs. Rather than risk a deflection that might cripple the elk, I waited, and he left. So left another tremendous bull I'd stalked with a client in a thicket. At 18 steps, I signaled not to fire until I confirmed the integrity of the antlers. The elk stayed motionless, boughs hiding rear tines. Our scent pool then detonated the stalemate. The parting glimpse of its magnificent, unbroken antlers haunts me still.

Doing the right things will eventually bring you results that you don't like. Then you must ask yourself if the measure of a decision is what comes of it, or what prompted it. I once declined at short-notice a grizzly hunt because I'd promised to teach an archery course at a local school.

The hunt was offered at no charge. Any chance to trigger a shot can vanish instantly, and you'll seldom know the result that would have followed a different decision.

Recently, in a foggy dawn, I spied a fine whitetail buck. After a sneak that yielded a kneeling shot at 90 yards, I aimed and fired. The impact was audible; fog hid the deer. Then I saw it—or one just like it—standing. The rear legs seemed skewed. Within a short sprint of property that I couldn't hunt, this buck was killable. But was it the buck I had shot? The crosswire quivered.

In the Far North, with a pal hunting a grizzly, I watched as he drilled a fine silvertip at 100 yards. The bear roared and spun, biting at the wound. We eased forward but the whirling animal offered him no sure follow-up. Suddenly the bear sprinted for an alder thicket. Though I had no tag, I cheeked my rifle. Badly hurt, this grizzly was still mobile and lethal. A quick finish was also its proper end.

To ensure only clients would kill elk, the outfit for which I worked during the '90s didn't permit guides to carry rifles. It was sound policy. Then a client paunched a six-point bull. Unarmed, I trailed it with the hunter behind. We spied the bedded elk; but to get a shot, we had to crawl. Needing all fours, the man handed me his rifle. Suddenly the bull rose and galloped toward a canyon that would swallow it.

In Africa, belying through thorn toward a Cape buffalo facing our way, I found a shot-alley to its nose. At 28 steps, threading a bullet to the brain became an option. The bull was unlikely to hold, but my guide couldn't see the alley. He pinched my ankle and whispered, "*wait for a shoulder shot.*" Confident of a kill, I

also owed the guide his due.

The first chance I had at a bull elephant came after a short hike, though I've since logged many fruitless miles on elephant tracks. At 30 yards, the .458's big ivory bead hovered just behind the ear as the animal quartered slightly away. The guide shook his head saying, "*Ear-hole to ear-hole. Wait.*" Sure of this shot and fearing our scent pool would soon spook the bull, I steadied the Ruger.

Your behavior can presume shooting as an option when in fact it is not. Once, hunting the hem of a Zimbabwean river, I nearly jumped out of my boots as the breast-high reeds were rent by the rush of a beast that split the water with equal violence. Seconds later a pair of reptilian eyes rose mid-stream. They seemed a foot apart. This introduction to wild Africa made an impression, and so did the hour I lay belly-flat and breathless in tall grass, as a crosswind foiled hostile elephants that were seeking me out.

On a long ago trip to the Arctic, between flights at Churchill, Manitoba's Aerodrome, I found the counter attendant an engaging girl. Where could I see a polar bear? She said, "The dump is some distance off, but walking there is dangerous. Take my car." She tossed me a set of keys and continued, "The Rambler; follow the road." My partner and I set off in the twilight. Shortly we found a polar bear. She was nosing about with a cub, facing away. I got out of the car, keen to photograph the beasts up close. Some yards farther on, the arithmetic struck home. If that bear could run twice as fast as me, I'd already gone too far. I shot a few frames and then heeded my pal's urgings to retreat.

Some decisions seem just fine in retrospect. ■