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PROFESSIONAL MEMBER  
Photos Courtesy of Author

# ACCURATE HUNTER

## OPERATOR ERROR

A nice eight-point came down off the ridge. For long seconds it was too thick to shoot, then he stepped from behind a stout oak and gave me a nice quartering-to presentation, maybe 60 yards.

At the shot he whirled and ran back up the ridge. Through oak cover, I was pretty sure I saw him stop and expected him to fall over. It was very thick, but I thought I saw him walk away. Not good. An hour later we went to look. No down deer, no blood, no trace.

A shot from a solid rest should be the easiest—with fewer excuses. In 2021, for the first time ever, Boddington missed a whitetail from a stand. Somehow, his scope turret had spun nearly a full revolution, off 18 inches at 50 yards. That's not an excuse: He didn't give Mr. Murphy proper respect!

Dialing the range is the most precise method, but also fraught with human error. It's essential to spend lots of range time with your system. Practice dialing down as well as up; a common error is to dial up, not shoot, and then forget to come back to zero.



After searching the ridge, the only choice to conclude was a clean miss. But why and how? I've never been shy writing about misses, but Shakespeare wrote truthfully, "Pride goeth before a fall." Recently, I wrote that I'd never missed a shot from a stand. Until this moment, I hadn't! Close range, steady rest, decent light. What the heck?

With an inexplicable bad shot, the best thing to do is check the rifle as quickly as possible. The problem could be anything. The scope could have a loose mount or ring screws (or action screws). Usually it's nothing; the rifle is still in zero. I find it oddly comforting to know it was my fault. There is nothing and nobody else to blame, just do better next time.

This time, though, I wasn't even on a 12-inch by 12-inch target at 50 yards! The elevation turret had spun nearly a full revolution! It was dark when I got into the stand with no way to see that. Without reading glasses, I wouldn't have seen it anyway. Obviously, I didn't look, did I?

At a writer's seminar in the 1970s, Elmer Keith missed a shot. To the end of his life, Keith swore that Jack

O'Connor had messed with his scope. That didn't happen, nor do I suspect that one of our six hunters in camp messed with mine. Murphy's Law rings true; I can only imagine that the turret was trapped and spun when I pulled the rifle out of a soft case early that morning.

I suppose I could blame the scope. That particular scope doesn't have a zero stop on the elevation turret. That's a feature (or lack thereof) to avoid. I knew it, though, and I should have been extra careful. Sixty yards nears the limit of vision on that stand. Who cares if the scope turret is off a few clicks? I failed to respect Mr. Murphy!

Weird stuff happens. In Zambia this year, my son-in-law Brad had a nearly-new, name-brand scope go completely bonkers. It was zeroed at home and on arrival. Then it went nuts. It's uncommon but can't be ruled out. Mr. Murphy's creativity knows no bounds. Usually, however, we can trace problems straight to operator error.

The most common error is one that unintentionally misdirects the projectile: not steady enough, plain old buck fever, aiming a bit high or a bit too low. Today's



Boddington's best-ever mule deer, taken in Alberta. Nothing difficult about the shot, nothing fancy about the equipment: Kimber .270, Zeiss Conquest scope. When shots go right things seem pretty simple, but Murphy's Law applies and there's plenty to think about.

reliance on equipment is a frequent culprit. With today's great optics, "dialing the range" on the elevation turret is the most precise method for bullet drop compensation but also the most fraught with human error.

There isn't a hunting guide in the world who doesn't have a story about dialing up, not shooting, and then forgetting to dial back down. I have dialed incorrectly because of ranging errors—enough to cause high or low hits—but not yet enough error for disaster. I haven't yet forgotten to go back to zero after not shooting. In part, this is because I rarely shoot at game so far that dialing is necessary, or the most sensible technique. However, if I keep dialing, sooner or later I will probably make this mistake.

As with most operator error, prevention is a matter of practice and familiarity. On the range, as we're dialing up and having a ball ringing steel targets at increasing distances (and verifying our data), do we also dial back down and re-address shorter targets? I suspect most of us do not.

Modern scopes are awesome but complex tools. I'm not suggesting one shouldn't dial. The more you do it, the more comfortable and confident you are. However, with a flat-shooting cartridge zeroed at 200 yards and a six- or seven-inch drop at 300 yards for a deer-sized target, doesn't it make more sense to hold a bit higher on the shoulder and just take the shot? No shooting opportunity lasts forever, so every guide also has stories about



**LEFT:** Murphy's Law applied: A case-head separation, usually means a trip to the gunsmith. Always uncommon, these are more likely with handloads and rear-locking actions (like the Savage 99). Careful inspection of cartridges should prevent this, but hopefully, somebody has a spare rifle in camp! **RIGHT:** Switching to unfamiliar rifles invites Mr. Murphy! In addition to the traditional hammer safety notch, recent (and current) Marlins have a crossbolt safety in an unusual position. More accustomed to older lever-actions without this feature, Boddington has flubbed this one!

hunters who let huge animals walk while fiddling with their turrets. Which after all, breaks concentration and, to get it right and be sure you're right, means taking your eye off the target.

Sometimes you have time. Sometimes you don't, but you don't *know* when the animal will move. Sometimes the shot gets better, but my faith in Mr. Murphy suggests that it usually gets worse. If you have practice-based confidence in your equipment and using accurate rifles and good optics (with good data), dialing the range is amazing. But until the distance is such that a hold off the animal is required, I think dialing increases the risk of human error.

Optics and ranging aren't the only opportunities for disaster. If you've shot and hunted a lot, be honest. Can you say with a straight face that you have never, ever flubbed a safety? I love the old adage "beware the one-gun man." If you've hunted all your life with maybe one shotgun and one rifle, you may be able to make the claim. I'm a gunwriter. I get paid to write about firearms. Especially with my left-handed affliction, colleagues are sometimes amazed at how easily I go back and forth between rifles. After all, it is what I do; I better be reasonably competent. I have never

reached for a bolt on the wrong side, nor completely spaced what type of action I have in my hands.

However, I have flubbed safeties on both shotguns and rifles. With the former, that error has cost some birds. With rifles, sometimes it's amazing the magnitude of a mistake one can make, recover from—and still wind up at the skinning shed. For sure, I do not claim that I've always taken my game with my first shot! This suggests to me that Mr. Murphy, though not a benevolent spirit, is not altogether omniscient.

I love lever-actions, at least for short and medium-range situations. I have a bunch of them, and they differ radically, but the majority of my lever-action hunting has been with older Winchester's with a hammer safety notch, no additional manual safety. Some time back the lawyers got involved. Recent lever-actions often have an additional manual safety, either a shotgun-style tang safety or a crossbolt. Neither seem natural nor familiar on lever-actions. These I have flubbed—most recently with one of the first Ruger-made Marlin lever-actions. I was shooting at a Texas hog and got a deafening click. Somehow I had time to work the action, push the safety button, and make the

shot. Mr. Murphy wasn't paying attention.

Pause and think about that. I didn't have to work the action, did I? Push the safety button, re-cock the hammer, and try again, right? Since I'd forgotten the safety and the hammer fell, I didn't think about the safety first. Maybe I'd forgotten to load the chamber. Maybe it was a round with a dead primer. Anybody out there ever forget to chamber a round (when you thought you had)? Ever have a misfire when taking a shot at a game animal? With modern ammo dud cartridges are rare, but blackpowder hunters deal with them all the time (re-watch Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*). I've had misfires on the range with every brand of ammo, but only one on game. It was my first shot on a lion in Tanzania in 1988. Mr. Murphy was there!

Genuine malfunctions are rare because of physics. A body in motion tends to stay in motion. In rifleman's terms, a gun that works will probably continue to work. However, anything made by man can fail at any time (Murphy's Law). Last fall I wanted to take a .300 Savage on a hunt. At the range just before departure I got a case-head separation where a major portion of the case was stuck in the chamber. There

was no damage, but with a Savage 99, that's gunsmith stuff. There's no immediate help if something like that happens on the mountain, but somebody needs to have a spare rifle in camp. Before any hunt, inspect your ammo and run every cartridge you're taking through your magazine and chamber.

In the main, when something goes wrong—whether miss, misfire, or malfunction—you don't usually know instantly what happened. If you short-stroked the action, flubbed the safety, had a bad cartridge, or caught a slight wobble, all you can do is try again. So, at the range, spend time shooting and working the action fast with a full magazine.

If, as happened to me, your rifle is off 18 inches at 50 yards, no immediate action drill can help. At least the rifle was off enough for a clean miss, which was amazing at that distance! Sometimes you get lucky and catch Mr. Murphy napping. There isn't time to ponder exactly what went wrong, just work the action while considering the variables and try again. As part of your range drill, repeat shots will help. Don't willy-nilly switch rifle platforms (with different actions and safeties) any more than necessary, and never without lots of range time! ■