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Photos Courtesy of Author

Surprise!

Beware a miss you didn't expect. Or a hit.

"Ready." Prepare your partner for the shot, so he or she has binocular to brow and can see the strike.

You'll hit where you look. This moose hunter kept his focus on the ribs, off those eye-popping antlers!

"A shot should surprise you," said Earl. "If you know exactly when the trigger will break, you're apt to jerk it, or flinch."

So I tried to crush the trigger and to call each shot—predict where the bullet would strike, given the sight picture at firing—accurately. But in the woods I had to shoot faster and calling shots got harder.

We lads had no real plan for hunting the east woodlot, beyond swarming it and shooting deer that squirted from it. Our swarm numbered from three to six. The woodlot comprised sugarbush and hawthorn thickets and a stand of second-growth pines above a swamp. The deer did not want for cover or exits.

Offsetting our weak strategy and lack of predatory acumen was the boundless ardor of youth.

One morning I eased along the pines to a rusted snarl of barbed wire, divining that here, this day, was a good spot. I hadn't long to wait. Half the swarm started hollering before they reached the woods. A thump in the pines, and suddenly a deer shot into the air, sun-fishing feet in front of my face. I threw the old .303 to cheek and fired as the animal made its next bound. The deer dropped at the report and lay still. I couldn't recall a sight picture. But I'd killed a deer! And look! There were antlers!

Sometimes we miss when we expect to hit; less often we hit when even hope rolls its eyes.

That buck and my bullet met about 15 feet in front of the muzzle, realistic range for the first shot at a ruffed grouse rocketing from the toe of a Bean's boot. I'd missed my share of those pokes with 7-1/2s from a 16-bore Remington 870. But I'd tumbled a few birds, too. Breaking that buck's neck, a wonderful surprise, was no great feat—just the equivalent of centering a grouse in a shot cloud.

Another thing in my favor: The pines aligned my vision along their border. My feet were placed for a comfortable look right where the deer would appear. Bullets, like shot clouds, usually go where you look. If you force a rifle or shotgun off its natural point of aim—determined by feet, hips and shoulders, not hands and arms—you'll likely miss. This deer had jumped right in front of my rifle. All I did was fire.

But as close is no guarantee of a kill, neither is a target smack dab in front of your muzzle.

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"Sharpies. You take my shotgun and get two or three. We'll make camp." So Burtt urged Ted to bag their first supper. They had canoed downriver to a spruce-studded bar at the mouth of a stream that "chuckled down over the rocks" and was just big enough to wet your feet crossing if you weren't careful. Opposite the bar rose a massive peak "with shoulders like a buffalo rolled up." Burtt was here to lay in a supply of winter's meat. In Anchorage, Ted had rented a .30-06. The $3 daily fee was stiff, he whined, for a bird hunter who might see a moose.

The afternoon far gone, Ted took the Model 12, slipped a couple of shells into the magazine, and hiked toward the old cabin where Burtt had spied the sharptails. He reached it without bumping a bird. At that instant, from a spruce thicket short steps away, rose a great black bull moose.

Equally surprised, the two faced each other long enough for Ted to cheek the trap gun. He fired instantly, without a thought to possible outcomes, and "forgetting I didn't even want to shoot a moose!"

Ted assumed the bull would drop. Instead, it blew by close enough to poke with the Winchester's muzzle, a mountain of muscle gone so quickly Ted didn't trigger a second shot. He ran back to camp and gasped, "I just missed a moose!"

The chorused reply: "With a shotgun?"

All trudged to the cabin. Not a clipped hair nor a spot of blood did they find. They followed the big splayed tracks a quarter-mile. By all indications, this bull was uninjured. If other hunters had missed moose with shotguns, Ted hadn't heard of them. "My friends were sure that distinction was mine alone."

■

I too have muffed shots so easy as to appear unmissable. Hubris once urged me on after sneaking within 50 yards of a bedded mule deer. *How close can you get?* The wind was favorable. Quiet as a snake in the fescue, I bellied forward. The buck seemed at peace. Then, as I paused in a depression 14 feet from him, he sensed something amiss. He rose. Never had a deer towered above me. Never, evidently, had this deer entertained a hunter at bedside. We stared stupidly at each other as I brought the barrel, slow as sun-up, nearly vertical. The actual angle, determined by the kink in my lumbar spine, was not steep enough. My bullet blasted shards from the basalt ledge between us as the buck fairly flew off the ridge.

It occurred to me later that I'd lacked the will to shoot this deer. At 50 yards,

my mission had changed. Before you can hit a target, you must want to. You must act on that desire as soon as you can. Nothing begs a quick, accurate shot more urgently than mortal threat.

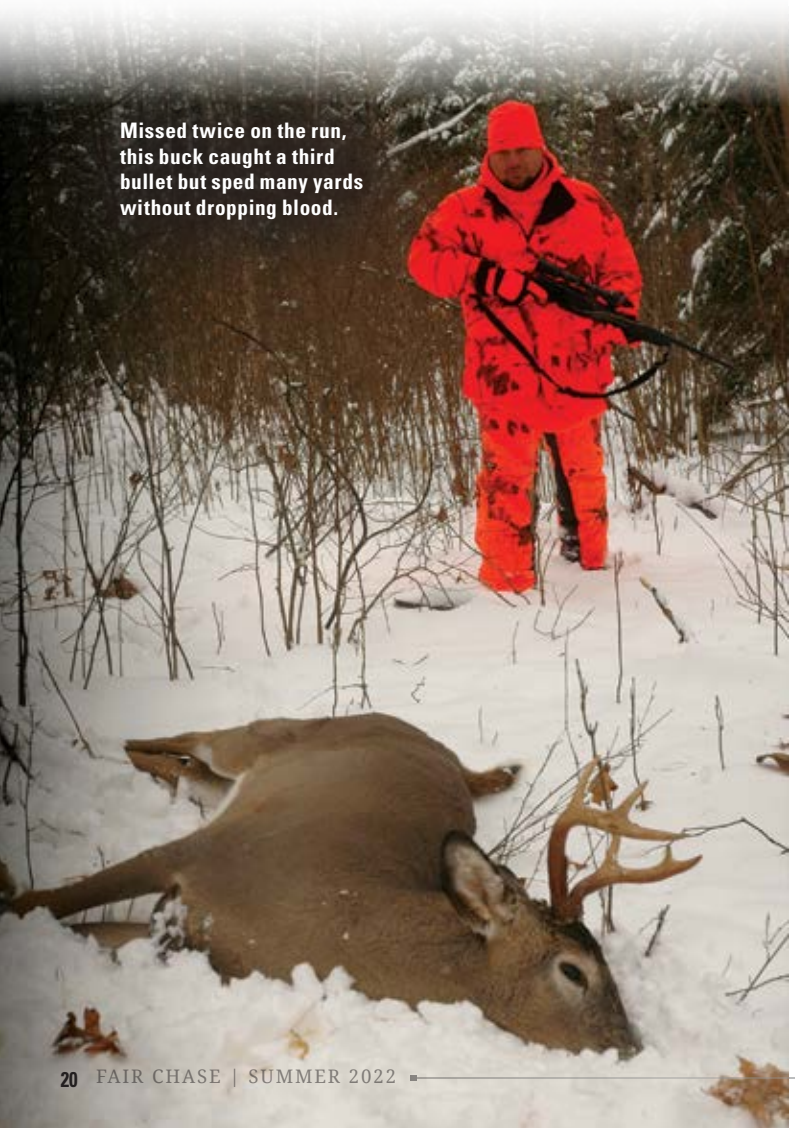
Ben saw the bear far off across the ice. Bumped by his partner, it was coming straight on, closing the distance fast. Ben knelt to escape its attention and steady his lever-action .300. "I fired twice, but to no effect. The range was too long for iron sights. But my third bullet struck. He braked to a stop and spun to bite savagely at the top of his shoulder. The softpoint, I would learn, had driven into the thick layers of fat and muscle there, doing little damage. To my inexperienced eye, however, this animal was about to keel over. I scrambled to my feet for a finishing shot.

"The beast saw me instantly and charged. I fired too fast, and still he came. As the range quickly collapsed, cold fear grabbed me by the throat. I'd loaded five cartridges in the rifle and fired four. All confidence in my shooting and ammo had evaporated.

"I can't recall sending that fifth and last bullet—only the whiplash report. The bear dropped as if struck by lightning, tumbling loose like a giant white dishrag, heels over head, skidding to a stop on the ice. Frantically, I fumbled five more cartridges into the Savage...."

The range was 17 paces, a couple of jumps for a polar bear. A neat hole between the eyes would tell of havoc inside the skull—a shot Ben might have worked hard to engineer from a rest at a still target!

Terror can sharpen focus.



Missed twice on the run, this buck caught a third bullet but sped many yards without dropping blood.

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Absent threat, a miss can still be costly. Long odds against another chance add pressure to a shot. As seconds tick by, pressure can bring panic. Muscles quake; pulse quickens; the rifle bobs. Oh, no! He's gonna leave! Gotta shoot! The trigger won't budge because the sight is bouncing about like a blue-bottle fly in a lampshade. Then: Now! The finger spasms; the barrel jumps before the bullet leaves....

Better that an imperative comes quickly, no hesitation permitted.

In the autumn of 1967, Jim Taffan and a couple of friends traded places at the wheel to motor 27 hours nonstop from their Pennsylvania digs to road's end at Sept Iles, Quebec. From there, North Shore rails brought them 365 miles up to Schefferville. Next morning they piled into a twin-engine Beechcraft on floats. A 45-minute flight put them above Lac Champadore and a splash of color: red fuel drums, tents of blue, white and yellow fronting water's edge and 20-foot freighter canoes.

By most measures, hunting caribou isn't hard, but the logistical challenges of reaching and living in caribou country deter the faint of heart. Jim and his pals were keen to find big bulls. Two hard days' hike through spongy tundra showed them a small herd in a jack-pine thicket. Nobody raised a rifle. The antlers were average. Fresh country the following day brought one bull to bag but no other worthwhile sightings. Next morning, quartering toward a ridge flecked with scraggly conifers and aspens, Jim squinted into the gale—and grabbed his guide's arm. Tall, wide antlers had sprouted from behind a jack-pine just 125 yards off! "Don't shoot into those branches," hissed the guide. "Wait!"

The tension built. When at last the bull stepped clear, Jim "couldn't steady the crosshairs" of his K6 Weaver. He triggered the Remington 760 anyway—and knew instantly he'd missed. "But buck fever left when that animal shifted into high gear. I'm not going to lose this enormous caribou!" Swinging the muzzle ahead as it raced toward a ravine 200 yards out, he mashed the trigger. At the .280's blast, the bull folded and tumbled, dead. James Tappan's caribou antlers scored 394-1/8.

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I seldom fire at running animals now, but back when most rifles still wore iron sights, we lads in whitetail country hung targets on clotheslines rigged with right-angle "tug lines." We took turns pulling. Such practice helped me tumble my first-ever deer, quartering off at a sprint through open poplars. I must have aimed. At 90 yards, "point and shoot" seldom works.

A lucky hit? Well, yes, if "lucky" means all bets are against a quick repeat. But shooting that begs regular assists from luck won't take much game. Lucky kills aren't as common as often claimed.

In Scandinavia, moose are hunted on organized drives. Hunters posted on stands get the shooting. They must first qualify offhand on life-size moose targets run electronically on a track. Range: 80 meters, if memory serves. It's no trick, after a few runs, to put most bullets in the chest. After all, a moving moose is the same size as one standing still. Stationary shots, also required, aren't much easier.

"Why do I hit when I can't steady the rifle?" The hunter who wondered this aloud the other day has lots of silent company. Even in fine conditions, when you're not breathing hard or buffeted by wind, keeping the sight on a small mark is hard. The rifle skips and hops to the

tune of quivering muscles and throbbing heart.

Such bumps plague competitive shooters, too. Black scoring rings cupping the bullseye bound in and out of the front sight, or about the reticle. Ace shooters pressure the trigger when the sight picture is acceptable, hold pressure when it isn't. Eventually the rifle fires. The shot may not be perfect, but because the sight has spent more time "in the black" than out during the squeeze, the bullet will probably land near point of aim. Hunters using this technique also wring good shots from shaking rifles. Shooters who yield to the temptation to "fire on the fly" as an ever-weaving sight nears the mark do not. Involuntary tensing of muscles and a quick tug on the trigger move the rifle before ignition. A bad shot results.

Swinging on a moving target, your torso, shoulder and arm muscles are engaged, not quivering. The swing smoothes pulse-bumps. Because time is often short, you don't see the sight picture deteriorate, as when you try too hard to steady a stationary rifle for a dead-center hit. Verily, still targets are easier to hit, *if you control the trigger and use the same accuracy standards you apply to moving targets.*

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In the still-frozen North, the month I was born, a grizzly mauled Field Johnson. No human could long endure the thrashing that beast gave the Yukon guide. Field survived, but never fully recovered.

Five years earlier, in happier days, Field had guided Jack O'Connor on his first Yukon hunt. They found a fine Dall's ram the second day. Jack "cut him down on the run." He'd procured for that trip three permits. Days and steep miles later, in thickening snow, he and Field spied six rams "at what looked like something more than 300 yards away." Wiping snow off scope lenses, O'Connor told Field he was about to fire. Eyes to his binocular, Field nodded.

"He braked and spun…." Errant shots waste bullets needed later. Fire only when the sight tells you to.

"The ram with the massive horns was lying broadside. I held about two thirds of the way up his body and eased off the shot. Field called it just below. The ram jumped up [and] ran off about 25 yards.... This time I held what looked to be about 6 inches above his shoulder...."

Field couldn't see a strike.

Just then the ram collapsed, rolled over and lay still.

"Other ram at top of bunch, right on ridge," said Field.

O'Connor again swabbed snow from his scope's ocular glass. The ram was facing away. Holding the post's tip even with the top of the horns, he crushed the trigger.

"You broke a leg," said Field.

Cycling the bolt, Jack aimed well above the ram and triggered the .30-06 once more.

"High!" Field cried.

This hunter declined a long shot to slip within 150 yards, waited patiently for the bedded buck to rise.

At that moment, "a snowflake as big as a rose petal sailed into the tube of the Stith mount and plastered itself all over the objective lens." By the time Jack could again see through his scope, the rams were gone. The hunters slid down shale, crossed a basin and found both sheep dead. Field's calls, if not specific, had been helpful. The broken leg was a broken hip. The high shot had grazed the base of a horn. With no better information at hand, O'Connor had wisely used his guide's observations to correct.

A companion who "spots the shot" can make a second poke easier than the first. Savvy spotters place themselves so their line of sight lies close to the bullet's path. They call by the clock—not "high," but "eleven o'clock." The measure of error, in inches from point of aim, is a bonus.

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That Field Johnson story came to mind not long ago, at forest's edge above the

apron of Montana foothills. A wolf, tiny at 8-power, trotted across a shrieking west wind, clouds of swirling snow on its wings. Unlike the wolf, we'd not given up on the elk, a small band hundreds of yards to the north and moving. I dabbed at the glass with a sodden kerchief, tucked both and beckoned to Ray.

An hour later we were a quarter-mile closer, shielded in our approach by thickening snow but shy of cover. We'd hustled to stay on our intercept route. The elk were moving steadily, nosing the snow only occasionally for grass. At the last cedar I dropped to my belly and crawled. When snow and fog erased the elk, I four-legged it to a rock. Ray followed. "Bull's on the right," he rasped. I slid a freezing hand through the sling's loop.

The sight picture was blank as a bed-sheet. "Still see him?"

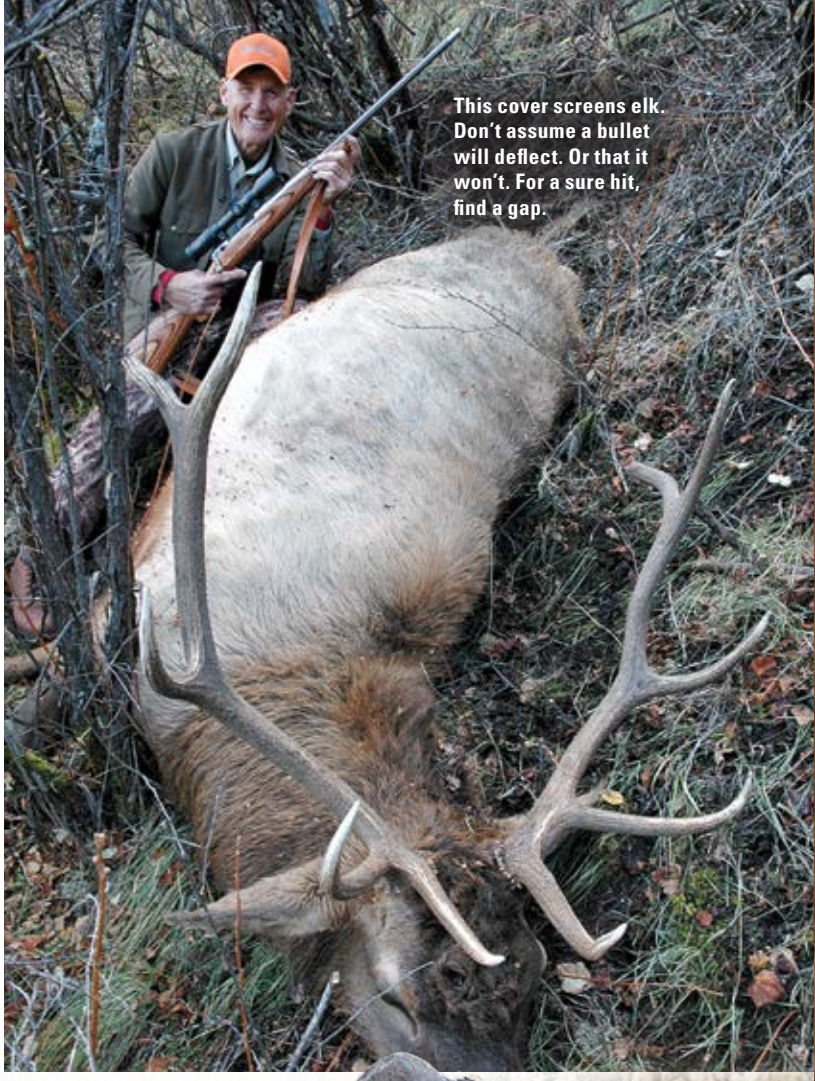
Silence. Then, through the wind: "There! Left now." A gap in the fog revealed four ghost-images. "Now second from. Figure 250, 300."

My call, too. I caught a smudge of antler, hung the crosswire high and squeezed as the storm again buried the lens.

Wind's wail sucked away the strike as snow shrouded the herd. I cycled the Remington, warmed my finger in my cheek. The elk re-appeared, miniature shadows "Right side now!" *Bless you, Ray*, and I shifted. Another muted *Pop!* from my .300. The bull was no longer obscured; he was gone. I scrambled to my feet and wiped the snow-plastered rifle.

We hurried forward, as the tracks were filling fast, and the trail was widely braided. Ray saw the bull first, dead, half-quilted by snow. My Core-Lokts had struck a hand's-width apart, minced both lungs.

Surprise hits, you might say, are better than surprise misses. Not according to Earl. "What matters is the call. A surprise, one way or the other, tells you the call was wrong. Besides, by all logic, a shot that doesn't match your call is more likely to cripple than it is to miss clean or kill." I can still see him draw on his cigar, thick as a 10-bore shell. "Surprise yourself on the trigger, not after the shot." ■



This cover screens elk. Don't assume a bullet will deflect. Or that it won't. For a sure hit, find a gap.

Assume a hit. Game doesn't always react to one. A bad shot can kill or maim. Follow-up is your job.