

Working with a GUNSMITH

Glen Zediker

There are few full truths associated with competitive rifle shooting, but here is one: we all need gunsmith services. This article probably won't offer any hard solutions, but it will provide a few ideas which, hopefully, will help add confidence to your decision.

LOCAL OR LONG-DISTANCE?

There is merit in the idea of finding a gunsmith within reasonable driving distance. This idea should never, however, supersede the far greater importance of finding a gunsmith who can do the work right! Here is luck, pure and simple. If you happen to live near a genuinely good gunsmith, you are lucky.

With the (often) good service provided by package carriers these days, there's really not a lot to get upset over if your gunsmith is five states away. Do invest in a very good shipping case (the aluminum ones are probably best) and invest in the shipping itself. I don't care what "they" say, carriers tend to treat an overnight or 2-day shipment, especially one that's insured to the hilt, to a little smaller gorilla when loading and unloading the truck. At any rate, never send a firearm without obtaining a tracking number. All that, I know, costs money, but so does gas and time to visit a nearby gunsmith. Balance it out and you won't pinch pennies.



SERVICE

No matter how much was spent and how well it worked, all rifles need service to keep shooting well. Listen... That soft sloshing noise you're hearing in the background is all the M14 shooters nodding their heads in unison.

I don't know of any good gunsmith who won't fix a problem straight away and straight up: if he made a mistake he'll be more upset over it that you will. But after

time (and bullets) pass and the rifle loses its accuracy edge, don't expect a free fix.

Most who have been through a few know what to expect, but for the newer shooters: be realistic about your gun's performance lifespan. If you're going racing don't expect your equipment to last as long. The rifle that shot so well last Spring is not necessarily broken if it's not shooting as well come football season.

Gunsmiths do, sometimes deservedly and sometimes un-, get blamed for a poor performing rifle. Most test fire their handiwork but this is mostly to ensure function. We all know that a rifle won't usually shoot establish itself until it's had a few rounds through it and a load has been prescribed. G. David Tubb offers wisdom when he says that rifles are either shooting better or shooting worse...

[This article originally ran in a magazine some years back, but this is the version I first wrote. It's a bit more, well, honest!]

If the man didn't test fire your rifle with ammunition that's at least similar to what you'll be using, call him names. I have gotten so many letters, calls, and e-mails from people who have AR15s that don't work. Not "don't shoot well," but flat don't function. AR15s should work! If your's doesn't send it back and don't listen to all the reasons why. It's the gunsmith's job to make it work. I've never had an auto mechanic suggest that I fiddle with my car after he's supposed to have fixed it...

Despite their best efforts, even a top notch builder occasionally gets a gun back. It is, fortunately, usually handled as one would expect from an essentially cottage industry association: each suppliers success, and existence, depends on the respective quality of workmanship exhibited along the chain. In other words, if it's the gunsmith's fault, he'll set it straight. If it's traced to a barrel problem, the barrelmaker will st it straight with the gunsmith, who will set it straight with you, and so on.

Take a gunsmith who decides to make his own barrels or parts. With a few exceptions (who aren't involved in competitive rifle shooting) such commitment suggests that we should have some respect for this fellow. What he's turning out may not really be any better than what he was previously getting elsewhere, but he thinks it is, and that's what we're after. The gunsmiths who build their own triggers, sight mounts, barrels, stocks, or what have you, are the ones who are genuinely concerned what what they're providing their customers. Often the decision to manufacture a component comes from experiences with poor quality or availability of a particular part. It's also sometimes done to make more money, but money's good. Point is that if a gunsmith even has the capability, let alone the desire, to produce something like a barrel, you really should take note.

THE FINER POINTS

Boy will I ever get the letters on this one, but I will still venture the following: the better shooter you are the better shooter your gunsmith should be. Now, this is in no way to state that a gunsmith has to be a national champion to build a good gun. Nothing could be further from the truth. But also well removed from the truth is the assumption that a master machinist or renown builder of custom hunting rifles is in any way qualified to tune for an across-the-course competitor, and the same can be said for many of the benchrest gunsmiths. If the gunsmith doesn't have an understanding of what his customer wants and needs, he's not going to deliver it.

If a gunsmith doesn't have a respectably impressive tournament record shooting his own rifles, he should have names of customers who do. In other words, if he doesn't know what a good shooter wants from his own experience through being an equally good shooter, he should have experience with (successfully) communicating with the good shooters using his guns. In this respect a gunsmith is much like an auto racing crew chief: he can't drive the car as fast as the hired gun behind the wheel, but he knows exactly how to interpret what the driver tells him about how the car is working. Admittedly, this criteria hurts the service rifle builder because it's plain not fair to put competitive records against what the gumment can produce.

ALL OR SOME

There are specialists who, well, specialize in individual component work. There are those who "just" do barreling, bedding, or action work. For instance, many of the barrelmakers will turn and fit their barrel to your action, but that's all they'll do.

This sort of "piecework" approach to rifle building has its goods and bads. One of

I don't recommend contractors either...

Live and learn that some folks just don't get along with other folks. Also that some gunsmiths take a little longer than others, and that can change based on time of year and happenstance. I strongly suggest, however, getting what you're after (if you know what that is), which means going with who is producing whatever that is, because until you do you'll still want it.

its advantages is to the self-smith who is competent, or equipped, in handling some rifle building chores, but not all. For instance, you might be able to stock a rifle and add the bolt-ons but not have the machinery necessary to fit a barrel. Another advantage is that a specialist generally does very good work. That is, for many, the reason they became specialists.

The disadvantages to working through specialists come mostly to the person who is looking to end up with a completed rifle. Working rifle components through a cycle of specialists can take a lot of time, some shipping here to there, and, usually, costs a little more money all totalled. Another point to consider is what happens if the darn thing doesn't shoot like it should? Who do you call back? Unless the reason for the problem is obvious, that might be tough to determine (although it's not like a specialist won't know about the other component areas; they just tend to avoid them). Plus, such a component project is still likely to require the services of an "all around" gunsmith to complete. Also, some gunsmiths prefer to handle a project from the ground up, and we can't really blame them. A person who is prideful enough of his work to qualify as a good gunsmith tends to believe in his ways and likes to avoid "redoing" any areas that don't suit those beliefs.



[Scott Medesha AR10]

DOING YOUR PART

My old buddy Charlie says that one thing he likes about America is that you're free to act and think as you choose, even if you look like a damn fool doing it. And gunsmiths deal with that daily. Trust is an issue, and if he tells you not to do something, you probably should listen. If you don't trust his advice on technical matters, get another gunsmith, but don't force him to compromise his standards. Trust it: if the gunsmith isn't happy with it neither will you be.

On that idea, think through what you want and figure out how to say it. This keeps both you and the gunsmith happy: you because you get what you want, and the gunsmith because you get what you want, the first time. If there is a subjective element to a request, such as rifle balance or a trigger characteristic, it's as much up to you to communicate it as it is for the gunsmith to deliver it. Obviously, though, there needs to be some flexibility if such a request is to be satisfied. If, for instance, you're

Most “gunsmith” problems are communication problems. I don’t want to hear anyone telling me that their gunsmith did something wrong in chambering, for instance, and then learn that the complaining customer didn’t tell them what he or she wanted. “I don’t like the way you didn’t do what I didn’t say anything about...” I go back and forth between sticking up for gunsmiths and sticking it to them, but gunsmiths need to be good listeners, and good customers need to know what to say.

having a match rifle built and that package includes a custom stock, suggest that the gunsmith send you the gun sans stock finish so you can feel and fiddle with what’s there before it’s “too late.” Here, obviously, a face-to-face meeting is ideal. If you’re “picky” about fine points, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that (it is what fuels a majority of self-smiths), you might be happiest finding a local who can do the work you want.

PIECES PARTS

Building a rifle is not strictly up to the gunsmith. You generally will have to supply parts. Some want more or less from their customers, but chances are that you’ll have to get at least the basics together.

Keep in mind quality. Most things manufactured for use on match rifles are of pretty high quality, but it’s the service rifle shooter who really has to gamble. There are some hideous examples out there, and that counts the same for “issue” and aftermarket parts. I like to purchase my smoke pole parts at a gun show so I can see what they look like, but mail order often is necessary to get the needed components.

It might cost more money to deal with a company that leans more toward competitive shooting supplies, but it’s usually less of a gamble if you do. It still, make no mistake, is a gamble. Make sure the folks on the phone promise to take back or swap out the parts you order if you don’t like them. One tip: “built by military contractors” is not the same quality of claim as is “genuine GI parts.” Some of those contractors sell their seconds (those which were not up to true mil-spec) to you and me. After watching some of the locals suffer through it, suffice to say that I’m really glad I bought a Colt® Sporter to serve for my AR15 base.

A good service gunsmith will be critical of poor parts and will not use them in your rifle. Hopefully, he’ll have a bin to sort through to replace a small part, but prepare to do a little more shopping if he says your op rod or gas cylinder is bad. M14 owners tend to collect a bag full of spares anyhow, and there’s merit to purchasing “optional” parts if you shoot one of these rifles.

On the subject of choosing a service rifle gunsmith, here’s a tough one. This work is a specialty, regardless of whether or not the gunsmith returns a completed rifle or not. There are no doubt many people in the country who can deliver a top notch gas gun, but there sure are pretenders in the majority. Ideally, you’ll know your prospective builder’s reputation (preferably first hand via an associate’s experience).

Many service rifle builders have had experience as military armorers; that’s a pretty fair pick as a full or part time occupation on return to civilian life. But, and pay attention to this, do not assume that military rifle building experience is automatically worthy of your investment. For instance, what’s the technological frame of reference? A retired USMC gunsmith setting up shop in 1990 builds ’em differently than did his predecessor starting out in 1970. Things do change.

More letters will pour in after this one, but here goes anyhow: some military armorers find it, ahem, challenging to adapt to producing top flight work for hire for

There's another booger out there and that's the man who builds a fine gun for his High-Master pals but falls asleep for the "undeserving." If you're not sure about this aspect of the man you're considering, if asked why you're sending in a gun, say something like you want "more Xs." Don't say anything like: "Well, I'm not really very good but I want to get a better gun anyhow..." That's a perfect invitation to the unscrupulous to finally get shed of a bent barrel he set back for just such an occasion. You folks know who you are, so if the cloak fits watch out for the dagger...

bill-wielding civilians. They had a lot more parts to choose from back at Ft. Benning. And none of the hard guns they 'smithed for relied exclusively on one gun. If this barrel won't shoot, get another one. Part of the challenge to building one good service rifle for a paying customer is making it work 100-percent using what that customer sends him. As mentioned, that's not always the gunsmith's fault, but a gunsmith in civilian practice does not have the luxury of following procedure on a gaggle of rifles and picking the best for the big team.

One thing big in the favor of a military man is the volume of his experience. He's seen more M14s than most civilians could dream about (or have nightmares over, whichever the case) and he has, therefore, seen just about every problem they can have.

I don't think there's much question that a service rifle builder with a military background is a good choice, just as long as he meets the other criteria set forth.

Aside, of course, from being really good gunsmiths, the best service rifle builders I've had experience with have been either really good shooters or really experienced "late model" military armorers, or both.

THE END

So, what really counts in finding a gunsmith? "Experience," the trump card, leaves little left in second place, but experience should be valued only in its application. There are a few gunsmiths floating around out there who used to be real good...

Experience should also be something furthered rather than possessed. A good gunsmith, like a good shooter, should have some new experience, and some which he's hopefully learned from, most every time he completes a job.

It's really no secret to making a rifle that shoots well, and the aforementioned innovations and tricks are generally "borrowed" forthwith. When it's all said and done, there's really only one thing that separates gunsmiths. Integrity. Not in the sense of whether he's honest or not, but in the sense of whether or not he'll deliver the best work he can and genuinely cares whether or not your rifle is working for you.