

LONG-RANGE

A hand holding a black revolver, pointing it towards the top right. The background is a desert landscape with a prominent mesa under a blue sky. The title 'LONG-RANGE' is written in large, bold, orange letters across the top.

The Ultimate Test of Gun and Shooter.

By Ross Seyfried

Long ago, Elmer Keith described long-range handgunning as the definitive test of a gun and load. I would add that it is even more a test of the man or woman behind them. Long range is graduate work, the pinnacle of the handgunner's art. When done well, it defies belief. Most of the unknowing will accuse you of being a liar when you speak of rifle-like hits with a handgun, but with good sights, some skill and an understanding of how it is done, you can prove it.

Long-range handgunning is not about a special gun, load or target. Instead, it is a concept that allows us to squeeze every ounce of performance out of ourselves and our guns. To begin with, we need to understand that this is Elmer Keith's game. Whether he invented it is conjectural, but he certainly did perfect it—and at the same time elevated handgunning to a level unknown before or since. When he was in his prime, he was simply magnifi-

cent with a sixgun in his hands. Telling the true tales of making multiple hits on moving deer at 500 or 600 yards branded him as being something less than honest. He thought nothing of telling the stories, for he had done the feats and felt that they were good, but not necessarily remarkable. He was so good that he could not comprehend that we mere mortals were unable to understand, let alone do, what he had done.

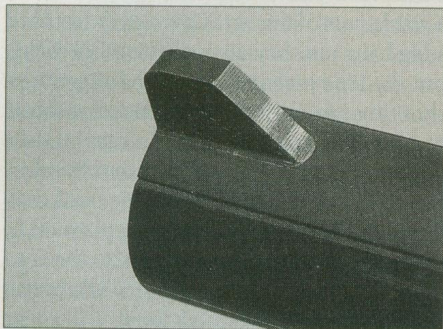
I watched him shoot when he was old, bordering on feeble. He was good enough then to be almost unbelievable—good enough to leave absolutely no doubt that he had done everything he claimed. We won't achieve his level, but by understanding his principles, we can make a handgun perform magic. If you would like to read Keith's handgunning stories, I highly recommend his book *Sixguns*.

This is about real handguns with real sights: revolvers, perhaps auto pistols and maybe even single shots—but no scoped contraptions are

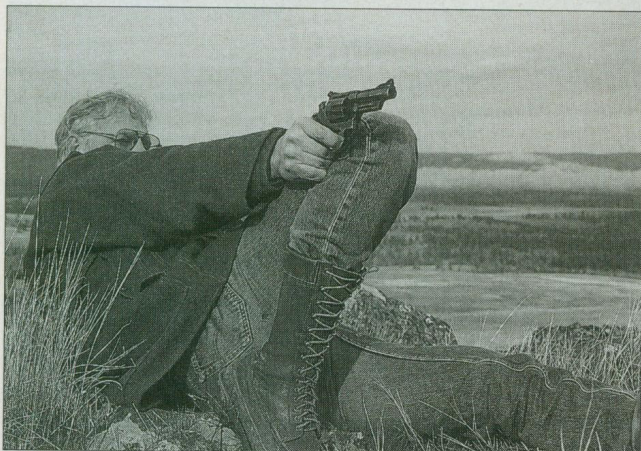
LONG-RANGE Handgunning

allowed. What is long range? I doubt there is an absolute definition because much depends on the gun and shooter, but my definition says it is shooting beyond normal point-blank range. That is, if the range is long enough that a normal sight picture falls appreciably low, the shot fits into the long-range category. When we have to start to "hold over" to make a hit, the long-range principles apply. I feel like anything beyond 100 yards fits, and it can be pushed to the extreme of 500 yards or more.

Long-range shooting does not require special tools, guns or loads. It is about special skills and methods with everyday guns. Some will perform much better than others, but any handgun will do. Keith perfected his skills with a single-action .45 Colt. His loads were black powder, and he used the bullet splash to herd sheep. Apparently, he maintained his composure and shot in front of, and not at, the woolly critters, but I do not know why. I rarely use



To aid in long-range sighting, two gold bars have been inlaid into the front sight of the author's 10-inch M-29. With the long barrel and short front sight, the bottom of the lower bar hits at about 500 yards.



The author shoots his four-inch M-29 from the reclining position. This method offers the best combination of stability and practicality over a wide range of conditions.

a paper target and generally do not use a specific target at all. Rocks, bushes or a bare patch of dirt all make fine long-range targets. When I do use a specific target it is usually an old tire or a five-gallon bucket.

HOLD AND HIT

Actually hitting a distant object with a handgun requires basic handgun skills combined with some methods to help us hold the gun precisely and a very specific sighting technique that is the basis of every shot we will make. Understanding long-range sighting is the key to success. As I said earlier, a long-range shot is one where a normal sight picture will hit low. Our guns, unlike those used in silhouette competition, are not specially zeroed for a specific long range. Instead they will be "sighted in" at 25 or 50 yards. Longer ranges will require extra elevation. It does not work to simply "hold over." If we do, the sights and/or the barrel will hide the target from our view. To get extra elevation with a handgun, you keep the standard sight picture. That is, the front sight is centered in the rear notch, and the target just touches, stays perched atop, the front sight. The adjustment is made by raising the front sight above the top of the rear. With this method, the target remains in full view and is always in the usual, easily defined place on top of the front sight, while precise windage alignment does not change. Now the real question is, how much front sight?

Long-range handgunning is a form of artillery. While it would be nice to make first-shot hits, they are extremely unusual. The first shot and perhaps several that follow are "ranging" shots, smoke rounds, that tell us how the sight picture we used was in error. An essential ingredient in the sport is some form of backstop that will show us the bullet strikes. A dusty hillside is the very best, but a rock face or any other place where the



Long-range shooting can be done with just about any cartridge. From left: The .32 Mag. and .357 Mag. are a bit light, while the .44 Mag. is optimum. The .45 ACP's low velocity keeps it from being a top performer, though the .45 Colt is right up there with the .44 Mag.

bullet can kick up dirt, mud or dust will do. If you fire a round and see the bullet hit low, increase the amount of sight that projects above the rear, or if you were high, reduce the front sight a bit and try again.

At 300 yards, most guns will need a sizeable portion of their front sights above the rear to make a hit. The top of the rear sight will be somewhere in the middle of a very long, black front sight. This makes it very difficult to know, from shot to shot, exactly how much sight was held out of the rear notch. Returning to the same sight picture or making precise corrections is a lot easier if the front sight is cut into several pieces. Elmer used three gold bars across the face of the sight to accomplish this. The gold bars became points of reference. If we imagine a shot at about 300 yards, he would make the first shot with the second bar lined up with the top of the rear sight. Suppose the shot fell 10 feet low. He would then fire round two with a tiny sliver of black between that bar and the top of the rear sight. You can visualize how much easier it is to hold close to a bar, rather than trying to remember



The author has fired all of these guns at long range. Counterclockwise from top left: The Colt .45 Government Model and S&W 2½-inch .357 Magnum are a decided handicap, but both made hits beyond 200 yards; the Colt SAA .45 is very effective, even with non-adjustable, minimal sights, while the 10-inch-barreled S&W M29 .44 Mag was made for the job; the Ruger .45 Bisley is about as effective as any normal handgun can be at long range.

LONG-RANGE Handgunning

where you were last time on a 1/2-inch-long strip of black front sight.

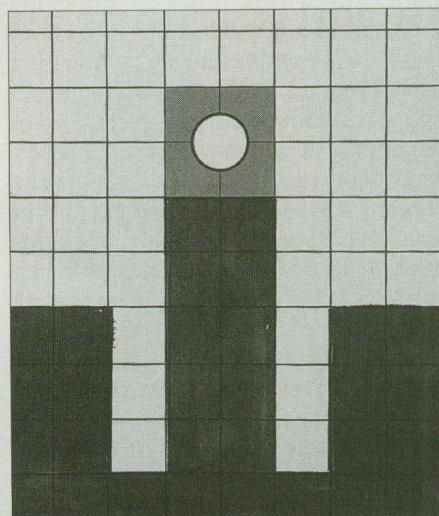
I have some three-bar sights, and they work very well. A good gunsmith can cut the front sight with a slitting saw and solder or mechanically fit strips of gold wire to make the bars. Another easy and quick way to make bars on the sight is to use gold or silver Pilot markers. I get them from office supply stores. They will "paint" a fine gold or silver line across front sights. They work best on serrated ones, but you can paint lines across a smooth sight also. With the markers, you can experiment with any number or placement of bars. I have painted bars that have lasted on guns for months. If they wear off, it is easy to repaint them, or if you want to change or remove them, lighter fluid or paint thinner will take them right off. My everyday guns usually have only one bar that is far enough below the top of the front sight to form a square. This is usually very close to 200 yards' worth of elevation, and while it keeps the sight picture simple, it is a big help on a long-range shot.

Windage errors are usually small compared to elevation, but a stiff breeze will move a handgun bullet several feet at a few hundred yards. You can adjust windage by moving the target left or right, relative to the center of the front sight. The target will appear very small in relationship to the front sight. Make the first shot with the target in the center, then if you need to correct for wind move the target left or right. Be sure to always maintain consistent, precise alignment between the front and rear sights themselves. The most minute error will result in a wide miss. This is where we begin to see the reality, the true skill level required

for long-range handgunning. The short barrels are accurate and even the bullets are accurate, but the short sight radius makes proving that accuracy extremely difficult.

Holding sight alignment at long range is difficult not only because of the sheer precision involved (I believe you must see and hold for a few thousandths of an inch), but also because of the great distance between the sights and target. It is impossible for your eyes to focus on the sights and target at the same time. This is true for all handgunning, but becomes magnified in our extreme game. How you manage the problem will be a major factor in your success.

Like all shooting, success lies in the basics. Begin by clearly focusing on the target, creating a mental image of its location and appearance. Then, shift your vision to the front sight. Look very, very hard at that front blade. When you have it in razor-



This represents a sight picture for about 200 yards. The orange square is the target. Note how the front sight projects above the top of the rear, but all other elements of the sight picture are "normal." Understanding this technique is critical to long-range success.

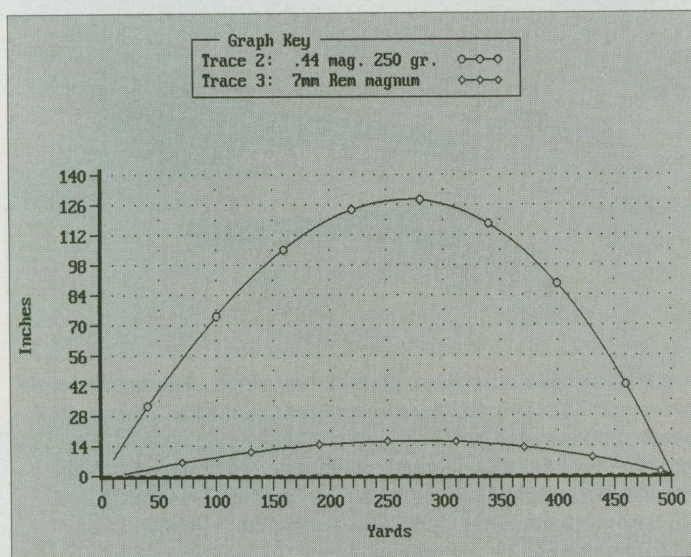
sharp focus, adjust the alignment between the front and rear sights until you have perfection. When the sights are perfect, flick your vision back to the target, and move the sight picture into position with the target on top of the front sight.

I realize things are not holding still, and this is much easier said than done. The wiggles and wobbles are in the way of every shot we make, but if you will move your focus from target to sights and back again you will be able to make a series of fine-tuning adjustments right up until the shot fires. While you are tuning the sights, continually add load to the trigger, and when you know things are about right and the gun is about to fire, lock your vision on the front sight. Be sure your last act before the shot is to "re-perfect" the sight alignment. A long-range target will be almost invisible when the shot breaks, but if the sights are perfect, the bullet will be headed in the right direction.

A STABLE SHOOTING ENVIRONMENT

Now that we know what to do with the sights, we need to look for ways to help us hold the gun still enough to have some hope of consistency. Generally, I do not feel bench rests and other mechanical rests are a viable part of this art. Cross-stick rests are a big help and they are realistic in the field, but the true essence of Keith's long-range shooting can only be experienced without mechanical aids. You can do reasonably good work from the standing, two-handed position, but it is the least stable hold that is viable. The standard kneeling position is a step ahead of standing. This uses the regular two-hand hold on the gun while the left elbow rests on your left knee.

The most versatile shooting position is what Elmer called "reclining." This is a variant of the old Creedmoor rifle position and similar to what the handgun-silhouette



The back-rest position is the steadiest one for long-range shooting. To use it, you need something to lean on. If a rock or tree isn't available, a truck will do very nicely.

competitors use. To use it, you lie on your back, feet toward the target. A right-handed shooter will draw his right leg up until his heel touches his hip. The left elbow rests on the ground and serves to prop up your torso or head. The greatest precision is found by resting your head on your left hand, but this also limits your ability to see over grass or other obstacles. I prefer to simply hold my head up and use my arm to support my ribs. That right, drawn-up leg becomes the gun rest. Hold the gun with a normal grip in your right hand, then snuggle your hand in the groove just below your knee. Your hand and the gun's grip are a nice fit in this hollow. The whole position becomes a series of mechanical triangles that makes the hold amazingly steady.

The last word in stability is what Elmer called the "back rest." Now, you need some object to lean against. A tree, rock or vehicle tire work perfectly. To use the back rest, sit on the ground and lean back against whatever support you have found, then draw both heels toward your hips. Your feet should be apart a little more than they would be if you were standing normally, and your knees should touch each other. Hold the gun in a normal two-handed grip, and then slide the backs of your hands/wrists between your knees. The back rest allows you to really get a hold on things. Gun, hands, legs and the ground all weld together in one solid unit making the back rest possibly even more stable than a bench rest. One trick is to be sure to maintain uniform tension between your knees, hands and the gun. This hold keeps the gun down under recoil. If you do not apply the same pressure from shot to shot, it can cause changes in elevation. Also, be sure the front of the cylinder is forward, past your knees. The flash from the cylinder gap can hurt if you let it hit your legs.



A two-handed, offhand stance can be used for long-range shooting, but stability is marginal.

LONG-RANGE LOADS

With the holding and shooting defined, we can take a moment to talk about guns suited to long range. As I said in the beginning, this is generally not about special guns and loads. I have had great fun "long-range" shooting with a .22 and a .45 auto, but both are seriously limited. The very best guns have relatively high velocity and heavy bullets. Rounds like the .44 Magnum and .45 Colt are tough to beat. They are most apt to kick up enough dust to let you see where the bullets hit, while having moderate, controllable recoil. That is, recoil that lets you hold the guns more or less gently, maximizing precision. Bullets that weigh 250 to 300 grains, with 1,200 to 1,500 fps muzzle velocity, do about all a handgun can do. "Flat-shooting" handguns do not exist. All have extreme trajectory at long range, so you do not have to worry about finding a good, flat, long-range load. This is all about techniques and skill. Ballistics will not help.

Longer barrels are always easier to hit with than short ones. Perhaps the 7½-inch models are the best compromise between sight radius and barrel time. A 2½-inch barrel is accurate enough to hit a five-gallon bucket at 300 yards, but the tiny sight radius makes it difficult to do.

With all of this in mind, what should we mortals expect to do with a long-range handgun? Like all shooting, it is relative to your basic skills. I do think an average, good pistol shot should be able to make a hit on a five-gallon bucket at 300 yards before his revolver is empty. By using the rests and techniques, you should be able to "wear out" a man-sized target at 200 yards. As the range stretches beyond 300 yards things get really wild. When I used to shoot two guns full of ammo through my four-inch Model 29 every day, at distances close to 500 yards, I felt pretty good if I scared

the tire I was shooting at once or twice. My real goal was to land almost all of the shots within 10 or 15 feet of the mark. As Elmer put it, "long-range shooting is mostly luck. You practice and practice until every shot you make gets close. Then from time to time the target gets unlucky and gets hit."

I remember making a few of those shots.



Kneeling is one of the best field shooting positions. It is extremely versatile and stable enough for good work at long ranges.

One stands out because of the great deal of luck involved. I took a whack at a coyote that was trotting from right to left at what I first estimated to be 450 yards. I shot from reclining, holding ¾ of the front sight out of the rear notch, with the coyote just on the right side of center on the sight. The dust flew about 50 feet short and behind ... and he shifted into second gear. I corrected for the second shot, lifting the front sight all the way to my third bar, moving almost all of the sight out of the notch. Then I put the speeding critter on the far right corner of the sight and squeezed the trigger. The lead looked to be 100 feet or more, while the elevation was something close to the moon. I saw the dust fly very close to him, but instead of making him run faster, it made him slow to a walk and go out of sight. I was really pleased to have gotten so close, but wondered why he was walking. I went over to look and sure enough, there he was with a .44 hole through both shoulders ... higher on the left side than the right.

Elmer had an explanation for this kind of hit, besides practicing until you regularly get close. He said, "The trajectory is really high on a very long shot. The bullets arc way up there, go plumb to heaven, get some guidance and come back down." He may have had a point.

Whatever the reason for a long-range hit, it is rewarding. This kind of shooting is a lot of fun and could prove useful in a pinch. I do not believe there is any excuse for shooting at game with a handgun much beyond 100 yards, but there are a lot of rocks and buckets that deserve our attention.