

UNLOADED

By James Collins

Owen, my best friend, had called to let me know he had just purchased a beautiful secondhand 12gauge pump shotgun from Abercrombie and Fitch in anticipation of our hunting plans for tomorrow. I told him I had picked up 12gauge ammunition and would bring it in my knapsack. We then set up the early morning pickup time and I sat down for dinner.

About 8:30 that evening, I received a call from Owen that he had a problem. His sister Margaret, a naval officer, was home on leave heard about his purchase and wanted to take the gun apart and examine it. Apparently, though she could field strip and clean the 45-caliber automatic, the Winchester 12gauge pump was something she had never seen in training. I told Owen I would come right over and see what I could do.

At Owen's house, I viewed the 12gauge pump shotgun disassembled and neatly laid out on the main table; every major assembly cleaned, oiled, and laid side-by-side on the table.

"Jim, Marge decided she wanted to look at the gun, clean it and reassemble it, but neither of us can remember how the parts go back together. Have you ever seen this gun before and do you know how to put it back together?"

"No I've never seen this type of pump gun before but one shotgun is pretty much the same as another. We can start with the stock and the breach and work it out from there."

Within half an hour, we had the gun reassembled and everything fit correctly. You could work the action and it was smooth. We all decided to have some tea and Owen familiarized himself with the new pump shotgun. We had opened the butt plate and discovered a hunting license from Oklahoma from 35 years earlier. Abercrombie and Fitch in 1956 was an outdoor outfitting store that scheduled African safaris. Often people traded in American type weapons for heavy bore guns more suitable in the African wilderness. We assume that was the history of the shotgun. It showed use and wear indicated that many rounds passed through the barrel.

Owen cocked the gun and swung it around the room. He came to rest with the gun pointing directly at my chest.

"Owen, don't point that gun at me. Point it somewhere else."

"Jim what are you getting paranoid about? You know there is no ammunition in this house and you personally took all the parts and put the gun back together. You know the gun is empty." However, the gun was still pointing at my chest.

"Owen, put the damn gun down now! Don't point it at me! You know how upset I get about guns pointing at me. You don't want me coming over the table at you."

Owen raised the barrel of the gun and pointed it at the corner of the ceiling at the other end of the room. Then he pulled the trigger. An unusual soft sound occurred followed by falling plaster hitting the floor. There, stuck in the three inch wide wood molding, appeared a nail four inches long and the plaster behind molding had shattered and fallen to the ground. Upon investigation the front four inches of firing pin had sheared off, split the four-inch molding and penetrated the plaster deep enough to knock a four-inch diameter piece off the wall. If Owen left the gun pointed at me at that time it would have gone right through me. The next day was Saturday morning and we went on our hunting trip. I really enjoyed that sunrise more than any I can remember for I felt I might have never seen this sunrise if things had gone badly the night before.

Monday, Owen took the weapon back to Abercrombie and Fitch and told them what had happened. Their gunsmith looked at the weapon and the firing pin and said that the weapon probably had fired more than 10,000 rounds over the 35 years and metal fatigue caused the firing pin to separate. They were very apologetic, repaired the gun and offered to extend their warranty a couple more years.

I have hunted with Owen for more than 50 years and have never seen him point a gun at anyone. The only exception might have been when he was the gunnery officer on the USS Protector a radar picket ship moored 12 miles off the Cuban coast during the Cuban missile crisis. Owen's ship had a survival expectation of less than one minute after Cuba launched missiles at the United States. His ship had to warn America of incoming missiles. However, that is a different story for another day.

THE END