

Bang! Bang! He shot me down!

Can the pistol be studied as a Historic European Martial Art?

Copyright: P. Crawley 2013 (Presented at SWASH 2013)

Historical Context

- C16th- Pistol develops as a short arm, invented for cavalry use
- C17th- Status and requirement increased with new models of mounted combat reliant on pistols for psychology and winnowing effect- Pistoliers, Adolphus' caracole &c
- C18th- Popularised and improved technology making them easier and cheaper. Finally replaced sword in last quarter due to fashion changes, cf Brummel
- C19th- widespread across all classes and available in all contexts

Introduction

- Lots of information for pistol use in terms of conduct, arrangements, giving & taking offence, covering failures, misfires, development, gun maintenance, loading &c. but very little on **actual technique** during these times
- In comparison lots on longarm use- relatively common due to military/maritime and hunting use- boarding actions &c.
- Especially so in the Americas- first indigenous martial art-Rifleman mythology (Bowie, Crockett, Monterey) cf modern Appleseed Movement

Parameters of Source Selection

- Pistol only- general rifle technique books such as "*ABC of Snap shooting*", Horace, 1880 available but want to narrow it down to specifics
- Pre-C20th sources- overt teaching cf Fairbairn/Sykes, "*Shooting to Live*", and Lucky McDaniel's "*Secrets to Shooting*"
- Sources and priority: treatises, texts, images, anecdotes
- French and English sources used- limited to languages read, and personal bias
- Examined across the broad aspects of weapon use:
Hunting, military, duelling, self-defence, leisure

Hunting

- Main setting to learn military skills until replaced by sport in the industrialised C19th "Playing fields of Eton"
- Oral and practical learning tradition (father to son) so little writing or recording
- Longarms better, socially acceptable, more versatile and reliable at the job
- Pistols used to increase the "sport"- cf American buffalo hunting in C19th

Military

- Wallhausen, 1616- depicts close-range shooting as pistol trumps lance
- Roundway Down, 1643- Halselrig vs Atkyns account of touch shooting, practice/wisdom continues through to Napoleonic era
- Prince Rupert- shooting weathercock with a *rifled* pistol NB of Henrician origin of gun laws
- Skilled learned through hunting until pistols become regular issued sidearms at first quarter c20th (cf Fairbairn, Sykes &c).
- Some unusual military uses closer to self-defence techniques- cf Pringle-Green and Von Tempsky's forearm defences
- Not a massed fire weapon requiring training and discipline as longarms did through drill for psychology, effect, safety and practicality.
- Pistols were generally personal issue equipment so no obligation to teach- cf Wellington's "No duelling pistols" order

Duelling

- Format- principals, seconds, surgeons, rules, 15 paces, dropped hanky &c., &c.
- Techniques required due to popularity and need to learn a "new" form of shooting.
- Texts mainly advice on how not to cock it all up, or authors witnessing poor practice and offering advice (cf epee texts of the era- "Game of the Sword, &c.)
- A Traveller (1836)

Range- backstop, 3' iron target, white wafers (2x 12, 3 rows)

Fire in sequence, never taking more than 3 seconds

Fix finger inside the trigger guard with a steady grip

5 or 6 dozen wafers before breakfast

Get used to being shot at-

"Wooden figure of a man constructed...a bracket must be affixed...firmly secure a pistol...copper wire to be wound round the trigger, and the other to be made fast to a piece of whipcord about twelve yards long...The practitioner take(s) his station, hooking the end of the whipcord to his belt...fire, receding slightly back, he will discharge the other pistol upon himself"

- G Dubois (1887)
"Pistol duels must take place in a field or other uncovered space without trees behind the combatants as trees aid their aim. If it is to take place in a field, then avoid, for the same reason, lining up the duellists with any furrows as they provide an ideal line-of-sight. "

- “Shoot out” American variation

cf Wild Bill Hickok vs Davis Tutt (1865) &c.

“Rested pistol on forearm”

“Raise to eye level”, “Will to survive” (Applegate, 1992)

- Anecdotal sneaky tricks to put off opponent-

cf Andrew Jackson’s cloak, nudity, odd variations (cf Baldick’s “The Duel”)

Pushkin shitting at adversary’s feet

Self-Defence

- Pistol is ideal defence while travelling, hence the most material.
- De Berenger (1835)

“present...rather below than at or above his chest...for a higher aim may pass over his shoulder”

“self defence ...precludes a deliberate aim.”

“Point suddenly at objects...close one eye...ascertain if your aim has been correct or not”

“the middle finger, and not the forefinger, is to be preferred...since the anatomical situation...is less likely to diverge your pistol”

“practice with the left hand...for a beginner it cannot make any difference which is practiced”

- Burton (1862)

“...carried with its butt to the fore...drawn it should not be levelled...but directed toward the object by means of the right fore finger laid flat along the cylinder while the medius draws the trigger. The instinctive consent between eye and hand, combined with a little practice, will soon enable the beginner to shoot correctly from the hip; all he has to do is to think that he is pointing at the mark”

“In dangerous places the revolver should be discharged and reloaded every morning, both for the purpose of keeping the hand in, and to do the weapon justice.”

NB: R. Miller- quickdraw = lost caps, J. Reynolds- burnt fingers

Andre-

- Get familiar with the weapon
- “Gentleman”-shaped human targets
- Good stance- body alignment gives accuracy
- Practice- build up to several shots, cocking in between

- Open sights- aim for the waist
- Walk the shot- correct the firing line until you hit

Dubois-

- “With the weapon loaded I can now teach the student. Next, with caution, take twenty blank rounds and let the student fire them so they have some experience, then carefully give them five live rounds to fire.”
- “Place a plank about 4 or 5 metres in front of her and, without stopping, let her shoot, with the arm bent and the weapon hand at chest height, five rounds at the presumed level of adversary's stomach.”
- “Never threaten, unless the shooter improves, or target the adversary at face height while holding out the arms. Not only can one miss but he can drop down and with a blow break the arm which threatens him. One must, if one is not a regular shooter, place your bent arms at chest height, let the aggressor approach and fire from one or two metres; firing instinctively.”

Renaud-

- “...arrange five silhouette targets grouped differently at a short distance all around you...keep your eyes shut ...When your assistant shout “fire”, you try to put a single bullet in every single target as fast as possible...(after) a while, your hand should be able to “throw” the bullet on its own without aiming.”
- “Firstly, shoot precisely and with increasing speed at a single target...you should be able to hit the target without aiming or looking at your weapon, with both the left and right hand, and from any position: seating, kneeling, on your back, etc.”
- “...try to hit at the same target as fast as possible using progressive bursts of bullets: two bullets, then three, then four and five.”
- “Use two targets, trying at first to put one bullet in each target alternatively. Progressively, you do the same exercise with two bullets in each, three bullets, etc. The exercise is still to be done without aiming at the targets.”
- “Increase the number of targets up to five.”
- “Practise the exercise described earlier on which consist in having the target arranged randomly around you while you keep your eyes shut.”
- “Some people will find it useful to press the trigger with the middle finger while keeping the index finger against the cylinder, parallel to the barrel. This technique relies on the habit of using the index finger to point at things.”
- “Practise this exercise outside as much as possible. One way to do this is to use a revolver instead of a hunting rifle, and to try to kill rabbits, jays, and magpies, which is far from being easy.”

Leisure

- Andre- “Use waxball ammunition. [It] can be fire(d) indoors, provided one hangs a canvas sheet or old clothes in front of a wall”
- DeBerenger-
“Britain’s national Arena”, London, 1830s
“The safe, unerring use [and] scientific treatment of...pistols at targets, with or without mechanical displays, at moveable objects, at whimsical contrivances ...under supervision”
“present much to the left and high...draw your pistol to the bottom corner...thus slowly to describe a diagonal line.”
“Wafer shooting is nothing more than skilful plaything”
- Bloodless Duelling-
France, London, America
Shooting at cards, candle-snuffing, human-shaped targets
- Trick shooting – Theatres, Wild West mania- all longarm displays

“When the men do it it’s marksmanship, when I do it it’s trickshooting”- Annie Oakely, attrib., ? multibullet “buck and ball”

Summary of Commonalities

- Two methods (“There are two kinds of fencing”, Jacob/Dubois)- Target & Point/Instinctive
- Both have consistent and common features, viz;
- Daily practice
- Mindset- calmness under fire, mental acuity, focus
- Training devices- targets, cards, wafers, board
- Techniques- aiming using terrain LOS, pointing finger, clothing, intense vision (cf Mcdaniels “Burning Intensity”)
- Safe(r) Practice Weapons- BBs, deVilliers (rubber), blanks

Conclusion

- Entirely feasible to reconstruct pistol shooting as a form of HEMA
- Techniques, psychology, training methods and tools all available then as now meaning that it can be easily done, cf Kautz and Keatings instinctive shooting revival.