

The M1A As A Whitetail Rifle

Many years ago, I had the good fortune to acquire an M1A. For those of you that may not know, the M1A is a 308, (Winchester) caliber, semiautomatic, military style rifle, based on the US Rifle M14. The M1A is commonly used in the Civilian Marksmanship Program <www.odcmp.com/about_us.htm>, Service Rifle Competition. I shot well with the rifle, achieving a civilian rating of Expert. However, a permanent, disability precludes my shooting in that sort of competition ever again. My lungs and back simply will no longer stand up to laying on a shooting-mat and shooting in full sun on a ninety-degree day. That activity is simply no longer an option.

For some time, I agonized over selling this rifle and equipment. In particular, I did not want to part with such an accurate, well-made, durable, firearm. This one was composed of parts made by Harrington & Richardson and Wolf, but for the receiver, which is a single lug national match model. H&R made a relatively small number of M14 rifles for Uncle Sugar and some consider them to be collectable. Wolf, <<http://www.shop.m-14parts.com>>, offers a radius grooved

medium weight barrel for the M1A that uses tech from the black powder days that has been, effectively, brought back today. There are significant benefits to this sort of rifling, including higher velocities and easier cleaning.

Ultimately, I decided to convert my rifle to a hunting rifle. The M1A is not a rifle that is usually considered for hunting. Most often one sees it advertised for competition in the national matches or use as a tactical rifle for Law Enforcement. This is unfortunate as it has definite applications for hunting.

My rifle came to me with the action bedded in a U.S. G.I. synthetic stock and I wished to keep the option of returning it to that configuration for someone in the future, open. I wished to semi permanently mount a scope on the rifle. Due to its design, my hold and body structure, I new that I would have to raise the comb quite a bit in order to get a good cheek meld while looking through a scope mounted on it. That meant that I would be looking for a modified or a replacement stock. As it happened, the fine people at Mag-Pull <<http://www.magpul.com>> arranged for a new Archangel Stock <<http://www.archangelmanufacturing.com>> for me to try. This caused the project to leap forward as the comb height and pull length are adjustable on the Archangel Stock. At this writing Springfield Armory, one of the best known manufacturers of the M1A, is expected to begin offering the Archangel Stock direct from the factory. That speaks to its quality.

Putting the M1A or M14 rifle in a new stock is not just a matter of simply dropping it in and tightening some action screws with an inch-pound wrench. The action has to be bedded correctly or accuracy will suffer. Even with a stock designed for the action, bedding is a critical part of the equation if you want best accuracy. Bedding is not difficult with the Archangel stock, however, as no material has to be removed.

After considering the bedding and stock requirements, I began making arrangements for the other bits and pieces I would need.

First on my list of items was a base for the scope. This can be a thorny issue with M1As as the receivers are known to vary in size and I had already had a problem with an aluminum base, years earlier, which had to be returned because it did not fit. I looked for an aluminum base once again because I originally thought this would be a rifle that would not be shot more than one hundred rounds a year and because I was concerned about adding weight to an already heavy rifle. That did not work. After several false starts with aluminum, it became clear that steel was the way to go. I ended up using nearly the same steel scope base the U.S. Marines use.

After more false starts with scopes that came apart under the inherent vibration in the firing sequence of the M1A, I contacted NightForce Optics

<<http://www.nightforceoptics.com/nxs/5-5-22x50>>. They were very gracious in sending out a 5.5 – 22 x 50 NXS scope with their incredible, illuminated, MOAR-T Reticle, Zero Stop Turrets, and rings to fit. This is truly a precision scope. The optics are exceptionally clear. You won't see any color fringing around the edges of things at any magnification with their scopes and they don't get the soft focus curse at maximum magnification. The scope steps and repeats with precision and, as expected, it has performed flawlessly. They also make a 2.5 – 10 power, in this product line that would be perfect for hunting. That would have been my normal choice, but I wanted the extra magnification in this case as I am also considering using this rifle in a Sporting Rifle league at the Detroit Sportsmen's Congress <<http://www.d-s-c.org>> this year. Basically, the league allows for shooting practice on full sized whitetail targets at both 100 and 200 yards. Last year, I shot 1,000 out of 1,000 in that league with 99 of the 200 rounds in the X-ring. I am hoping to beat this record this year!

The next step was working up a hunting load. I contacted my friends at Berger Bullets <<http://www.bergerbullets.com>> for their recommendation for a 155 grain hunting bullet suitable for use in the M1A with a medium weight barrel and standard cartridge overall length. I chose the 155 grain because it is within the weight range that is standard for GI loadings for the M14 and is a good weight for whitetail hunting in the 308 Winchester caliber. Contrary to the musings of many an old uncle, 180 and 200 grain bullets are not necessary for good results on

thin-skinned game like whitetails at reasonable ranges. And, no, the heavier bullets do not buck brush better than the light ones.

Over all length is a primary consideration when the cartridges have to be workable in a magazine fed firearm like the M1A and many bolt guns if you don't wish to single load the arm. Many competitors choose Berger Bullets for their consistency and reputation for the finest accuracy. For this application, Berger recommended their VLD hunting bullet, PN: 30508. These have a G1 ballistic coefficient of .439, which is pretty impressive for a hunting bullet. Bullet design has made great advances in the last twenty years and the folks at Berger have been at the forefront. The changes mean that you can do things with lighter bullets today that were not thought prudent seventy years ago.

Careful attention to detail in hand-loading is essential to tight groups. I worked up a winter load of 40.5 grains of H4895, a Hodgdon Extreme powder, <<http://www.hodgdon.com>> in Lapua brass with CCI Bench Rest BR2 primers. This yields a round that leaves the muzzle right around 2,600 feet per second. This velocity seems to be a sweet spot for most M1A/M14 rifles. The results have been stellar with 100-yard five shot groups consistently at $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch, center to center. This group size rivals those using match ammo in a Springfield Armory Super Match M1A rifle that was featured in a recent article in the American Rifleman as well as testing they did on a Springfield Armory M21 tactical. In fact these groups rival many bolt action hunting rifles. I say a winter

load as powders can change their burning characteristics in extreme cold and or heat. Most of the Hodgdon powders do not exhibit this trait and are stable and consistent, hot or cold. All my testing was done in Michigan's Deep Freeze last winter so I know, for sure, they will work during the hunt.

I know that many of you don't hand-load for hunting. I understand. It seemed that I nearly always lost my match brass in the snow on chambering a follow up round after my shot at Mr. Whitetail. Still others have no desire to add hand-loading as an extension to hunting or shooting. Accordingly, I tested several commercial loadings as well. One of the best was Hornady Superformance ammo loaded with their 150 grain SST bullet. This is premium hunting ammo that is loaded in their match grade brass. As you can see from the photo of the deer head target, it shot very well off of a rest, yielding this incredible 15 shot group at 100 yards. I also tested Federal Premium Vital-Shok loaded with 150 grain Barns X-bullets. These produced a one inch, 5 shot, group at 100 yards out of my M1A. This bullet is good on game up to and including Black Bear. These commercial loads should be used in conjunction with an adjustable gas cylinder plug on the M1A. These are available from Schuster Manufacturing <<http://www.schustermfg.com>> and are used to reduce pressures that could damage a stock M1A/M14.

If you have the opportunity to collect an M1A and are looking for a durable, semi-auto hunting rifle, I can heartily recommend it! Equipped with a five round

detachable magazine instead of the usual 20 round military standard, this M1A is capable of shots well in excess of 200 yards with the option of a very quick follow-up if necessary. It is not what I would call a pretty rifle. However, when it comes to down range accuracy and durability, as my Grandmother used to say; "Handsome is as handsome does."

If there is a downside to using an M1A for hunting, it is the fact that, scoped, it is a heavy rifle. However, if you hunt from a stand, the weight is of little or no consequence and reduces recoil in any rifle, lessening any tendency toward flinching. If you still hunt, the rifle would be tremendous as it can be slung "Ranger Style" for stalking. The Archangel stock has two options for a sling built in.

The fact that the rifle is somewhat heavy is of little concern to me now, as I will no longer be walking any great distances in the woods, depending instead on a mechanical steed... But that is another story.

Good luck and good shooting!

Cutline for photo "Deer Head Target.tif":

15 shot group fired by the author at 100 yards.

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The Author

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Dave's M1A Hunting Rifle