



# CUSTOM RIFLE CONSIDERATIONS

Planning and Guidelines

## From the Gunsmith's Bench BY DEAN MAISEY

**A subject that I have been asked** to write about recently is that of having a 'custom' (made-to-order) rifle built to your specifications. This is assuming that you are intending to pay someone to undertake the job, rather than doing your own DIY project. This process can be fraught with challenges, and if you go about it the wrong way it could end up becoming a series of expensive mistakes, especially if you don't do your due diligence. But on the other hand, it could all go smoothly if you do it right. Just like building a new home you have to employ the right builder, use the best materials, plan a build that is fit for the purpose and the style that you want, as well as being within your budget. Having a custom built rifle can be a satisfying addition to your gun safe.

### **WHY DO I WANT A CUSTOM RIFLE?**

This is the first question you need to ask yourself. Some possible answers may be as follows:

- I need a rifle chambered for a special cartridge that the usual factory offerings don't cater for.
  - I want a classic-styled hunting rifle or a target/tactical rifle of the type that the regular gun factories don't make at all.
  - I think I can have a special rifle built in NZ better or cheaper than the cost of importing one.
- If you decide to go ahead you will need to commit time and money. Any custom rifle is going to take some months to build, rather than weeks. Sometimes they can even take years for elaborate high-grade classic type rifles, especially if custom hand-cut engraving is requested.

### **WHO SHOULD I GET TO BUILD MY CUSTOM RIFLE?**

This is a topic which can be a bit tricky for someone in my position to speak openly about. Having been professionally involved in the gun trade in NZ for over 15 years, one has to maintain a degree of professional courtesy to others, but there are some things that need to be discussed as matters of fact.

The first thing you must understand is that the gun trade in NZ is essentially an un-regulated industry. What this means is that almost anyone can claim to be a gunsmith or rifle builder, without having undertaken any firearms-specific, peer reviewed training or accreditation. Even having a firearms dealer license is not compulsory. I am even aware of a guy who once set himself up as a stock maker, but didn't

actually have a firearms license! Obviously a lack of regulation or accepted industry standard training means that there are increased risks to be aware of, and prospective clients need to be very careful about who they engage to do their gun work for them. If you are intending to pay someone to do work for you, you are perfectly within your rights to be able to ask what firearms-specific training or experience that person has, how long they have been in business, how many and what sort of rifles have they built for others? Ask to see their qualifications or references. This is your due diligence.

NZ does have some very talented and skilled engineers and machinists, but being an engineer doesn't automatically qualify someone as a gunsmith, and vice versa. There is a huge amount

of firearms specific knowledge, machining techniques, protocols and practices involved in the successful completion of a custom rifle build. It would naturally be prudent to engage a qualified gunsmith wherever possible, especially when doing any barrel or action work. What you need to realise is that a working firearm is essentially a controlled explosion six inches in front of your face. Firearms are not toys and the building of firearms should not be undertaken lightly by amateurs. This is one of the main reasons why I went to the USA years ago, after having completed a couple of other trades here in NZ - to gain training and a recognised qualification in gunsmithing from one of America's oldest gunsmithing schools. For me, I felt that I owed it to my future customers to at least do what I could to get some specialist training first, rather than just becoming a self-taught gunsmith.

At the end of the day, you need to select someone who has some experience building the type of rifle that you are looking for, and who you can trust to work with. The building of a custom rifle is essentially a partnership between the customer and the gunsmith. Good communication is vital so that there are no misunderstandings, and to increase the chances of getting exactly what you want, and right the first time. If things don't go exactly to plan you need to know that they will stand behind their work. Despite best intentions and prior planning, complications can still sometimes occur. Delays with parts arriving, getting a bad reamer, barrel, or other item, can all be beyond their control.

#### DECIDING YOUR ORDER

Once you have decided that you need or want a custom rifle, the first thing you need to do is determine some basic principles about your intended rifle:

- What calibre/s are you considering? This is a major as it can determine or limit your

choice of rifle actions to base the project on.

- What will be the main purpose of the rifle? (I.e. hunting - bush or alpine, varmint, target, tactical/long range, or classic/African?)
- Weight limit, barrel length, and stock length to suit you?
- Stock type, sighting systems, single shot or repeater?
- Are you intending to shoot just factory ammo, or are you loading your own to produce the best accuracy or performance possible?
- Is a silencer, muzzle brake, or barrel-tuner to be fitted?
- Stainless, blued, or other coating on the metal work?
- Walnut, laminated, or synthetic stock?
- And - possibly the most important - what is your budget?

Once you have answers to all these questions then it's time to talk to your gunsmith. Personally I prefer initial enquiries about custom rifle jobs to be via email with the information in writing. With phone calls it can be hard to stop to talk through the whole 'rifle build' process with someone when you are in the middle of trying to finish a job for someone else or have other people in the shop waiting for you. Most gunsmiths work by themselves or have only one or two staff, and they earn their living by charging for their time in the same way that any other professional service provider does. Once you have made your enquiry about what you want, your gunsmith can then discuss the proposal and options with you, and based on his experience, should be able to provide some guidance or assistance before you commit to anything.

#### SOURCING COMPONENTS

Sometimes a customer will want to supply certain parts themselves for a rifle build, rather than asking the gunsmith (or rifle builder/agent) to supply everything. Before you purchase anything, talk to your gunsmith first in order to avoid complications. »



Barnard S 22-250 varmint.



Dakota Left Hand 7x57, a classic hunting rifle in blued steel and high grade walnut.

**What you need to realise is that a working firearm is essentially a controlled explosion six inches in front of your face. Firearms are not toys and the building of firearms should not be undertaken lightly by amateurs. This is one of the main reasons why I went to the USA years ago, after having completed a couple of other trades here in NZ.**

## D.F. Maisey Gunsmithing

Genuine Qualified Civilian Gunsmith, Graduate Colorado School of Trades-1997, Certified Smith&Wesson Armourer-Revolver-Pistol, NZDA Short F-Class National Champion 2010, 2011, 2012

**SUPPLYING AND FITTING** True Flite Ultra Match barrels, Bartlein (cut rifle) barrels, Barnard Actions, muzzle brake, silencers, suppressors, scope mounts, accessories, TM solution bore cleaner, (Pac-Nor barrels, Shilen, Jewell, Surgeon Rifles, McMillan stocks and other products by special order)

#### FULLY EQUIPPED DEDICATED GUNSMITHING MACHINE SHOP

Includes two ultra-high precision toolroom lathes for all barrel fitting, action truing and custom machining

FOR ALL YOUR PRECISION HUNTING & MATCH-WINNING RIFLE WORK Email: dean@gunsmith.co.nz / Ph/Fax: 07544 2207 / www.gunsmith.co.nz

## Tech-Talk

Rem 700TI 300 WSM.



Often the gunsmith will prefer to supply components for a rifle build that they know are good quality and that they are familiar with. This also simplifies things from a 'Consumer Guarantees Act' point of view. If someone is responsible for both supplying and fitting an item, then they are duty bound to warranty both.

If you supply an item with a request for the gunsmith to just do the fitting, then the 'warranty' situation can become tricky. Be prepared to accept a share of the burden of responsibility if the item fails to perform, or if that supplied item has problems that affect the performance of others, or it takes longer than expected to fit or fix it. I have had problems in the past with barrels that have been supplied to me by the customer for fitting, and am now reluctant to fit rifle barrel blanks other than those that I supply as part of the job. Likewise, the fitting of cheap silencers, or other things that guys have found on Trade Me or elsewhere, can sometimes cause problems for both the gunsmith and the customer. If you are trying to save costs, then it is best to discuss the options with

your gunsmith first. If you can supply an action or something cheaper than they can get it for, then they may well be happy for you to purchase and supply it. But bear in mind, the gunsmith or gun maker is in business and as such they will need to put a small margin on any items that they have supplied as part of the job. This is just normal business practice to help towards paying for overheads and administration time, warranty cover etc. Be aware that if you are looking at foreign parts or prices on the internet, there are often hidden costs or complications with the exporting and importing process. Sometimes it can actually cost you more than dealing through your gunsmith or gun dealer. Be aware of the exchange rate differences, export fees, freight costs, customs clearance and brokerage fees at this end, as well as GST and MAF fees. Quite a few guys have got a surprise in this regard.

### BUSINESS CONSIDERATIONS AND WARRANTIES

Most professional gunsmiths only charge about \$30 - \$50 per hour, plus GST. This is cheap

and with the huge expenses of setting up a workshop, it can only be maintained with extreme dedication to the job and by keeping overheads down.

Unfortunately insurance costs have recently increased as a direct result of some newcomers to the gun industry having product failures that have come to the attention of the insurance companies; this ends up affecting legitimate businesses as well.

Pricing up a quote or estimate for a custom rifle build can be tricky, and it can take up a lot of time to work through the process - time that hopefully ends up getting paid for. The gunsmith will estimate a build cost based on the estimated cost of parts, the estimated cost of their time and a small margin to allow for contingencies and other expenses. No one wants to under-quote or lose money on a job, as this ultimately benefits no one. A good gunsmith deserves to be paid and have a successful business. If they go out of business then the customer loses too. If you are the kind of person who likes to shop around to get an idea of prices, then that's fine, just don't waste large amounts of people's time in the process. Most gunsmiths are very busy and are usually not sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. Everybody likes to get a 'great deal' but remember you have to compare apples with apples. With retail purchases you can compare the exact same products and so just focus on the price, however when getting quotes for a custom rifle you are comparing one business / workshop / gunsmith to another, and the equipment / skill level

/ service / expertise can vary dramatically from one to another. The cheapest option is not always the best. A good gunsmith is usually happy to build a custom rifle for you, provided that it ends up being a successful and profitable exercise, rather than a project that costs them money or becomes a burden.

### COMMUNICATION

This is one of most important aspects for both parties to get right. Your gunsmith is not a mind reader. It is your responsibility to clearly convey to your gunsmith exactly what you want when commissioning a rifle build. Providing sample photos of a rifle via email is one good method that is commonly used. If you're not sure about something, then ask. Never assume. Some companies offer a sort of 'canned custom rifle' package, where you can select from a basic rifle template with several multi-choice options available. (Such as Borden Rifles in the USA, and others.) Getting all the details of a custom rifle build down in writing is strongly advised, that way there is no confusion later. However, if you agree on something and then get a price based on that, be aware that if you add items or tasks to the job list then you must expect the price to alter accordingly. And as we discussed back in Rod & Rifle Nov/Dec 2011 - keep your expectations realistic, and this will help to avoid disappointment.

In Part 2 of this series we will discuss the components and parts for a rifle build, and some of the things you need to know about them in order to make the right decisions. **R&R**

## HILL COUNTRY HELICOPTERS

We will fly you on your hunting or fishing adventure into the RUAHINE, KAWEKA and KAIMANAWA ranges from our Taihape base – Maori Land Blocks and Fishing Blocks Available



Call Mark Tilyard 027 223 0298 > Peter Robb 0274 424 818 > Hill Country Helicopters Limited  
PO Box 774, Wanganui > Tel: 06 388 0084 > Fax: 06 343 1890 > Email: marktilyard@hotmail.co.nz