

Outdoors

A gun is just a tool?

How often have I said, in bitter debates against anti-gun fanatics on radio, TV and before live audiences during the past 30 years, that “a gun is just a tool, an inanimate object like a monkey wrench, having no independent will of its own for either good or evil?”

That statement remains objectively true, but I come before you now to confess that a special firearm actually can be far, far more than “just a tool.”

Of course, the guns involved in those debates were mostly handguns, the possession of which the antis were striving to ban as a first step toward total civilian disarmament. That remains their fixed intention still, by the way, but they’re now trying to do it through the United Nations.

The following statements may also describe some handguns, but many long guns, especially hunting rifles, rise above the “tool” category to become trusted companions, treasured for years of reliable service and shared adventures.

Hunters may own several rifles, but there was a saying in the old West, “Beware the man with only one gun!”, meaning that familiarity and daily practice with his one weapon probably made him very dangerous with it.

I own such a rifle. It’s a standard Sako “Forester” carbine with a Mannlicher-style stock, caliber .308 WCF. It was my regular deer rifle for many seasons, and in my hands was very dangerous to literally scores of whitetail bucks.

With it I pulled off close shots and long shots, open shots and snap shots in thick cover, shots at every angle, standing and running. It never failed me ... and this despite the fact that on its best day it never grouped five shots smaller than 1-1/2 to

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two inches at 100 yards ... so much for the much-desired “minute-of-angle” rifle for Texas whitetails.

Some years after I’d retired the Sako, an official of the Sako company of Finland offered to trade me a brand-new Sako Forester for my 40-year-old carbine showing the dents and scratches of years of honorable service. When I demurred, he upped the offer to two new rifles for mine. I still refused, pleading sentimental value, and asked why the company’s interest in an undistinguished and hard-used model of which they’d manufactured thousands.

He replied that so many photographs had been published in so many magazines and books of me grinning smugly over some defunct creature while clutching that Sako that the company had come to regard mine as the “most famous Sako rifle in the world!”

As flattering as that was, I still couldn’t part with my rifle. It hasn’t been fired in years now and may never speak again, but I recently refused another offer to buy it, saying – only half in jest — that I plan to take it with me when I depart for the Happy Hunting Grounds.

This rifle is infinitely more than a tool; it’s a partner and a favorite companion, with a distinct personality. Together we have a history, this rifle and I, a tale of a thousand cold December mornings and myriad exciting memories.

If memory serves, we were infallible on whitetails, killing



Wootters, with his favorite Sako rifle on his shoulder, poses with one of scores of whitetail bucks the man-rifle team harvested during the seasons when the little .308 carbine was his principal deer rifle. The buck was rattled up on a Uvalde County lease just at dusk.

every single deer at which we ever fired ... no misses, no cripples, and very few second bullets needed.

It still handles like a part of my anatomy. The butt hits my shoulder with my eye centered behind the scope, the crosshairs resting wherever I’m looking. When a buck starts busting brush, the Sako seems to leap to its place against my cheek without conscious effort from me. Such a paragon simply cannot be had for money; only years of intimacy can weld rifle and rifleman into such a unit.

nothing better than to find one such special gun in a lifetime. If you do, or already have, cherish it and care for it tenderly ... and never, never let it get away.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.