



Hangfire: A delay in firing a cartridge after the firing pin has struck the primer. ([International Hunter Education Association IHEA](#))

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As I read a number of peoples' comments on related sites re shooting old military surplus rifles, with old military surplus (mil-surp) ammo, I got the cold sweats. Here's why:

HANGFIRE. Ever hear that word before? It means a delayed ignition of a cartridge after the primer is struck. People that shoot old Mil-Surp ammo need to tattoo that word into their brain.

In the late 60s a friend was shooting Mil-Surp ammo through his 91 Mauser. It was all head-stamped late 1930s and was clean, except for an occasional round that showed a little bit of green gunk seeping out from around the primer. Not to worry, we thought, so kept on firing, ejecting, loading, etc.

Once in a while we'd get a dud that wouldn't go off (misfire) so just ignored it and kept on shooting.

Then it happened. Aim, squeeze trigger, click...another misfire. Just as my friend was grabbing the bolt handle to clear the apparent "dud"

BOOM! The rifle discharged. Fortunately it was still being pointed downrange.

All kinds of nervous thoughts ran through our heads,

like.....

"What would have happened if that round went off with the bolt open?"

"How many of those ejected duds laying on the ground have a primer that's still smoldering and waiting to go BANG?"

"Should I drop this rifle and run like hell away from here?"

We chose the last option and ran about 50 yds. behind our firing location. We waited for a very long five minutes for any ejected "duds" to go off. None did. We reasoned that if any were going to detonate they would have done so by now, so walked back to retrieve our gear.

We dug a good-sized hole and buried the misfired duds, empty fired cases and all of the remaining unfired ammo. The stuff was Berdan primed so not reloadable, practically speaking.

My point? If one must shoot Mil-Surp ammo, they should know what to do when they squeeze the trigger on a live round and nothing happens.

I'll put it in caps:

IF YOU'RE SHOOTING MIL-SURP AMMO AND GET A MISFIRE (DUD), YOU MUST ASSUME YOU HAVE A HANGFIRE. DO NOT OPEN THE BOLT FOR UP TO FIVE MINUTES, BUT NO LESS THAN ONE MINUTE.

CONTINUE HOLDING THE RIFLE DOWNRANGE FOR THOSE FIVE MINUTES.

A CARTRIDGE WITH A DEFECTIVE PRIMER THAT IGNITES THE POWDER CHARGE SECONDS AFTER IT'S BEEN STRUCK CAN CAUSE SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH IF IT EXPLODES OUTSIDE OF A LOCKED BREECH FIREARM!

Think of it as a small hand grenade spewing brass shrapnel in all directions.

The five minute waiting period after a Mil-Surp ammo misfire was my own self-imposed restriction that I placed on myself years ago, and it seemed prudent at the time.

However, five minutes may be excessive. It is probably best to get quality advice from a certified firearms instructor as to how long to wait after a misfire before ejecting, or any good authoritative printed source, like NRA publications.

Looking back, the only hangfire I'm aware of lasted only seconds, or even fractions of a second.....kind of like firing an old flintlock (Click - WHOOSH...**BOOM!**).

Two more related safety rules:

(1) Always wear eye protection when shooting.

(2) Have your Mil-Surp rifle checked out by a competent gunsmith to be sure that it's safe to shoot before you take it to the range. If you've been shooting a Mil-Surp rifle that hasn't been gunsmith inspected then please have it checked out before shooting it again. Be sure the gunsmith checks for excessive headspace as part of the inspection.

If you mention a headspace check and they don't know what you're talking about, find another gunsmith that does.

Mil-Surp rifles got me started into hand loading as the only way to get safe, dependable, accurate, and affordable ammo. I quit using Mil-Surp ammo because the misfires were nerve-wracking what with having to keep the rifle pointed downrange, wondering whether or not I had a hangfire that could discharge at any second.

I hope what I've mentioned here saves some Mil-Surp newbies from needless injury. Be safe and have fun. This hobby is a lot more entertaining when one has both eyes and all fingers to enjoy it with.

Hangfire Quiz

If your firearm fails to shoot immediately (hangfire), you should

- (a) disassemble your firearm;
- (b) look down the barrel to see why the round did not fire;
- (c) keep the firearm pointed downrange for at least one to five minutes;
- (d) none of the above.

If you chose any answer other than (c), please re-read article.

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