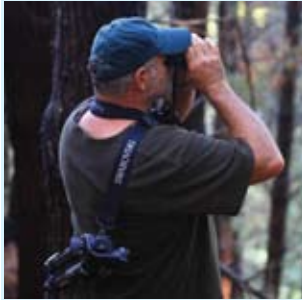


# Know the Arms Code



Mike Spray  
Programme Manager,  
Firearms and HUNTS  
NZ Mountain Safety Council



After a particularly tragic hunting incident where one hunter mistook another hunter for a deer, Coroner M McFarlane in his report stated: *Despite its brevity, the Arms Code is remarkably comprehensive. Hunters need to not only thoroughly know the Code, but also apply every part of it at all times. Even the most experienced hunter would benefit from a refresher course on firearms safety and from membership, or at least contact with one of the many deerstalkers clubs.*

A tragic hunting incident in November this year involving two good mates was a reminder to all of us who use firearms to follow the coroner's recommendation and **know the Code and apply every part of it at all times**. The two 17 year old mates had been shooting on a farm during the night. The next morning one was cleaning the .22 rifle when it discharged killing the other mate.

This was the third non intentional firearms death this year. In March one deer hunter was shot by his hunting companion after he failed to positively identify his target beyond all doubt, and in September a man died when handling a firearm after drinking.



A version of the Arms Code was first written in 1968, by Lynn Harris and P C Logan called 'Firearms and Hunting - Safety with Firearms and Safe Hunting Manual.' It was produced by the National Mountain Safety Council, now called the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council (NZMSC). The idea to produce this safety manual was born out of the Forest Service rules for safe hunting. Lynn Harris had instructed at the Forest Service deer cullers training camp at Dip Flat in the Wairau Valley, Nelson Lakes National Park; an aspect of the deer cullers training was firearm's and hunter safety.

In the 'introduction' of the manual Logan and Harris wrote: *The National Mountain Safety Council conducts continuing campaigns of both publicity and technical instruction in accordance with accepted principles of safe mountain practices as approved by experts drawn from all member*

*bodies. In accordance with this aim, it was decided that 1968-69 would be devoted to firearms safety and safe hunting and that the programme would include the production of a comprehensive manual covering these facets of mountain recreation. To ensure uniformity of thought on the subjects it was considered imperative to obtain the knowledge of experienced shooters, hunters and firearm technical experts. This was accomplished by promoting a seminar at Lake Rotoiti, Nelson, where the representatives from all interested bodies met, the content of the manual was completed and the many technical or controversial details agreed upon. This manual is the result of those findings. It is hoped that its production will assist in supplying the sportsman hunter with definite and reliable information on correct handling and safe hunting as applied to New Zealand conditions.*

Logan and Harris went on to write: *We cannot afford to ignore or be complacent about the continuing tragic toll of human lives caused by unsafe handling of firearms and carelessness. In a study of so many so called firearms 'accidents' it has been found that no 'accident' would have occurred had every firearm user known of and adhered to the advice contained in this book. To achieve a better record of firearms safety requires the active and full support of every sportsman – it is something that cannot be left to 'the other fellow'.*

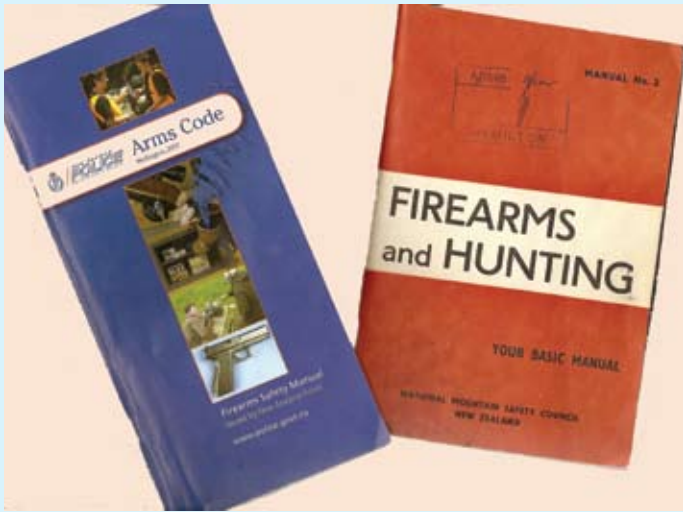
It is clear that message Logan and Harris wrote in 1968 differs little from the recommendation made by the coroner 38 years later. Logan and Harris's manual highlighted five basic rules of firearms safety:

1. CHECK THAT FIREARM
  - Check that you have the right ammunition
  - Check that the muzzle is always pointed an a safe direction
  - Check that the bore is not obstructed
  - Check that the chamber and magazine are empty
2. LOAD MAGAZINE ONLY WHEN HUNTING AREA IS REACHED
3. USE HALF OPEN BOLT WHEN IN A STATE OF SEMI READINESS
4. IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET
5. CONSIDER YOUR FIRING ZONE

It seems little has changed in 38 years even the basic rules of firearms safety. I suppose common sense will always be common sense.

A little poem appears in the text under Rule 4, Identify your target:

*You may kill, or you may miss  
But at all times think of this,  
All the game ever bred,  
Won't repay for one man dead*



The first Arms Code was produced by Police following Logan and Harris's example the following year in 1969. The then Commissioner of Police, G C Urquhart stated in his introduction to the Code:

*Every year unsuspecting citizens are killed or injured simply through carelessness of failure to observe a few basic rules. To protect yourself and others, you are recommended to follow the advice given in this booklet.*

Interestingly the very first sentence in Chapter one states:

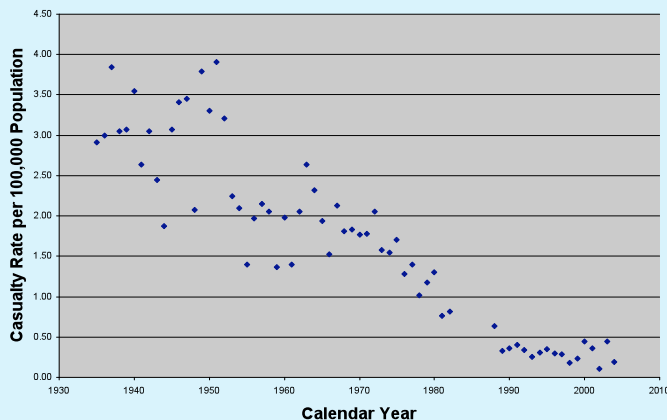
*Every month some child is killed because firearms have been carelessly left within reach.*

Mountain Safety Council records show that there have been five incidents in the past five years where a firearm has been left insecure in the home. Two of these resulted in a death. Three of the victims were under the age of sixteen; the legal age to obtain a firearms licence. This indicates that child deaths as a result of firearms being left insecure in the home has dropped markedly from 1969.

Chaz Forsyth's research, 'Trends in Accidental Shootings in NZ – 1935 to 2004' supports MSC's records. In Chaz's research he states:

*One thing is clear – despite the firearms per capita increasing from 0.24 in 1935 to 0.31 in 2004, accidental shooting casualty rates are declining!*

Accidental Shooting Casualties 1935 - 2004



Incidentally, the 1969 Police Arms Code contained the five basic rules that Logan and Harris's manual contained almost word for word.

There have been 13 subsequent editions of the Arms Code, all revised and reprinted. NZMSC was first acknowledged for its assistance in compiling the Arms Code in 1985 and from then on in all other subsequent rewrites, the Council has been acknowledged as a major contributor to the review and rewrite of the Code. In the last edition, 2007 the Commissioner, Rob Robinson included in his message:

*It is because of the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council's involvement that New Zealand has a comparatively good safety record. The Police are grateful to these unpaid volunteers for their expertise and contribution and recognises them as strategic partners in furthering out shared aim of 'Safer Communities Together', which was a nice and deserving statement from the commissioner to MSC.*

The purpose of the Arms Act 1983 and Arms Regulations 1992 is to promote both the safe use and control of firearms. Much of the Arms Code, as it relates to safety, is due to New Zealand's legislation. Security of firearms is an example. The law enforces security of firearms but in doing so promotes a very important safety message. The 1992 Arms Regulations states: *A firearm must not be put in a place where a child has ready access to it, so lock your guns away.*



The purpose of the Arms Code is to ensure that rigorous procedures for firearms safety and security are maintained. The Arms Code contains:

- what you must know about firearms
- firearms safety
- understanding firearms
- firearms licensing
- your duties and legal requirements

All firearms owners and users are legally obliged to comply with all legal requirements contained within the Arms Code.

The five basic rules written and promoted by Logan and Harris lasted for the first three editions of the Arms Code. They changed to seven basic rules in the 1984 edition and have remained the same ever since. It is now a good time to, as Coroner M McFarlane recommended, refresh on the current seven basic rules of firearms safety.

### The Seven Basic Rules Are:

#### 1. Treat every firearm as loaded

- Do not take any one's word that a firearm is unloaded
- Check the firearm yourself
- Only pass or accept a firearm that has the muzzle pointed in a safe direction, the action is open, and is not loaded

#### 2. Always point a firearm in a safe direction

- A safe direction will depend on where you are
- Never point a firearm at any one else including yourself
- Always be particularly careful when placing firearms in, or removing them from vehicles, boats or storage

#### 3. Load a firearm only when ready to fire

- Only load your magazine when you reach your shooting area
- Do not load the chamber until you are ready to shoot
- Unload the chamber if game gets away
- Unload the firearm completely (magazine and chamber) before leaving the shooting area

#### 4. Identify your target beyond all doubt

- Never fire at movement, colour, sound or shape
- Assume movement, colour, sound or shape to be human until you prove otherwise
- Beware of stag fever where emotions may override rational thinking
- Wear a colour that stands out from the background you are shooting in and is different from game animals in that area

#### 5. Check your firing zone

- Be aware of what you could hit in the area between you, and your target, and in the area beyond
- Never fire when companions are ahead of you
- It is unsafe to shoot at a target on the skyline
- Use extra care when shooting at a moving target, as your firing zone can change rapidly as your target moves
- Ricochets can be caused by flat or hard surfaces like rocks, snow, water or trees

#### 6. Store firearms and ammunition separately

- A firearm must not be put in a place where a child has ready access to it
- Ammunition must be stored separately of the firearm incapable of firing
- Firearms must be secured against theft
- Never leave a firearm in a vehicle that is unattended

#### 7. Avoid alcohol and drugs when handling firearms

- Alcohol and drugs must never be taken just before you go shooting
- Do not shoot with others who are, or have been, drinking alcohol or taking drugs

These seven basic rules of firearms safety have stood the test of time and are as relevant today as they were when first introduced in 1984. They are easily understood and are common sense rules. It is clearly common sense to never point a firearm at any one or yourself.

The Arms Code contains information relating to a number of other specific firearms safety protocols. Let's have a refresher on some of these:



#### Crossing fences

- If there is a gate use it. Never climb a fence while carrying a firearm.
- If there are two or more people, one should climb over the fence without a firearm, then pass the unloaded firearms across with the actions open, and pointed in a safe direction.
- If you are on your own, unload the firearm and place it muzzle first, through the fence. Lay the firearm on the ground, and then climb over the fence.

#### Half open bolt or action in a state of semi readiness

(Shotguns and rifles except semi automatics)

The semi ready condition with half open bolt can be taken up when you have seen game or expect to flush game. Hold the firearm in both hands, with the cartridge pushed partly forward into the chamber so there is part of the cartridge showing. Hold the bolt with the thumb so it does not slide backwards and eject the round. Never close the action completely unless you know you have correctly identified your target and you have time to make a safe shot. If you do close the action but then do not take a shot, go back to the semi ready state with a half open bolt.

#### Cleaning firearms

Before cleaning a firearm point it in a safe direction and check that it is completely unloaded. Regular cleaning and maintenance will keep a firearm safe and reliable.

#### Safety catches

Never rely on a safety catch as it is a mechanical device which can malfunction. It is not possible to use a half open bolt with a semi automatic rifle or shotgun. So when you have seen game, or expect to flush game at any moment, you can load your firearm and put the

safety catch on. Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction and unload the chamber immediately if you do not take a shot.

If you do own a semi automatic rifle or shotgun, have the safety catch regularly tested by a competent gunsmith.

If you are testing the safety catch yourself:

- Be sure there is no ammunition in the firearm
- Point the muzzle in a safe direction
- Cock the action
- Apply the safety catch
- Check the firearm cannot be fired (do this by pulling the trigger several times and by bumping the firearm)

#### Correct ammunition

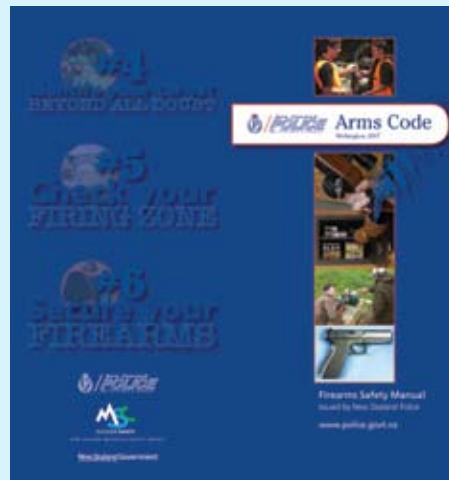
- It is important to use the correct ammunition in your firearm
- Do not use old or corroded ammunition
- Be aware of using modern ammunition in old shotguns

#### Know the Arms Code

You are able to get a copy of the Arms Code by visiting your local Police Arms Office or by contacting the NZMSC through their website, [www.mountainsafety.org.nz](http://www.mountainsafety.org.nz)

Thoroughly knowing the Arms Code and applying every part of it at all times may be the difference between being involved in a terrible shooting tragedy, or you and your mates remaining completely safe and enjoying every hunting moment.

Stay safe



*Mike Spray has been a National Park Ranger and has spent a number of years based in Te Urewera National Park where this work provided opportunity to have the bush and hunting just out the back door. Since those days, Mike has spent time managing an outdoor education centre, possum monitoring, and is now working as the firearms and hunter training programme manager employed by New Zealand Mountain Safety Council National Office.*