

SAMUEL COLT'S

Magical Disappearing Sight Picture



.44 Caliber Black Powder Colt 1851

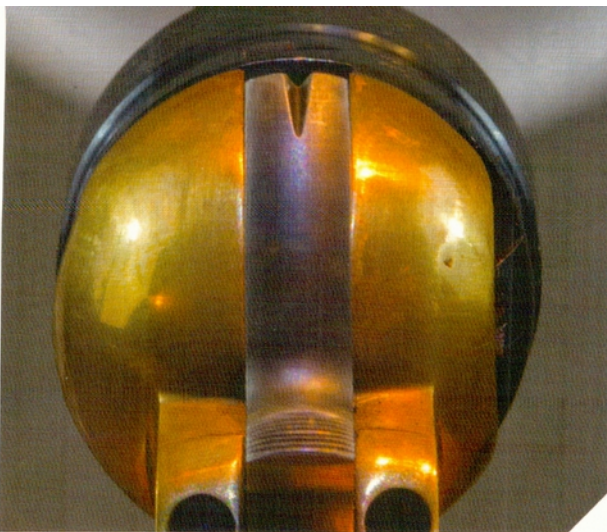
Confederate Navy by Pietta.

By Klint Macro

Photos by Matt Snyder

My favorite black powder pistol is the .44 caliber Colt 1851 Confederate Navy. I am drawn to it's lines, the glowing brass frame, and its rugged elegance. The Colt design has a reputation of not being as "accurate" as the Remington design. I do not agree with this sentiment. I don't think that the gun is inaccurate, but perhaps it requires a bit more skill to fire it

accurately. The fact is that the sight picture disappears when the gun is fired. The cause of this magical phenomenon is that the rear sight is actually cut into the hammer spur. Sight alignment cannot be achieved until the hammer is cocked and when the hammer falls, presto -- no more sight picture.



The rear sight is cut into the hammer and is visible when cocked.

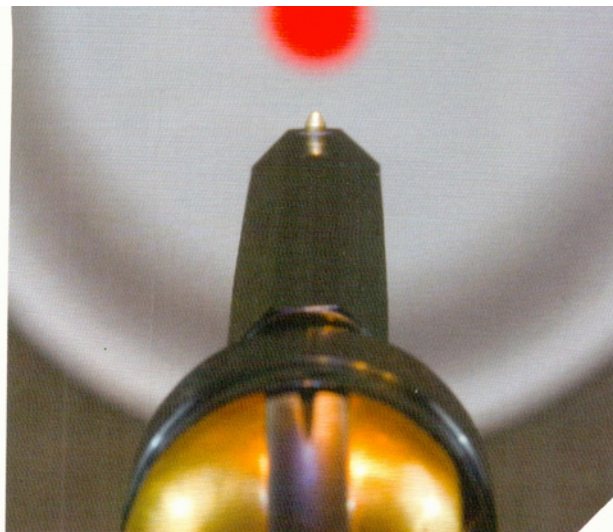
Anyone who has taken a shooting course has heard of the “Fundamentals of Firing a Shot.” These fundamentals (or rules) are: Aiming, Hold Control, Breath Control, Trigger Control, and Follow Through. Let’s discuss the shooting fundamentals and how they apply specifically to the Colt 1851 Navy.

Aiming: Sight Alignment and Sight Picture

Aiming actually consists of two components, sight alignment and sight picture.

When using sighted fire, we center the front sight post in the center of the rear sight “V” maintaining equal height along the top of the “V” and the post, and equal light, as the contrast of light slivers on either side of the front sight post placed in the center of the rear sight “V.” Our focus should be on the front sight post. The rear sight “V” and the target should be slightly blurry. That is sight alignment -- equal height, equal light.

Sight Picture is when we place those aligned sights onto the target. We may use a six o’clock hold, or a center hold. A six o’clock hold is where we hold the aligned sights at the bottom of the target as if it were at six o’clock on an analog clock. A six o’clock hold is often used by target shooters. It makes the sights easier to see while shooting at a black paper bull’s eye. The center hold is just that. We hold the aligned sights on the exact center of the target. This is typically used by folks who are employing a gun for more practical applications like hunting. If you know your gun well enough, you may change your hold from six o’clock to center hold, depending on the load or distance that you are shooting.



Equal Height, Equal Light: While focusing on the front sight, align the front sight post inside the rear sight “V.” Create a sight picture by placing the aligned sights onto the target.

Sight adjustments on the Colt are impossible without a file, and be advised that they are “destructive.” You must either file down the front sight, or cut the “V” of the rear sight deeper to make a sight adjustment. I recommend being very careful and absolutely sure of what you are doing before making these modifications. Perhaps consulting a gunsmith prior to doing this at home would be prudent.

Hold Control

The next fundamental, Hold Control, is crucial in allowing us to control the firearm. It consists of presenting the gun in such a way that we can efficiently index the gun to the target and lessen our movement when achieving sight alignment and sight picture.

Although this firearm was traditionally used in a one handed application, I am a fan of a two handed “Center Indexed” grip and presentation. While a modern semi-auto thumbs forward two handed grip will give us much more “tactile interface” and control of the pistol when managing recoil, with a single action Colt, recoil management is not a factor as we will need to cock the pistol manually between shots. Besides that, a thumbs forward grip with any revolver, especially a black powder gun, will result in a nasty burn that you will only want to experience one time. A traditional “thumb over” two handed grip is quite sufficient. I recommend that you maintain your “master” strong hand grip and do your hammer manipulation using your support thumb, giving you greater control over the gun.

Prior to presenting the gun, identify the target, focus on the



Two Handed Grip: Get as much tactile interface as possible. Put more meat on the gun and lock the grip in place by putting your support thumb over the strong thumb.

target, then drive the gun into your line of sight from your center or high compressed retention position. If you present the gun directly from your center index and push to the center of your target via your line of sight, you will be able to achieve sight alignment and sight picture with much more efficiency. Once you come to full extension with both arms, touch the trigger (touch not press) and shift your focus to the front sight of the gun. As soon as you have created your proper sight picture, apply pressure to the trigger.



Presentation is critical! Drive the gun to full extension via your line of sight.

Breath Control

Breath Control should happen simultaneous to the presentation of the gun. When you breathe normally, you stop breathing for a beat or two before you begin the inhale of the next breath cycle. It doesn't require thought or muscles, it just happens naturally. Take advantage of this natural pause in the breath cycle. Identify the target, present the gun and exhale simultaneously, get to full extension, touch trigger, stop breathing, aim, and then press the trigger.



Identify the target, present and exhale simultaneously, get to full extension, touch trigger, stop breathing, aim, then press trigger.



The High Compressed "Center Indexed" Ready Position.

Trigger Control

We need to press the trigger rearward with a smooth consistent pressure that allows us to actuate the trigger with out disrupting the sight picture. Sounds simple, right? It actually is. The Colt 1851 has an extremely short and easy trigger. If we touch the trigger at full extension as we exhale, shift our focus to the front sight, acquire our sight picture then apply slight pressure.... pressure.... pressure.... BANG! Most likely we will have a good hit. Initially we should experience a “surprise break” meaning we don’t know when the hammer will fall. If we know our gun and know ourselves, we should be able to purposefully press the trigger without jerking, slapping, or generally disrespecting the trigger and disrupting our sight alignment and sight picture.

Follow Through

Follow through is one of the fundamentals that I have found folks understand the least and with the Colt 1851 Navy, follow through may arguably be the most important fundamental of all. Follow through is achieved when we can hold our sight alignment and sight picture throughout the entire trigger cycle and firing process.

Considering that a black powder load is typically slower than a modern smokeless cartridge, and considering that, with the Colt 1851, our sight picture disappears before the percussion cap is struck and the load is ignited, it is SUPER crucial that we maintain all of the fundamentals as the gun fires and the projectile exits the muzzle. This is follow through.

One way to work on follow through is to make a conscience observation and “mental snapshot” of where the sights were when the gun fired. This way you can “call the shot.” After the gun fires, keep the trigger pinned rearward for “one hippopotamus – two hippopotamus” before changing your mental focus to breaking your sight picture and cocking the hammer and continue with follow up shots.

Using slow air pistols and modern laser training products such as the SIRT pistol can really help you, as a shooter, overcome any follow through issues and hone all of the shooting fundamentals at home. Of course, practicing with your Colt on the range is the preferred method.

Next time someone challenges you and your Colt, stand with your back to the sun and put all of your shots in the X ring by employing the fundamentals and following through with Sam Colt’s magical disappearing sight picture.

Klint Macro is an NMLRA Certified Trainer and the founder of The Trigger Pressers Union (www.triggerpressersunion.com). MB



Klint Macro, NMLRA Trainer, with his Pietta Colt 1851 Confederate Navy.

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