

Top Up Your Magazine

... or do you just feel lucky?

By Dave Brown

"I know what you're thinking. 'Did he fire six shots or only five?' Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement I kind of lost track myself. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya, punk?"

– Clint Eastwood, "Dirty Harry"

There is nothing laughable or exciting about a real-life gunfight. To paraphrase 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, a gunfight is nasty, brutish and short. The longer it lasts, the more people get hurt.

If a gunfight were to happen today, how many rounds are currently in your sidearm? For some officers, that answer might be, one less than full capacity. Why? Do you even know how many rounds might be required if you need that firearm to save human life? One? Two? A lot? Even when Clint Eastwood's fictional character Harry Callahan carried a .44 Magnum revolver that held only six shots, he still lost count. It is certainly no easier today when the average military or police sidearm holds 15 to 17 rounds.

If your agency allows the topping up of one more round to bring that pistol up to full capacity, why not load that one extra round.



The PLUS ONE Principle

Why top up? After all, that first round is probably the most critical. That extra loose round adds seconds to your loading procedure and takes up room in your locker. The average police sidearm holds 15 to 17 rounds in the magazine plus another 30 to 34 on your belt. Surely that is enough.

Statistically, that is true. The average officer-involved shooting in Canada involves far less than 17 rounds.

But bad guys don't read statistics. If your agency allows topping up that extra round, the Plus One principle says when you walk out that door to go on duty there should be one on the chamber, a fully-loaded magazine in the pistol and two fully loaded magazines on your belt.

The modern handgun magazine is designed to contain its full capacity of cartridges for years at a time. Magazine springs do not weaken from staying loaded all the time. (Springs weaken from being repeatedly stretched and compressed.)

There are three good reasons to top up your sidearm to its maximum capacity. Surprisingly, only having 51 rounds in a 52-round gunfight is not the only reason.

Sure, those 51 rounds may get you through your entire career, firing them off only in periodic qualifications. But both Thomas Hobbes and Harry Callahan would support the principle that when things go wrong, they go wrong in a hurry. Experience two Phase Two jams in a row such as a magazine double-feed, and you are now down to whatever is left in the gun. Now, that one extra round might make a difference.

The second reason why taking those few extra seconds to top up your magazine where allowed is simple. It provides absolute proof you remembered to chamber a round.

More than one officer in Canada has unloaded their firearm at the end of their shift and found they forgot to chamber a round. Most modern pistols have mechanical devices to indicate that the chamber is loaded, but as former United States President Ronald Reagan was famously quoted, "Trust, but verify."

I think he may have been talking about global nuclear disarmament, but his translation of an old Russian proverb makes as much sense in law enforcement today as it did when the Berlin Wall began to come down.

That one extra round is positive proof there is a round in the chamber. With early semi-automatics, we would perform what is known as a 'press-check.' We don't need to do that anymore. If that one extra round fits your previously fully-loaded magazine, then you know for certain there is a round in the chamber.

The third reason to top up a magazine with one extra round is it spreads the wear and tear of a round constantly being chambered and unloaded across two rounds instead of one. Sometimes, a round constantly going in and out of the chamber may experience what is known as 'bullet setback.' This occurs when the bullet begins to get seated deeper into the case. But how serious is that problem?

The Bullet Setback Myth

In scientific testing for *Blue Line Magazine*, we have found there is no discernible pressure increase in 9mm Luger rounds seated deeper into the case mouth. We found that a bullet can be seated so deep that it literally compresses the gunpowder, and it still does not result in a significant pressure increase.

If a bullet gets pushed back somewhat into the case mouth, it may however cause feeding problems. This is why most instructors recommend that round only for initial feeding into the chamber – and then firing it off at the next qualification session of course.

If officers top off their magazine with one extra round every time they load their pistol, that wear and tear now gets spread over two rounds; the top round gets fed into the chamber and a new round is topped up in the magazine. On the next loading, the new round becomes the chambered round, and the original chambered round becomes the topped up round.

Topping Up and the PROVE Procedure

Sidearms that are unloaded at the end of every shift and reloaded before the next one require more steps to perform and may result in more things that can go wrong, but with simple and consistent procedures, it can also add an extra opportunity to practice the same muscle movements that would be required in emergency manipulation drills.

For most officers, that simple procedure is known as PROVE. This acronym was created for the Canadian Firearms Safety Course program back in 1999 to inspire students to remember to Point the firearm in a safe direction; Remove all ammunition; Observe the chamber; Verify the feeding path; and Examine the bore for obstructions.

The PROVE procedure save lives.

To integrate topping up into PROVE, it is simple. Point the pistol into your designated safe direction or loading station; remove any magazine FIRST, then pull back the slide and lock it open; observe the chamber is empty; take a look down the empty magazine well to ensure you can see all the way to the bottom and nothing is stuck or left behind; and check the barrel for obstructions with a rod or bore light.

Now, with the slide still locked back, insert your loaded magazine into the grip, grasp the slide with your support hand, pull back and let go. Let the slide slam forward. If done correctly, your support hand will move in the opposite direction of the slide.

Holster your sidearm, pop out the magazine and top up one more round. Reinsert the magazine and give it a final tug to ensure it is locked in place.

That's it. You have now gotten positive feedback that there is a round in the chamber and you have also practiced the same muscle movements required if you run out of ammunition and need to reload in a hurry.

Take those extra five seconds. Once your sidearm is safely loaded and holstered, pop out the magazine, top up with one more round and you can now walk out the door with the confidence that there truly is a round in the chamber; no press check or loaded chamber indicator needed.

The Three “Rules” of a Gunfight

If I were to sum up 30-years as a professional firearms trainer into what I consider my top three rules of a gunfight in situations where there literally are no “rules,” they would probably be something like the following.

The first rule of a gunfight is to have a gun. Second rule of a gunfight is to have a loaded gun. Third rule of a gunfight is to have lots of friends with lots of guns. Respond with overwhelming force and the best gunfight in the world is the one that never happens in the first place.

If your agency allows topping up one more round, do it. It is not just one more card stacked in your favor if things go sideways. When you walk out that door, it also acts as absolute proof that there is a round in the chamber for the day when you are going to need that first round the most.

– Sun Tzu, *The Art of War.* *“Every battle is won before it is ever fought.”*