

Famous Firearm Slangs & Terms

- By Joe Aiello / December 12, 2012

With the holiday season upon us, we all are probably seeing more groups of people and attending more events. It is at these large events where people generally get to talking and tend to use well-known terms in regular conversation.

But, how many of these well known terms are actually gun terms? You would probably be surprised at just how many terms and slangs are derived from firearms or firearms related activities.

I have been keeping a mental list of some of these firearm slangs for some time now and decided that it would be fun to finally get around to listing them in print (so to speak...). Have a look at the list below and remember, the next time you hear someone who is anti-gun using a firearm term...you can have your own private laugh!

The Whole Nine Yards:

Meaning: Everything or Everything Available

Origin: During World War 2, fighter planes had machine guns mounted in the wings and belts of ammo fed these machine guns. When the plane was being serviced and re-armed, crews would lay out these belts of ammo and they would be roughly nine yards long. When pilots returning from a mission were asked if they engaged the enemy, they would say they did and, "gave 'em the whole nine yards".

Flash in the Pan:

Meaning: Something that is quick and perhaps entertaining but has no longevity or substance.

Origin: Early flintlock rifles were fired by manually pouring gunpowder down the barrel and ramming a bullet down on top of it. To fire the gun, you had to pour some of the powder in a pan located under the hammer at the rear of the rifle. The hammer would fall, striking the flint against steel, and send sparks into the pan, which would ignite the powder there. When that powder ignited, it would send a flash of fire through a small hole in the barrel that would ignite the main charge and fire the gun. Occasionally, the main charge would not ignite and the gun wouldn't fire, and all that ended up happening was a flash in the pan.

Going Off Half Cocked:

Meaning: To take reckless or premature action. To do something brash or impulsive without warning.

Origin: To load early guns (both muzzleloaders and early cartridge type guns), the shooter would at some point have to draw the hammer back to the half-cock position (as opposed to all the way back to the full-cock position to fire). This was necessary to complete the loading process and the half-cock notch also served as a rudimentary safety position for many types of firearms. The problem was, a gun that was not mechanically sound or suffered a blow to the hammer (like if it was dropped or bumped into something) had the possibility of the hammer falling and firing the gun unexpectedly or unintentionally.

Lock, Stock & Barrel:

Meaning: Containing or accounting for everything.

Origin: These are all the parts you need to make a gun. While today we identify the three main components of a gun as the Frame, Barrel and Action, originally the Action was called the “Lock” (as in flintlock, caplock, matchlock, etc.).

Catching Flak:

Meaning: To be criticized, to get into trouble or be berated/abused for something you did.

Origin: In World War 2, Allied aircraft flying over enemy territory were subjected to anti-aircraft fire. Allied pilots and aircrew began calling this fire, “Flak”, which was an abbreviation of the German word for Anti-Aircraft Cannon/Gun.

Calling "Shotgun" in a Car:

Meaning: When someone calls out, “Shotgun”, it means that they are reserving the front seat next to the driver.

Origin: Early stagecoaches were often the target of bandits and other hostile actions because they were known to carry valuables, important mail and people with a lot of possessions. To protect the stagecoach, a man would sit outside, next to the driver and carry a shotgun (which also became known as a “coach gun”).

Take a Shot/Worth a Shot:

Meaning: To take a chance or make an attempt.

Origin: The action of firing at a distant or hard to hit target in hopes of scoring a hit.

Fire Off a Letter/Question:

Meaning: To say or write something very quickly and send it off, usually with an angry intent.

Origin: Since firing a gun at someone is done with fast and angry intent, this term has been applied to the same action using words or letters instead of a firearm.

Pull the Trigger on a Deal:

Meaning: To take action in finalizing something.

Origin: Do I really have to explain what pulling a trigger really means? Of course, it is the final action you perform when firing a gun.

Ramrod Straight:

Meaning: Very straight and rigid.

Origin: A ramrod is a long rod that was used to ram a ball/bullet down the bore to load a muzzle-loading rifle. It had to be rigid and straight or it would not fit all the way down the bore of the barrel.

Straight Shooter:

Meaning: Someone who is honest and speaks accurately or directly.

Origin: The best marksman would be those that shot very accurately and kept their rounds going straight and direct to the target...hence, a "straight shooter".

Going Ballistic:

Meaning: To become furious and to take impulsive action in anger.

Origin: Ballistics is the science of mechanics that deals with the flight, behavior, and effects of projectiles/bullets.

Shoot From the Hip:

Meaning: To take quick action that might not be well planned, accurate or given a lot of thought.

Origin: To draw and fire a gun quickly without aiming it.

Shot in the Dark:

Meaning: To make an attempt at something without any real hope of success. To take a chance with the hope of getting lucky.

Origin: To fire a gun into the dark on the chance of either hitting something or scaring away the target.

Dud

Meaning: A poorly defined device that doesn't work or a disappointing or ineffective plan, device or even person.

Origin: A cartridge or other explosive device that fails to fire/explode.

Shot Down:

Meaning: To be rejected or make an unsuccessful attempt.

Origin: The loser (or as I like to call it, the guy who came in second...) in a gunfight.

Going Down in Flames:

Meaning: A spectacular failure or rejection.

Origin: Similar to "Shot Down", it refers to a burning plane falling in aerial combat.

Loose Cannon:

Meaning: Someone who is unpredictable and dangerous.

Origin: Early sailing ships used very heavy cannons that were on wheels so they could be moved for loading and for aiming. These cannons had to be securely tied so when they were fired or when the ship experienced rough seas, they wouldn't roll all over the deck endangering the crew or causing damage to the ship. If the ropes securing them to the deck broke in combat or during a storm, the loose cannon rolling around became a very dangerous situation.

Loaded for Bear:

Meaning: To be extremely prepared for a dangerous or difficult situation.

Origin: To have a big enough gun and powerful enough cartridges on hand for hunting bears.

Giving Them Both Barrels:

Meaning: To give maximum effort. To take the most action available.

Origin: To simultaneously fire both barrels of a double-barrel shotgun.

Green Horn:

Meaning: A person who is inexperienced or a foreigner new to an area and not prepared to handle the environment.

Origin: It was believed that you could spot a new and inexperienced woodsman because his powder horn was so newly made that it didn't fully cure and still had a green tint to it.

Smoking Gun:

Meaning: Solid or undeniable information or evidence that identifies the cause of something that happened.

Origin: Simply stated, the gun used in a murder that was found so quickly that it was still smoking from the shot it fired.

Son of a Gun:

Meaning: An expression of surprise or someone who surprised you.

Origin: It is believed that on a sailing ship, the sailor's families would sometimes be on board with the sailors who stayed/bunked mostly on the lower gun decks with the cannon. A woman who unexpectedly went into labor would be placed between the cannon to afford her a little bit of privacy while she was being helped during childbirth. Another thought is that the space between the cannons afforded sailors and their companions a little bit of privacy. Whether referring to birth or conception, the term comes from the two cannons on either side of the space where the child was "made".

Drop the Hammer:

Meaning: To take action, usually very quickly.

Origin: Pretty simple actually. Dropping the hammer is how you fire a gun. How you drop the hammer is irrelevant. You can press the trigger or a cowboy action shooter might hold the trigger back and use his/her thumb to cock and drop the hammer.

Bite the Bullet:

Meaning: To do something despite great discomfort/pain/etc.

Origin: Early bullets did not have a hard jacket and were simply a chunk of lead. Since life on the frontier and on the early battlefields meant that medical treatments were (at best) primitive. Without access to anesthesia, some procedures were done on a fully awake patient. They sometimes bit down on a soft lead bullet to deal with the pain.

Set Your Sights on Something:

Meaning: To have a set goal. To try and obtain something desirable.

Origin: Today, we refer to the action of aiming a gun as being a two-part process. You have "Sight Alignment" (where you align the front sight with the rear sight) and "Sight Picture" (where you take your aligned sights and place them on the target). In earlier times, the process of aiming a gun was referred to as simply, "setting your sights on the target".

Aim High:

Meaning: To attempt to reach an important and high-value goal.

Origin: Because a bullet will drop during its flight due to gravity, you have to aim higher than the target to compensate for bullet drop. The further the target, the higher above it you have to aim to score a hit.

Shooting for Gold:

Meaning: To have an excellent performance.

Origin: This term applies to both firearms and archery in competition where the winner would receive a prize made of gold. This tradition of the gold prize is carried on in the Olympics.

First String, Second String:

Meaning: In sports, the best players are referred to as the first string. The next best are referred to as second string. Etc.

Origin: This term is really not a firearms term but rather an archery term. However, since it has to do with personal projectile weapons, I thought I'd include it. In Medieval England, there was a time where the only public sport allowed was archery. This was done so the kingdom's archers could keep their skills sharp and always be ready for battle. In the games, the best archers would shoot first...hence they were called the first string. The second best archers would shoot next and they were, of course, called the second string.

Miss the Mark/Fall Short:

Meaning: To be unsuccessful or to fail to meet an objective.

Origin: This is another term that originally started with archery then went to firearms and even later to artillery. The "mark" is the target as designated by a mark on a map, a mark on the battlefield or even the mark in the center of a bullseye. To fall short means that you didn't correctly compensate for bullet/arrow drop on a distant target and your bullet/arrow hit the ground in front of the target.

Going Full Clip:

Meaning: To work quickly or to use all available assets as fast as possible.

Origin: Ammunition is commonly held in clips to make it easier to load into a magazine. Also, sometimes magazines are (incorrectly) referred to as clips. Going full clip means emptying your magazine as quickly as possible.

3 on a Match is Bad Luck:

Meaning: It is considered bad luck to light 3 cigarettes with one match.

Origin: This originated from soldiers who were on sentry or guard duty at night. It was believed that if you left a match burning for the time needed to light three cigarettes, that would give a sniper the chance to acquire, sight/aim and fire at you.