

TACTICS AND PREPAREDNESS

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A GOOD PRONE IS EFFICIENT AND CAN BE MAINTAINED FOR HOURS.

TIPS FOR RIFLEMEN

MASTER THE PRONE

BY: KEN [REDACTED] / PHOTOS COURTESY KEN JAVES

The prone firing position is typically one of the first firing positions taught to recruits at basic training or when training a new rifle shooter.

It provides excellent stability which aids the new shooter in practicing marksmanship fundamentals, it provides a low silhouette to reduce exposure in a tactical environment and, when done properly, can be maintained for hours on end. Your rifle may be capable of engaging precise targets out to 500 yards, 1000 yards or more and a refined

prone position will enable you to come closer to matching your rifle's capability.

POINTS OF PERFORMANCE

1. Body Alignment

The first point of performance when establishing a proper prone firing position is to ensure the body is correctly aligned behind

the weapon of choice. This aids in establishing the natural point of aim, recoil control and assists in follow-through after the shot. An observer standing over a shooter should be able to draw a straight line from the front sight, through the rear sight, firing shoulder, parallel to the spine and over the corresponding butt-cheek with no more than about a ten degree deviation. The small amount of deviation from straight-line is to account for shooters who may experience significant neck strain or discomfort when trying to align themselves *continued on next page*

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FOR THOSE NOT USED TO THIS POSITION, YOU WILL FEEL SOME STRETCHING AND STRAIN OVER THE TOP OF THE SHOULDER JOINT UNTIL FLEXIBILITY IMPROVES.

straight behind the weapon. The strain will have a much more negative effect than a minor difference in body alignment.

2. Shoulders

When the body is properly aligned behind the rifle the shoulders will naturally lie perpendicular to the line drawn in Figure 1, which will allow the formation of the shoulder pocket and effectively prevent the butt of the rifle from moving horizontally. If the non-firing shoulder is allowed to creep forward, past perpendicular, the pocket formed on the firing side will be shallower and allow the stock to shift out of position during recoil. This will force the shooter to readjust the position of the rifle after every shot, leading to inconsistent shot groups and slow recovery between shots. If body armor is worn, the stock can be tucked on the inside (closest to the neck) of the shoulder strap to provide additional stability.

3. Elbows

The next point of performance is the position of the elbows. The position of the elbows helps to maintain the alignment of the shoulders and provides structural (not muscular) support for the front of the rifle. Each elbow should be placed on a line roughly parallel to the line drawn across the shoulders. This helps to maintain the relationship of the shoulders and the proper shoulder pocket. If the support-side elbow moves too far forward it will cause the pocket formed on the shooting side to flatten. In order to provide structural support

for the rifle you will want the support-side elbow as close to, and directly below the rifle as possible. This will allow the weight of the rifle to be supported by the bones in the forearm instead of the muscles in the bicep and deltoid. For those not used to this position you will feel some stretching and strain over the top of the shoulder joint until flexibility improves. For those using an AR/M4/M16/M14/AK variant with a standard capacity magazine, the magazine may prevent the shooter from placing the elbow directly under the rifle. In this case place the supporting forearm against the side of the magazine, being careful not to cant the rifle to one side or the other.

4. Hands

The hands provide one of the most important interfaces with the rifle. They provide immense tactile feedback and are necessary to operate the weapon's controls, so their placement is critical to the effective and accurate employment of the rifle. The firing hand should be placed so that all controls (safety, trigger, magazine release, etc.) can be easily reached and manipulated with a minimum amount of movement or shifting of the firing grip. It should also allow the trigger finger to be placed such that pressure applied to the trigger is directed straight back through the grip, stock, shoulder, etc. Neither hand should be applying excessive grip pressure, just enough to prevent the rifle from jumping out of the hands when fired. The more the firing hand can be relaxed the more dexterity the shooter will be able to wring

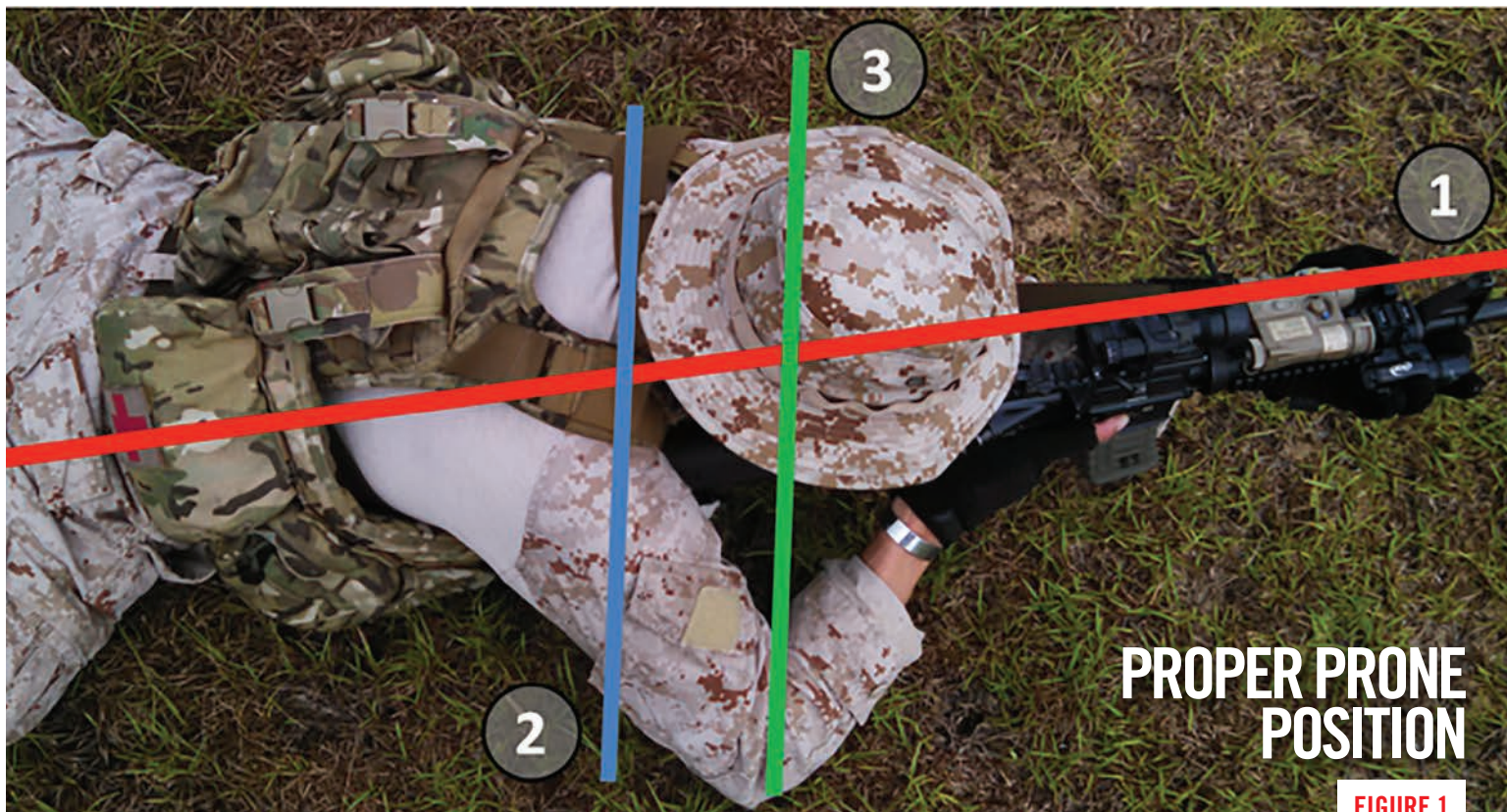


FIGURE 1

When using a bipod or sandbags, the support hand can move under the rear of the buttstock.



out of the trigger finger. The support hand should be placed somewhere on the fore-end or hand guards (not on the magazine or magazine well for AR variants due to safety concerns for an out of battery detonation or the fingers covering the ejection port and inducing a stoppage.) If the hand is opened flat the rifle should rest comfortably on it without sliding to one side or the other, the fingers are then naturally curled around the fore-end without providing rotational torque on the rifle, disturbing its vertical alignment. By moving the support hand (without moving the elbow) forward or back on the fore-end the elevation of the front of the rifle can be changed. Bring the hand back to raise the rifle or slide it for-

ward to reduce the elevation. When using some other form of support for the front of the rifle (such as a bipod, sandbags, the slain bodies of your foes, etc.) the support hand can move to an alternate position under the rear of the butt stock. For this position the elbow remains in the same spot, but the arm and hand curl under the rifle and grasp the angled portion of the stock or the rear sling swivel. The support hand now helps hold the stock in the shoulder pocket and the hand can be flexed to raise or lower the rifle.

5. Head

Proper placement of the head on the stock

ensures that the eye is in position to see the target and align the sights correctly. The head should be comfortably positioned to reduce any strain on the neck and the entire rifle can be raised or lowered to reduce extreme angles of the head and neck. It is important to keep the head position as vertical as possible to allow the eye to naturally center in the socket. If the head is at an exaggerated angle and the eye has to move toward the edge of the orbit (typically at the top, near the eyebrow) the eye itself can distort. This in turn changes how the light bends through the lens of the eye and how the image is projected on the retina. This will cause the shot group to shift when firing in other positions; where the eye is centered in the orbit. The selection of eye protection is tied to this as well; you do not want glasses with frames that will interfere with the position of the head or prevent viewing of the sights. Eye relief (the distance from the shooting eye to the rear sight or optic) is also determined by where the head is placed. Too close to the rear sight and the front sight will appear to float loosely in the rear sight notch or aperture. Too far away and it will be difficult to locate the target and maintain sight alignment. Excessive "scope shadow" and a narrowing of the field of view will be the result when using magnified optics with improper eye relief. Consistent eye relief is

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very important and a “nose to the charging handle” technique is commonly taught in some service branch’s basic training. It is a viable instructional technique to ensure consistent eye relief when educating a large number of untrained shooters, but it is not necessarily the optimal position for everyone. Optimum head position and eye relief must be determined by the individual shooter as everyone varies in build, head shape, neck length and flexibility.

6. Hips

Ideally the hips should be flat against the ground to anchor the lower body and aid in maintaining the natural point of aim. This may be modified based on the positioning of the legs as outlined in the next point of performance.

7. Legs

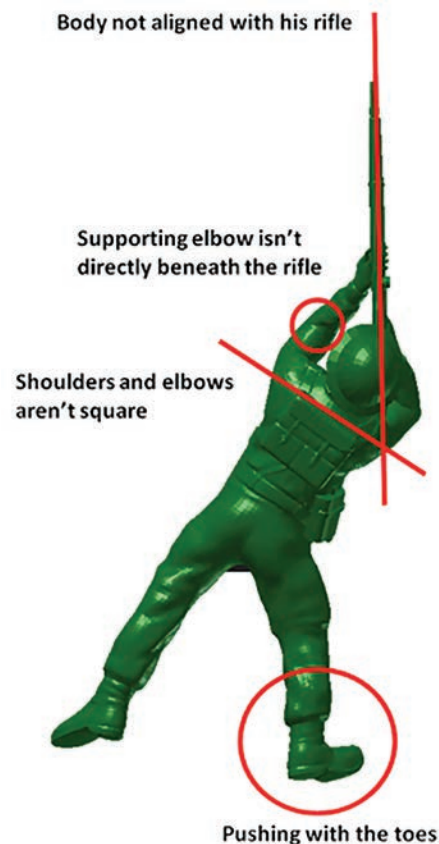
The legs should be spread comfortably so that no excessive pressure is placed on the knees and the hips stay perpendicular to the spine. For shooters wearing bulky body armor or chest rigs (or who just have a little more tactical padding than most) an alternate position can be used. In the alternate position the firing-side leg is brought up so the knee is almost even with the waist. This causes the hip to rise and relieves pressure on the chest cavity, making it easier to breathe. The non-firing-side foot should be turned in so the shooter is lying along the outside of the non-firing leg. This position can be just as effective as long as the shoulders remain perpendicular to the rifle and the shoulder pocket is maintained.

8. Feet

Feet should lay flat on the ground to increase the contact area with the ground and to prevent any movement of the feet from being transmitted through the legs, hips, back and into the shoulders. The legs and feet should be relaxed as well; the shooter should not dig in the toes or push into the rifle with the feet. This muscle tension will relax at some point during the shot and result in inconsistent shot groups.

9. Relax!

Speaking of relaxation; the shooter should be as relaxed behind the rifle as possible, only applying enough muscle tension to maintain control of the weapon during the firing process. As stated above, if any un-

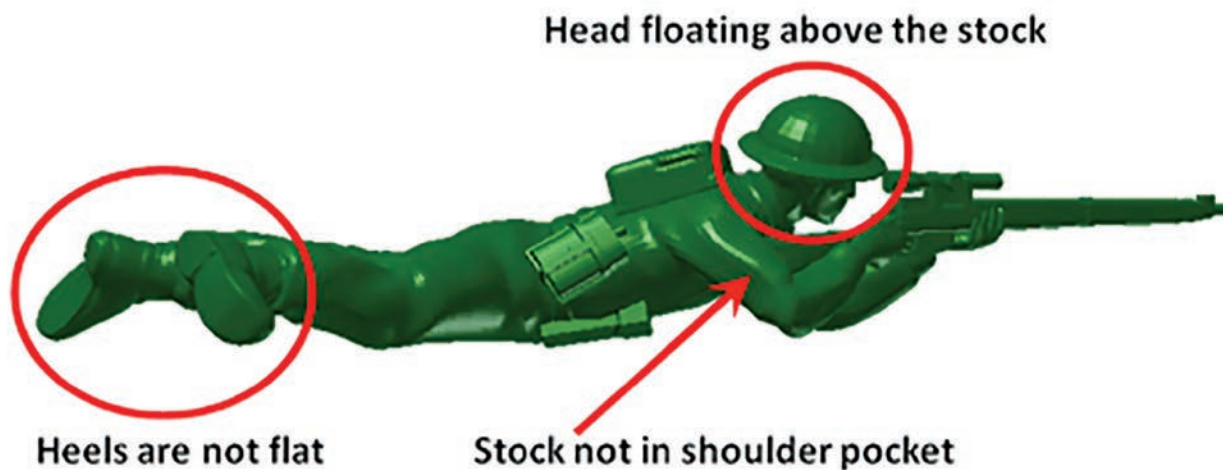


COMMON ERRORS IN THE PRONE POSITION. PROPER ALIGNMENT BEHIND THE WEAPON OF CHOICE AIDS IN ESTABLISHING THE NATURAL POINT OF AIM, RECOIL CONTROL AND ASSISTS IN FOLLOW-THROUGH AFTER THE SHOT.

necessary tension is applied or the shooter is trying to push or pull the rifle onto the target, this tension will change during recoil and the round will not hit its intended mark.

10. Natural Point of Aim

All of the above points of performance for establishing the prone firing position combine and result in the “natural point of aim.” Natural point of aim is where the rifle and the sights will naturally lay with no additional muscular input from the shooter. A simple method to check this is to close the eyes, relax, take a couple of deep breaths, exhale to the natural respiratory pause, open the eyes and see where the sights are in relation to the target. More often than not this initial point of aim will be nowhere close to the desired point of



A PROPER PRONE POSITION OFFERS GREAT STABILITY, A LOW PROFILE, AND PROVIDES EXCELLENT CONTROL OF THE RIFLE.

aim. For anything but urgent large/close targets, the shooter must avoid the temptation to pull or push the sights onto the target at this point. To correct an error in the natural point of aim the shooter must make minor adjustments to the entire position, from the hands to the feet, to align the rifle with the target. This process is repeated as many times as necessary (or the situation permits) until the sights remain in the desired location during the test outlined above. The next test occurs during the follow-through portion, immediately following the shot. As the rifle settles out of recoil the sights should return to the exact point of aim used prior to the shot being fired. If the sights settle to the right, the natural point of aim lays to the right and the hips need to be shifted in the direction of the error in order to correct it. If the sights settle to the left, the body must be shifted in the direction of the error as well.

MODIFICATIONS TO THE TRADITIONAL PRONE POSITION

Although certain purists will claim that placing the magazine of an AR/AK variant on the ground when firing from the prone is cheating, it does provide an additional point of contact and when done correctly can improve stability, accuracy and reduce the time it takes to recover between shots. One option for the support hand, instead of placing it below the fore-end, calls for placing it over the top of the receiver, in front of the optic or carrying handle. The hand is

then used to apply a slight amount of pressure down and to the rear, pulling the stock into the shoulder pocket. Many shooters find this most useful for stabilizing a rifle when having to shoot with elevated heart rate or breathing such as immediately after heavy exertion. I have successfully used this technique to effectively engage targets out to 500 yards with an issue M4 Carbine. The other common myth associated with this technique in regard to the AR/M4 family is that placing the magazine on the ground will induce stoppages. With quality magazines (including GI) I have never experienced this problem. I have even gone so far as to perform instructional demonstrations with a buddy standing on top of the rifle as I empty the magazine as fast as possible. Of course, if your magazines are recycled through a third-world country's supply chain you may want to do some extensive testing with this technique before applying it in a life-or-death situation.

Using a form of artificial support for the front of the rifle is another method to gain additional stability in the prone position. This can take the form of sandbags, rifle rests, bipods, tree limbs, etc. The important thing to remember is to ensure that the fore-end makes contact with the rest and not the barrel. I have demonstrated point of impact shifts of as much as 6-8 inches at 50 yards by placing an M4 barrel against a barricade or rest with just a slight amount of pressure. This becomes even more important if a free-floated barrel is used, since no addi-

tional support is provided to the barrel by the hand guards or fore-end.

DIAGNOSING ERRORS

Using a good friend from the childhood sandbox—the Green Army Man—and diagnosing his shooting position, we can see why he consistently failed to defeat the Tan Army.

When performed correctly (and not like our Green Army Man) the prone position offers great stability, a low profile, provides excellent control of the rifle and is the position of choice for long-range shooters. By adhering to the points of performance outlined in this article and applying them to your prone position you should see an increase in stability and accuracy, tighter shot-groups, and an increase in the number of people who want to buy you drinks. ✓

Editor's Note: Tan Army Man's prone position was no better than Green Army Man, but Tan Army Man was able to call in artillery support.

BIO

Ken █████ has over 19 years of military and security contracting experience to include multiple combat and contract deployments to South West Asia. He has served with Marine Infantry and Force Reconnaissance units. He possesses instructor certifications from multiple agencies and organizations, and has trained with some of the top military and competitive shooters in the country.