

# The JFK Assassination: Rifle Range Realities vs. the Oswald-did-it Story

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*So maybe Oswald really did shoot JFK with an old Italian army rifle — that now-famous Carcano. But I seriously doubt it. I just can't picture a Marine Corps trained rifleman selecting such a weapon to shoot anybody. That's because Italian weapons of the World War II era had a lousy reputation, and most Marines would've been aware of that.*

Lee Harvey Oswald spent three years in the US Marine Corps, leaving it in September 1959. That was shortly after I enlisted, my time in the USMC overlapping his by a few days. I served for four years, and received my discharge a few months before the assassination. That was over fifty years ago now, nevertheless, Marine Corps training is pretty unforgettable. Having been in the USMC about the same time as the alleged assassin, I handled the same weapons and fired on the same type of rifle range as he did. In this essay I'd like to say a bit about Marine Corps weapons training of that era and how those rifle range realities conflict with the official story.

"The most dangerous thing in the world is a Marine with his M1 rifle," our Drill Instructors told us from day-one. The M1 Garand was the standard U.S. military rifle at that time, and the Marine Corps took intense pride in training us to use it well. Whatever our military task might've been, whether truck driver, cook, office clerk, infantry or radar operator, as Marines we were riflemen first of all.

We were issued the M1 during our first week in boot camp, but before we ever got to the firing range, we spent many weeks learning to dismantle and reassemble it, memorizing the name of every part and understanding its function. Terms like "trigger-housing-group" or "bolt locking lug" still come to mind after all these years. We also spent a huge amount of time on the manual of arms, practicing "right shoulder arms," "present arms," all that parade ground stuff. So we all came to know that rifle very, very well. All that was down pat before they ever let us fire it.

Actually, weapons training did not generally start there. Most guys I knew in the USMC came from gun culture, typically starting out in early childhood with a BB gun, later a .22 caliber target rifle, and eventually deer rifles and shotguns. So the USMC was kind of like advanced training in weaponry, where guys learned the fine points of marksmanship, also fired light and heavy machine guns as well as pistols. These guys generally liked guns, visited gun shows, and would often spend hours talking about weapons, discussing which firearm they would choose for this or that task. For long range sniper shooting one needs a very accurate

weapon, the first choice being unanimously the 1903 Springfield rifle. The second choice would've been a Mauser. The Carcano was not in the running.

(Both the Springfield and the Mauser were ancient, but they were known to be accurate and reliable, and most importantly, in the USMC gun culture of the early 1960s, those two rifles were considered legendary.)

Oswald apparently had some interest in guns. According to his brother, the two of them hunted rabbits with .22 caliber rifles. While in Russia he reportedly joined a gun club. As for the Carcano that he allegedly owned, some gun buffs do acquire all sorts of antique and exotic firearms, and it wouldn't surprise me to hear that he may have possessed a Carcano. What I cannot believe is that he would've considered it a serviceable weapon for the crime of the century — or if he had, I'm sure that President Kennedy would've survived the day.

In dismissing the Carcano, I don't mean to say that Italian craftsmen aren't capable of making quality products. They indeed are. In all sorts of things from clocks to autos, Italian craftsmen have a reputation for excellence. They make good firearms too.



Carcano rifle (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Nevertheless, the Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President John F. Kennedy with a Carcano. Yes, a Carcano! It's hard to imagine a more bizarre story. While it served to promote the image of Oswald as an unhinged nutcase, an important element of the official narrative, it clashes with rifle-range realities.

Within the brief space of less than ten seconds, according to the Warren Commission, Oswald fired three shots, two of which hit the president, a moving target. That would've been phenomenal marksmanship, even with a state-of-the-art sniper rifle. Your average Marine is a good shot, but not that good. According to records that were made public, Oswald was about average.

Accurate shooting requires time and concentration; the faster one shoots, the less one hits. USMC marksmanship training included slow firing at 200 and 500 yards, and rapid fire at 300 yards. For rapid fire we were given sixty seconds to fire ten rounds. Our task also included reloading a clip since the magazine only held eight rounds. Being semiautomatic, the M1 would fire as fast as we could pull the trigger — theoretically that is. In reality, the recoil knocks the rifle off target, so each time we fired we had to find the target and line up the sights all over again. That eats up time, precious seconds. Those are physical limitations on how fast anyone can shoot and expect to hit anything. With an average of six seconds for each of those ten shots, it might seem that we had plenty of time, but in reality, those sixty seconds ran by very, very quickly, and accuracy was greatly diminished.

Unlike the semiautomatic M1 Garand, the Carcano has a bolt action, making it much slower to operate. And, that particular Carcano was equipped with a telescopic sight, which makes rapid fire even more difficult. It's slower to resight a telescopic sight than an ordinary metal one. (Consider also the report that the telescopic sight on Oswald's Carcano was defectively mounted — which would render any sort of accuracy impossible.)

The marksmanship attributed to Oswald in that Texas town is beyond anything he could've done on a USMC rifle range. It was more like what we were used to seeing on the silver screen. Shooting from the hip, Hollywood cowboys could knock a tin can out of the sky; almost every western had a scene like that. And so does the official story of what happened that November day in Dallas. Such are the legendary exploits of superheroes and arch-villains.

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