

Germany's Great Eight

By Karl Stumpfe
Photos – Francois Weyers

As we all know, the 'all-purpose cartridge' does not exist and there is always a reason for needing one more rifle. As I do a fair amount of hunting of the bigger antelope in Namibia, I began thinking about a rifle that would be ideal for the long shots that are the norm rather than the exception in the south of that country. Desert gemsbok are extremely tough animals, as are Hartmann's mountain zebra. Kudu are not particularly difficult to kill, but they make up for this by being much harder to find in the first place, and in the mountainous regions of Namibia, they require more gun than their bushveld cousins because of the longer shooting distances. They are big and heavy animals, so heavier bullets always work better.

Until recently I used a 7x64 with 160gr Nosler Partitions almost exclusively in Namibia, but found it lacking when presented with a less than ideal shot. Francois Weyers, my hunting companion and 'cameraman', uses a .270 loaded with 150gr Noslers. On one trip he shot a Hartmann's zebra from around 150 yards. The shot was placed perfectly – the bullet nicked the heart, cut through the aorta and punctured both lungs – but that zebra ran close on a kilometre before expiring. I would not have believed it possible if I had not seen it myself.

Incidents like this convinced me that something bigger and heavier was needed. The ideal rifle for these conditions would launch a bullet of 200gr or heavier (but having a high sectional density factor) at around 2800fps. And recoil must not be excessive, since accurate shooting is required for the distances I'm talking about. Any of the .300 magnums and .338 magnums would do the job, but the cartridge I fancied, predictably perhaps, was the German powerhouse, the 8x68S. To quote Frank Barnes in *Cartridges of the World*, "It is one of the best European cartridges for



Although big, eland can also be hunted with the 8x68, if heavy premium grade bullets are used.

all-round use in North America." I consider it one of the best for longer range African hunting.

The 8x68S has been a fairly popular cartridge in Europe since its introduction by RWS in 1938. The older 8mm cartridges were available in either the 'J' version (.318-inch bullet diameter) or the 'S' version (.323-inch diameter, also known as the 'JS'). This came about in 1904-1905, when the Germans replaced the original 8x57J military cartridge with the slightly more powerful 8x57JS. The 'J' stood for 'Infanterie' (in German the letters I and J were interchangeable). The original 8x57J launched a 226gr roundnose bullet at close to 2100fps, while the later 8x57JS fired a 154gr spitzer bullet at nearly 2900fps (identical cases were used for both.) The let-



ter S stood for 'spitzer' indicating the pointed bullet used in the replacement version, but was also to indicate the slightly bigger (.323-inch) bullet diameter. Factories produced sporting rifles for both bullet sizes well into the 20th century, but now only rifles in the 'S' (.323) calibre are offered. Stocks of the .318 bullets are still available. RWS no longer lists the 8x57J ammunition, though these old rifles are still around in South Africa and Namibia. I have a sporting rifle in 8x57J made in 1951 by Ferlach, but that is another story. To my knowledge, the 8x68 is the only German 8mm that was *never* available in .318 diameter, so we can drop the 'S' and just call it the 8x68. An old RWS brochure shows that 8x68 ammo was available in 181gr to 224gr factory loads, including a 196gr solid, advertised as suitable for buffalo!

As I do not particularly fancy modern European rifles, I chose to go the custom-built route. I also happened to have a spotless Oberndorf Mauser action lying around. I got Bushy's Guns in Bloemfontein to build the rifle for me. It comprises the Oberndorf action, a magnum magazine

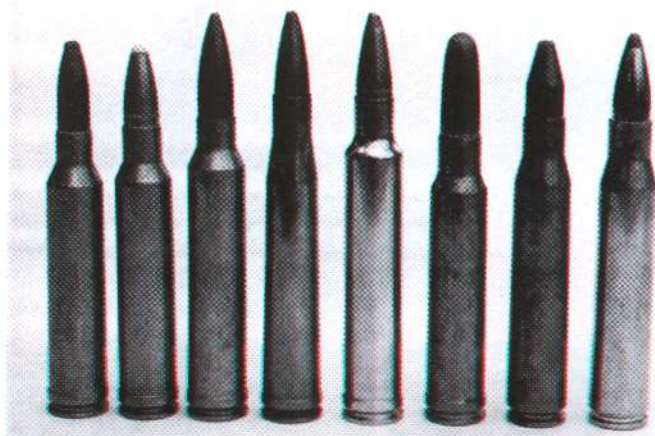
made by Musgrave, a Timney trigger, a McGowen barrel, and a beautiful piece of Turkish walnut. As the action was a standard military one, a lot of extra metalwork had to be done. A bolt shroud similar to that of the FN Supreme was fitted. The gunsmith who assembled it, Gerrie Coetzee, was trained by Musgrave and later by Kevan Healy. I regard him as one of the best stockmakers in South Africa, considering the prices he charges.

The rifle turned out to be a real beauty. The barrel originally measured 26" but has since been reduced to 24" (some of the velocities given in this article were obtained with the longer barrel). The rifle weighs about 10½ pounds fully loaded. Recoil from the bench was getting a bit much, so I invested in a Past Mag Plus shoulder pad, which kept the load development enjoyable. I fitted the rifle with a 6x42 Schmidt & Bender scope.

I now had the long-range rifle of my dreams, just two weeks before we were due to leave for Namibia – not enough time for serious load development, so I bought some Hirtenberger factory ammunition loaded

Recovered bullets – left to right: 220gr Hornady new as comparison; recovered from zebra; recovered from wetpack. 220gr Swift (new) and from wetpack.





Comparison between 8x68 and other flat shooting magnums. Left to right: 7mm Rem Mag, .308 Norma Mag, .300 Win Mag, .300 H&H Mag, .300 Wby Mag, .338 Win Mag, 8x68 (RWS), 8x68 (Hirtenberger).

8x68 Reloading Data					
Bullet	Powder	Charge	Primer	Velocity (fps)	Comments
Speer 200gr	S365	68.0gr	CCI 200	2854	Most accurate
Speer 200gr	S365	70.0gr	CCI 200	2929	Max in my rifle
Nosler Part 200gr	S365	68.0gr	CCI 200	2831	47mm@100 yds
Hornady Interlock 220gr	S365	66.5gr	CCI 200	2752	30mm@100 yds
Hornady Interlock 220gr	S385	73.0gr	CCI 250	2772	28mm@100 yds
Swift A-Frame 220gr	S385	73gr	CCI 250	2850	MOA

with 200gr Nosler Partition bullets. This particular factory load did not group well in my rifle, which has a very tight chamber and bore. The first two shots had the primers popping out, so it was back to the drawing board. No RWS factory ammo was available at such short notice, so I decided to work up a load. I had some RWS cases and Hornady dies, so I bought some 200gr Nosler Partitions, 200gr Speers and 220gr Hornadys from Sauers in Kimberley. I normally develop a load using a Speer bullet with nearly the same ballistic coefficient and weight as the Nosler Partition that I would like to use, and then try the best loads again using the Nosler Partition. Neither of the 200 grainers got better than about 50mm groups at 100m, so I tried the 220gr Hornadys which, with 66.5gr S365, achieved 38mm groups – good enough for the coming hunt. I would have liked a premium bullet, but figured the additional weight would, to some extent, make up for the lack of effective reinforcing in the Hornady Interlock. I zeroed the scope at 250m, and was ready for the Kalahari.

During our first morning out on Koos Boltman's farm near Gochas, we spotted a lone gemsbok bull walking down a 'straat' (street, which is what the locals call the open, flat part between two dunes). I took up position on top of a dune, and estimated the range to be close to 250 yards, my zero range. The bull dropped on the spot from a frontal chest shot, which broke the neck on entering. It was the perfect beginning to a perfect week, though my friend Francois mocked me, saying it does not help to have such a powerful rifle and then shoot the gemsbok in the neck. Later on I shot another huge bull from about 300 yards. I overestimated the range and the shot went a bit high and about a hand's breadth too far back. The bull dashed straight towards me, then went to lie down next to a driedoringbos, where I gave it a shot to the head. As it turned out, the first shot would have been fatal, as both lungs were punctured.

Two days later I shot a Burchell's zebra stallion and came to

really appreciate how tough these animals are. It was angling away from me at about 280 yards, so I decided to shoot for the opposite front leg. I must have pulled the shot, as the bullet entered the zebra a little further back than planned – fractionally in front of its left hip – travelled through its intestines and stomach, diagonally through its right lung, and exited just behind its right shoulder. I later realized it was an irresponsible shot, but as they say, hindsight is always 20/20. The zebra continued to run with its buddy. A few minutes later, I killed it with a broadside shot to the spine. This bullet was the only one I recovered on this hunt. Although it had broken the bottom half of the spine, what was left of it did not impress me. Weight retention was poor at 58.3gr or 26.5%. I was still looking for a good red hartebeest bull, but time was running out. On the last day I eventually shot an ancient hartebeest cow that was in very poor condition. Again, penetration was complete.

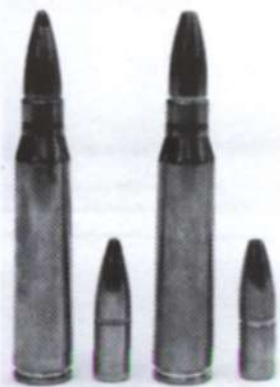
Back home again, my search for optimum accuracy began with high hopes. Good quality spitzer bullets of 220gr were hard to come by. I found three packs of Swift A-Frames – though expensive, they gave outstanding accuracy. Somchem's S365 did not give good results in my rifle, producing signs of excessive pressure and extreme spreads between shots (close to 50fps with the 200gr bullets and about 35fps with 220gr bullets, on average). Due to the tight chamber, maximum loads in my rifle have to be two grains lower than those published by Somchem (let this serve as a warning to reloaders who take the maximum published load as their personal starting point.)

My rifle had shown a preference for the heavier bullets, so I decided to try S385 powder. Accuracy improved even further, and pressures seemed lower than with S365. I would advise any reloader to consider my S385 loads as maximum. I have not tried S385 with the lighter bullets but suspect that this powder would be better for them. My best results were with S385 and CCI magnum primers.

My rifle's best accuracy came from a combination of S385, 220gr Swifts and CCI-250 primers, which produced consistent MOA three-shot groups. I have since used this combination to shoot another gemsbok and an eland bull. In both cases, the penetration amazed me. The gemsbok was shot in the 'kuiltjie' (chest centre) and the bullet was recovered just in front of the right hind leg. The eland was also shot from the front, but at an angle. The bullet entered on the curve of the clavicle, went through one lung, and was recovered in the opposite shoulder. A second shot (as insurance) high behind the shoulder, went straight through. The recovered bullets weighed 209.3 and 204.6 respectively: an average weight retention of 94%. The same load fired into wetpack at 50m produced weight retention of 96.4%. The Hornadys averaged 67.7% in wetpack.

RWS cases are available, as well as top quality locally made cases by Ken Stewart Gunsmithing and OPM Ammunition. RWS and Hirtenberger load the ammunition. Hirtenberger's 200gr Nosler Partition loads are very good performers and they also load a bullet similar to the Rhino Solid Shank, called the ABC. RWS load their H-Mantel, though I consider its weight (187gr) on the light side. Another load from RWS is their 224gr Cone Point, but it is not in the same terminal performance class as the various partitioned or otherwise reinforced bullets. Shooting the 8x68 works out rather expensive if factory fodder is used exclusively; serious hunters on a 'normal' budget will want to reload.

Thanks to the influx of military 8x57 rifles into America after the war, all major US manufacturers make bullets in 8mm. These include weights from 125gr all the way up to 224gr. The develop-



Two 8x68 reloads, 220gr Hornady and 220gr Swift. (Note - necks only partially sized with full-length die set to fit chamber.)



Components and factory ammo for 8x68.

ment of the 8mm Remington Magnum in the late seventies brought better quality bullets that can stand up to much-increased velocities. Custom bullet makers like Ken Stewart offer weights up to 250gr. Rhino Bullets have said they will start making 8mm bullets soon. I consider the 220gr bullet about optimum for this calibre, especially in good quality versions like Swift A-Frame. The 170-180gr bullets offer no real advantage over the .300 magnums. However, with the 200gr and 220gr bullets, the 8x68 really outshines the more commonly available .300s and comes pretty close to the .338 Win Mag. The difference in trajectory between the 200 and 220gr bullets is so small over practical hunting ranges that you are better off with the 220gr.

The 8x68 is close to ideal for long shots on the larger antelope. With the best premium grade bullets it can even be used on eland. I do not consider it a first choice bushveld calibre, but if downloaded with 250gr bullets it will make a good one nonetheless. Ken Stewart tells me that he makes a fair amount of roundnose 8mm 250gr bullets, which his clients use on anything up to giraffe in culling operations. The perfect all-rounder it is not, but it is pretty hard to beat as a big-bore plains rifle. **m**