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Submission on behalf of the Council of Licensed Firearms Owners

The Council of Licensed Firearms Owners Incorporated (COLFO) is the overarching organisation for firearms users in New Zealand. It is an association of organisations governing the various types of shooting sports. Many of the 250,000 New Zealanders who have firearms do not belong to organisations, but our membership represents the views of those who organise to hunt, target shoot, collect firearms and who work in the industry, including professional guides. From experience we are confident that we represent the predominant views of firearms owners in this country.

Our board includes representatives of the major member organisations including Pistol NZ, the NZ Deerstalkers Association, the National Rifle Association of NZ, NZ Antique and Historical Arms Association, NZ Service Rifle Association, Sporting Shooters NZ, the International Military Arms Society, Target Shooting New Zealand, New Zealand Shooting Federation, Airsoft New Zealand and NZ Black Powder Shooters Federation. It includes world renowned and published authors on the subject of firearms and has ready access to technical experts.

We are a UN-accredited organisation and have represented New Zealand internationally at the UN Arms Trade Treaty and the UN Programme of Action. We are a member of the World Forum on Shooting Activities (WFSA).

We have the capability to provide immediate technical advice and assistance to the Royal Commission. We respectfully offer our services in any technical aspects on firearms or licencing in New Zealand. We would be happy to supplement this submission on request, in any way convenient to the Commission.

There are many misconceptions regarding firearms and licensing in New Zealand. The following information has been peer reviewed and checked by all of our Board. We provide the following information to the Commission.

SUMMARY

Our submission is in direct referral to the Terms of Reference:

4(a) [The inquiry must report its findings on the following matters] whether there was any information provided or otherwise available to relevant State sector agencies that could or should have alerted them to the attack and, if such information was provided or otherwise available, how the agencies responded to any such information, and whether that was response was appropriate;

4 (d) whether any relevant State sector agency failed to meet required standards or was otherwise at fault, whether in whole or in part;

5 (c) [The inquiry must make any recommendation it considers appropriate on] what changes, if any, should be implemented to improve relevant State sector agency systems, or operation practices, to ensure the prevention of such attacks in the future.

COLFO considers that the NZ Police approach to their responsibilities and the licencing system have substantially damaged the reliability of firearm licensing and registration over recent years, namely –

1. the overall approach by NZ Police to the administration of the Arms Act 1983;
2. changes to firearm licencing that may have directly affected Mr Tarrant’s ability to gain a licence; and
3. failures in the existing limited registration system of E category equipment in not exercising existing provisions in legislation to control this equipment.

We also remain concerned that funding allocated for NZ Police to administer the provisions of the Arms Act has not been directly spent on this purpose, but rather diverted to other policing priorities.¹

We do not know enough about the particular circumstances of the licencing of Tarrant to know if the damage contributed to him being licenced when he should not have been. But we consider that changes to licensing would have definitely reduced the chances that he would be identified as not fit and proper. We are also concerned about the application of the fit and proper test to Tarrant, as we understand that his referees were people that had never met Tarrant in person, nor were they a family member.

We also say, more firmly that the NZ Police could have made changes to the existing E category registration that would have made it much more difficult for him to obtain the large magazines he is reported to have used. We had urged previously that they be restricted consistently with E category equipment. Our submissions on that and many other issues were dismissed by the Police.

¹ See NZ Police Annual Report 2017/18, page 50.

THE OVERALL APPROACH BY NZ POLICE TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE ARMS ACT 1983

1. The Police do not and have not effectively administered the Arms Act and the situation is getting worse. For a long period, the New Zealand shooting community and the Police had a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Over the past 6 years that relationship decayed, particularly at senior and policy levels. But even the warm practical respect that was normal at local levels has disappeared in too many areas.
2. COLFO has been worried about the effect on local Police of perceptions that senior officers did not value Arms Act work. The COLFO Board includes people who lead organisations. We know how people respond to leaders' signals on what is valued and rewarded, and what is not. We believe that front line officers were getting unmistakable signals on what HQ thought of the importance of the licensing system and vetting, from the diversion of budgeted funds, and the thrust behind ending the involvement of volunteer instructors, from before 2105.
3. Organisations typically see poor morale, with slipping performance standards, in the sections targeted with such demotivating changes. COLFO thinks that even in the areas where the vetting system was still ostensibly operating along the traditional lines, it would be remarkable if there was not more risk of tolerance for departures from normal care, more readiness to accept sub-grade referee reports, more indifference to missed deadlines or other procedural slippages. COLFO speculates that the vetting of Tarrant could have been affected.
4. The NZ Police lack technical knowledge and skills in many areas of firearms. They seem unwilling to listen to external advice that does not suit them, even from experts. For example, in the thumbhole stock debate (detailed below), world experts provided advice to the Police about their interpretation of the regulation. It was ignored.
5. Before what we regard as a significant Police change in approach in 2015² there would have been a mutually respectful consultation and investigation of COLFO recommendations, because of the expertise available to us. We have previously worked with Police where we have identified that legislative change and education is required, such as changes to dangerous air rifles. We do not oppose all changes to firearms legislation, but seek to provide input where the changes would be ineffective.
6. COLFO believes that many Police mourn the reduction in the mutual respect that characterised relations between Police Arms Officers and their communities, and local shooting sports clubs. Former strong relationships between community representatives and Police have been lost due to policy and personnel changes in Police.

² See the [Proposed change to Operating Model and Organisational Structure for Arms Act Service Delivery Group \(AASDG\)](#) consultation document, 29 January 2019.

7. Our system was for a long time a matter of pride for us, representing New Zealand in international discussion of firearms regulation, alongside our diplomats. We were recognised as being among the countries, like Switzerland, where a high level of social trust enabled coexistence of widespread firearms ownership, with low levels of criminal use of firearms. We are second on the Global Peace index after Iceland, which has more guns per capita.³ The symbols of this were our generally unarmed policing, and our firearms system that focused on cooperation in the community to keep firearms away from unsuitable holders.
8. We have never had in this country any widespread assertion of the combative “rights based” claims to firearms ownership, and on the other side, the rooted hostility to firearms users that so disfigures politics in some countries. Firearms users generally are anxious to help ensure that unsuitable people were identified, scrutinised, and excluded from firearms ownership.
9. We are still anxious to help. But we believe that Police have ceased to feel that licensed owners are necessary partners in a joint endeavour. Instead the attitude expressed at key levels of the Police is one of rulers to their subjects, and the consultation is merely to satisfy requirements imposed by Parliament.
10. The success of the licensing system rested on expectations of mutual respect between licenced owners and the police. Cooperation helped the licensing system to operate with the kind of intelligence that depends on a widespread feeling of voluntary responsibility to inform the authorities of concerns.
11. The Police have also dismantled a system that involved hours of face to face contact between people seeking licences, and instructors and assessors in a position to be alerted to characteristics of concern.
12. There has been a determined push to cut costs, and to replace it with an internet based service with few of the personal assessment opportunities inherent in the previous administrative arrangements.⁴
13. In 2015 Police via the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council dismissed their volunteer Firearms Safety Instructors based in over 114 venues around New Zealand. Ultimately they were “replaced” with online self-education and VTNZ testing venues. In decisions announced late in 2018, NZ Police began to further dismantle their own cadre of Arms Officers and Vettors. The decisions were to take effect in 2019. They would reduce staff numbers in those roles from over 300 to 36. They intended to centralise administration to an Arms Act Service Delivery Group in a base on the Kapiti Coast.

³ See <http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/global-peace-index/>

⁴ See the New Zealand Police [submission](#) to the Inquiry into issues relating to the illegal possession of firearms in New Zealand, 30 March 2016, at 11.

14. Before the 2015 changes the first point of contact for all new firearms licence applicants had for many years been vetted and trained firearms safety instructors from their local communities. They assisted with safety education, administered the test on behalf of NZ Police and gave advice on local clubs and contacts. The trusting relationships between Arms Officers, vettors and the firearms community were at an all-time high. They were relied upon by all our constituent organisations. This was purposefully dismantled in 2015. We do not know why.
15. We suspect, but cannot provide firm evidence, that some of it might have been driven by Police HQ fears that the relationships were too strong at local level. We suspect that some people at Police HQ may have felt the Arms Officer relationships could impede plans to promote another push for registration. There was evident disgruntlement about some of the advocacy of our representatives in the liaison committee and other channels of discussion about firearms policy.⁵
16. We are also concerned that this withdrawal might have something to do with what we have seen mainly from the Police Association, but which we know to be fostered from within Police HQ –a push for fundamental changes to the position of NZ Police as an “unarmed” force, like the communities they serve.
17. There appear to be a number within the Police concerned about what is reported to be a senior level determination to take advantage of the political opportunity presented by this shooting to eliminate our traditional firearms approach, and coincidentally to achieve routine arming of the police in New Zealand. We have been told that relevant records may be altered or “lost”. We are not free to provide more particulars. We cannot vouch for the information, but we believe that there is likely to be some truth in what has been conveyed to us.
18. COLFO’s recent licenced firearms owner’s trust and confidence survey demonstrates the importance that the community places on those local relationships. The degree of trust and confidence in Police at a local level is at 47%. But the degree of trust and confidence in Police at a national level (Police HQ) sits at 28%.
19. These results are based on a survey completed by COLFO in September 2018 with 1270 licenced firearms owners’. It was conducted last year after the Police had published the results of their ‘service delivery promise’ survey because COLFO member organisations felt that the results did not reflect what they were hearing from their communities. The member organisations wanted to know if Arms Act administration was a significant concern for their members.

⁵ In the last 15 years, two Arms Amendment Bills did not pass through Parliament following consultation. The Arms Amendment Bill (No 2) did not proceed in March 2004, and the Arms Amendment Bill (No 3) did not proceed in March 2012.

20. COLFO drafted 10 questions, similar in form to the questions the Police survey asked, but distinguishing between relations and confidence with local police officers, and with Police HQ (or policy). The survey was distributed by member organisations to their members, and posted on the COLFO Facebook page.
21. The key takeaway for COLFO was the great gap between local respect and respect for the policy and senior management influence.
22. The reported gap between local confidence and HQ will to some extent reflect what is being picked up by our members from police they know well. In other words, shooting sports people will be hearing about officers' own apprehensions about what Police HQ is up to.
23. COLFO believes that getting rid of local staff, as proposed in 2018, will further diminish the overall level of trust and confidence at a time when Police have been tasked to build on this requirement.

CHANGES TO FIREARM LICENSING THAT MAY HAVE DIRECTLY AFFECTED TARRANT'S ABILITY TO GAIN A LICENCE

24. It is rare for a licensed firearms owner to commit an arms related crime in New Zealand. In the recent Stuff.co.nz Homicide Report, they found that only a small minority of those who kill with a gun hold a licence.⁶ In about 12 per cent of homicide cases, they established that the killer was a licensed gun owner, in 70 per cent they found they were not.⁷ Indeed they are law abiding generally. There are 250,000 licensed users in New Zealand.⁸ To obtain a licence they must be considered 'fit and proper'. Tarrant proved not to be a 'fit and proper' person.
25. No matter what the test for a licence is, if vetting is inadequate there is a greater likelihood of unsuitable people getting lawful access to firearms. More importantly perhaps, there is a greater likelihood, if it is known that vetting is nominal, that people who know they are unsuitable, or should expect to be found unsuitable, will nevertheless 'give it a go'.
26. Generally speaking criminals can and will get access to firearms as they require. The Police have stated that the most common source of illegally held firearms is theft from licensed owners.⁹

⁶ Note that the Homicide Report includes the 15th March attack, therefore 31 per cent of the deaths in the periods were as a result of that incident.

⁷ See <https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2019/the-homicide-report/>

⁸ See OIA [request](#) to New Zealand Police (Reference: IR-01-19-7926) dated 18 March 2019.

⁹ See [New Zealand Police response to NZ First comments on draft report](#) submitted to the Law and Order Committee on 5 March 2017 at 5.

27. This attack was rare; the last such incident being Aramoana in 1992. There are as noted hundreds of thousands of firearms licence holders in New Zealand who are 'fit and proper'. Multiple homicides with firearms are very rare.
28. Prior to 2015, the general process to obtain a licence was:
- A) An application form is filled in and a fee paid;
 - B) The person attends a safety lesson;
 - C) The person is tested on knowledge of firearms safety procedures and requirements; and
 - D) The person is interviewed and their referees consulted as well as their security checked. The interviews and checks were expressly focused on mental stability and social adjustment. It was widely known that family members would be questioned.
29. The safety lesson was provided by volunteers for the Mountain Safety Council. The lessons were practical, and generally interactive. The volunteers were persons with high levels of experience and a passion for firearm safety and lawful use. A critical part of the process was that volunteers would report to Police if there was a person in a lesson who they had concerns about. This was just one channel of frequent open communication between Police and the shooting community. The regular contact created a network of local people engaged in supporting the objectives of firearms licensing, working in close cooperation with the local Police Arms Officer.
30. In 2018 the volunteer instructor safety lessons and test were replaced by tests administered by VTNZ and AA, and paid instructors taking practical handling assessments. In many areas the process came to rely on completion of a test based on information and 'rules' set out in a booklet issued by Police to applicants.

Mr Tarrant's licence

31. This submission describes changes in the licencing procedures that may have contributed to Tarrant being licenced, when previous procedures might have improved the chances of him being:
- Identified as unsuitable and not licenced, or
 - being reported to the Police later as someone to be put under surveillance.
32. It appears to COLFO that the perpetrator had criminal intent from the very start. Given that he was not a New Zealand resident for long, and seemingly had no involvement with firearms as a hobby (such as hunting) prior to gaining a licence there should have been more care taken with the background checks.

33. We urge that the Commission investigate very closely the records associated with assessment of Tarrant's fit and proper status and the dealings with his referees. We say reluctantly that we do not believe it would be prudent for the Commission to take records or Police HQ assurances at face value. Persons involved should be interviewed with forensic care. We say that because we are no longer confident that the Police organisation is consistently impartial or objectively truthful in relation to firearms regulation.
34. We note that Mr Tarrant applied for his firearms licence and received it in 2017. We have concerns around the vetting procedures and whether the 2010 NZ Police vetting guide was adhered to during Tarrant's licencing process.
35. The regime that Tarrant underwent to attain his firearms licence would have meant that he had little oversight from the firearms community upon application. His education would have been self-administered.
36. Had he applied under the new regime (in 2018), his testing would likely have been either solo at a VTNZ station or delivered under supervision of a paid firearms instructor.
37. The exact circumstances of Mr Tarrant's checks is unknown to COLFO. What COLFO does know is that he had travelled to North Korea and the Turkish border with Syria. It is concerning that the troubling travel destinations were not investigated further.
38. Additionally, we are aware that data sharing between NZ Police and their international counterparts does not appear to occur for firearm licensing purposes. COLFO has often been surprised to find that it is raising matters with the Police that we expected them to know, only to find that they have no expert and no routine channel for building expertise.
39. For example, we are aware of a licences being granted to people who had been deported from Australia.
40. COLFO asks the Commission to consider whether Tarrant's peculiarities might have been more evident under the pre-2014 process. A volunteer safety instructor may have more opportunity to form a view, to pass to the Arms Officer – generally someone they had a long and respectful association with.
41. The importance of the role of the independent firearms vetter cannot be underestimated. They should be a filter and be able to pass on concerns to police.
42. There is a difference between interacting with an applicant during a firearms safety lecture and standing over them while they complete a test where they cannot ask questions.
43. We therefore submit that the changes in the licencing application regime may have played a part in Tarrant obtaining a firearms licence.

FAILURE BY THE EXISTING LIMITED REGISTRATION SYSTEM OF E CATEGORY FIREARMS

44. Whilst we note that the Terms of the Inquiry exclude recommendations on firearms legislation, it is prudent that the Commission inquire in to the operation of the current limited registration system of E category equipment, and how the implementation of the system may have contributed to the events in Christchurch.
45. As way of background, we have provided detail on the AR15 type rifle as APPENDIX A

Consequences of the Thumbhole stock exemption

46. What characterised the availability of AR15 type rifles prior to 2010 was a very limited supply and numbers. The reason was that most in the country had been held on an E licence since the law was amended in 1992. From the 1990's it became increasingly common for new rifles to almost always include a vertical pistol grip. They were seen as more ergonomically correct for precision shooting.
47. Following the Aramoana event, and 1992 law change, owners of these firearms had the option of converting the endorsement for an existing AR15 type to either an E endorsed firearm requiring an E endorsed licence (which was newly created) or convert it to a "sporting" configuration.
48. A definition was provided that held a "sporting configuration" had restrictions on the number of cartridges that could be held in the magazine and other features, mostly cosmetic were also outlawed, such as bayonet lugs. The reasons for this determination was unclear beyond that Parliament felt that firearms that represented "Rambo-style military look-alikes"¹⁰ style should be controlled, The Police would not engage with the community on the reasons. Many in the community did believe that determinations like the bayonet lug had no relevance to firearms safety
49. At the time, almost the only way you could meet the "special reason" requirement in the Act to import a new AR15 rifle was to hand in an existing E registered endorsed firearm to get an import permit for a new one. The Police insisted on this regime though it was widely thought that it was without lawful foundation.
50. This meant that the price of these rifles was artificially high. It could run from \$5,000-\$10,000 each. Only a handful of enthusiasts had them, and these were mainly in the professional pest control/dedicated target shooter space. The artificial price made them a more attractive target for burglars.
51. E category licence holders were very thoroughly vetted. They were required to store the firearms registered and endorsed on that licence with extremely high security. As far as

¹⁰ See Minister for Police, Hansard, 28 November 1991

COLFO knows there has never, in 25 years, been an incident of the holder of an E licence committing an offence with an E registered firearm.

52. This all changed in 2009 when the NZ Police unilaterally announced that they had reinterpreted the terms of the Act. They alleged that a “thumbhole stock”, which allowed a semi-automatic rifle to remain an A category firearm (classified as a “sporting configuration”), now incorporated a military pattern free-standing pistol grip. As a result, they claimed that those rifles required an E endorsement to maintain legal ownership.
53. COLFO engaged with the Police. We strongly argued that the interpretation was incorrect. We urged that the difference between A and E rifles should be based on sound policy and safety distinctions, not cosmetics. We outlined distinctions that would depend on function, magazine capacity and potential modifications. Police did not engage with the shooting community. They insisted that thumbhole stocked semi-automatic rifles must be E category.
54. This was challenged in Court. The High Court found that the Police decision on the basis of the thumbhole was unlawful and ultra vires.¹¹
55. Following the decision, the Police did not engage with the shooting community to find consensus and a way ahead. Instead they allowed category A licence holders who had been affected by the decision (and were endorsed) to choose to convert their firearm to a style requiring a category E licence and receive an E endorsement on their licence to reflect this.
56. This also affected the Police’s ability to unilaterally enforce their import surrender policy (outlined above), which they should have expected would occur.
57. The practical result of all this was AR15 rifles, which only had cosmetic differences from the E category rifles (essentially less “military looking”) entered the country in far greater numbers than previously. There remained a difference between an E and A rifle cosmetically, but there was a major loophole from the perspective of anyone expecting the law to relate to function, not cosmetics. The law contained nothing stopping a person with an A licence buying parts that would, if fitted to the A category firearm turn it into a firearm that should be treated as E category. The most obvious part that should have been controlled was large capacity magazines.¹² The shooting community warned NZ Police that this was a significant problem. As far as we know, they did not engage with us on these warnings on any level at this time.

¹¹ *Police v Lincoln* [2017] NZDC 15411 at [58] – [74].

¹² See [COLFO Review of the Law and Order Select Committee Report](#) at 4.

59. The total number of military style semi-automatic firearms rose from 6919 in 1997, to 7800 in 2010. A large part of this increase was due to the change in interpretation by Police. Since 2010, there have been significant increases to the number of these firearms in NZ.
60. It also meant the price of rifles plummeted, making them very affordable. Rifles which were worth \$10,000 second hand were suddenly selling for under half that.
61. Moreover, a person could purchase a magazine (like the 30 round ones used in the 15 March attack) without proof of a firearms licence or an E licence endorsement which was required to use it. An offence was committed if a large capacity magazine and an A category semi- automatic, the two items, were located together, but enforcement was uncommon.
62. The rifle used on 15 March had been illegally converted to an E configuration, namely by inserting a high capacity magazine. The law should not have permitted Mr Tarrant to purchase the magazines which greatly increased the number of rounds that could have been fired without reloading and replacing the magazine.
63. The Arms Act has a provision¹³ for Police to impose on E endorsement holders conditions for the use and storage of high capacity magazines in their possession. It could have controlled the vast quantity of high capacity magazines which Police permitted to be imported after 2010. These powers were not exercised.
64. There have been claims that the implementation of a more extensive registration would have made the Christchurch event more unlikely. In COLFO's view the firearm used should have been covered by existing registration requirements. Certain firearms are required to be registered – pistols, collectors' items and formerly E category firearms. That is, from the moment that the 30 round magazine was inserted in the rifle, it was legally required to be registered as an endorsed E category firearm and recorded on an endorsed firearms licence.
65. A general firearms registration system is unlikely to prevent a homicide by an inclined individual unless all the following occur:
- The individual has a licence;
 - The individual has registered firearms;
 - The individual "telegraphs" that an attack is likely in some way;
 - The law enforcement agency detects or is informed of that signal by a member of a cooperative and supportive population;
 - The law enforcement agency has enough knowledge of the informant to be confident enough to act on the information;
 - The registry is accurate;

¹³ See Section 33A of The Arms 1983

- The individual does not have access to firearms or explosives or another weapon such as a truck; and
 - The individual has their freedom reduced in some way.
66. COLFO notes that in the Aramoana event the Police failed to act on clear information that Mr Gray was significantly disturbed and, indeed, had presented a rifle a few days before.
67. A registered firearms can only link back to the owner if:
- The Police database is accurate;
 - The firearm is left at the scene of the crime or found later; and
 - The identifying features of the firearms are not removed.
68. The Police say that the primary source of illegally held firearms in New Zealand is theft. It is not stated how registration would prevent or reduce theft. Currently, owners are required to report stolen or lost firearms.
69. COLFO submits that the E category registration service worked reasonably well, because it had modest objectives, and because its practical outcome was the creation of a set of expectations among owners of such firearms that they should be intensely involved in security, vetting and expect regular police contact. It functioned because it was of manageable scale.
70. But even that registry, small though it was, was not at all reliable.
71. COLFO is concerned that the Police have not even tried to learn from the experience of the past decade. We know of no reason to expect them to maintain the necessary focus on a much enlarged and more cumbersome and expensive Arms Act administration, given the way they allowed the decay of what they had, and should have been proud of, after Aramoana.
72. A firearms registry focused on specially licensed or exempted users of semi-automatics could be workable. But universal registration would use Police resources that in COLFO's view should be dedicated to improving the flow of information on 'fit and proper' characteristics. Ultimately, that kind of intelligence is most effective when it is part of a relationship of the kind envisaged by Sir Robert Peel, where the Police only do full time, what it is the duty of every responsible adult to do as and when needed.
73. Given the sinister nature of extremism every effort should be bent toward engaging a community with mutual trust in a collaborative effort to identify and to counter dangerous extremism wherever it appears. Time spent looking to see if a rifle has the correct serial number could be time and resource lost in unwarranted confidence,

while the next offender is collecting materials for explosives, or other means of mass murder.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Under schedule clause 5(1) of the Terms of Reference, the Commission has the ability to make recommendations to improve practices by State sector agencies that could ensure prevention of another such attack. We respectfully, and in reference to the matters detailed above, make the following suggestions:

1. An external state agency, experienced in quality assurance, is made responsible for ensuring that the discretionary application of licensing requirements, such as the determination of 'fit and proper' is properly exercised by Police;
2. Dedicated and protected funding is provided for the administration of firearms safety measures, and accountability measures established to ensure efficient and effective spending of this funding; and
3. Consultation requirements with stakeholders is strengthened to ensure it is a real forum for policy development using the expert opinion in the community, not used as a checklist requirement by Police. This consultation should also provide oversight on regulatory changes. Such a forum would require separate funding dedicated to advice and research.

APPENDIX A –

Semi-Automatic Firearms/The AR15 type rifle

The rifle reportedly used by Tarrant was an AR-15 type rifle chambered in .223 Remington. The military name of this cartridge is 5.56mm NATO. Military cartridges are commonly used in the sporting and target shooting realm, such as the common .308 Winchester cartridge, which is the civilian version of the 7.62 NATO cartridge.

The AR15 rifle is so called as it was developed by the “Armalite” corporation prior to the Vietnam War. AR15 stands for “Armalite Rifle Model 15”- not “automatic rifle”.

Semi-automatic firearms have been available to New Zealanders since the beginning of last century. They are the most popular rimfire firearms in use with hundreds of thousands in circulation, and are also probably the most common type of shotgun in use, as the semi-automatic action reduces recoil felt by the shooter. The requirement to use steel shot in water fowl hunting has meant that waterfowl shooters have to use heavier loads of steel shot with a corresponding increase in recoil. Bolt action rifles dominate big game hunting, but semi-automatics are also commonly used for hunting depending on the game as they allow the hunter to efficiently take another shot when required to humanely dispatch the animal. Semi-automatic rifles are also used for target shooting in the “three gun” and “service rifle” disciplines in which New Zealanders compete internationally.

The AR15 type rifle is not a military rifle. It does physically resemble the US M16 and M4 military rifles but internally the rifles are different in that they have no capability to fire fully automatically (that is, firing continuously as long as the trigger is depressed and the ammunition feed is available). They are manufactured to make using the parts that make the M16 rifle fire automatically incompatible.

Whilst deadly, the firearm used by Mr Tarrant was not a particularly powerful firearm. A typical power would be a 3.5 gram projectile travelling at about 990m/s. This can be compared to the common .308 hunting cartridge typically used for deer and pig hunting. This fires a much heavier 10 gram projectile travelling at 860m/s. The low powered .22LR cartridge fires typically a 2.5 gram projectile at about 380m/s.

It is not correct to say as some have, that it is a “high powered military rifle”. It is none of these things. It is at the margins of what would be appropriate for deer or pig hunting. It would be unsuitable for tahr or large deer (such as red deer) hunting.

The .223 cartridge is commonly used for shooting smaller game animals in New Zealand such as goats or wallabies. It is also used as a longer range “varmint” cartridge for longer range rabbit shooting. It is also very commonly used as a target shooting cartridge.

The AR15 type rifle was very common in New Zealand. Many hunters used them, although the exact number is unknown. It was also used by professional helicopter shooters,

professional game control officers, as a target shooting rifle and for casual shooting. The rifle has been available commercially in New Zealand since the 1960's and was very popular from about 2000 when it became more available outside a handful of collectors. The rifle's huge popularity was due to its modular nature. That is, by swapping out commonly available parts, the rifle could be customised to meet the user's requirements.

The rifle is capable of very high levels of accuracy with modifications.

There is no difference between an AR15 type rifle, technically, and a "sporting" rifle with a high end walnut stock. That is, the cartridge is not unique, the action is not unique and its capabilities are not unique.