

The Twilight of a Golden Era
By
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Those who have been to Camp Perry more than a few times find that it is much the same year after year. There are always changes, but it seems that the more Perry changes the more it stays the same. It was no different for the competitors arriving in August of 1940 for a full program of shooting in all three disciplines, pistol, smallbore, and highpower rifle. Few suspected that this would be a watershed event in the long and storied history of the National Matches.

Certainly the war in Europe and Asia was a prevalent topic of conversation. As the nation reluctantly prepared for war extensive Army maneuvers forced a last minute change in the match's planned dates, moving them back two weeks into the middle of September. The New dates knocked travel and vacation plans were into a cocked hat and with schools opening their doors for the fall semester there was legitimate fear that participation might drop significantly. Such was not the case and the shooting population remained about the same as 1939. A side benefit was that the early weeks of the old schedule were rainy, but by the time of the actual matches the days were mostly cool, dry and sunny.

The imminent possibility of the United States being drawn into war certainly drove the lessons of Small Arms Firing School home a little harder. Young men who arrived in the bright sunlight of a lighthearted and carefree youth would leave under the shadow of the first peacetime draft in United States history; signed into law as they lay on Camp Perry's grass honing that most fundamental of soldiery skills: small arms marksmanship.

But, in the insular world of the National Matches, these concerns could be pushed into the background for three weeks. For smallbore shooters the debate was even more circumscribed. Who among the many former champions and hot Regional winners present would take the Critchfield Trophy home?

Pistol shooters were delighted to find the old hand operated targets had been replaced by electrically timed and operated ones developed by Fred Bannerfield of Tampa, Florida.

Questions about the "U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1" and how the new semi-automatic would compare to the tried and true Springfield '03 would come to the fore for the high power community.

War in Europe had a direct effect on smallbore shooters. The RWS Challenge Trophy, named for its donor, the German munitions firm of Rheinische-Westfalischen-Sprengstoff, was the prize for a postal match among teams from the United States, Great Britain and Germany. With British Hawker Hurricanes and Supermarine Spitfires facing German Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Focke-Wulf Fw 190s in the skies over the English Channel there could be no friendly marksmanship competition between the belligerent nations.

As the smallbore riflemen of England were preoccupied with shooting of a different sort they did not fire in the Dewar. Canada was also involved in the conflict, as a member of the Commonwealth, but, being as far from the tumult as the United States our northern neighbors were able to scratch up a team.

To earn a berth on the Dewar Team one first had to place in the top 25 in selected matches and then shoot twice across the Dewar Course with metallic sights in

a special selection match. In a record setting performance Arthur C. Jackson, holder of a sharpshooter card in the two year old NRA classification system, from Brooklyn, New York, fired a perfect 800-49X in the tryout. In second place, with a 799-47X was C.L. Jackson, no relation, of Atlanta. Art Jackson ended up shooting a 396-20X in the Dewar, three points off the high score of 399-27X, coached by his good friend Tom Lewis.

Irene Barney would become the third woman to earn a place on the United States Dewar Team. The number nine must have had some magical significance for the distaff side in that event. Blanche Crossman shot on the team in 1919, Mary Ward in 1929, and now Barney, who placed 19th in the trials, would shoot a 399 in the match. Her 399-24X was the second highest score posted by the United States team and, as a result of their efforts, the Dewar Trophy would not be shipped back to war torn England, but remain safe at NRA Headquarters.

On an ominously numbered Friday, the 13th of September, the individual smallbore championship was decided. When the scores were tallied and posted it turned out to be a lucky day indeed for Dave Carlson, a Winchester employee from New Haven, Connecticut, who shot a 3187-177X to win the title. Carlson had appeared only once in the top five in the sub aggregate matches. It was his consistent performance that counted in the long run.

Carlson was a 1937 Pershing Team veteran and had medaled at the World Championships in Finland the same year. During the spring and summer leading up to Camp Perry Carlson campaigned throughout the northeast, racking up an impressive

seven consecutive grand aggregate wins. Although the eyes were not on Carlson to win in the early days of the Nationals, in hindsight, his victory was no real surprise.

Tucked away in the 1940 results bulletin were two historical firsts. Pennsylvanian Adelaide McCord became the first woman officially designated as the National Women Champion and a young Georgian, John C. Symmes, earned the distinction of becoming the first National Junior Champion.

Smallbore rifle had come into its own during the two decades since Ned Crossman organized the sport in 1919. The 1940 matches saw a record, yet to be surpassed, of 754 smallbore entries, showing that smallbore could stand on its own and be equal to its big brother, high power.

The pistol shooters took advantage of their new target system by shooting as much practice as possible. The ample supply of free service "Hard Ball" 45 caliber ammunition helped in preparation for the high point of the pistol competition, the National Trophy Individual and National Trophy Team Matches.

They also warmed up with the new Camp Perry Course event in which each competitor fired ten shots slow, timed and rapid fire with a 22 caliber, center fire, and 45 caliber pistol at 25 yards. In all there were 28 fired and aggregate matches for the handgun enthusiast. Harry Reeves, a Detroit police officer, won the individual title and would, by the time he retired, add another five to his resume.

Two policemen, Joseph P. Corr and Arvid 'Andy' Anderson, tied for first in the National Trophy Individual Match. With a 98 rapid fire, no small feat with an issue Colt 1911 and service ammunition, Corr took possession of the General Custer Trophy. The United States Infantry Team would emerge the top team in the National Trophy Pistol

Team Match. They were anchored by a young sergeant, Huelet 'Joe' Benner who would go on to win, like Reeves, six United States national pistol titles. He also won three world championships and Olympic gold to become, hands down, the top United States international pistol competitor.

Pistol competition was marked by nearly 600 people of kindred spirit doing their best to post the highest possible score. When not shooting they could be found kibitzing as the more experienced cheerfully gave valuable coaching to newcomers.

The NRA and National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice 30 caliber matches were the backbone of the championships. Teams arrived representing the major military commands, as well as the National Guards and civilian teams of the various states.

Anyone who participated, supported or not, was issued, free of charge one Service Rifle, a star gauged Springfield rifle, and a cartridge belt. If one wished a Service Rifle (M1) could be drawn as well as a Model 1911 45 caliber pistol, if needed. All the National Match ammunition one required for practice and match firing was issued on the line at no cost.

A civilian who wished to take advantage of the Government's largess to bring home a little ammunition practiced a procedure known as the 'firing point hop'. A 'hopper' would waltz up to the edge of an ammunition distribution point during the pre-match issue frenzy. Experience had taught the 'hoppers' that any hand sticking out of a shooting coat and thrust into the melee, would, more often than not, exit with two five round clips. An aggressive 'hopper' could return home with a fair supply of Frankford Arsenal's best.

The “Caliber .30 Rifle Training School including Musketry”-the Small Arms Firing School for rifle, opened Camp Perry for the center fore shooters. Completion of the six day basic course was required for participation in the National Trophy Team Rifle Match and it offered introductory instruction to neophytes, refresher training for experienced hands, and, most importantly, a chance to zero and practice with the newly issued firearms. An advanced school was also available for more experienced shooters and coaches.

While the '03 was the rifle of choice a rifleman also could shoot the new M1 in any match not designated for the Service Rifle. There were four matches for the M1 only, 16 rounds at 200 yards rapid fire in 60 seconds, 16 rounds at 300 yards rapid fire in 90 seconds, the Camp Perry Instructor's Trophy Match which was a 16 shot surprise fire match shot standing at 200 yards, and a ten man team match of eight shots at 600 yards.

The M1 had first appeared at Perry in 1939 and had its teething problems. By 1940 the design had been improved and a sufficient number of rifles were available for use in the matches. Oddly enough two of the three individual M1 matches were won by civilians who had only just become acquainted with the new rifle during SAFS. The team match was won by the United States Marine Corps Reserve by a one point margin over the regular Marine Team, with the North Dakota civilians placing third. This indicated that the rifle could be quickly mastered, an important factor when training millions of men in its use was becoming a real possibility. Even though its days were numbered the 37 year love affair between and America's riflemen and the '03 died hard. The M1 would not win the same acceptance and affection lavished on the Springfield

until it had proved its worth on the battlefields of Europe and the contested islands of the Pacific.

Much to the happiness of the team captains and coaches the schedule had been arranged so that all of the individual matches were completed before the team events. They now had an opportunity to observe and evaluate their charges in the work up to the National Trophy Team Rifle Match.

NRA individual matches saw entries run from a low of 758 in the NRA Instructor's Match to a high of 1635 in the Member's Trophy Match. It came as no surprise that the bulk of the winners in the 16 matches were regular service riflemen. Infantrymen, Corporal Thaddeus A. Ferenc and Sergeant William J. Coffman, had won the President's Match and National Trophy Individual Match respectively. In the NTI Coffman was followed by two more infantrymen. The United States Infantry Team was prominent in the individual matches leading to the all important National Trophy Rifle Team Match

The Infantry was favored to win the NTT as they had won the match the previous two years and had the hot hands who dominated the NTI. However, the Marines had arrived at Perry in early August. When the schedule changed they had a month's extra practice on the very ranges where the biggest team match of the year was to be contested.

The final team match of the '03 opened with the Infantry and Marines tied after the standing stage. When the thunder of the 200 rapid fire stage had died the Marines were in the lead; ten men dropping only seven points. At 300 yards the Marines shot well and built up a 15 point lead. The Infantry took back two points at 600 yards. As the

day ended, the teams cleaned their rifles and went off to dinner and, hopefully, a goodnight's rest before the final stage.

It wouldn't be a cake walk for the Marines as they faced a determined Infantry team. With ten men shooting 20 shots each at 1,000 yards on a hot and muggy morning there was no guarantee of victory, even with a 13 point advantage. With tension in the air and an uncertain future staring them in the face the men from both teams wanted to go out winners. In the end the Marines slowly added a point here and another point there and soon had broken the Infantry's hold on the Dogs of War Trophy. Almost unnoticed was the Marine Reserve Team which came in third, behind the Infantry, by a single point! It was a day of triumph for the Marines.

As quickly as the rifle smoke blew away the camp emptied. Those departing Camp Perry at the end of the third week of September had no inkling that 13 years would pass before all three disciplines would again meet on the shores of Lake Erie. Within a short time most of the young men went off to war, some twice, in the intervening years. Some, like Walter Walsh, Harry Reeves, and Joe Benner would return to Perry. Others, like Tom Lewis and David McDougal would not.

For thirty caliber competitors 1940 was the last hurrah of the much beloved bolt-action service rifle, the .30-06 Springfield '03, as well as 1,000 yard stage of the National Match Course. On the other hand, it was the competitor's first full taste of the coming generations of semiautomatic service rifles.

When the matches resumed at Perry in 1953 each discipline would have its own time frame with set programs of fire, eliminating both the options of shooting all three guns or picking and choosing only the events one wished to shoot. 1940 was the last

year that the match schedule allowed a shooter to easily get from the smallbore range, to pistol range, to the highpower range, or visa versa. In those prewar days a competitor's only duty was to shoot. Troops from various military organizations ran the line, scored, and operated the pits. That would soon change also.

For smallbore riflemen the Dewar Team selection became merely a function of finish in the metallic sight match aggregate rather than having to qualify through special selection matches.

Trophy winners no longer could box up the valuable bronzes and take them home, but had to settle for replicas and trophy plaques.

Some things stayed the same, more or less, when the camp filled with shooters in 1953. The long lines of Army Pyramid tents used to house competitors and support personnel were replaced by tar paper huts used to house prisoners of war.

The National Trophy Infantry Match, the "Rattle Battle" would continue but with a sixth rifle replacing the Browning Automatic Rifle.

The red brick buildings, the arcade, camp headquarters, theater, and chapel constructed during the Depression stood strong, as did the pre-cast concrete mess hall, but they would be adorned with bronze plaques dedicating them to the memory of the fallen.

Ranges A, B, C, D East, and D West still beckoned there but they soon would carry the names of 37th Infantry Division Medal of Honor recipients. Named for Private First Class Frank J. Petrarca, Technical Sergeant Cleto Rodriguez, Private Roger Young and Second Lieutenant Robert M. Viale, although, until corrected 36 years later,

a clerical error would insure that the range was incorrectly known as 'Vaile,' had not changed and neither had the perplexing winds and mirage.

For these, and other nostalgic reasons, the 1940 National Matches are considered by many to be the quintessential Camp Perry and the twilight of a golden era of marksmanship.