

THE RATIONALE OF BUILDING A NATIONAL MATCH SERVICE RIFLE:

Why, you might ask, did *THE* National Armory even consider building a Match version of the Nation's Service Rifle? In concept it was quite simple, it had several purposes:

- 1) It served to act as a test bed for the current issue service weapon and encouraged the shooters (both civilian and military) to work on and contribute to improvement(s) to the issue military rifle.
- 2) The availability of a truly accurate version of the service rifle tended to encourage practice and competition with the issue military service weapon.
- 3) Individuals trained on an accurate version of the issue service rifle could (and did) render invaluable service as individual soldiers and rifle coaches during wartime.
- 4) Summing up, the program took the myth of the universal excellence of the American rifleman and turned it into fact. From WWI on, the marksmanship of the American soldier in battle became legend, and in most cases, rightfully so.

Since the inception of the National Trophy Matches in 1903 and the Small Arms Firing School in 1918 the graduates of the school and the veteran competitors have rendered yeoman service in wartime and many participants in the National Trophy Matches became well known heroes in time of war. Within the Marine Corps, at least two Distinguished Marksmen became Medal of Honor winners, and two became Commandant of the Marine Corps. This doesn't include many shooters that were awarded the Navy Cross (the Navy equivalent to the Distinguished Service Cross) and a good number of Army Shooters who won the Distinguished Service Cross. Future snipers were often selected from those who had proven their skill with the rifle on the firing line at Camp Perry. In short, the entire competition-in-arms program was a huge success and returned results far in excess of the time and funds expended. Service Rifles were improved as well as coaching and shooting techniques. The rifles themselves were often improved due to the input of the military and civilian shooting community. All in all, the competition-in-arms program constituted an extremely cost effective program in relation to its contribution to the National Defense effort.

Unlike modern day shooting, great pains were taken to prevent the bastardization of the service rifle in the pursuit of accuracy during the days of the M1903 Springfield and the initial use of the M1. The name of the game was to familiarize the average soldier, sailor, Marine or civilian in the use of the service rifle, as it existed, not a stylized imitation of the real thing.

A letter from Lt. Col. Crossman of the Ordnance Corps to Col. Rau also of the Ordnance Corps discussing the possible modifications to the NM M1s was summed up pretty well by the following statement(s)¹

...Any alteration permitted, I feel, should be aimed at producing one thing only – producing a better battle weapon. Changes which will improve it only for competitive shooting I would oppose. Changes should not affect the safety features of the rifle nor should they affect the functioning. I believe we can readily defend changes made as a result of this philosophy.

It seems to me that changes to the sights, as reducing the diameter of the rear peep, adding ½ minute clicks for windage, using narrower front sights, etc, and (are) all designed to help scores, not to improve the combat rifle. Some of those changes, as smaller peep, I'm convinced would seriously damage the combat usefulness of the rifle. Such changes would be pretty hard to defend, I believe.

Lt. Colonel Crossman was also quite irate at the allowing of more than one malfunction alibi per (the entire) match, as there are no alibis in combat! Obviously, Lt. Colonel Crossman was a man

of the Martial Arts bent when it came to modification(s) of the service rifle. These gentlemen had their hearts in the right place, but eventually were overruled by those who should perhaps, be termed "*The (early) Gamesmen.*" ...The Gamesmen were/are more interested in producing a high score in a sporting event, as opposed to demonstrating their ability to shoot a match winning score with a battle worthy service rifle under simulated field conditions. The "martial art" mindset that once required the rapid-fire stages of the National Trophy Matches be fired using the "battle sight" setting on the M1903 Springfield Rifle bespoke of an age dedicated to the defense of our country rather than the glory of winning a sporting event. Few individuals who today compete in the service rifle matches using a heavy barreled, heavy stocked rifle using optical aids in the rear sight apertures would truly choose to carry their *competition* service rifle to war if the country were suddenly invaded. In the early days of the NM M1 such was not the case... the National Match M1s used through the early 1970s were simply "tweaked" service guns and would have performed well on the battle field. The rifles produced by Springfield Armory through the end of production in 1963, truly fit the description of a combat ready (if somewhat more accurate) service rifle.

All would go well in the Martial Arts camp until the attempt to transition from the M1 to the M14. It was not until approximately 1965 that the various services were supplied with the new (M14) service rifles, and the issue M1s were turned in. The thrust was (and rightfully so) to ensure that all the troops in the field were supplied with the new service rifle before allowing the sale to individuals. Unlike the transition to the M1903 as *THE* service rifle at Camp Perry in 1908, sufficient NM M14s were not available for issue to the civilian competitors at the Nationals. This forced the decision to continue to allow the NM M1 to be a "legal service rifle" in the National Trophy Matches at Camp Perry. Ultimately the war in Vietnam prevented a smooth transition, and the Gun Control Act of 1968 prevented the sale of the "welded" NM M14s to civilian competitors even though the Alcohol Tobacco Tax people had previously approved the sale as soon as sufficient M14 Rifles became available to equip the Armed Forces. The demise of the Armory in Springfield, and a new policy of ignoring the training of American Civilians with the service rifle, pervaded the new Congress and eliminated the funding that had perpetuated the Nationals Matches. The (then) new M16 further added to the problem, and before it became the defacto service rifle, everyone simply hoped it was an aberration that would simply disappear into the mists of history.

The commercial firm of Springfield Armory, Inc. was not yet a reality thus leaving a dearth of available M14 clones to allow the civilian shooters to participate in the National Trophy Matches. A decision was made to allow the M1 to continue as a sort of limited standard service rifle, legal for participation in the Excellence-in-Competition Matches. It wouldn't be until about 1994 that the decision was made in the various individual services to improve the M16 Rifle to the point that it would become competitive in the Service Rifle arena. Current results with the so called "Mouse Gun" have proven extremely successful and at last we are back on track of competing with and improving *THE* service rifle and allowing the improvements to be ploughed back into the rifle we would be required to carry to war. At last we seem to be back on track of the intent of Service Rifle Competition. I sincerely doubt that Lt. Col. Crossman would be amused with the use of leather shooting jackets, ground cloths, handloaded ammunition, and heavily weighted competition service weapons, but Rome wasn't built in a day. We are at least pointed in the right direction for the first time since about 1965.

¹ Letter from Lt. Col. E.B. Crossman, Ordnance Corps, Aberdeen Proving Grounds to Colonel Charles G. Rau discussing the philosophy of the National Trophy Matches.