The Shooter

I recently had an appointment at the local Veteran's Administration hospital to have my hearing aids replaced. The VA provides my hearing aids because they have determined that my hearing loss was service connected. It's not unusual, of course, to find old veterans like me—particularly those that spent some time in combat—suffering from a loss of hearing. However, I did not claim that I was disabled as a result of combat service, or even some other duty assignment in my three years of active service during the Korean War. My injury occurred while I was a college student, serving as a "weekend warrior" in the active Army reserve. Here is how that came to be.

I had been an officer in the Infantry during my active duty service and I remained in the active Reserve at the end of that service. However, when I moved to Ames in the fall of 1954 to attend Iowa State College under the GI Bill, there were no reserve Infantry units available, so I accepted assignment as commander of a company of Combat Engineers. The company I took over was located right on the campus of the college, but it was identified by the officer in charge of the Reserve office in Ames as the worst unit in his jurisdiction. So, as the new commander of the Company C of the 328th Engineer Battalion, I was immediately challenged with how to increase membership, morale and esprit de corps in my command.

As it turned out, the location of our unit made it possible for me to take a major step in that direction. The college had a small-bore rifle and pistol range in the Army ROTC armory on the campus. The ROTC department used the range in its training program. They had all of the necessary equipment (.22-caliber rifles, ammunition, targets) and they were willing to let our unit use it when the range was free. This made it possible for my company to enter marksmanship competitions sponsored by the Military District of Iowa, the command that oversaw Army Reserve activities in the state.

Statewide postal matches were conducted every year, with the winning team competing shoulder-to-shoulder against the best team from the Iowa National Guard. Postal matches were carried on with each team firing a prescribed series of carefully supervised and certified matches on its home range. The certified results (and the targets) from each match were mailed to Iowa District Headquarters for compilation and publication of scores. These competitions provided an ideal way for me to build esprit de corps in my unit. However, before I explain more about the facilities we used and the mechanics of the competition, I need to explain that these activities were all voluntary—and unpaid. The time we spent in practice and competition was not considered drill time. It was all done in the interest of personal satisfaction and unit pride.

My unit did not put a team into the competition in the winter of 1954-55. I had just taken command of the company and I was trying with some effort to adjust to being a college freshman after six years out of high school. However, by the following fall, I had recruited enough able shooters to field a team of seven, the maximum allowed in the postal matches, and we began practicing in earnest. As I was one of the seven, these sessions began a regimen spanning several years that produced the trauma that ultimately led to my loss of hearing.

An indoor rifle and pistol range—even a small-bore facility—is necessarily an enclosed space, and the sounds of half a dozen .22-caliber weapons being repeatedly fired in your near vicinity can leave you with ringing ears. In those days, the kinds of ear protections in use today were unheard of. Some of the guys would use earplugs or they'd try to stuff cotton in their ears, but many of us just got used to the noise and learned to tolerate the ringing. In addition, as the

coach, I had to be able to communicate with my team members—and I couldn't do that with my ears stuffed full of cotton.

The construction of an indoor shooting range required some way, safely and effectively, to stop bullets that were traveling with enough velocity to carry them several miles. This was done by placing, just behind the position of the targets, heavy steel plates that were fixed at 45 degrees from the line of fire. Just below these plates were piles of sand. Thus, after the bullets had passed through the targets, they ricocheted off the plates and into the sand.

To position targets the proper distance from the firing line (50 feet), shooters clipped a target to a cable that circled on a pair of pulleys between the firing line and the down-range location of the target. The target was roughly the size of a sheet of printer paper. In the center was an aiming bulls eye a little less than 1.5 inches in diameter. Within the bulls eye were a series of five concentric and equally-spaced scoring rings constituting the top five scores on the target. The center ring—about the size of the .22-caliber bullet—gave a score of 10, if the bullet hole touched the ring. Each successive ring away from the center gave a one-point lower score. Outside the bulls eye were larger—and lower scoring—rings terminating with a score of 2 at the outer extremes of the target.

Each shooting session consisted of ten rounds fired from one of four positions; prone, sitting, kneeling or standing, giving a total maximum possible score of 100 for each session. Our first postal match was conducted in four stages over a two-month period in early 1956. Each stage had to be completed in a specified 12-day period. The first three stages each consisted of two sessions (20 rounds), with ten fired from the prone position and ten from one of the other three positions. The final stage specified four sessions (40 rounds), ten at each position.

So, to complete the match, each shooter had to fire a total of 100 rounds, but that was just the shooting we did in competition. As in any other endeavor requiring the development of skill, you don't compete well if you don't practice. So, the shooting we did in competition was only a small fraction of the time my team spent on the range that winter trying to become accomplished marksmen. We did become a good team, but not without having to endure an awful lot of noise. How good were we? That first year our team ranked third in the state (out of 39 teams entered) and we placed four members of our team in the top 14 competitors—two in the top 10 (I was seventh).

Because of my score in that match, I received a letter a few weeks later with an invitation to become a member of the Iowa Military District rifle team at the 5th Army Rifle and Pistol Matches at Ft. Riley, KS, in May. When I accepted that invitation, I had no idea how much the business of marksmanship (and the noise that went with it) was going to dominate my life for the next several months that year. Of course, I was still a full-time student carrying a full load of credit hours, but by now—almost through my second year in school—I had the system figured out well enough to be able to take off a few days now and then without doing serious damage to my grade point.

The rifle matches at Ft. Riley would be conducted outdoors using the Army-issue, .30-caliber M1 rifle. The .30-06 ammunition used by the M1 has about eight times the powder load of the .22 long-rifle cartridge we used on the small-bore range—and has an equivalent increase in the noise level when it is fired. In addition, as in our activities on the small-bore range, no protection for our ears was provided—or required. The firing range we would be using for the match was familiar territory for me. I had taken my basic training at Ft. Riley and I had served there two different times as a training officer. On one of those training-officer assignments, I had an experience on that rifle range that is worth a slight digression to relate.

My assignment that day was "pit officer." However, to understand my duties in that assignment, you first need to know a little about how a military training rifle range was laid out in those days. The shooters were aligned abreast along one of several slightly elevated lines of positions several hundred feet long, called "firing lines," that faced a downrange, matched series of target positions. Firing lines were typically located at 200, 300 and 600 yards from the targets. Each firing position was marked with a numbered stake that corresponded to the number on a large panel under each target. Targets appeared from behind an earthen rampart that ran parallel to the firing lines. Behind this rampart was the "pit," where the targets were handled by a pit crew under the supervision of the pit officer.

Targets (about six feet square) were pasted onto canvas facings fastened to two-by-four wood frames. At each target position, the frame was manipulated by means of a series of pulleys and counterbalanced so that raising and lowering the targets required minimum effort. That effort was provided by a pit crew, with one or two men assigned to each target. The tools of the trade for a member of the pit crew were (1) a number of cardboard discs perhaps four or five inches in diameter and (2) another slightly larger metal disc connected to a long pole. Each of the smaller discs, called "spotters," was painted black on one side and white on the other and had a wooden peg through its center (perhaps three inches long and the diameter of a pencil). The spotter was used by the pit crew to mark the location of a bullet hole in the target by placing its peg through the hole. If the bullet passed through the bulls-eye, the white side of the spotter was made to face the firing line. The black spotter was used for hits outside the bulls-eye.

Typically, training on the range involved both slow-fire and sustained-fire exercises. During slow-fire exercises, the target was pulled down after every shot, the hole was marked with the spotter, the target was raised again and the metal disk was held over the spotter showing a color that indicated the score. During sustained fire exercises, shooters had to fire a specified number of rounds in a certain amount of time. That time was determined by how long the targets were visible and I, as the pit officer, controlled that period of time. That is, when I was advised that everything was ready on the firing line, I gave the command through the PA system in the pit and every target was raised at the same time. Then, after the time specified for the exercise, I gave another command and all targets were lowered.

On the fateful day in question, it was very shortly after giving that second command that I heard shouts coming from one of the target areas and one of my NCOs came running up to tell me that a member of the pit crew had been shot. Of course that couldn't be true. All of the pit crew were 10 feet below the top of the parapet—and no more than a few feet behind it. However, when I got to the injured crew member and he dropped his pants, there was a fresh bullet wound in his backside—just a grazing wound, but there was no question that he'd been shot. The man was ambulatory, but we called for the ambulance from the firing line and shipped him off to the post hospital. The question was, how could such a thing have happened? We found the answer in the top cross timber of the target frame. There we found a knot—or what was left of a knot after having been hit by a .30-caliber bullet. Apparently, the man firing on that target had fired his last round just as the target was being pulled down and the crew member pulling it down was bent over with his backside stuck out behind him. The bullet struck the top of the target frame, hit the knot and ricocheted almost 90 degrees, hitting the crew member in the butt. It was a pretty obvious explanation, but I still was having interviews and signing papers for several weeks after that.

When I showed up at Ft. Riley for the 1956 Fifth Army Rifle Matches, I was what the shooting community called a tyro—a beginner. I had never fired a high powered rifle on the

range for any other purpose than to qualify—to achieve a score for my military records. Now I was a competitive shooter, complete with shooting jacket and glove. The photo on the right shows the Iowa District team on the range during the matches. For those who can't recognize me from when I was 55 years younger, I am in the front row, second from the right. I 'm not sure if the jackets and gloves were government issue, but they became our property.

Two other items of equipment—in addition to the rifle—were issued for us to use while we were in the competition. One was a carbide lamp and the other was a 20-power spotting scope. The carbide lamp was for "blackening" the sights on the rifle. These lamps had been used by miners in the old days to provide light while they were working underground. They attached them to their hard hats to illuminate whatever area they were working in. The photo on the right shows what such a lamp looked like. Of course we didn't use them for the light they produced, but rather for the unburned carbon that was in the flame. What made these lamps particularly convenient for this purpose was the simplicity of their operation. The jet from which the flame was emitted was connected to a chamber with a secure lid. When you put into the chamber a mineral called calcium carbide and then added water, a reaction occurred with the release of acetylene, a flammable gas. When the lid was secured, the gas came through the jet and, when lighted, produced a bright yellow flame—and unburned carbon, which we used to eliminate any possible reflections from our rifle sights.

The spotting scope was a short, but powerful, telescope mounted on a tripod. Under most circumstances, its primary use was not for looking at the target. It was used mainly for "reading the wind." A powerful telescope condenses the space between the firing line and the target. In that space, heat waves (what we call "mirage") rise from the earth and can be easily observed when they are condensed by the scope. As the wind blows, the "mirage" can be seen moving one way or the other and its velocity can be estimated from the pattern. An experienced shooter knows how many "clicks" of windage to adjust his sight for any particular pattern.

One of the traditions that are carried on in official rifle and pistol matches is the awarding of a patch designating each match. These patches are typically sewn onto the shooting jacket. Shooters that are regular competitors in such matches have their shooting jackets covered with these patches. The one from the 1956 Fifth Army Matches (shown on the left) was the first for me—and, I think, for most of the members of our team.

The matches at Ft. Riley went on for five days and involved the firing of some 200 rounds in the actual competition. However, we had arrived at the match two days before they officially began—to allow our

team to practice and get accustomed to the range—so we probably fired double that many rounds during the week we were there. I have no record of the performance of the Iowa team at these matches. I do have a commendation letter from the commander of the Iowa District praising our efforts in the competition—although he didn't have any official results at the time. If those records ever became available, I don't have a copy, but I must have done reasonably well because, a few weeks later, I received an invitation to become a member of the Fifth Army Reserve Component rifle team. This team—represented by Army reservists from twelve states in the north-central United States—would be competing at The National Rifle Matches in Camp Perry, Ohio in August and early September. It began to appear that my days as a high-power rifle competitor were just beginning.

Competition in the National Rifle Matches, conducted by the National Rifle Association (NRA) was going to be very different from any kind of shooting experience I had ever had—and I was going to need an additional weapon. The only kind of high-power rifle I had every fired—in training or in competition—had been the M1. (My assigned weapon in combat was the carbine, although I had carried a pistol through most of the war.) So, soon after I received appointment to the Fifth Army team, I was issued another rifle to use in the competition—a Model 70 Winchester. It fired the same .30-06 ammunition as the M1, but it was built for greater accuracy. It had a bolt action for more consistent seating of the cartridge in the chamber and it had a slightly longer—and a lot heavier—barrel than the M1. A photo of the Model 70 from that era is shown above.

I have no recollection of exactly when or where I acquired that rifle, but I know I had possession of it for most of that summer, and I expect that I was also allowed to keep possession of the M1, the carbide lamp and the spotting scope to use in practice. Of course, practice was going to be a major issue. The Fifth Army team members (perhaps eight or ten of us) came from all over the twelve-state area. To my best recollection, I was the only one from Iowa, so I was on my own for practice. Fortunately, Ames had a gun club and the club had an outdoor rifle range. So I joined the Ames club and began practicing at their range. I think the maximum distance on the range was 200 yards and, of course, it was all self-service. I was not only the shooter; I was also the pit crew. But it gave me the opportunity to get more familiar with the weapon I would be using in many of the upcoming matches—and, obviously, it continued the abuse my ears were receiving from the noise. The Army must have supplied me an unlimited amount of ammunition, because I don't recall ever running short.

Then, early in July, I received orders to active duty at the Midwest Regional Championship Rifle Matches to be held in Springfield, IL, the following week. I assume that other members of the Fifth Army team received similar orders, but I don't remember. In fact, I remember very little of that match, except that the range in Springfield had the capacity for shooting at targets 1,000 yards distant. When I was in Korea, I once tried shooting at an enemy soldier from about that distance with an M1, but the idea of rifle competition at 1,000 yards was totally foreign to me.

I should also point out that this first venture into NRA competition introduced me to the reality that I was a tyro in more ways than just my performance on the firing line. Most of my

fellow competitors in that match were deadly serious about the business of rifle marksmanship. They were primarily civilians who were there at their own expense. They owned their own weapons plus all the supporting equipment. Much of that equipment was totally foreign to me—particularly those items involved in the business of reloading ammo. The ammunition I used were "off-the-shelf" .30-06 cartridges available at any gun shop. These other guys didn't trust the manufacturer to measure the powder load accurately or to assure that each bullet was of a precise weight. So their equipment included a supply of gunpowder, a precision scale, shell casings, firing caps, precisely weighed bullets and a crimping device to secure the bullet in the casing. That is, "they loaded their own ammo." Every round was attended to with particular care. In fact, even some of my own team members were a part of that culture. However, my own view of that practice was that, to spend your time and money doing it, you had to be so good on the firing line that your ammunition was limiting further achievement. As a beginner, I was a long way from worrying about that, as were a lot of my fellow competitors—even many of those that "loaded their own ammo."

When I received my orders directing me to the National Rifle Matches in Ohio, they included a few days back at the range in Springfield, IL, where our team would spend some time practicing together and getting to know one another. I have no better recollection of this practice session than I have of the competition in Springfield the month before and I'm not even sure whether all of the team members were there. I am sure it was a welcome experience for me. I needed all the practice I could get—to prepare me for what was awaiting at Camp Perry.

Here is how Wikipedia describes the camp: *"Camp Perry is a National Guard training facility located on the shore of Lake Erie in northern Ohio near Port Clinton. In addition to its regular mission as a military training base, Camp Perry also boasts the largest outdoor rifle range in the world. The firing is done in the direction of the open water of the lake, just beyond an earthen berm and the targets."* The National Rifle Matches that year were scheduled to be in session there for two weeks—from 25 August to 8 September 1956.

Most of what happened on the range at Camp Perry has faded from my memory, although a couple of things still stand out—and I have a few medals from the competition that help fill in some blanks. I don't know how it was determined which matches I would enter, but I expect that I was probably in every one for which I was qualified. It does seem to me that I was on the range at one time or another every day of the competition. However, a typical match required less than half an hour (usually twenty-shot matches limited to one minute per shot), so every day included a lot of leisure time. I do recall spending some of that time reading Tolstoy's "War and Peace," which I finished before I left Camp Perry. (This was not a school assignment—just a way to minimize boredom.)

The photo above shows our living quarters on the post, which were clearly less than palatial. As can be seen, some of our time was spent cleaning our living areas and cleaning our

weapons. The teammate manning the broom in the photo is a Lt. Colonel and the one cleaning his M1 rifle was our team captain, a full Colonel. However, rank was never a big issue among the team members. We were all just shooters, and scores on the firing line had no respect for how much brass you had on your collar.

I came home from the National Rifle Matches that year with four medals and a certificate. The certificate was for completion of a course for instructors in rifle marksmanship, which was offered while I was there. Only two of the medals were place medals. I assume the others were for participation. I have no recollection at all of shooting in the matches in which I earned place medals. They were earned in the Marksman (lowest) Class. If I hadn't been able to research those matches on the Internet, I would still have no idea what they were. The first was called the Members Trophy Cup Match, in which I earned a tenth place. Actually I am surprised that this was one of the matches in which I performed best, because it required me to shoot from the standing position (at 200 yards), which was definitely not my favorite shooting position.

The other place medal I received was a third place in the Leech Cup Match. It was probably in this match that I found my niche as a shooter. It was fired from the prone position at 1,000 yards. I really liked shooting from that distance. It required not only accurate aim, but also a good ability to read the wind. And although many competitors came with rifles that could be equipped with telescopic sights for shooting at that distance, everyone shooting in the Leech Cup Match was required to use only "iron sights," that is the standard sighting equipment with which the rifle was manufactured. In spite of my reasonable showing in that match (my medal is shown at the left), I don't remember any details about my participation. However, in a later match at the same distance, I can still recall almost every shot—at least the critical ones. That match was the Wimbledon Cup Match—the one with the most coveted award.

I expect that the reason I still remember this match was that, after a good showing at that distance in the earlier match, I was determined to hit the bulls-eye with every shot in the Wimbledon. This doesn't mean that I was hoping to win the match, because a lot of other shooters would be putting every shot into the bulls-eye. Winners weren't determined by registering a perfect score of 100. They were determined by how many "Vs" were scored when you hit the bulls-eye. The bulls-eye in the one thousand-yard target was 36 inches across. In its center was another ring of half that diameter (one-fourth the area). That was the "V" ring. The number of shots inside that ring determined the winner among all of those that scored 100. The Wimbledon was an "open" match, permitting the use of telescopic sights, so I was competing that day with a lot of shooters that had a considerable advantage. But I figured that, if I could score 100, I would still emerge among the better shooters—however many Vs I scored.

By this time in the competition, I was very familiar with the routine. I had 22 rounds of ammunition at my position on the firing line. The first two were "spotters," shots to fine-tune my sights to the conditions of that particular day. They did not count toward my score. Also among the equipment I took with me to the firing line was my score book. In that book, I kept a personal record of my activities in every match. It had a facsimile of the target for every shot in the match, including the spotters. For every shot, I made a "call" as soon as I pulled the trigger, estimating

where I thought the bullet would hit the target, and then marked the call in the book. After the crewman in the pit spotted the bullet hole and signaled its score with the colored disk, I marked in my book the exact location of the hit and the score. However, this record was for my own information only. The official score was being kept by a man in a chair behind me. I regret that my score book has long since disappeared. It had a lot of history in it.

In the match, I fired my first spotter round and called it in the bulls-eye. The target, when it reappeared, showed a hole in the 4-ring, slightly to the right of the bulls-eye. I adjusted my sight for what I thought was appropriate for the distance I was off target and fired my second spotter. This shot I called out to the right. It was in fact out slightly to the right, so I assumed that my sight was properly adjusted. It wasn't. My first shot in the match was what we called a "wart four," so called because it was so close to the bulls-eye that the black marker made the bulls-eye look like it had a wart on it. So, with my first round, I had already destroyed my chance of scoring 100 in the match.

I made a slightly bolder adjustment in my sight and continued shooting. The next 14 rounds were all in the bulls-eye. At about that time, my sling began to feel that it was beginning to loosen. The slings on these rifles were made so that they could be detached from their connection on the stock and made into a loop that fit tightly around the upper left arm. You will see in the photo of the Ft. Riley rifle team on page 4 that each shooting jacket had special padding on the sleeve in that area. This made it possible to create a tight connection, holding the rifle butt firmly against the shoulder when you were in the shooting position. The padded shooting glove protected your left hand from the very taut sling.

After firing that 15th round, I considered stopping long enough to tighten my sling, but I decided to wait and fired my 16th round. It was another wart four. Then I adjusted my sling and completed the match with four more bulls-eyes. So my score for the match was 98. I don't recall how many Vs. It really didn't matter because my score had already put me too far down the line for the Vs to be important. However, I wasn't so far down the line that I had to walk away that day feeling totally dejected. There were about 1300 shooters in the match and I made it into the top 100 (barely).

1956 was an Olympic year. The Games were scheduled to be conducted in Melbourne, Australia in late November and early December that year—and they included competitions in rifle and pistol marksmanship. At the time, the selection of the U. S. Olympic teams for those competitions was carried on at the National Rifle Matches. So, sometime during those two weeks at Camp Perry, simply because I was there, I became a competitor vying for a place on the U. S. Olympic rifle team. I don't recall much at all about those Olympic tryouts. I just remember that they were very difficult—and very humbling. I appreciated the unique experience it offered (after all, now I could say that I had tried out for the Olympics), but it reminded me big time why I was classified as a tyro.

I do recall one other adventure during our tour at Camp Perry that is probably worth mentioning. Apparently they did not schedule any competition on the mid-match Sunday, because I can recall (and have a few photos of) an excursion on a

ferry boat with some other team members to an island somewhere out in the middle of Lake Erie. The photo on the previous page shows a ferry like the one we rode on and an island scene taken from our ferry. I don't recall the name of the island.

Heading home after the two weeks at Camp Perry, I could look back on the past eight months with a certain sense of satisfaction—and some considerable astonishment at all that had happened in that short time. I had had 37 days of active duty in the Army during that time—all of it shooting with the high power rifle—in addition to the small bore competitions early in the year. I can't begin to imagine how many rounds of ammunition I expended in that period, but I'm sure it was plenty sufficient to begin the tinnitis (ringing in my ears) that has grown ever more pronounced over the years. However, my shooting days were still far from over.

That fall, after classes at Iowa State were back in session, my small bore team began to prepare for the next year's postal matches beginning the following January. With a good year behind us, we had an even stronger team to field in the 1957 competition. And, in fact, we acquitted ourselves very well. In the postal match, all seven team members scored in the top 17 places (out of 92 competing). Three were in the top 10 (I was second, one point out of first). That year, the top four teams in the state (we were second) and the top 10 individuals had a shoulder-to-shoulder shoot-off at our home range in Ames. Our team scored second in the shoot-off (two points out of first) and I scored third in the individual competition.

I have no surviving paperwork to document my invitation to the Fifth Army Rifle and Pistol Matches in 1957, but I was there. I have the patch from the competition to prove it and I even have a medal I earned for achieving a second place in one of the matches. My shooting jacket, decorated with all my patches—including that one—is shown on the left and the medal from the Fifth Army Matches can be seen on the right. I have no recollection—and no paperwork to indicate whether or not I was invited again to the National Matches, but there is no way I could have attended. By then, I had already begun my Senior year and I was committed to begin graduate school the following Spring quarter. School work was becoming more critical than marksmanship.

However, apparently it was not so critical that I couldn't coach my small-bore team in one more postal match, because I found two more medals among my memorabilia—although I have no other documentation. One medal was for placing third as an individual in the 1958 Iowa District small-bore match. The other was for being a member of the <u>first place team</u> in that match. On the left is a photo of what I think is the team that won the state championship that year.

It was a most satisfactory way to conclude my career

as a competitive shooter—and it was the conclusion. I retired then from the shooting business…and never looked back. But, you have to admit, it was a most unusual pathway to my eligibility as a disabled veteran.