

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Ever since man gained dominance over the other animals on this planet by constructing weapons with which to kill them, prowess with those weapons has been admired by his fellow men.

In the animal world it was always the biggest, strongest and fastest which survived. Man changed that balance by learning to hunt with weapons, and gradually he learnt that weapons gave him superiority over other men and well.

It's in man's nature to be dominant and this probably accounts for the superiority of the human race - we may not have been here today if it hadn't been for the development of weapons.

Man has always argued and fought, and he always will - that's why there's a war going on somewhere on this planet every day.

Wars have increased the sophistication of weapons and when there hasn't been a local war to be fought, men have met in *mock* battles and competitions. These have always been good spectator sports, because people can be involved in the excitement without the risk of their own personal failure.

When it was accidentally discovered in the Thirteenth Century that a certain mixture of chemicals went off bang when lit, this led to firearms starting to appear. Development was very slow at first and it took a long time - some 500 years - to persuade man to cast aside his trusty bow and arrow in favour of the new-fangled 'bang sticks'.

Once again it was war which was responsible for the rapid development of this new weapon. It was soon realized that, while it took many weeks of intensive training to make a useful archer, it took no time at all to get a soldier to point a tube and pull a trigger.

At first these new weapons were not particularly effective, but they did make a flash and a bang, and that frightened the horses at least! A good archer could get seven arrows in the air at the same time, whereas the poor old musketeer was much slower and not nearly so accurate at anything like the range of a good arrow.

Also, in the excitement of the battle, a musketeer was a walking bomb, because he had all his powder charges hung around his neck, as well as a lighted taper for ignition.

The ignition system *did* become more sophisticated as they moved from matchlocks to flintlocks but, even so, many muskets have been recovered from old battle fields, where the barrels were full of unfired musket balls. (The musketeer, in the excitement and noise of battle, didn't realize he'd only had a 'flash in the pan' without igniting the main charge.)

A major breakthrough came when a certain Reverend Forsythe managed to combine some chemicals based on a fulminate of mercury, which went 'bang' when struck by a hammer. That did away with all those lighted tapers and striking of flints to produce sparks.

That discovery revolutionised the development of the gun - suddenly they were much more reliable and faster, and no army could afford to be without them; today we're still using the same basic principle of hitting an explosive compound in order to ignite the main propellant.

However, two more major events occurred before we arrived at the modern rifles we use today.

The first was Mr Whitworth - a brilliant engineer who came up with a workable rifling system for the inside of barrels. This imparted a spin to the bullet which gave it gyroscopic stability. (During Government trials the Whitworth rifle was still putting bullets on the target at 2,000 yards, which was unheard of in those days.)

Suddenly soldiers no longer needed to be a very few paces away to ensure a hit, they could be hundreds of yards away and still do the same damage.

However, there was still one big disadvantage: shooting at your enemy from long range and behind cover was not particularly safe, because the pall of white smoke hanging over your muzzle gave *your* position away. So the race began to find a powder which did not smoke.

That led to the second major event.

A side development in the explosive field of nitro glycerine and dynamite eventually produced a cellulose-based powder which didn't smoke at all when ignited. It also burnt in a different way to the old black powder, and that made it a lot safer.

The old black gunpowder was extremely dangerous because it could be ignited with any little spark or flame, and it burnt with the same explosive force however it was contained.

Cellulose powder, on the other hand, is a progressive powder. That means that, when ignited in air, it's just inflammable without any explosive force. In a sealed container the first grain of powder which is ignited produces a gas which increases the pressure; this, in turn, ignites more powder and produces more gas, and so on until the container bursts. All this takes place in thousandths of a second.

Suddenly the soldier had everything he wanted: accuracy, safety and reliability, and the gun became the main weapon of an army.

Target shooting has always run a parallel course to the need for military firepower - it's no good giving a soldier an accurate gun if he can't hit anything with it. Every army in the world has to teach its members how to shoot - they have to shoot at something, and paper targets are cheap.

In the days when the British Army was all-powerful they went to Africa to settle an argument and ended up fighting the Boer War. In those days the British Army officers wore red uniforms and marched into battle in straight lines. The Boers on the other hand were Dutch farmers who used their rifles for hunting for food on the plains of Africa. They wore their normal working clothes which blended in with their surroundings, and they were excellent shots at long range.

It was an uneven contest. Laying prone on the top of a hill behind a rock and shooting at some soldiers standing in straight lines and conveniently dressed in bright red was easy for the Boers, and they made mincemeat of some of the British battalions.

Many brave and gallant soldiers died on both sides during that war, but superior numbers told, and eventually, despite their losses, the British forced the Boers to surrender.

However, back in Britain, questions were asked about the British Army suffering such losses and about how we would defend ourselves should we be invaded.

A certain Major-General Luard came up with the answer: he proposed that facilities should be provided for the instruction in the 'Science and Art of Rifle Shooting'. He further proposed that this should be aimed at the ordinary working man in the street.

The .22 rimfire rifle and ammunition was chosen because it was cheap, and could be shot indoors in heated buildings during the long cold winter evenings.

In 1901 a society was formed called *The Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs* (this was changed to the *National Smallbore Rifle Association* in 1947). The General enlisted the help of Earl Roberts who had just returned from sorting out the Boers in Africa and was an influential national hero.

The British long-range .22 rifle championships are still called *The Earl Roberts* today.

Clubs sprung up all over the country and proved to be very popular. Competitions were organized where clubs shot against each other; there were inter-services matches, civilians versus services, county matches, national matches and eventually (when the rest of the world caught up) international matches.

As the whole scheme was devised to contribute to the defence of the Realm, it was deemed to be a charitable enterprise; rifle clubs were consequently allowed to become registered as charities, which resulted in some savings in running costs with rates and taxes.

Proof of the effectiveness of the general's idea was shown in the First World War when the civilian rifle clubs provided instructors to help train the infantry in shooting. The Germans were amazed at the accuracy and speed of the British rifle fire.

Nowadays rifle shooting has developed into a very technical sport and its relationship to the needs of the army has grown more distant. However, the competition is just as fierce and now there's the rest of the world to take on.

The *Commonwealth Games*, *Olympic Games* and *World Championships* are the top of the tree for the aspiring marksman and this country has produced gold medal winners in all of those competitions.

Sadly, the news media has found that misuse of guns sells newspapers because of the shock-horror syndrome. That, unfortunately, has curtailed the expansion of the sport in this country, and the rest of the world has now overtaken us.

If there is any justice in this world, the sport will grow again when people realize the advantages to be gained: things like discipline, concentration, team spirit and the general benefit of taking part in something.

Every sport has its winners and losers; of course, losing is sad, but winning is great and you'll never win if you don't take part!