

300 Metres

from Ian Shirra-Gibb

My normal report at this time of the year usually recaps on the previous year, so here goes! I would like to congratulate the winners of gold medals; Mary Pearse 598 (Ladies Prone, Weimar, Germany); Tony Lincoln with a new British Prone 60 shot record of 600 ex 600; an equal British record men's prone team score of 1784 (European Championships, Croatia) from Tony Lincoln, Simon Aldhouse and Harry Creevy. Well done guys, long may it continue! Yes, we also had our ups and downs but we learnt a lot.

So we look forward to another busy new year with Bisley and overseas programs plus the World Championships being at the Olympic ranges in Munich.

This winter saw a full refurbishment of our target systems, which have given us such good service over the last five years.

Whilst, yet again, the snow settled on Bisley, I started to reminisce and think it's amazing how quickly another decade has passed in our discipline. When I look back to the start of my involvement with 300m (early seventies) what incredible advances I, and others, have seen in the technology of clothing, rifles, ammunition and range standards etc.

British involvement goes back a long way and is well recorded. Evidence can be found, in the NRA Museum, of shooting from the early nineteenth-hundreds and, in my research of British shooters attending invitation matches in Switzerland, in the late eighteen-hundreds.

Calibres of rifles were, of course, in the national calibre of the country with central European nations being almost anything up to 8mm.

The target is still one of the hardest of all rifle events, requiring first class equipment and a well-trained shooter to obtain top scores.

Looking back Britain had, to my knowledge, no dedicated 300m ranges and, when the 1908 and 1948 Olympics came to Britain, temporary firing points were assembled (certainly in 1948) on or around what is now butt 18 or 19.

As 300m shooting was classed as a free rifle event, there were then no major prone-only competitions and it was 3 x 40 (40 shots in each position) which, at that point, was not a practised British discipline!

For the 1948 Olympics our rifles were assembled by the late John Knott with 303" BSA heavy barrels and set triggers on P14 actions. An example is on display at Bisley and to my knowledge around eight or so were made.

Spectators watched in amazement as the 1948 gold medal was won by the Swiss shooter Emil Grunig

with 1121 ex 1200 with his 7.5mm rifle, the pictures show him in a leather shooting jacket and modern style glove etc, which was very advanced for the time. Our shooters looked more fit for going to the office in trilbies and suits!

Emil's family business evolved over the years to what we know to day as Grunig and Elmiger, run now by his grandsons, who make some of the best 300m target rifles in the world.

As a discipline we were to become a little dormant for a time, but myself and other UIT shooters watched with interest as mainly the USA and Russia, together with assorted European nations, battled it out for 300m supremacy throughout the late 1950s and 1960s.

Leaping forwards a few years to 1970 and the World Championships in Phoenix, Arizona. British shooters were given the opportunity to enter (with borrowed equipment) the 300m Free and Army Rifle (now Std Rifle) events, and, on their return, decisions were made to get the event back on the fullbore map as the 1972 Olympics were getting close. The British Free Rifle Club were tasked to hold trials on behalf of the NRA to see what we could produce in the way of scores (I have memories of mixing concrete for a firing point on Long Siberia which today can still be found in the grass, but is now used as a base by the clay shooters).

The majority of the triallists mainly came from the small-bore world and at each trial British records were broken. The now legendary Malcolm Cooper, who by then was a force to reckon with at 50m, produced some very good 3 x 40 scores so was selected to go. His Munich score of 1139 stood for some years, with his kneeling British record score of 387 not being beaten by himself for another twenty years or so. However his standing prowess was for what he became world famous, as records show.

The NRA had been donated (sometime back) a trophy by Argentina, which was hurriedly forgotten in the early 1980s. The Argentina was a NRA squadded extra event at 300m on Long Siberia during the Imperial Meeting – I wonder where it is now?

Britain joined the Nordic region in the mid 1970s and were regular competitors in these and other countries where European and World Championships were held.

Most other calendar events were run together with 50m competitions in various countries, as 300m was, and still is, a military event.

Britain was now a force to reckon with and, travelling as I did with the teams, it was a great feeling to know you would bring medals home – 1985 and 1986 were particularly good and memorable.

As by now 300m had been dropped from the Olympics (mainly caused by the need for large land areas for range complexes) which, in turn, produced a lack of funding as it was no longer an Olympic event, many of our old friends disappeared from the competition. However, following an incentive from the French (FFT), a series of Grand Prix were organised, starting in the early 1990s, which today is the European cup circuit as we know it. This now includes ladies events which were, for a period of some years, prohibited in international competition.

There was then the acceptance by the ISSF of the 60 shot prone event introduced, I understand, to encourage more of the prone-only Commonwealth nations to participate.

The next major step forward was in ammunition when, in 1995 at a European Championships in Sweden,

Norma introduced their new 300m target calibre of 6mm Br, followed later by the Swiss 6 X 47mm. This helped dramatically with the lower recoil (as we had all been using .308" at the time) to introduce people to the sport, and over the last fifteen years or so has seen competition scores rise comparable to and sometimes better than small-bore.

We have held two Nordic 300m events at Bisley, the first being in 1980/1, the second in 1992 and, as Bisley had to build a facility fast, the range was put on butt 10 where it is today. It was plain, open, noisy, probably in the wrong place but, with lots of upgrade work over the years, it is now our home.

Electronic targets have revolutionised 300m shooting; they are now the expected norm.

But enough of the past and let us look forward to another successful year for British 300m shooting!