

First Generation 7.62



.303 No. 4 rifle - the mainstay of British formal rifle shooting from 1948 - 68. These were used in 'as issued' but 'regulated' form with very close links between NRA and the forces.

Target Rifles

SOME 'JOHNNY FOREIGNER' once described our relationship with motor vehicles: give us one and we make a pet of it; give us two and we compete with each other in them. He might have added a third element - if it survives 25 years we rescue and restore it, spending a small fortune. The first two characteristics apply to target rifles, but once a rifle loses its competitive edge, many Target Rifle (TR) shooters can't wait to trade it in for whatever is currently taking the top places. Although hundreds of early 7.62 TR rifles are still used at club level, there is little interest in them from most shooters. Owners may be very fond of 'Old Faithful', but cheerfully admit they usually shoot against their own standards rather than the field. When sold, prices are usually modest and there is little collector interest with the exception of a few rare examples such as the No. 4 based rifles built for the 1970 UK-USA Palma Match. (Back then, the host country supplied all competitors with identical, specially marked rifles.)

SERVICE RIFLE

Service Rifle (SR) was the main UK centrefire target shooting discipline for a century before TR. It was based on close links with training for the defence of the realm that went back centuries to the English archer and his long bow. The whole point about SR was it used the service rifle of the day without specialist development for target shooting. The basic, and most widely practised, version required rifles to be 'as issued'. The competitor was allowed to have the fit of the various parts adjusted (regulated) to the optimal form; this was target gunsmiths' bread and butter. Service Enfields are sensitive to bedding, especially that of the barrel in the fore-end and an expert armorer could markedly improve a rifle's grouping ability. Apart

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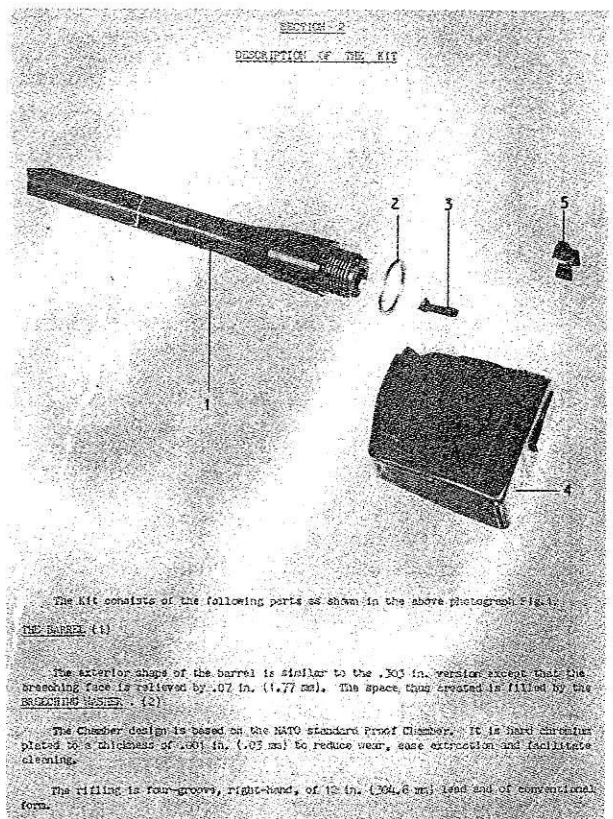
from frequent checks and adjustment of the 'regulation', competitors changed (factory) barrels every couple of thousand shots and that was it. The alternative Service Rifle (b) class allowed some enhancements including target sights.

ENTER 7.62 TARGET RIFLE

The forces adopted the 7.62 NATO cartridge and L1A1 self loading rifle in 1957. The NRA continued with .303 Service Rifle for the time being, but ammunition manufacture was dependant upon military requirements and would end in due course. The status quo was not, therefore, a long term option. RSAF Enfield developed a 7.62 conversion kit for the No. 4 service rifle with a new barrel having the external profile .303 predecessor.

These (L8) rifles were insufficiently accurate, mostly due to the higher pressures generated by the 7.62 cartridge, although indifferent ammunition quality was also a factor until Radway Green developed the "Green Spot" sniper/target round. Various unsuccessful expedient's were tried such as welding a

strengthening bar onto the receiver. Sadly, the decision was taken to end the historic link between target shooting and national defence. This led to the adoption of the specialist single shot TR rifle and rejection of the L1A1 rifle for *any* NRA sponsored civilian discipline. The only remaining link was the use of the 7.62 NATO cartridge,



Extract from the 1963 R.S.A.F. Enfield instructions for use with the 7.62mm conversion kit for the No4 rifle. This retained the service rifle form with a light barrel. For 'Target Rifle', only a replacement heavy barrel, the breeching washer (2) and replacement extractor (3) were required.



Three early 7.62 TR rifles borrowed from Fulton's armoury - a Mauser and two converted No. 4s. The centre rifle is a very early conversion with the fore-end left longer than the handguard. The version on the right is more common. Note .303 magazines retained, so no ejectors.

though close competition and operational ties survived for many years.

That first generation of 7.62s was the bridge between two quite different eras of our sport as most were converted service rifles. I have always been interested in them but knew little about their development. So I went to see an expert in both Service and Target Rifle - Roger Millard, the Armourer at G. Fulton & Sons at Bisley. Roger has a working lifetime's experience with these rifles in the army and at Fultons.

THE NEW 7.62 RIFLES

I had always assumed that TR started soon after adoption of 7.62 NATO in 1957 - not so. With the armed forces larger than today's, the changeover to the L1A1 took many years, and good .303 ammunition continued to be produced alongside 7.62. TR rifles were allowed in a few competitions in 1968 and full implementation took place the following year. The preceding years saw a search for a suitable bolt-action format involving Britain, other Commonwealth SR shooting countries, Scandinavia, with help also sought from the USA. RSAF Enfield, and equivalent ordnance factories abroad, were in the lead but civilian target shooting organisations and specialist gunsmiths played a role.

Experimentation showed the need for a much heavier barrel and the abandonment of the full-length stock. Bedding was primarily at the receiver and it was soon found that the barrel should be unsupported by the stock - 'fully floating'. Roger Millard says that this was the biggest mental hurdle for contemporary shooters - after decades of tuning the interaction of barrel and forend, many could not see how this set-up could work. Military actions offer a fairly small

bedding area, so glass fibre and resin metal filler compounds were soon used to bed them under the tang and front receiver ring allowing a firmer and more consistent metal/wood fit as well as strengthening crucial areas of the stock. However, rifles converted by government factories just bedded the actions onto the wood.

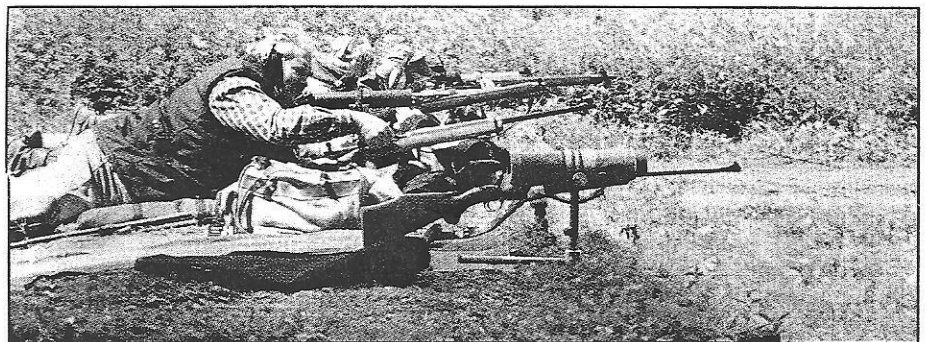
The common pre-7.62 actions continued in use - the No. 4 in Britain and the Commonwealth, Mauser M96 in Sweden, Mauser M98 derivatives elsewhere in Scandinavia and Europe, Schmidt-Rubin KAR31 in Switzerland. Specialist gunsmiths offered a choice, so British shooters used No.4, P14/17 and Mauser actions including new ones built by Parker-Hale. Likewise, RSAF Enfield produced hammer forged barrel kits, but other suppliers soon provided alternatives - Parker-Hale, Schulz & Larsen and others. Initially, cost was the main factor for many

shooters, so A.J. Parker, Parker-Hale and Fultons converted huge numbers of existing No. 4 rifles. Most retained a 'military look' with the service rifle wood used in cut-down form and handguards retained. Schultz & Larsen and Parker-Hale soon started producing rifles with heavier, more rounded foreends and no handguard - the form universally used today although materials and design styles have evolved. Most SR rifle shooters had their rifles converted - Roger reckons that over 90% of the No. 4 based 7.62 rifles bearing the common "Fulton Regulated" stamp had it applied in .303 SR days. Many shooters had the basic kit fitted - barrel and longer extractor claw while keeping the .303 magazine. 7.62 cartridges will not feed through it and there is no ejector, so fired cases have to be manually removed from the magazine follower.

Dealers and Gunsmiths also imported



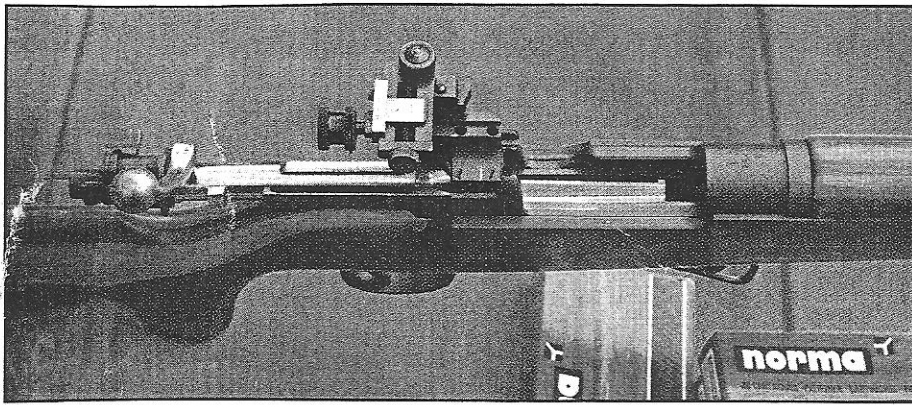
Early 7.62 conversions from .303 rifles usually do not eject the fired case. Jack Reddy picks the case out of the action of his P'14 based TR rifle.



Enfields are still widely used in historic and club level TR shooting. Three eras of Enfields are in use here - SMLE, No.4 service and No.4 based 7.62 Enfield Envoy target rifle.



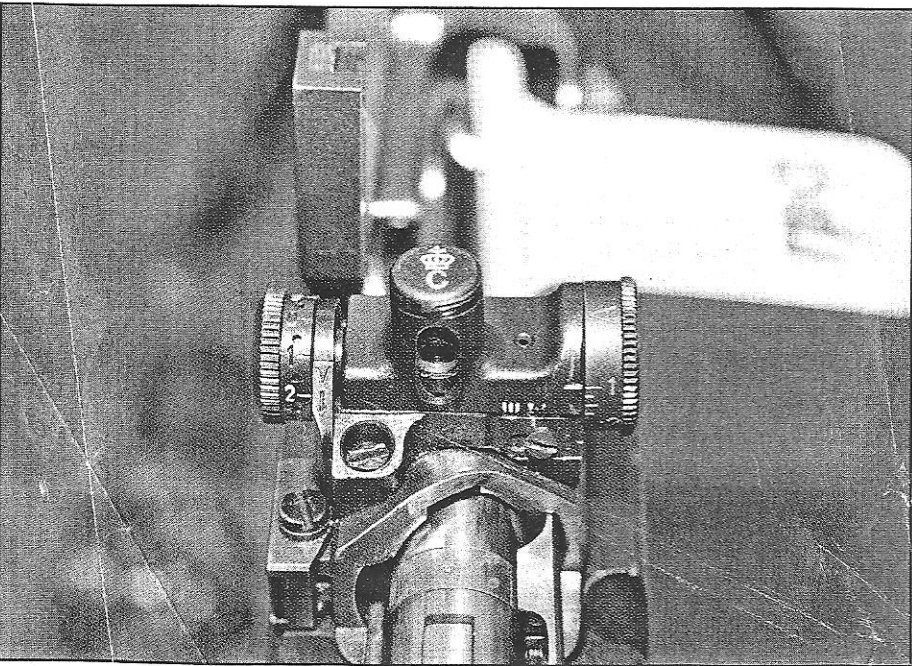
The Scandinavians were well to the fore in converting Mauser based rifles to 7.62 Kongsberg M19 in front of a Carl Gustaf M63 sniper rifle. Note the better finish on the rifle built for the civilian market.



Action and bolt of the Kongsberg M59. The bolt handle has been reshaped to clear the rearsight and the magazine shortened for use with the 7.62 cartridge. AJP sights have been fitted for the UK market. Finish is good but the action is bedded onto the wood.



Civilian target shooting version of the Carl Gustaf M63 (M63E) imported by Parker-Hale. Better finish than the military version, but the same rifle otherwise. Still has the military Mauser trigger, but PH sights and glass-bedded.



Original Scandinavian Carl Gustaf rearsight (minus eyepiece) on the M63 sniper rifle. It was common for 1960s police 7.62 conversions to have iron target sights as well as the scope allowing competition use.

Mauser-based Swedish Carl Gustaf M63E, Norwegian Kongsberg M59, Danish Schulz & Larsen rifles, and a bit later the Australian Sportco M44, the first common TR rifle which did not use a military-style action. The Scandinavian rifles had little rearsights with insufficient adjustment for longer ranges, so importers replaced them with Parker-Hale or AJP 'double zero' pattern sights. Often, they carried out glass-bedding as well.

RAPID DEVELOPMENT

While 'regulated' but otherwise as-issued No. 4 rifles were used from 1948 to 1968 without development, the period since has seen continuous change. The military actions lack rigidity because of the big holes for charger loading, magazine feed and so on while their bedding area is small. Lock-times are high, although some rifle-builders removed metal from cocking pieces to improve this. It was not long before strong single shot actions appeared with heavy circular section receiver bodies, large flat bottoms for good bedding, and a minimally sized cartridge opening. Lock times were dramatically reduced with lightweight components. The South African Musgrave RSA action is a good example, and is still a favourite at club and county level. Stainless replaced chrome-moly steel barrels and the whole technology of producing 'accuracy barrels' changed with factory produced hammer forged barrels replaced by small-scale specialist production. George Swenson produced the 'Swing' action and most TR rifle design has since adopted its features including multi-lug bolts. Sights have been constantly developed becoming lighter, stronger with more precise adjustments. Today's TR rifle with its closed-in receiver, 30" stainless steel barrel, and slotted laminated stock has few visual or design links with its military-based predecessors. 'Good thing, too!' many TR shooters think, but I sometimes feel we have lost something in the process. Shooter attitudes changed quite quickly too. Price was the main determinant of barrel choice at the time of first conversion. Competitors soon began to choose rifles and barrels on the basis of reputation and results and are much more willing to upgrade equipment to remain competitive.

BUYING A FIRST GENERATION TR RIFLE TODAY

There are plenty about and prices can be £100 or less. Generally, dealers ask for £125 – £250 depending upon condition. A few will be dearer if in exceptional condition or retrofitted with a little-used quality barrel. A good example will still provide a lot of pleasure and some good scores although nobody is going to win the Sovereign's Prize today — or even get into The Hundred — with one.

I would like to thank Røger Millard of G Fulton & Sons, Bisley for his kindness, patience and invaluable help in providing information, documents and some early rifles for photography in the preparation of this article.