



Talbot on target! Combined Services

Communications Officer Sam Talbot continues his mission to shoot the SSAA disciplines, turning his attention this month to Combined Services

When I arrived at the range for this month's shoot my fellow competitors were surprised I wasn't dressed in camouflage or fatigues. After becoming a Single Action cowboy in our February magazine, they thought I'd be dressed as a soldier to suit the Combined Services competition which is based on military and police firearms. While I may not have looked the part this time, I enjoyed my day with the .303s and managed at least one battle scar.

How it works

Combined Services is a rifle and handgun discipline that aims to encourage organised competitive shooting with a view towards a better knowledge of safe handling and proper care of military or service firearms. The discipline encompasses more than a dozen Service Rifle and Service Pistol classes where competitors use original or faithful reproduction rimfire, centrefire and black powder military and other service rifles, carbines, revolvers and self-loading pistols, shot for score at paper targets of different sizes and from various distances and positions.

My competition was rifles rather than pistols and followed the 3-Positional Core match, which is made up of three courses of fire. To begin, competitors take five shots prone at 300m in one minute. Next, the targets are brought in to 200m and competitors take five shots prone and five sitting in two minutes. The final course of fire is five shots standing, five sitting and five prone at 100m in four minutes.

There are quite a few other types of matches shot in Combined Services which demand even more position changes and strict time limits but the main 3P event is more than enough



Big calibres but even bigger targets - luckily they were on wheels.

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for beginners and is the match used for grading.

While the distances may sound challenging, especially since we'd only be using iron sights, the targets are the largest I've seen. Complete with their own frame built on wheels, targets for the rifle competitions measure 1200 x 1200mm and feature five rings, the inner-ring representing the bullseye and a black aiming spot in the shape of a helmet. There are five rings which include a bullseye and indicate points of five through to two, while hitting anywhere else on the rectangular target counts as a score of one.

Dad's old .303

Some shooters turn to Combined Services to make use of the .303 stored in their parents' safe. After all, many older generation shooters have a Short Magazine Lee-Enfield variant which has no doubt stood the test of time. Accordingly I asked my dad if he had a .303 and, as expected, he did. "I bought the SMLE from a man who for some reason had removed some of the stock to reveal the barrel so he could use it as a target rifle," he said. "I paid \$50 for it years ago and expect it might still be worth \$50 or even \$60!"

While I was more than happy to use dad's SMLE, it had some subtle modifications which would render it ineligible for Combined Services as all rifles must be used as they were issued at time of production.

Combined Services National Discipline Chairman Steve Knight was attracted to the discipline as competitors generally compete



Sam gets acquainted with the .303 rifle.

with the same quality of firearm. "It's not how much you spend to gain an advantage as we're strict that all standard rifles are as-issued," he said.

Competition

When I arrived at the range, discussion was focused on how much money can be saved by reloading. Unlike rounds of .22, .303 ammunition can cost more than \$1 a shot, enough to make even the less technically minded shooter consider reloading if it means saving money. While I'm still a long way from doing this, others assured me I could do it and were more than happy to offer advice. On the day I used store-bought PPU .303 British, which cost \$56 for two boxes of 20 and turned out to be the exact amount needed on the day (10 shots warm-up and 30 in competition).

Next it was time to talk about the vast array of rifles on display. The first detail of shooters featured a Martini Enfield, Swedish Mauser M96, a Number 4 and Springfield 03, a snapshot of rifles from around the world and across different time periods. They also represent different solutions to problems, advances in technology, cultural differences, manufacturing abilities and ongoing refinements for military purposes and it's no surprise many



The long walk to the 300m targets.

Combined Services shooters are keen history buffs. The rifles used tend to be quite heavy and being similar to .303s can kick quite a bit. I have no problem with a gun that kicks having grown up with shotguns, but a regular .22 shooter could be taken by surprise.

Recoil feels about the same as a shotgun, which may sound like it



Military rifles from around the world in action.



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would make getting settled for five shots in a minute difficult, but this was balanced out by the fact I was using Tony Noble's P14 rifle (later known as the No.3 Mark 1) which had the smoothest trigger pull I've ever used. Tony is Combined Services Captain at SSAA Para and gave me valuable advice for aiming as well as loading throughout the day. I used the P14 for 10 shots prone at 300m as a warm-up (also known as a Deliberate) and for the first course of fire, five shots prone at 300m to start the competition proper.

I managed to hit the inner ring during the warm-up, proving that despite being more than 100 years old the rifle was still more than up to its task, and for the first round of competition scored 14 from a possible 25 (five shots with five the highest score per shot). While I'd have been happy to continue with the P14, the many rifles offered by fellow competitors were too tempting and I moved to the Number 1 Mark 3* SMLE, a rifle that went into service in 1907 and is still used today.

With targets in to 200m we had to get through five shots prone and five sitting/squatting in two minutes. I've had trouble with sitting/squatting positions in the past but on the day I felt pretty good, mostly due to not having to use a scope and being more relaxed in general. I finished in plenty of time and scored 27 from a possible 50, the bigger targets a lot easier to hit.

The iron sights work similar to the Target Pistol sights I addressed at length in April's *Australian Shooter* and just about all sights for that matter. Lining up the front and back sights symmetrically ensures a straight shot, though this proved a little tricky during the standing position of the

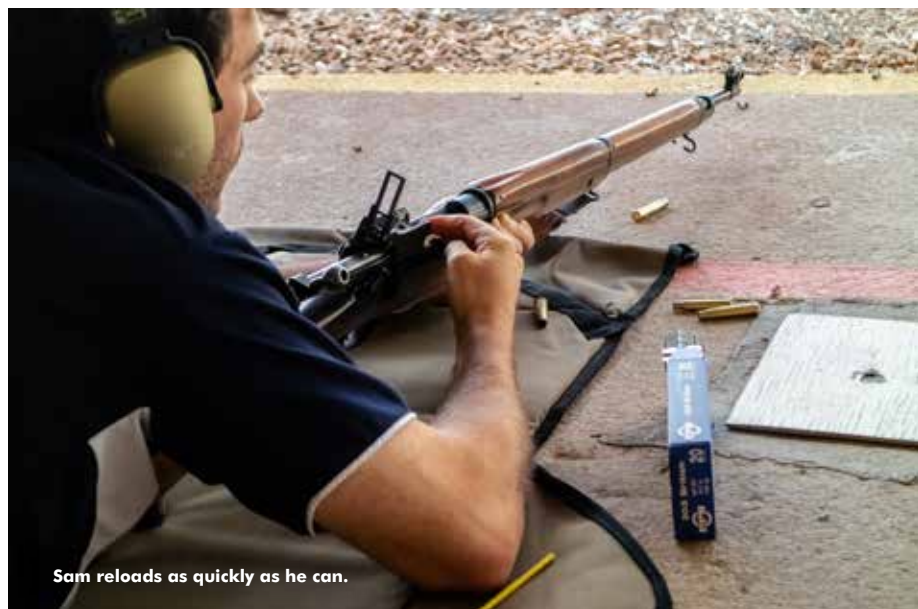
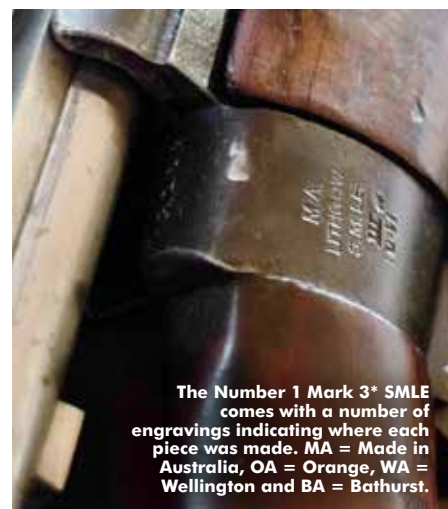


final course of fire even though the targets had been brought into 100m.

Despite my lack of balance, the final course of fire turned out to be my best round of the day, all 15 shots hitting the target at least somewhere, which goes a long way to a decent overall score. The 15 hits gave me 53 out of a possible 75 and a final score of 94. To put that in perspective, the Bronze Proficiency Award for Combined Services is for a score between 127 and 134, which I feel I could realistically achieve with a few more shoots and more practice.

Reloading

The five shots in each position means a



reload is needed before the next stage and this turned out trickier than expected, especially in the strict time limit. While you can feed one cartridge at a time into the Number 1 Mark 3* SMLE, a faster option is to use chargers which are like a skeleton version of a regular magazine. Instead of being inserted into the rifle, chargers hold the ammunition by the rim which lets you push five rounds down at once. The cartridges are staggered in the chamber which saves vertical space and the stagger of five cartridges also means the charger can be loaded in either direction. Despite being theoretically impossible I did manage a slight jam in my rifle which was quickly rectified. The trick, which I learned eventually, is to push them all down hard in one smooth action with four fingers >

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wrapped over the top, rather than trying to finesse it in with the thumb.

Conclusion

If you're interested in military or firearm history or firearms in general, I can't recommend Combined Services enough. The wealth of knowledge learned at my competition was incredible and my head was spinning with the different modifications various countries had made to rifles, where different parts had been made and the fascinating history service rifles are steeped in. And it's fun to shoot.

From both a history lesson and shooting perspective I had a great time. There are so many different and unique rifles for



Practising loading and using the chargers.



Sam sustained some damage shooting in the prone position.

competitors to choose from while still offering an equal footing for all. I also enjoyed the challenge of using a firearm with some power behind it while moving into different positions on a time limit.

Service rifles are not only historically significant but enjoyable to use and this discipline adds real value to the shooting

sports. Combined Services is a must-try for passionate sporting shooters and if you're still not convinced, ask your parents about the .303 they may have stored away or borrow one and give it a go at the range.

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