

REENACTING THE WORLD WARS



The influx of inexpensive, user-grade World War I and World War II-vintage firearms has made this fascinating hobby more popular than ever.

BY PHILLIP SCHREIER

One of the fastest-growing activities in the field of shooting sports today is the hobby of reenacting. Today's bull market of surplus military firearms and equipment has created a boom in living-history programs across the country. There are an estimated 500,000 reenactors nationwide who portray one or more historical periods ranging from Caesar's Roman Legions to Vietnam.

Modern reenacting had its popular beginning during the centennial of the American Civil War in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the successful North-South Skirmish Association shoots

that started a decade earlier. Although battle recreations had been staged by the U.S. military as early as the 1890s, primarily as an educational exercise for young officer candidates, it was not until the advent of replica Civil War arms in the 1950s that reenacting began to find a following among the civilian population of history buffs and firearms enthusiasts.

Civil War skirmishing survives as a popular hobby today only because reproductions of the original firearms used during the war are available at a fraction of the cost of an original. Similarly, other historical periods of the post-Civil War era are open to enthusi-

asts because inexpensive, user-grade surplus arms are readily available to collectors and hobbyists. World War I and World War II reenacting have experienced growth spurts that are directly related to the recent importation of firearms that were only previously available at high prices. Mass imports of No. 1 Mk III Enfields, *Gewehr* 1898 Mausers and M1 Garands have brought the prices of previously expensive arms down to costs reminiscent of those in the old gun magazine ads of the 1960s. As a result of these import bargains, reenacting the First World War has become popular on both coasts with an estimated fol-

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lowing of some 2,000 members, and the growth of World War II enthusiasm shows no sign of slowing down, as nearly 10,000 participated in the various 50th anniversary of D-Day commemorative events nationwide last year.

Reenacting, as a hobby, has begun to take its rightful place among the legitimate shooting sports. Two years ago, the National Rifle Association began to allow historical recreation groups to affiliate as shooting clubs, a privilege that had long been denied as the very nature of reenacting places the participants in direct conflict with the accepted laws of safe gun handling. Secondary schools, universities, museums and historic parks are recognizing that reenactors, in their roles as living historians, offer their students and visitors a unique opportunity to experience military life throughout the ages.

Reenacting offers the armchair military historian the opportunity to experience firsthand some of the thrills, hardships and pure misery that are involved in military life. Charging a machine gun nest during broad daylight gives you a real sense of the futility that faced the common soldier during the First World War and a greater appreciation of what our forebears went through decades ago to secure the

liberties that we enjoy today.

Aside from the heady sentiments, reenacting has been called the most fun you can have fully clothed! There are few things that can match the pure adrenaline rush that occurs as you sprint from shell crater to shell crater, hurdling barbed wire and hearing the staccato of an '08 Maxim blending in with the dull drone of an SE5a biplane overhead. You can't get that kind of excitement or realism simply from reading a book on the subject. As they say, you had to be there to really understand.

As in the real thing, recreating a battle carries a similar level of risk. Safety is therefore of paramount importance to all participants. Raw recruits are drilled endlessly in the rules of combat: only safe, functioning firearms are used by combatants; never aim directly at someone; no discharge of firearms closer than 10 feet to an opposing soldier; all blanks must be checked before battle to ensure that no live rounds are present; everyone checks to see that there are no barrel obstructions that could cause an ac-



U.S. 1903 Springfields and M1917 "Enfields" are a common sight along a section of Allied trenches in this WWI reenactment at Blackstone, Virginia.

cident. Blank adaptors on semi- and full-auto firearms are checked to make sure that they are battleworthy and securely in place before each engagement. If the standard rules are followed, the only real casualties suffered are cuts and bruises.

ARMING FOR WAR: THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

World War I, or the Great War as it was contemporarily known, was perhaps the last "old-style" conflict of the modern age. As such, modern romantics have found a niche in reenacting a period that contributed immensely to popular memory and legend but also was witness to some of the most violent destruction ever inflicted by man upon his fellow man. Today's reenactor has an abundance of surplus firearms currently available to choose from any number of impressions to represent. Some of the more popular are listed here:

Great Britain & Commonwealth Countries: The No. 1, Mk III SMLE (Enfield) was the workhorse of the empire from its introduction in 1902 until the



On the previous page, World War II "GIs" pose with their M1 Garands during the annual reenactment of the Battle of the Bulge at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. Reenactments also offer the military vehicle collector (above) the opportunity to see how well their equipment performs under "combat" conditions.

introduction of the No. 4 Mk I* in 1939. (Australian soldiers carried the No. 1 Mk III into combat as late as Korea in the 1950s.) A critical shortage of firearms at the onset of the war necessitated that the British re-issue the "long" Lee-Metford of the Boer War days to those units that would become known as Kitchener Battalions in 1915. It was the SMLE No. 1 Mk III and III* that served the soldiers of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India throughout the war in all theaters of operations.

Les Armies Françaises: Though not commonly available, the 1886 Lebel and the 1907/15 and 1916 models of the Mannlicher Berthier rifles were used by the French, Colonial and Algerian troops that saw service during the war. The United States Army, still segregated during the First World War, sent their colored troops to fight with



Grenade-launching devices, as seen on the muzzle of this French M1886 Lebel, are popular additions to a platoon arsenal. Tennis balls and film canisters can be harmlessly sent into No-Man's Land.

the French from 1917-1918. Though they wore the uniform of a U.S. soldier, they were equipped with French Berthier rifles and accoutrements. Both the Lebel and the Berthier chamber the difficult-to-find 8mm Lebel cartridge, making it necessary for a potential French reenactor to become adept at reloading blanks and scrounging for brass.

The United States of America: Entering the war in the spring of 1917, the United States was ill prepared to mobilize and equip an army in any short period of time. The standard ser-



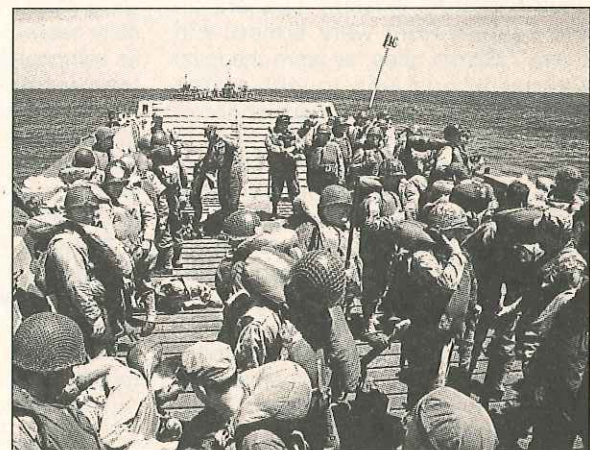
German "Falschirmjagers" employ K98ks and an MP.40 "Schmeisser" as they defend a section of the "Ardennes."

vice rifle of the time was the .30-06 Springfield 1903, a licensed copy of the famous Mauser 98 action and bolt. The Springfield Armory and Rock Island Arsenal were the only sources of the Springfield 1903, and production could not keep up with increasing demand as hundreds of thousands volunteered and were drafted into the ranks. Avoiding the costly and time-consuming process of manufacturing new equipment, dies and gauges to produce additional rifles at another facility or armory, the Ordnance Department quickly set about on a plan to convert machinery at the Winchester plant in New Haven, CT and the two Remington plants (Ilion, NY and Ed-dystone, PA) that were currently producing the Pattern 1914 Enfield Rifle for the British. The three factories quickly converted from the manufacture of the .303 Pattern 14 Enfield to what is now known as the .30-06 Model 17 Enfield. Over 2,000,000

M17s were produced during the war, more than twice the number of Springfields produced during the same period. Today's reenactor can pick up an



Though not in the category of "inexpensive surplus," the G.43 with ZF41 scope adds a specialty impression of a World War II sniper to the reenactment scenario.



U.S. GIs await instructions aboard a Navy landing craft during the 50th Anniversary commemoration of the Normandy Invasion, held at Ft. Storey, Virginia.

M17 for a fraction of the cost of a 1903 in the current collector's market.

The Armies of the Eastern Front: Italy and Russia: Though the battles

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of the Eastern Front and Alpine Campaign are not regularly reenacted, collecting the rifles of the Italian and Russian campaigns is challenging and offers the enthusiast a diverse impression to assemble. The firearms used by both countries are easily available, and many saw service in both World Wars. The Russian 1891 Moisin-Nagant was produced by ar-

rifle manufacture. Reenactors had great difficulty in obtaining these rifles until last year when thousands were imported from Turkey. Chambered in 7.92mm, blanks are abundant from numerous sources. The *Karbine 98a* was introduced in 1908 and issued to pioneers, artillerymen and machine gun crews. Not currently available in great numbers, the 98a remains a rare find for those wishing to kit out in a speciality impression.

The 1895 Steyr was standard among Austrian troops and is one of

post-Normandy invasion months. There is gaining popularity for Eastern Front reenactments, but few have been staged.

The standard service rifle of the United States was the M1 Garand. Reenactors and collectors recently benefited from a special act of Congress that allowed thousands of M1 Garands and M1 carbines to be imported into the country from stockpiles sold to the Republic of South Korea. Previously available only



This 101 Airborne Division paratrooper is ready for a sniper duel armed with a Springfield 1903A4.

mories in Russia and at the Westinghouse and Remington plants in the United States. Russian soldiers on the Eastern front were armed with these 7.62mm rifles, as were the loyal Czarist troops who fought on the Western Front after the surrender of the Russian Armies in the East in 1917. U.S. soldiers on the Siberian expedition were equipped with the U.S.-manufactured versions of this rifle. Many 1891s were converted for use in World War II by Finnish armorers and bear rework stamps.

The 6.5mm 1891 Mannlicher Carcano rifle was the standard service rifle of Italian troops during the war. Desirable in original condition, many were rebarreled to 7.35mm prior to World War II.

The Central Powers: Germany & Austria: The world-famous Mauser 98 was the standard arm of the Kaiser's troops during the war. Introduced as the *Gewehr 98*, it is known popularly among collectors as the "long 98." The action/bolt design of this rifle is the most produced design in the history of

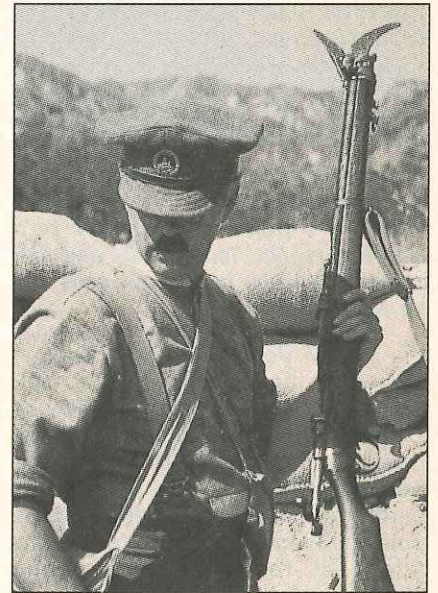


Author Schreier (foreground) and editor Garry James survey a section of Allied trench located near Banning, California. A gun crew passes in the background as they prepare to set up a dummy artillery piece for battlefield wreckage.

only two "straight-pull" bolt designs used during the war (the Canadian 1910 Ross Rifle was the other). Originally chambered in 8mm Steyr, this rifle will chamber the standard 7.92mm Mauser blanks, but do not attempt to fire live ammunition until a competent gunsmith has inspected your rifle and determined its true caliber, as many were converted in the interwar period to the "S" cartridge.

Arming For War: The Second World War 1939-1945

Second World War reenacting has enjoyed a recent burst of popularity as a result of the positive press attention that the 50th anniversary commemorative events received over the last four years. Reenactment groups received recognition from the Department of Defense and were invited to participate in official commemorative events hosted by the branch services. Currently, most WWII reenactments take place on training sites at military forts and posts throughout the country. Most reenactors portray American, British and German impressions of the



Surplus Firearms editor Garry James prepares his Mark III Enfield for a trench raid across No-Man's Land. Note the original wirecutters attached to the muzzle of the rifle.

through the DCM or from collectors, the price of these rifles has been cut in half in the past two years. World War II Garands were made by the Springfield Armory, with serial numbers up to 3,800,000, and by Winchester, with serial numbers up to 1,600,000. Garands bearing the manufacturer's marks of International Harvester, Harrington & Richardson or Springfield Armory rifles with numbers above 3,900,000 are considered postwar, and their use is discouraged for reenactment purposes. Scott Duff's excellent book *The M1 Garand: World War II* (1993, Scott A. Duff, Export, PA) will greatly aid the reenactor in selecting the right parts to use when restoring his Garand to wartime configuration. M1 Cs and M1 Ds, the sniper version of the M1, are available from the DCM at competitive prices.

British reenactors can still find No.4 Mk 1s available at reasonable prices and in great numbers due again to recent imports. Manufactured by a num-



This World War I German mortar crew prepares to send their flour-filled shells towards the Allied trenches.



Blank-adapted machine guns add a tremendous amount of realism to any 20th-century reenactment. Left to right: German MG.42, Thompson 1928 with 50-round drum magazine and Browning Automatic Rifle.



These battle-hardened Tommies prepare to avenge Dunkirk with their No. 4 Mk1 Enfields. Before a reenactment is allowed to begin, every soldier is required to submit to a firearms and blank ammo inspection to ensure safety.

ber of factories in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, this .303 rifle saw service in most corners of the globe during the war.

The German 98k, the reworked successor to the WWI 98a, has also been imported in vast numbers, and reenactors can obtain these rifles for a fraction of the cost of what they would have paid just a few years ago.

Those interested in joining a World War I reenactment unit can find out more by writing to: *The Great War Association, Dept. G&A, 9525 Beech Dr., Cincinnati, OH 45231* or *GWHA, Dept. G&A, 978 Helix Ave., Chula Vista, CA 91911*. The address for the *World War II Historical Preservation Federation* is *Dept. G&A, P.O. Box 1360, Leesburg, VA 22075*. Other contacts of interest are:

Great War Militaria

Dept. G&A
P.O. Box 552
Chambersburg, PA 17201
WWI Uniforms & Equipment

Living History Magazine

Dept. G&A
P.O. Box 77
Fairfax, VA 22030
Offers quarterly info on multiple periods, events and reenactments

International Military Antiques

Dept. G&A
P.O. Box 355
Bernardsville, NJ 07924
Offers a well-illustrated catalog of military equipment and firearms accoutrements

Military Vehicle Preservation Association

Dept. G&A
P.O. Box 520378
Independence, MO 64052-0378
Their publication, *Army Motors*, is an excellent reference for restoring an old military vehicle

Shotgun News

Dept. G&A
P.O. Box 669
Hastings, NE 68902
Publishes three times a month, lists hundreds of dealers and businesses that offer surplus firearms