

THE M-1 GARAND RIFLE

By Bob Pocklington

Posted: August 11, 2009

There are two ways to describe the nine-pound 30-06 weapon carried by millions of soldiers during World War II. One: a gas operated, semi-automatic, eight round magazine clip fed rifle, 600-yard effective range, capable of piercing armor. Two: your sleeping partner, if that baby was not slung over your shoulder it was stacked in the proper manner with others very nearby while you worked. You marched with it, ate with it, slept with it; it was seldom out of your sight. Rank stripes were hard to earn, easy to lose if your rifle was found “dirty” during inspection. It was a lot easier to learn the showoff cute flipping maneuvers than how to hit a 12-inch bulls eye at 500-yards.

Having never owned even a cap pistol I was at eighteen completely devoid of experience with a killing machine. Within six weeks of basic training I was a “sharpshooter.” You could earn the designation “expert” but that would come later. Back then the equivalent of an “expert” would be a sniper and we’d never heard of them except that the Germans had a few. You had to learn, under the eye of a nasty sergeant, to keep both eyes open when at first it was difficult to keep one open. Then came “squeeze versus jerk.” You have to carefully sqeeeeeze that trigger if you expected to hit something. There was very little recoil with that rifle; you pushed a clip of bullets in from the top, squeezed eight times and the clip popped out empty. In combat you carried a belt loaded with clips.

You learned that even a breeze affected your bullet’s path and distance. I remember once laying in the prone position and sticking a wet finger in the air to test the wind. The sergeant sarcastically asked if I was waving to the enemy. “Read the damn grass,” he exploded. He taught us to estimate the distance and adjust the rear sight correctly. The guy knew his stuff and slowly but surely we learned all the tricks. There is a very strong adjustable leather belt on the M-1 and if adjusted properly to fit your wrist and shoulder that leather sling did much to improve your accuracy and that was the idea of it all.

The rifle range was two hundred yards deep for beginners. We shot from atop a ridge, across open ground to another embankment behind which were soldiers raising and lowering a four foot white paper target with a 12-inch bulls-eye in the center. You shoot; they lower the target. If there is no hole in the four-foot square you get the treatment. Each target operator has a long pole with a pair of 1940 woman’s bloomers attached. They love to wave that back and forth in front of your target for all to see. This very embarrassing procedure is called “Maggie’s Drawers.” I suffered it many times. If you hit the target they raise a small black bulls-eye to show where. If you hit the bulls-eye they raise a small white bulls-eye to again show where. How you feel at the end of the day depends entirely upon how often you put a round in the 12-incher.

Over time you move to longer rifle ranges and finally at 500-yards you earn the badge you will wear as long as you wear the uniform and keep to show your grandchildren.

Mine is in a small case with other mementoes of those three years, 18 to 22. I often wonder how my life would have been different if there had been no war. No complaint, over four hundred thousand American boys never got the chance at life I had, millions more paid heavily with wounds, many still paying the price. I was lucky.

