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ON THE FRONTLINE FOR DE AMERICA'S MILITARY .30-06 RIFLES

Mike "Duke" Venturino
Photos: Yvonne Venturino

For over 50 years the .30-06 was the issue rifle cartridge of American military forces. The rifles spanned bolt actions, semi-autos and even full autos, such as the BAR.

The BAR were either select fire semi-auto, full-auto or full auto only. The early Model 1918s were select fire but the later Model 1918A2s could only be switched in full auto from either 350 rounds per minute to 550 rounds per minute. Prices for good, genuine BARs seem to start around \$25,000. I don't

have one.

What I do have is an Ohio Ordnance Works Model 1918A3, which is semi-auto only and hence can be owned by anyone who can legally own a rifle. It is made with genuine US Government surplus parts except the receivers are newly manufactured. Like the originals

this "new" BAR fires from a 20-round box magazine. Not only was a "BAR man" expected to carry the 22-pound rifle, but besides his personal gear he was given a "BAR belt" that held 12 more of the 20-round magazines. That lash-up added about 25 more pounds to his load!

The Beginning

As most of us already know the US Army adopted the .30-06 in 1906 as the round for the 1903 "Springfield" rifles it had adopted three years previously. At first those rifles were chambered



Duke's friend Kirk Stovall with the Ohio Ordnance Works Model 1918A3 Browning Automatic Rifle. Firing the 22-pound BAR in the most practical manner is from its bipod.

CADES

for a .30-03 round with a 220-grain roundnose bullet traveling at about 2,200 fps. Then in 1905 the Germans got the worlds' other major military organizations upset by going to pointed bullets in their ammunition. That caused the United States to follow suit in 1906 by converting to a 150-grain spitzer bullet going in excess of 2,700 fps for the 1903s.

The US Model 1903 was official standard issue for the US Army until 1936 when the M1 Garand was adopted. In reality it stayed "standard" for several more years because so few M1s were

manufactured prior to the early '40s. It is arguably the finest bolt-action military rifle ever produced. Workmanship in regards to fit and finish were superb, and its reputation for fine accuracy was well deserved.

Collectors can point out minor variations of '03s all day long but in practical terms they were all of a type. They had 24" barrels, a very intricate, fully adjustable, ladder style, rear sight graduated to 2,700 yards. It could also serve as a peep sight once the ladder was raised but a fairly inefficient one since it was far out on the barrel. Front sight was a simple blade, which incidentally was furnished in 11 different heights so each rifle could be sighted in properly. Battle zero for '03s according to *The Springfield 1903 Rifles* by Lt. Col. William S. Brophy was 547 yards (500 meters). Magazine capacity was five rounds and it could be loaded singly or by means of a 5-round stripper clip.

The Magazine Cutoff

Since many American Ordnance officers had started their careers in the single shot era, the '03 was designed with a magazine cutoff. It's a lever at the rear of the receiver's left side. Pushed up to ON and the bolt will feed cartridges out of the magazine. Pushed down to OFF and the bolt will not feed them. This feature enables the magazine to be left loaded and single rounds dropped on top and fed into the chamber. (Author's note: In all my considerable reading of American military history I've not once seen reference to soldiers using their '03 Springfields as single shots.) When the magazine cutoff lever is between ON and OFF it serves as a bolt release.

Only one major change occurred in the Model 1903 Springfield in its three decades of official service. American

military forces were interested in formal target shooting in those days and their competition teams had influence. Those shooters preferred pistol grip stocks to the straight grip of the standard '03. Therefore about 1929 the change was made to pistol grip stocks and the model designation changed to 1903A1, but the rifle's receivers were just stamped 1903.

Too Few

When America entered WWI in April 1917 there weren't enough Model 1903 Springfields to equip our armed forces. The Marine Corps, being rather small, had enough, but the Army did not. Remington and Winchester (and an Eddystone factory also owned by Remington) had been busy making Pattern 1914 .303 caliber rifles for the British. So those companies made that same rifle with a few minor alterations for the US. The two most significant changes were removing the Brits' "volley sights" and chambering it for .30-06.

These were the US Model 1917, commonly and mistakenly called "Enfields" since none had ever been made in an "Enfield factory." Again they were all of a type with 26" barrels and a magazine capacity of six rounds, but loaded with the same 5-round stripper clip as the '03s.

However, sights were a vast improvement over the '03s. The Brits had stipulated a peep sight located on the rear receiver bridge, capable of being elevated to 1,800 yards, coupled with a post front sight protected by "wings." That wasn't a bad idea for a time when bayonet fighting was still considered important.

Because it weighed a pound more than an '03 Springfield (about 10 to nine



Besides infantry rifles the US military depended on .30-06s in crew-served machine guns for decades. This one is a Browning Model 1919A4.



A



B
C



D



E

when loaded), its bolt cocked on closing and its basic appearance was just a little foreign to the American eye, these 1917s were not as popular with troops as our domestic designed rifle. Still in an amazing manufacturing feat those three factories turned out over 2,200,000 Model 1917s by 1919. These rifles not only saw service in WWI, they were in action in most theaters of combat in WWII. If they weren't in American hands then with our allies such as the Chinese, British, and Free French.

The Garand

The M1 Garand may be the most famous American battle rifle ever, but it sure got off to a slow start. The government-owned Springfield Armory had John C. Garand working on its design for over a decade and a half before it was adopted. Here's an interesting fact. It almost wasn't a .30-06. Initial work had been done with an experimental .276 cartridge.

It's no wonder military people steeped in bolt-action rifles for decades resisted the semi-auto M1 Garand. It was just so different from what they were used to. It loaded with an 8-round "en-bloc loader" commonly called a "clip." Its magazine couldn't be topped off during combat but had to be emptied completely first. It was gas operated, making it much harder to fieldstrip for cleaning, and it was considered less accurate than the '03 (in truth, it is in regards to standard off-the-shelf specimens). What it did

offer was firepower and the fellows actually fighting with the big 10-pound M1s loved them.

M1 Garands had 24" barrels with perhaps the best battle sight ever put on a rifle. Its rear peep sight was fully adjustable for windage and elevation. Its front sight was a post protected by "wings" as started with the 1917s. Springfield Armory was the primary manufacturer of M1s during WWII, but Winchester helped, too.

During the Korean War of 1950 to 1953 Springfield Armory made more and Harrington & Richardson and International Harvester joined in, too. Although the 7.62mm NATO cartridge and its M14 rifle were officially adopted circa 1954, none actually entered troops' hands until about 1957. So in reality the M1 Garand stayed in service for over 20 years and the .30-06 lasted for a half century.

Faster, Cheaper

Let's return to the US Model 1903. During WWI, the government-owned Rock Island Arsenal also produced '03s. When WWII was brewing, the government prevailed on Remington to take the old Rock Island machinery and produce '03s. They did to the tune of over 300,000. So M1903 Springfields can be found marked Springfield Armory, Rock Island, or Remington.

But Remington had some sharp engineers and they figured out ways to make Springfields faster and cheaper.

(A) Earlier, the Model 1905 rear sight on the Model 1903 Springfield was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, which is why it was discontinued in the wartime emergency of 1941/1942. Raised, it offered a small peep. Lying flat, its battle zero was set for 500 meters. (B) The peep rear sight of the British-designed US Model 1917 was a fine battle sight, but lacked windage adjustment. (C) Duke considers the US Model 1903A3 to have a fine rear sight because it is a windage adjustable peep type. (D) The M1 Garand rear sight was arguably the best sight ever issued on a battle rifle. This one is the WWII "locking bar" version. (E) The M1 Garand (below) was loaded by means of an 8-round "en bloc" loader, most commonly called a "clip."



They were given stamped instead of machined parts and changed so much only a couple dozen parts remained interchangeable with the old '03s. These new rifles were called US Model 1903A3. Between 1942 when Remington was given permission to alter the basic '03 design to A3 and February 1944 they produced over 1 million rifles. A contract was given to the former typewriter manufacturer Smith-Corona and they produced another 1/4 million.

Personally speaking, to me the best change Remington's engineers made was the incorporation of a peep sight at the rear receiver bridge. Even with elevation only to 800 yards, it is windage adjustable and makes for much better shooting than the '03s open rear sight.

During '03A3 production, the government gave Remington the go ahead to build a sniper version designated M1903A4. These were a stopgap measure utilizing civilian Weaver 2.5X Model 330C scopes in Redfield mounts. They made about 28,000 and, in reality, impressed about no one. They weren't particularly accurate because unlike our British and Russian allies Americans didn't pick a rifle to become an '03A4 because it showed superior accuracy potential. They just picked them at random. In a move long frustrating counterfeiterers, they marked the 03A4s only 03A3 but put the marking upside down on the left front of the receiver.

In the last few years I've gathered up at least one each of the following (and sometimes more than one): Model 1903, Model 1903A1, Model 1903A3, Model 1903A4, Model 1917, M1 Garand, and the facsimile BAR mentioned in



the beginning. I've fired thousands of .30-06s rounds collectively through them and here are my opinions.

Shooting

First off, the Model 1903A3 is my favorite. I have both Remington (2-groove barrel) and Smith-Corona (4-groove barrel) and they give equal shooting precision. I like the peep sights. The Model 1903A4 isn't so great as charged. My iron sighted '03A3s outshoot my single, scoped '03A4. All the variations of '03 Springfields have been accused of delivering "heavy or punishing recoil." To me they don't. The Model 1917s have a little less recoil due to that extra pound of weight but shoot and handle just fine. I like their peep sights too. M1 Garands are great to shoot but less fun to clean. And that BAR in .30-06 caliber is a pussycat. It ought to be—it weighs 22 pounds! Shooting it from the bench is about as gentle as firing a .223 Remington. Lifting it up on the bench is the hard part!

And a final word here pertains to .30-06 ammunition. If you're going to buy it, and some firing with semi-autos is in the picture, buy the variety labeled "For M1 Garands." Hornady sells it with 168-grain HPBT bullets and Federal has a new load with 150-grain FMJ bullets. The "Garand" loads differ from ordinary .30-06 ammo in that it is loaded with propellants of medium burning rate. Most .30-06 factory ammo is loaded with slower burning propellants and they have been known to bend the operating rods of Garands. I don't know if this caution pertains to the Ohio Ordnance Works BARs but I prefer to err on the safe side. Mine only gets the above two factory loads and my handloads listed below.

With the same thought in mind I have settled on only two basic handloads to feed my assortment of military .30-06s. I'll use any 150-grain jacketed bullet, but prefer the 155-grain Palma match bullets by Sierra, Nosler or Hornady over either 48 grains of Hodgdon's Varget powder or 46.5 grains of IMR4895. That latter

All 20th century Springfield bolt actions (the M1903A3 is shown above) and the M1917 were loaded via the same 5-round stripper clip, although the M1917 magazine actually held six rounds.



Duke will shoot about any .30 caliber bullet between 150 and 168 grains in his .30-06 military rifles but prefers these three 155-grain ones.

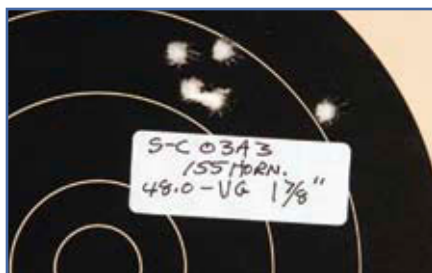


Both Federal and Hornady now have introduced specific factory loads for M1 Garands. They work well for all other .30-06 caliber rifles also. The Hornady Reloading Manual offers specific loads for M1 Garands.

powder, incidentally, was developed specifically for the M1 Garand. Those handloads hit about 2,700 fps from the bolt actions and perhaps a hundred fps less from the gas-operated M1 Garands.

As I write this my military .30-06s number an even dozen but just this afternoon I have plans to go look at a Winchester-made M1 Garand for sale locally. Less than a decade back I owned not one .30-06 rifle—sporting or military. I've come a long way and enjoyed the trip immensely.

PS: I did buy that Winchester M1 Garand. It's the one used in the photos of me shooting an M1. It shoots great! **GUNS**



Duke's favorite .30-06 handload for his military rifle collection shoots very well from his Smith-Corona Model 1903A3.



This group was fired at 100 yards with M1 Garand and the new Federal 150-grain factory load specifically intended for M1s.