

Military Rifle Club

A Brief History

2016 sees the Military Rifle Club (MRC) celebrate its 31st birthday. The club was formed in 1985 by a few people interested in preserving military rifles and their history, and over the 31 years traditions have been established such as the MRC State Titles at Dookie Agricultural College.

In December 2010 a dinner was held to celebrate the MRC's 25th anniversary and the following speech was presented by a senior member of the club, please read and enjoy.

25th Anniversary Dinner Speech- December 2010

25 years is quite an achievement for a sporting club, so it's appropriate that we should celebrate the occasion. When the MRC turned 20 in 2005, we held a special competition and a dinner at the range at Eagle Park. This seemed to be enjoyed by everyone who was there, so it was decided that we shouldn't wait another 20 years to do it again, or even 10 years, but that we should celebrate the club's 25th anniversary in 2011.

At the 20th birthday dinner, we had all but one of the past club presidents in attendance, and they were each presented with a clock to commemorate their time in office. We also had a large birthday cake to celebrate the occasion, and this was cut by three of the original members of the club. The knife that was used to cut the cake was a 1907 bayonet for an SMLE, quickly cleaned up for the occasion.

At a time like this it is worthwhile looking back over the history of the club, and some of the significant events in its development.

In the beginning of course was the SSAA, which was formed in 1948 in NSW to represent the interests of hunters and field shooters, who were not catered for by the target shooting organisations then in existence. It is worth remembering that even now, the majority of SSAA members are hunters and field shooters from rural areas. If you get the chance it is worth attending a SSAA(Vic) State Conference, where the country branches have the opportunity to raise matters of concern to them. You will find that these are often quite different to the concerns of a range based club such as the MRC.

After 1948, SSAA branches were set up in most other states, but it was the hosting of the Olympics by Melbourne in 1956 that gave an impetus for the development of the SSAA in Victoria, and particularly the Springvale Range. Springvale was the venue for one of the Olympic Moving Target competitions, which was held on what is now the public .22 range, and some of the old moving target mechanisms still exist.

At that time there wasn't a clubhouse building at Springvale, and the SSAA monthly meetings were held in the ICI Theatre in the ICI building at the top end of the city. Architectural historians will of course recognise that the ICI Building was the first modern multi storey curtain wall building constructed in Melbourne. There were however two SSAA rifle ranges in those days, one at Little River, and one at Tynong down the Princes Highway past Berwick. The Tynong range was a delightful spot, set in a clearing in the forest, but it was closed some time in the late 1970s I think, because the land owner wanted to use the property for something else. This no doubt encouraged the SSAA to purchase the Little River property freehold when they had the opportunity. For those that don't remember, the range at Little River was only named the Eagle Park Range in about 2001. The credit for this must go to the MRC representative, who strongly pushed for this name to be adopted while he was on the Range Management Committee.

Incidentally, the steel boat hull in the Little River township was there 40 years ago, and hasn't changed much in that time.

Since the Tynong range was closed, the SSAA hasn't had access to a rifle range on the east side of Melbourne, however there was funding provided and investigations carried out by the previous

State Government for a multiple use range to be developed to the east of Melbourne, which would accommodate a number of shooting groups including the SSAA.

The **Military Rifle Club** itself was formed in 1985, and an early report on the origins of the club stated that:

The SSAA(Vic) Military Rifle Club was formed in 1985 and held its first shoot at Little River on 6th October of that year. There were 9 or 10 shooters present on that first day, and the rifles used included an M1 Carbine, an Israeli Mauser and an SMLE No1 Mk3. Members all agreed that there must be a lot of people who would like to shoot military rifles in a club, so a proposal was put to the SSAA who gave it their support and the club was formed. The first organised trophy shoot was held on 5 October 1986 and was won with a Lee Enfield No4.

Those present at the first shoot appeared in a photograph later printed in Parabellum, and they included some still well known characters who are still members of the club.

An early indication that the club would have a focus on history as well as shooting was the Lee Enfield Rifle Centennial Exhibition, which was held at the Springvale clubrooms in November 1988. The organisers were three MRC members, and the variety of rifles on display indicates that military rifle collecting was well underway way even back then. The Centennial was also the subject of a 5 page spread, in the October 1988 edition of the Australian Shooters Journal (the predecessor to the Australian Shooter). This showed the development of the rifle from the original Lee Metford up to the latest No.4s and No.5s.

When the club was first formed, and the constitution written, it was envisaged as a statewide club with members in the various metropolitan and regional branches being part of the overall state body. In 1989 the Mildura club was formed and there was also a branch formed at Shepparton and one in Gippsland, although the Gippsland group didn't last long. The Mildura and Shepparton branches are obviously still going strong, and we have a very healthy and competitive relationship with them both. The official relationship between the clubs has however changed over the years, and both the country MRC clubs are now independent clubs in their own right. They are sub clubs of their regional SSAA branch, rather than sub clubs of the MRC in Melbourne. When the Military Pistol Club was first formed in 1991, the Melbourne branch was recognised by Victoria Police as the responsible club for all Victorian members, and country members had to be part of the Melbourne MPC to obtain licences and permits to purchase. Mildura eventually decided to set up their own pistol club, and more recently, with the introduction of strict reporting requirements for pistol competitions, Shepparton also set up their own pistol club; although in their case it is part of the Shepparton SSAA rather than the MRC. The continuing good relationship between the three MRC clubs, as well as the competitive spirit, is most evident at the State Rifle Championships held at Dookie each year.

One of the most enjoyable features of the MRC is that it is a multi faceted club. As well as shooting, there is a strong emphasis on collecting and also understanding the history of the firearms that we use. There is also the social interaction that takes place at our events, and Dookie is again a good example of this. The shooting during the day, and the relaxation around dinner and a glass of red in the evenings, brings the members from the three clubs much closer together.

Dookie was also the venue for the inaugural National Military Rifle Championships (now the Combined Services Discipline National Championships), which were held in 1989, and hosted by Victoria. How they managed a Nationals on the Dookie range with only 4 target positions is a bit of a mystery, but the numbers were no doubt smaller in those days. The Nationals now rotate round the various states, however it is interesting to note that the third Nationals in 1991 was held in Victoria at Mildura.

Another first was the inaugural Anzac Memorial Match which was first held at the Upper Yarra Rifle Club on 25th April 1997. This was organised by the VRA, with the MRC being invited guests. As a sign of things to come, an MRC member won all three matches on the day, and accepted the Lithgow Memorial Trophy on behalf of the MRC. Time passed and venues changed, but the Anzac Day shoot continued as his event, and he was the person in the MRC who promoted it and developed it into the successful day that it became.

Obviously feeling that there was something missing from the calendar at the other end of the year, in 1999 he organised the El Alamein Trophy shoot, also held at the Upper Yarra Rifle Range. Like the Anzac Day shoot, this competition was relocated to the Lang Lang Rifle Club when Upper Yarra had difficulties with bookings for the competitions. For the El Alamein shoot, a striking trophy with a polished brass 25 pounder cartridge case mounted on a timber base, was prepared.

At a time like this it is impossible to mention everyone who has made a significant contribution to the club, but we think particularly of two well respected members who passed away recently, and also other long standing members who have contributed significantly to the club over the years.

Updated October 2016