Artillery Extraordinaire at N-SSA 140th

by Bruce W. Miller

Hardaway's Alabama Battery fires their cannon and demonstrates why safety practices are so important when shooting artillery, due to the significant vent flame and muzzle blast from the relatively large powder charges being used.

(Joseph Pelot)
At a North-South Skirmish Association National Competition you will see just about every kind of field piece used in the Civil War. Some are originals, refurbished for authenticity and safety; some are reproductions, purchased from dealers and some are actually built by individual cannon enthusiasts.

One of those enthusiasts is Mike Vigorito. Mike joined the N-SSA’s 10th Massachusetts Battery in 2003. A retired dentist who built his first muzzle loader when he was a teenager, he became an expert woodworker, and learned casting through his dental training. When he joined the 10th Mass., the unit had a mountain rifle and he learned the art crewing it. However, Mike dreamed of something a bit larger. When he built a new home in North Attleboro, Mass., he also had a massive workshop constructed on the property. There, he could pursue his dream of constructing a 3-inch ordnance rifle. He purchased plans from Antique Ordnance Publishers and over 10 years he bought or made all the parts necessary to assemble his cannon. The barrel came from Historical Ordnance Works along with a Ken Kurdt liner. The wheels came from Stafford Wheel & Carriage, but the rest of the carriage was constructed of white oak by Mike himself. It took about 18 months to complete the gun and he says that getting the cheek pieces properly aligned was the most difficult part of the entire project.

But would it shoot? Mike shot his new ordnance rifle at several American Artillery Association matches, experimenting with projectiles and powder loads. He settled on a five pound, fifteen ounce hollow base projectile of his own design, cast from a mold he designed, and with a charge of five and a half ounces of 3F non-glazed black powder.

With the gun “skirmish worthy,” he brought it to the home of the N-SSA, Fort Shenandoah, near Winchester, Va., for inspection. The National Artillery Officer and his staff inspected the gun for authenticity and soundness with particular attention to the barrel, its liner, and vent. It passed with flying colors and received the approval certificate necessary to compete in the N-SSA; it must be renewed every three years. Mike and the members of the 10th...
Massachusetts Battery now compete in the N-SSA national matches with what Mike calls his “labor of love for any gun builder.”

The 140th National Competition was held October 2-6, 2019. Member units competed in live-fire matches with original or authentic reproduction Civil War period muskets, carbines, breech-loading rifles, revolvers, mortars, and cannon. It is the largest Civil War event of its kind in the country.

The Artillery Team matches are a spectator favorite and the excellent Shenandoah Valley weather brought out 46 guns to participate. Target frames and their paper targets are set at a range of 200 yards for rifled guns and 100 yards for smoothbores and howitzers. Each cannon fires solid shot at two targets; a bull’s eye and a silhouette of a cannon facing them that represents counter battery fire. A maximum of seven shots are fired on either target with a maximum point count of 25 per target. A perfect score is 50 points. The guns are classified by type: smoothbore, rifled, howitzer, and rifled howitzer. In the Smoothbore class, the 1st Virginia Cavalry (gun #1) was the winner with a 46-1V. In the Rifled class, the 3rd U.S. Infantry (Smithgall) won with a perfect score of 50-5V. In the Howitzer class, the Rowan Artillery finished first, shooting a better than perfect 50-8V. Not surprisingly, the 1st Maryland Cavalry won for the sixth consecutive national in the Rifled Howitzer class with a score of 49-4V.

Fifty units participated in the Mortar Team match. The mortar teams fire seven shots at a stake 100 yards down range. Officials then carefully measure the distance from the stake and tally the best five shots for score. The overall winner was the 2nd South Carolina Infantry, Company I, “Palmetto Guards” with a terrific five shot aggregate score of 23 feet-3.25 inches; a huge 12 feet better than any other team.

After two days of individual matches, seven small arms team matches were held over the three-day weekend. The weather in the scenic Shenandoah Valley was spectacular with the exception of a rainy Sunday; the day of the Rifle-Musket Team match. All targets are breakable and the pieces flew as clay pigeons, ceramic tiles and pot silhouettes were blasted by minie balls at ranges of 50 and 100 yards. The rain couldn’t stop the consistent 110th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI) from winning the gold medals once again. They won the musket match with a phenomenal time of 399.9 seconds for the five-event program, besting the next closest unit by over a minute. This makes an amazing 25 rifle-musket championships since 2000. Two of their members, Mike Rouch and Jerry Smith, have been in all 25. A total of 159 eight-member teams participated in this classic competition.

The always competitive 8th Virginia Volunteer Infantry won the Carbine Team match with a time of 392.1 seconds beating the next closest unit by a solid 44.7 seconds. One hundred thirty-four teams participated in this match of speed and accuracy. Smith carbines are a favorite for this match skirmishers are also fond of Sharps’ and you will often see Burnside, Maynard, and even muzzle-loading carbines and musketoons on the firing line.

Eighty teams squared off in the Revolver Team match. The four-member teams participated in the four-event
match: 12 clay pigeons on a cardboard backer; eight hanging 6 x 6-inch ceramic tiles; eight hanging clay pigeons and eight hanging 4 x 4-inch ceramic tiles. Harris’ Light Cavalry finished first and claimed the gold medals with a time of 118.4 seconds, 13.5 seconds better than the second place team, the Nansemond Guards, winners of the match at the previous two nationals.

The 1st Maryland Cavalry won the gold in the Smoothbore Musket Team match, besting 130 other units to finish first with a total time of 214.2 seconds, just 1.1 seconds ahead of the 110th OVI. The match consisted of four events, including the extra challenging silhouette of a tiny clay pot at 25 yards and 6 x 6-inch ceramic tiles at 50 yards.

Three additional shoulder arm team matches were held. In the Single-Shot Rifle Team match, the 149th Pennsylvania Infantry finished first. In the Breech-Loading Rifle Team match, the 2nd Maryland Artillery was the winner; Spencer Team match was won by the 46th Illinois Infantry.

The N-SSA is the country’s oldest and largest Civil War shooting sports organization with over 3,000 individuals who make up its 200 member units. Each represents a particular company or regiment and proudly wears the uniform they wore over 150 years ago. At the 140th National, twelve more members were recognized for 50 years of membership in the Association; quite an accomplishment.

The 141st National Competition is scheduled for May 13-17, 2020 at Fort Shenandoah, just north of Winchester, Va. For more information about the N-SSA visit the web site at www.n-ssa.org.

Below: Even small cannons generate a lot of energy, as demonstrated by the vent flame from Kenny Winklepleck’s reproduction 2.25-inch Tredegar Confederate mountain rifle. As the cannon begins to fire, flame shoots up from the vent a split second before the projectile and accompanying muzzle blast erupts from the front of the gun.

(Ericka Hoffmann)
The #2 crewman of the 3rd U.S. Infantry loads a projectile into the muzzle of Charlie Smithgall’s original Army 20-pounder Parrott rifle, as the #1 crewman stands ready with the rammer. The 3rd U.S. won first place in the rifled cannon class with this gun, shooting a perfect score of 50-5V.

(Jeri Harris)

Jimmy Murray (#1 position) of the 3rd U.S. sponges an original 12-pounder field howitzer to remove debris and extinguish any burning material that may be left in the barrel. Kurt Ulrich (#3 position) uses a leather thumbstall to prevent air from entering the barrel through the vent and causing premature ignition during the sponging and loading of the piece.

(Ericka Hoffmann)

Mike Klinepeter aims his 3-inch ordnance rifle using a period-correct pendulum Hausse sight.

(Ericka Hoffmann)

A cloud of flame and smoke rolls down range behind the projectile as Terry Bishop fires Mike and Rosie Klinepeter’s 3-inch ordnance rifle.

(Ericka Hoffmann)
The 1st Maryland Cavalry won first place in the rifled howitzer class with their pack Parrott for the sixth consecutive time at a National Skirmish. Here, the #1 crewman, Ray Quinn, rams the powder charge into this startlingly loud and very accurate gun.  
(Ericka Hoffmann)

Rob Bethke pulls the lanyard sending a projectile flying in a blast of fire from the 3rd Maryland Artillery’s mortar. Crews fire seven mortar balls at target stakes placed 100 yards from the firing line during a National mortar match. The distances of the five closest shots are then tallied to determine a team’s score.  
(Niki Bethke)

The gunner for the 2nd Maryland Baltimore Light Artillery (CSA) carefully aims their 3-inch ordnance rifle while a crewman helps move the gun using the trail spike.  
(Niki Bethke)
Charlie Smithgall of the 3rd U.S. deftly aims his original 12-pounder field howitzer, manufactured in 1848 by N.P. Ames Manufacturing Company. (Ericka Hoffmann)

Melanie West of the 1st Regiment Virginia Volunteers turns the elevating screw to adjust the barrel's elevation as she aims this 1841 Model 12-pounder mountain howitzer. (Ericka Hoffmann)

The lanyard used to fire this 10-pounder Parrott rifle is still taught at the very instant of ignition, as the initial flame just starts to shoot up from the vent. (Lis Cole)

A member of the Hazelwood Volunteers mortar crew carefully loads the projectile into their 24-pounder mortar using tongs that fit into small notches in the mortar ball. (Ben Harris)

Charlie Smithgall of the 3rd U.S. deftly aims his original 12-pounder field howitzer, manufactured in 1848 by N.P. Ames Manufacturing Company. (Ericka Hoffmann)

The Dixie Artillery #1 crewman carefully loads the projectile into their reproduction Austrian 24-pounder field howitzer. Variations in the loading of an artillery piece can significantly affect the accuracy of the gun, so consistency in the loading process from shot to shot is very important. (Ericka Hoffmann)

The bright muzzle blast from this 12-pounder mortar makes it easy to see why the crewman firing the piece quickly moves away from the mortar. Fifty gun crews participated in the 140th National mortar match. (Niki Bethke)

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Safety is a priority in the N-SSA, and proper gun handling is a must when loading and firing these guns. Here, the Union Guards carefully load and fire away at the four-inch hanging tiles while overseen by a safety officer. (Ericka Hoffmann)

Music of the fifes and drums rally competitors in the second phase of the rifle musket match as they march across Back Creek to the range. (Ericka Hoffmann)

Three members of the Bethke family, with the 3rd Maryland Artillery, compete in the smoothbore match. It is not unusual to have multiple family members on one N-SSA team, demonstrating the family-oriented nature of the N-SSA. (Ericka Hoffmann)

Authentically uniformed Confederate skirmishers load and fire at breakable targets during the musket match. N-SSA units are named after and adopt the uniform of actual Civil War units. (Ericka Hoffmann)
The N-SSA is America’s oldest and largest Civil War shooting sports organization. Competitors shoot original or approved reproduction muskets, carbines and revolvers at breakable targets in a timed match. Some units even compete with cannons and mortars. Each team represents a specific Civil War regiment or unit and wears the uniform they wore over 150 years ago. Dedicated to preserving our history, period firearms competition and the camaraderie of team sports with friends and family, the N-SSA may be just right for you.

For more information visit us online at www.n-ssa.org.