

James E. Clark - Bullseye Legend

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- excerpted from a 1989 article by Dean Grennell

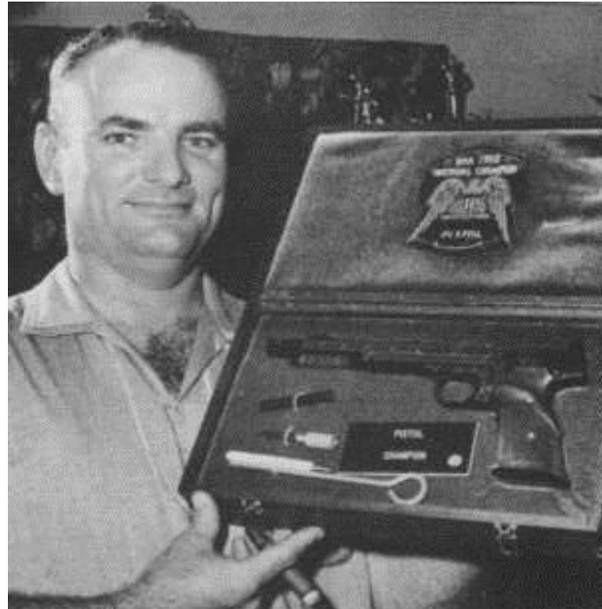
JIM CLARK shot NRA Bullseye Pistol competition for twenty-eight years, finally retiring from competition in 1975. Clark won the National Pistol Championship in 1958 and is the only civilian ever to accomplish this feat. He won the National civilian title five times. He was the fifth man in the U.S. to break 2600 and the fourth to break 2650. But his accomplishments don't end there. He has been fully active in the pistolsmith business since 1950, well known as one of the true innovators of pistol accurizing.

In 1985, the American Pistolsmiths Guild awarded Clark a trophy proclaiming him American Pistolsmith of the Year. Bagging double brass rings as the best pistol shooter in the country and its top pistolsmith is a unique coup: accomplished by James Edwin Clark and by no other known human being. I would say it serves as more than adequate excuse to feel a bit chesty about things.

Mrs. Clark works in the office in the shipping-receiving department and they have a son, Jim Clark, Jr., who's also a pistolsmith and shooter. The younger Clark racked up his first listed win in 1971, his twenty-eighth in 1988. Give him time and he may catch up with his sire, but that's a tough row for anyone to hoe, though his genes should be helpful.

The story of Clark's early years constitutes one of those triumphs over bleak adversity through sheer guts and perseverance. He was born on the fifteenth of February in 1923, down in Fort Worth, Texas. When he was 3 years old, his father deserted his mother and her brood of three. She struggled to keep the family intact as best she could, working as a seamstress. After a time, she remarried and, from Jim's viewpoint, everything didn't start coming up roses, as of that moment.

His stepfather wouldn't allow Jim to own or fire guns during the lad's early years. The children had no toys other than what Jim was able to construct and share with them. Put another way, when the basic alloy is just right, adversity can serve as the tempering agent that, somehow, produces an uncommonly remarkable human being. Browning certainly was one example and Clark is another. Does this mean we should set up homes for over-privileged children and systematically mistreat the wee nippers so they'll grow up to be the leaders and innovators of generations to come? I hasten to note that I'm being facetious... probably.



Jim Clark receiving a gold inlaid Smith & Wesson Model 41 after winning the National Pistol Championship in 1958.

Despite being 8-1/2 months older than myself, Clark made a more routine passage through the school system and graduated from high school in 1942, rather than 1940. We both went into uniform in '42, however.

Clark wanted to be a Navy pilot, but the swabbie docs thought they spotted a trifling defect in the cartilage of his nose and declined his offer. So he went around to palaver with recruiters for the U. S. Marine Corps, all too innocently unmindful that they "take" from the USN.

A glib-tongued Marine recruiter solemnly assured Clark that, if he'd only sign the paper and hold up his right hand, he'd go off to pilot training straight as a shot. So Clark signed up and they zipped him off to training...as a rifleman.

Clark's family had moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1939, about the time he got into high school and his favorite course had been mechanical drawing getting nothing but straight A's for that on his report card. He'd also joined the ROTC and became the captain of its rifle team. Thus, the USMC's arbitrary assignment wasn't all that grotesque. All they really did was nail the feet of a would-be birdman to terra ever-so firma.

Clark got through USMC boot camp and was assigned to Camp Elliot, California, for scout/sniper training with the newly organized 4th Marine Division. Graduating with honors from that program, Clark saw service at Roi-Namur and Saipan with the division. Scout/ snipers serve as sort of the eyes and flashing fangs of combat USMC groups; a spectacular but small band of specialists. Most of Clark's duties were carried out well in advance of the American lines.

He was issued a Springfield with a 10x Lyman target scope sight and came to like the rifle, meanwhile feeling somewhat less warmth toward the unwieldy and painfully vulnerable scope. During the Saipan landing, he stashed the scope in his pack and later, on unpacking it, discovered it had been demolished by a shell fragment, even though he didn't have so much as a scratch.

He discarded the sightless Springfield in favor of a scavenged M-1 Garand and an M1911A1 pistol, dealing himself into the surrounding fray. After a time, he acquired another Lyman-scoped Springfield from a sniper who'd collected some punctures and was being retired from combat, thus putting Clark solidly back into business as a scout/sniper.

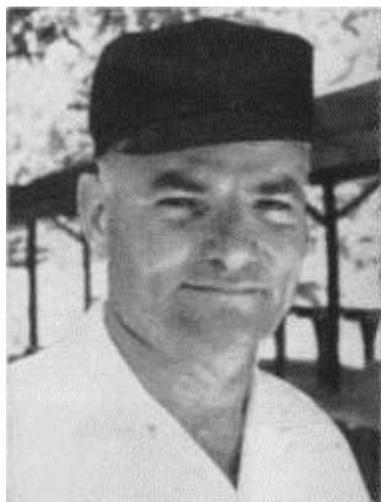
As Clark's unit came up on the small village of Garapan, Clark had lost three different spotters to enemy fire. All by himself and unattended, he perched alone upon a cliff, a thousand yards or so above a road leading out of the village.

The road below was all a-crawl with Jap troops engaged in a frantic bugout. Clark managed to get his new scoped Springfield sighted in for the generous distance and fired over three hundred rounds, scoring nothing but hits after he'd "found the range." It seems likely he accounted for more enemy soldiers than he would had he gotten his original wish and won his wings.

Clark put in twenty-one days of combat before catching a rifle bullet in the shoulder as he

attempted to rescue a wounded partner. He was sent to the hospital and his left arm was paralyzed for six months. He spent the next year in various stateside Naval hospitals before receiving a discharge in 1945.

Returning to Shreveport, Clark enrolled in college, majoring in architecture and took a job after classes, working part time in a local gun shop.



Jim Clark circa 1969.

It was in 1947 that a friend invited Clark to shoot in a pistol match. Using an as-issued GI Remington Rand .45 auto and hardball military ammo, Clark chalked up a seventy-eight percent at fifty yards on his first try. Considerably intrigued, he borrowed the needed three guns -- a .22, a .38 Special and an accurized .45 auto -- to enter a registered NRA match. He qualified as sharp shooter and made expert in his second match, master in his third. Many pistol shooters work for grim and dogged years to achieve master rank and a lot of them never make it.

When Clark shot his first score over 2600 -- out of a possible 2700 - he did it with borrowed guns, except for the Colt Match Target .22 he'd bought second-hand for \$50. It was 1950 when Clark broke 2600 and 1960 when he became the fourth man to top 2650.

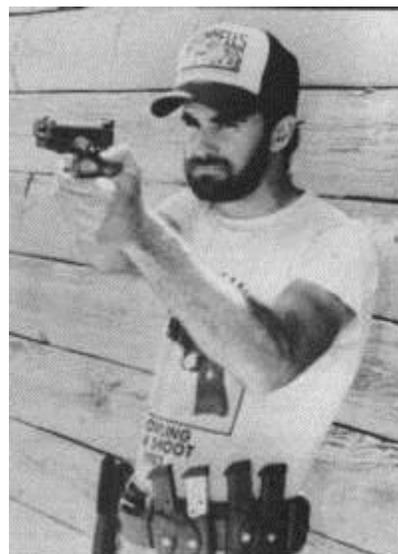
With the outbreak of the Korean War, Clark was called back into service in 1951 and spent considerable time at Camp Pendleton, California, doing accuracy jobs on Marine competitors' .45 pistols. He encountered a .38 Super Colt that had been converted to handle the .38 Special wadcutter and was thoroughly fascinated by the prospects he saw in it.

Upon his discharge in late 1951, Clark went back to Shreveport with a Sheldon lathe and milling attachment he'd purchased for \$600 from a Marine gunner. His friend Bill Gooch -- the same one who had introduced him to pistol shooting in the first place -- loaned him money and helped him set up a building.

Clark arranged a bank loan and bought twenty .38 Super Colts, converting them to handle the .38 Special midrange wadcutter cartridge. He ran an advertisement in the American Rifleman and it drew a heavy response from interested would-be customers. The Clark name quickly became known among pistol competitors and there has been heavy demand for his products and services ever since.

Despite the time and effort of maintaining a successful business, Clark continued as an active competitor. Goaded by the heavy traveling entailed in match shooting, Clark learned to fly and bought an airplane, thus finally realizing a long-term ambition.

During the years as a match competitor, Clark spent upward of \$10,000 a year on match fees, travel expenses and practice



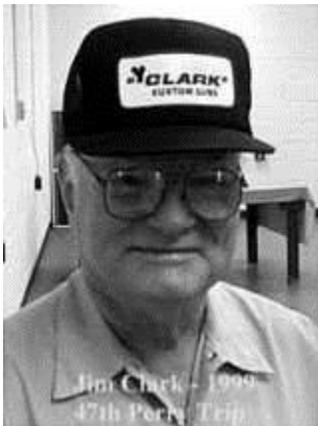
Clark's son "Jimbo" is a master pistolsmith and a prominent combat shooter.

ammunition. There are some who do not need a great deal of practice, but Clark admitted he is not one of them.

His top place in the U.S. Open Pistol Championship in 1958 was a singular achievement, as Clark was the first shooter to win that event without being sponsored by a military or police group. He footed all of the considerable expenses out of his personal pocket and, yes, he feels it was worth it.

It was 1975 when Clark finally decided the game was no longer worth the candle and retired from the competition circuits so he could devote full time to running his shop. One of the house specialties was a target conversion of the .22 LR Ruger auto pistol to which he fitted a steel trigger of his own design, as well as stocks and barrels. He has turned out close to 30,000 such guns, along with nearly a quartermillion .45 accuracy jobs and .38 Special Colt conversions.

As time permitted, Clark made a number of experiments aimed at improving performance of the .45 ACP Colt. Among the things he discovered was that six inches probably represents the ideal length for the barrel. He began using Douglas barrels that incorporated an integral feed ramp of his own design. The novel concept served two vital purposes: First, it cured a lot of the feeding problems that stem from the juncture between the feed ramp at the upper front of the magazine well and the relieved area at the lower edge-of the chamber. Second, it supported the case head and thus prevented the occasional problem from blown case heads. Clark eventually manufactured such barrels entirely in his own shop.



Another Clark innovation was the long-slide conversion and that came about rather fortuitously. Visiting a war surplus store in Arkansas, Clark came upon an entire oil drum full of GI pistol slides that had been cut in two by the government in the process of deactivating service pistols. Clark bought the entire lot of destroyed slides for a dime apiece and spent the next several years turning them into long slides. With the supply finally exhausted, he had them made from scratch by an outside vendor.

With the advent of bowling pin competition in the mid-Seventies, Clark came upon another area of endeavor. He produced what probably was the first auto pistol expressly designed for that challenging event. As refined and finalized, the Clark pin gun has a coned sleeve at the muzzle extending in front of the slide and the same width. At the buyer's option, it can have recoil-control vents or it can be plain, with a choice of 5-1/4, 5-3/4, or 6 inch barrel lengths. Several other helpful features can be had such as a bevel around the base of the magazine well, stippled front strap, low-mounted sights by Millett, Bo-Mar or others, extended ejector and a lowered ejection port,

Jim Clark was also an enthusiastic hunter and has taken dozens of deer, using an iron-sighted Model 29 Smith & Wesson with an 8-3/4 inch barrel, along with a great many smaller game species bagged with assorted other handguns.

To read more about Jim Clark and the company he founded, Clark Custom Guns, visit their

website at www.clarkcustomguns.com. Up until the day he died, Jim and company faithfully made the trip to Camp Perry every year.