

36 The Civilian Marksmanship Program

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Many of us in the shooting community have a libertarian streak that leads us to view most government programs with feelings ranging from skeptical neutrality to outright hostility, particularly government programs that deal with guns in any way. Now, consider a government program whose intent is to improve the overall level of *civilian* marksmanship proficiency, which partners with the NRA to conduct marksmanship competitions and small arms clinics and firing schools, and which can sell US military surplus rifles to US citizens without going through a local FFL dealer – what’s not to like? And no, I haven’t been smoking some of those funny weeds that grow in the West Virginia hills either – this is the Civilian Marksmanship Program. Because this is such a unique federal program, it is important for all in the shooting community to know a little about its history and its current operations.

Although the Union won the Civil War, it was widely accepted that the average Confederate soldier, having been raised on a farm and grown up around firearms, was a better marksman than his Union counterpart. In recognition of the importance of marksmanship to military preparedness, a group of former Union generals founded the NRA in 1871 to promote the general level of military marksmanship. To further advance this goal by promoting the level of marksmanship among those not on active military duty or in the National Guard, the 1903 War Department appropriations bill established the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and the National Rifle and Pistol Trophy Matches. These matches originally took place in Sea Girt, New Jersey, but in 1907 they were moved to their present location at Camp Perry, Ohio. Congress passed a law in 1905 authorizing the sale of surplus military rifles, ammunition, and equipment to civilian rifle clubs meeting requirements specified by the Board and approved by the Secretary of War. The National Defense Act of 1916 provided funds to promote marksmanship training, opened military ranges to the public, and established the Office of the Director of Civilian Marksmanship (DCM) to supervise the Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP). Although the Army managed DCM programs for many years, the 1996 National Defense Authorization Act chartered a

new, non-profit Corporation for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and Firearms Safety, over the objections of the usual suspects who would have preferred to see the CMP abolished, its activities eliminated, and its firearms and ammunition destroyed. Today the CMP is thriving, and its programs can be roughly divided into three categories – matches, youth programs, and sales.

The CMP conducts a series of regional and national matches. The National Trophy Rifle and Pistol Matches are conducted in conjunction with the NRA National Rifle and Pistol Championships at Camp Perry. These include a number of CMP National Trophy rifle and pistol matches and NRA national championship matches as well as special matches for vintage military rifles, Springfield rifles, Garand rifles, and M1 carbines. The Excellence in Competition (EIC) program is a series of CMP matches where both civilian and military service rifle and service pistol competitors can compete to earn points good for credit toward the Distinguished Rifleman and Distinguished Pistol Shot badges. The CMP also sanctions its affiliated clubs and state associations to conduct service rifle and pistol, as well as smallbore rifle and pistol matches, which must adhere to CMP rules and the CMP course of fire.

As the program has matured, there has been a greater emphasis on youth shooting programs. These began in 1908, with younger shooters being coached by the senior shooters, and schools were established during the national matches to train youth instructors. Since the 1996 reorganization there has been a particularly strong youth emphasis. The CMP supports youth shooting programs through the Scouts, 4H, and the American Legion, as well as providing resources for summer camps that have, or would like to have rifle programs. The CMP provides stipends for young shooters to attend the National Trophy Matches, the Small Arms Firing Schools, and various clinics, as well as scholarships for ROTC and JROTC shooters.

One of the most popular features of the CMP is its firearms-sales programs. Although its inventory varies with availability, the CMP’s website currently lists M1 Garand rifles, M1903 and 1903A3 Springfield rifles, military surplus .22 caliber rifles, and air rifles for sale. The CMP expects to have M1 carbines in stock in 2007, and hopes

