

SHOOTER EXPORTS RIFLE TO NORTH AMERICA – AND WINS.

James Mehta (S70-75) reveals his diary as a first-time Great Britain cap touring the USA and Canada.

As a teenage shooter at Fram , the pinnacle to which one can aspire – and it is the same to this day – is to be selected for the UK Cadet Rifle Team, known more commonly as the Athelings.

This team tours Canada every year and is reciprocated in the summer Imperial Meeting at Bisley when the Canadian cadets visit us. Sadly, I was selected as the non-travelling reserve in 1975. So for more than 40 years I have always carried a deep sense of unfinished business.

Like most shooters there has at some stage been a long absence from the sport –family and career sometimes have to come first.

But returning to the fold of the renaissant OF Rifle Club in the early 2000s led to steady improvement and finding old form – as have most of us, as regular readers will know. First came selection for county (Essex) and then country (Scotland) and so when selected for the GB team a mere four decades later there seemed a certain serendipity and justice. Not to mention a definite spring in one's step and great deal of well-meaning banter from my OF compadres.

I felt a considerable amount of anxiety as a new cap – despite being nearly 60 years of age - mixing with the great and the even greater. One member has won HM The Queens Prize not once but THREE times, and two more Queen's Prize winners and more Commonwealth Games medallists than you can shake a laurel garland at.

Yet they were all were welcoming and encouraging, although creeping self-doubt meant I had to keep telling myself that I wouldn't have been picked if I wasn't good enough.

Following a successful Imperial Meeting for all the OF's (see previous report) I felt in good shape boarding the long flight to Vancouver for a series of "warm-up" competitions in Western Canada and the USA.

While I am a reasonably seasoned traveller I wasn't prepared for the chaos that surrounds the carriage of numerous firearms across international borders and onto aeroplanes. Even with the correct paperwork one has to be prepared for long delays and meticulous baggage examination.

The first venue for shooting was the British Columbia Rifle Association annual meeting at Chilliwack, taking place over four days. The words "scenic", "picturesque", and "rifle range" are not commonly seen in the same sentence, but the 600m range nestling in the tree-lined foothills of the snow-capped Rockies is all of those things and more. A long way in every sense from a gloomy Bromeswell range in Rendlesham Forest which many OFs will remember.

We soon settled into our stride, winning many of the individual competitions and all of the team competitions against good regional opposition from both Canada and the USA. I started very well, and was placed second in the Meeting Aggregate, robbed of first place by a terrible shot on the first day. I blame the jet lag. On the upside this is a new addition to my vast collection of shooting excuses.

From there we headed off across the US border for a couple of days of well-deserved R&R, visiting Seattle and hiking up Mount Rainier in the nearby National Park. Then further south into the breathtaking Washington State to Richland in the Tri-Cities area, the landscape changing dramatically from wooded peaks to an arid desert. Horizon to horizon scrub with arrow straight roads passing sinister guard posts, for it was here that the plutonium for the first atomic bombs was produced.

Ours was the first GB team to ever visit Rattlesnake Shooting Facility near Richland, and we received a typically warm American welcome. Infamous for the wildlife that it is named after, though I didn't see any, as well as fierce dry heat and strong winds, the range presented a daunting challenge. But at least the Americans have the decency to measure their ranges in more familiar yards rather than the metric Canadians. This ensured that the zero on our sights was more predictable. Despite a wicked fish-tailing wind, moving abruptly from 7 minutes of angle left to 6 minutes right, and shooting on very tight US decimal targets, the GB team were victorious after two days of long range shooting.

Saying farewell to our generous American hosts we drove back across the border to Vancouver for more R&R in this wonderful city before an internal flight to Ottawa....slightly less airport firearm chaos this time.

Now was to begin the serious business of the tour with the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association Meeting at Connaught Ranges, the equivalent of our Imperial Meeting at Bisley and just as prestigious.

Seven days of competition ensued. In the main it was individual events, but culminating in the Canada and the Commonwealth matches against full-strength Canadian and USA teams.

The weather was brutally hot and humid, with periods of biblical deluge so bad that shooting was abandoned on two occasions. But again the GB tourists were victorious, and in the last match, The Commonwealth, beating the previous record score by two points, dropping only six points out of 1200 at 800 and 900 metres, a remarkable feat which will stand for some time.

With all the pride I felt in making the full GB team and competing successfully, it was a very successful tour for me. I managed 19 highest possible scores during the tour, being well-placed on many prize lists, and contributing great scores in the team matches. Our GB team members hoovered up vast piles of trophies as the accompanying photographs show.

Returning to normality in the UK and working life after a wonderful summer of shooting has proved difficult, and I'm already planning the next trip.....to New Zealand for the World Championships in early 2019.

I can only thank Fram for the start in this sport provided so long ago, and if Messrs Barry Pritchard and Jack Meynell (shooting masters in the 70s) were still around I think they would be as pleased with me as I am grateful to them.

Business concluded. Thanks gents.