



P.A.L.
POLICE ATHLETIC LEAGUE
of Stratford, Connecticut
2725 MAIN STREET STRATFORD, CONN.

Here's the news that you have been waiting for! Your club is OFFICIAL - all papers finally approved.

It was August 11, 1951. The Stratford P.A.L. Junior Rifle Club had been organized and its members trained for the past five weeks and now our club was enrolled in the National Rifle Association, the governing body of rifle and pistol shooting in the United States.

It all came about early in 1951 when Chief Patrick Flanagan delegated Sgt. Jack Havery to look into the procedure on how to form a Police Athletic League. Sgt. Havery traveled to New York City and conferred with Inspector John Nolan of the N.Y.C. Police Department who founded the P.A.L. program in that city many years before. So, in June of 1951 the Stratford Police Department organized a Police Athletic League in order to bring healthful and competitive sporting activities to the youth of the town.

Young people have a natural curiosity about firearms and many youngsters had been hurt, and some killed, by investigating guns on their own, so when activities for our P.A.L. program were discussed, I offered to organize and operate a junior rifle club.

A notice was published in the local papers telling of our intentions and an organizational date was set. In the meantime I rounded up a squad of instructors who had some experience or were interested in firearms and under the guidance of Mr. Clarence McCubbin of the Remington Arms Co., all of us who were going to serve as instructors, took a course in relation to firearms instruction so that our methods of instructing would be similar and uniform.

Earl Fowler was my Chief Instructor and ably assisted by his wife Tess, as well as Robert Ehram, George Ehram, Stephen Shulik, Joseph Warren, D.J. "Mickey" Ogalin, Clinton Hoysradt of Remington Arms, Carl Stover, Lieut. Fred Wilcoxson of the Fire Dept. (now Assistant Chief), Officer Donald Nielsen, Officer George Squibb (now Lieut. Squibb) and Officer Chester Parniewski (now Lieut. Parniewski and the present President of the Stratford P.A.L.).

Our first member entrollment was held in the Stratford Town Hall and about 85 youngsters showed up. For the next three weeks we gave an intensive course on the nomenclature of a rifle, all of the safety measures, proper sight picture, .22 caliber ballistics, shooting positions, sight adjustment and just about everything that would make a knowledgeable shooter out of a complete tyro.

Club officers were elected as follows: President Neal Priestley (whose daughter Mary Lou is now a member of our club), Vice President, Robert Brockway, and Secretary Mary-Jo Dodd. By the time we were ready to go outdoors to a range that we prepared at the Town gravel bank in Oronoque, our membership had risen to 115 boys and a few girls.

On Saturday, Sept. 1, 1951 we fired our first shots at our outdoor range. Town Manager Harry Flood and Town Council members were there as well as just about our entire membership. This was a new venture and if anyone had any fears - because this sport involved firearms - they were soon dispelled when the youngsters took their turn on the firing line. They had been well-schooled and conducted themselves perfectly. I knew that if given the proper training, any boy or girl will handle a firearm with a lot more consideration for the safety of themselves and others than many of their elders. Our opening day was a huge success!

At that time our equipment consisted of ten Remington Model 513 target rifles loaned to our club by the Director of Civilian Marksmanship, a government agency whose purpose includes helping clubs such as ours to get started, with the loan of equipment and supplies. The P.A.L. purchased two other rifles so we had a total of 12. We fired at the standard 50-yard target over that distance. As our range was in a gravel pit, there wasn't a blade of grass in sight and I recall how, when the wind blew sand into the action of the rifle, you could both feel and hear it as the bolt was opened or closed.

On Saturday, October 26, 1951 we had our first inter-club tournament. At that time it was named in honor of our Police Chief, Patrick Flanagan. The top guns of the day were Class A, Don Piscura; Class B, Robert Fedak; Class C, Bruce Reynolds; and High Girl, Sherry Ashcroft.

With the coming of winter we had no indoor range in town that we could use. However, through the courtesy of the Bridgeport Rifle Club, we were allowed the use of their range on Glenwood Avenue, Bridgeport on Saturday mornings throughout the winter. In fact, we spent each winter there until 1959 when we were given the use of the basement of Second Hill School and built a range at that location.

As soon as the snow melted we started the 1952 outdoor season back at the town gravel pit. Our membership was in the neighborhood of about 85 and we boasted of three girls in the club; Dorothea Squib, Betty Rahn and Angie Zullo. (The other day, one of our lady school crossing guards spoke to me and said that she was in our rifle club years ago. It was Angie - married and raising a family and helping the youngsters across the street on Sedgwick Avenue.)

With a year of practice under our belts the club began to jell. Neal Priestly and Bruce Reynolds were developing as the leading shooters in the club. The group craved competition with other clubs and in September fired in a match at the Gunners Club of Long Island. Neal Priestly and Charlie Perley came through in great style in that match, returning with several awards.

Toward the middle of the 1952 Outdoor season a young lady named Barbara Winton joined our club. Within a year Barbara was an outstanding shooter. All through her career of rifle shooting she set numerous records, such as winning a spot on the International Randle Team four times. This team is composed of the top ten women shooters representing the United States in competition with most of the other English-speaking nations. Teaming up with Bruce Reynolds in 1957, Barbara and Bruce set a National 2-man Team junior record of 800x800 with a 60-x count which still stands. Barbara also won several state championships and has a house full of medals and trophies to show for her shooting skill.

By 1953 our club had progressed to a point where I thought that we ought to be able to compete in the National Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio. A Connecticut shooter, John Crowley of Winchester Firearms of New Haven had won the National Championship that year and, as we all knew John as a fellow-shooter, our interest was high for a crack at this competition. In order to help raise the necessary funds for this even, I organized a trick shooting team whose members at that time were Neal Priestley, Bruce Reynolds, Barbara Winton and Judy Mortenson. Our first show was going to be for the St. James Men's Club and we practiced our routines until we had them down pat. On that night our exhibition team was going to be Bruce, Barbara and Judy. However, our star performer, Bruce, came up with an ear infection and couldn't shoot, so that left me with Barbara and Judy. Some of our stunts included hand-held targets and Bruce was to take care of this part of the show. Barbara did not want to shoot at any hand-held objects so I pressed Judy into service. Judy had never practiced this kind of shooting before, but she had a lot of nerve plus ability and we came through our first show in great style. We have continued these shows for the past seventeen years, entertaining various groups and organizations. Some of our stunts include cutting a business card in half edgeways, shooting the tobacco out of a cigarette leaving the paper tube, splitting a bullet in half on a blade and having each half of the bullet snuff out a candle a break and balloon station on each side of the blade. Our present performer, Paula Schmidt, did a shooting exhibition in the State Capitol on St. Patrick's Day, 1969, at a party for the legislators there.

I had been talking about Camp Perry for an entire year, so when the 1954 outdoor season rolled around we set our sights on sending a team to the Nationals. Our top 4 shooters at that time were Bruce Reynolds, Neal Priestley, Barbara Winton and Judy Mortenson. We raised the funds to make this trip, with the aid of such civic groups as the Stratford Lions Club, Exchange Club and others, and James Cochrane of the Henderson Chevrolet Co. provided us with a car for transportation. We were fortunate to live in Stratford because the individual people and civic organizations were all behind us 100 percent and it has always been this way for the past 20 years.

We arrived at Camp Perry, Ohio on August 26th, 1954 and this was a thrilling experience for all of us. The top shooters from all over the country were there. No one goes to the Nationals just for a lark and when you shoot there you are up against the best. Our juniors might have been awed by all of the activity at Camp Perry but if they were, they did not show it when the shooting started. When the smoke cleared, our kids had taken a total of 38 medals; Barbara winning 14; Neal, 13; Bruce, 8; and Judy, 3. Besides this, Barbara and Neal qualified for the Connecticut Team shooting in the Caswell match against teams representing the other states attending this match. Neal placed second to John Crowley on the Conn. Team and Barbara, fourth. The balance of the Conn. Team included such veteran shooters as Sam and Pat Burkhalter and Dick Lyman. As anyone in the shooting sport knows, this is mighty fast company.

This was our first really big competitive event and we were a happy group - already making plans for next year.

In 1954 our outdoor range had progressed to the point where we were going to build a covered shelter for the shooters and we had the posts already set in the ground. Through the aid of the Stratford Lions Club a heavy wire fence had been secured and placed around the back of the range. Just as our hopes were high for a first-class range, the Town sold the property to the United Aircraft Sikorsky Division and we lost our range. However, the United Aircraft officials agreed to provide us with a spot as long as they were able and we moved over to a strip just north of our original range. With the aid of Mr. Nelson Downs of the Sikorsky Company, who has been a tremendous help to our club down through the years, an earthen bank was pushed up with a bulldozer and we had a backstop and so we were in business again. This range had real grass and it was a pleasure not to have sand grinding into the action of the rifles. There was a problem though. There was a tidal brook running across the range and at high tide you were sure of getting wet feet when you went to change your target.

We only stayed one season at this location. A rotor test stand was built nearby and because of the danger involved, should a rotor blade come loose from the stand, we were moved to our present locations next to the Far Mill River.

I gathered together some of the kids in the club and a few parents and we cut down the trees and cleared an area large enough for a 50-yard range. Since that time we enlarged the range to a full 100 yards and built a 20-point range with fully covered firing points plus a range house and storage shed.

The golden era of our club was from 1956 to 1963. During that time we had such members as Dick Baldwin, Joyce Coutant, Tom Efford, John Goodsell, Ray Dolyak, Bob Mottram (now a State Trooper), Janie Svab, Barbara Huenerberg, Steve Metzger, Albert Pjura, Terry Wilkinson, Elaine Bugyi, Harold Noren, Carol Mottram, Janice McAuley and my daughter Karen. We had great depth during these years and it was a problem picking a team because one team was about as good as another and the problem was in guessing as to who would shoot the best score on a given day. Our girls team cleaned up throughout the state, and especially in the annual Connecticut State Gallery Championship held at the Winchester Range in New Haven.

In 1963 our girls' team was Karen, Elaine, Janie and Barbara. This team was the best that we ever had. They started shooting when about 12 or 13 years old and by the time they were 17 they were accomplished shooters. I especially enjoyed these years. I had been working with other people's children for so long and now I was able to be with my own daughter and, as we had so much in common, we had some great times. I remember that Karen and I would enter the senior matches at Blue Trail in Wallingford as a 2-man team and we always placed among the winners.

Karen didn't like to practice too often but I couldn't press the issue because usually at a match I would ask her how she did and in most cases got the answer, "I got a 400, Pop. How did you do?" Well, Pop didn't get a 400 so he pulled in his horns and kept quiet.

Quite a number of our police officers were once members of our P.A.L. Rifle Club. These include Lieut. William DiFederico, Det. Joseph Chickos, Officers Brian Cody, Brian Graham, Robert Morrison and our Policewoman, Pat Tenney. I think back when they were kids and suddenly realize how fast time has gone by. Many of our alumni have scattered to all parts of the country. Just the other day I sent Tom Efford his NRA classification card. Tom is now living in North Carolina.

Down through the years there has been a turnover among the adults that have worked with me. After the first two years of our existence all of the instructors with the exception of Robert Ehrsam were gone due to some moving away, some entering the military service and some being unable to devote the time. For several years it was a one-man operation but the older members of the club were of great help to me. As time went on other parents such as Ken Baldwin, Al Metzger, Al Pjura, Joe Svab, Ed Bugyi, Frank Sawyer, and Mrs. Ollie Schmidt (affectionately known to our kids as "Mrs. Pinky") have devoted years of their time to these youngsters.

Some of the adult instructors have children in the club such as Paula "Pinky" Schmidt and Patty Sawyer, whose parents assist me while others have had children who were members years ago - but the parents have remained to help.

In looking back over the past two decades of our existence, it gives me a great deal of pride to hear or read of the accomplishments of our former members in their adult life. Our club was more than just a rifle club. It was more like a huge close-knit family. All of the time spent in the past 20 years was not wasted, so I say to Pinky, Patty, Steve, George, Mike and all the rest of the present-day kids, "Let's get started on the next 20 years."

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