

Springfield 1903 "Tanker"

Paul Smeltzer

AGI Professional Course Graduate, GCA Silver Member,
Owner/Gunsmith - Athens Gunsmith Service

Doing as much work as I do with vintage military weapons, particularly M1 Garands, I am familiar with the mythical M1 "Tanker", I have even built a couple. However when a Korean War Marine vet came into my shop and asked if I could build him an "'03 Tanker", I was at a loss.

I had known Mr. Les Davis a little while at this point and knew that he served in Korea in M26 tanks, but found his request to be a little odd. I could not fathom how or better yet why, a tank crewman would think that a long barreled bolt-action rifle would be the weapon of choice as a personal small arm for defense of a tank, or what kind of modifications would be necessary to convert it into a "Tanker" version. I came to find out that there is a great deal to learn about what makes an appropriate defensive small arm for a tank crewman.

Mr. Les explained that while the Thompson sub machine gun was a fine choice for such use, much better than the M3 'grease gun' ("Which was unreliable, and had no punch."), neither .45acp gun was as useful for shots at range as a 1903 in 30-06. It seems that there had been occasions to hunker down in the tank and look for snipers, and, upon finding one, the Springfield was a much better choice than the Thompson or M3 for such work. "Besides, I liked the Springfield, mine had a real smooth action".

Not one to argue with anyone who had "been there, done that", we talked about exactly what he was looking for. The simple answer was "like the one I had before". The one he had before was a 1903, not a 1903A3, and while it had a stock that was a bit rough, the type of rear sight stuck in Mr. Les's mind, and, after sorting through a couple of the '03 sight variations, we struck upon the proper sight. With these preliminaries out of the way, my naturally inquisitive mind wanted to know how he came to be in possession of the Springfield knowing it was not standard equipment, and why the reconstruction of his 1903 was of importance. I was brave enough to ask, and he was gracious enough to answer.

September 15th, 1950 saw a big for his age 16 year old corporal driving a truck up from the beachhead at Inchon, South Korea. Although he had been trained to drive the M26 tank, he was assigned to drive a supply truck until such time that a



The "proper" sight on Mr. Davis's 1903 Springfield

seat in a tank became available. It did not take long. After the marines secured the beachhead, Corporal Davis found himself as assistant driver in tank A23, Able Company, 1st Tank Battalion. The tanks were heading to Seoul in support of the 3rd Marine Battalion, 5th Marine Division. It was during the running battle on the way to Seoul that Corporal Davis liberated the Springfield 1903 from the enemy. We had supplied the Chinese Nationalist government with a quantity of American made weaponry and supplies just a few years earlier during WW II. Apparently the Chinese communist government which had taken root between 1945 and 1950 decided to keep all the cool stuff we gave the previous Chinese government. Thus the presence of our equipment lying on the battlefield, formerly in the possession of the enemy.

I now understood how the '03 got to be a tanker weapon, but the reason for the desire to reacquire a Springfield came from its use in combat at Wonsan a few months later.

In early November, Able company's tanks found themselves bivouacked in an open field near the Wonsan power plant. It was a good place to rest according to Corporal Davis. "There was little activity and a nice big field to park the tanks in." The road headed north from their position with a ridge across the road to the west and the power plant and buildings on the east. At 11:30 p.m. on a cold night Corporal Davis had guard duty and was patrolling the road. It had been uneventful the past couple of days, the power plant had been secured, but everyone was wary. As Corporal Davis was walking his post he heard a distinct ZIPpppp go past his ear. He immediately took cover in the drainage ditch between his position and the plant. Cold water instantly soaked through his dungarees as he collected himself and tried to figure out where the shot came from. It must have come from a long distance because he did not hear the shot. Oddly it seemed to have come from the power plant that was supposed to be secured, rather than the exposed ridge.

Davis gathered himself with his Springfield '03 and peered slowly over the edge of the ditch. ZIPPPP, another shot whizzed past his ear, just missing his head. Still no sound of the shot, no muzzle flash, must be a sniper hunkered down somewhere in the collection of buildings and he had Davis's positioned pinned. Les works the bolt of the Springfield to check for a chambered round, there is a clunk and a splash. Great God in Heaven! The selector switch had ended up in the bolt release position and the bolt had fallen out of the rifle, into the muddy water, in a ditch, in the dark, in South Korea, with some unknown enemy taking careful aim. Perfect!

For those unfamiliar with the Springfield and other US made bolt action rifles of the late 1800's and early 1900's, it was deemed necessary by the Brass to place a magazine cut-off switch on these magazine fed rifles. Its function was to prevent the wasting of ammunition by the troops used to shooting single shot weapons, not rifles that were capable of cycling new rounds from a magazine. It was feared that if the troops were allowed access to the fully loaded 5 round

Continue on page 13

Springfield 1903 Continued . . .

magazines they would not take the time to aim and just keep firing until empty. This would be wasteful, particularly in training.

To eliminate this potential problem a three position magazine cut-off switch was installed on all bolt guns, the Krag, '03 and '03A3 Springfields, and Enfield 1917s being the most prominent in the U.S. military at the time. There was an on/off position that would restrict loading from the magazine to one shot in the on position and full access in the off position. The middle or neutral position would allow the bolt to be removed from the rifle. On a gun that was smooth operating and well oiled it was possible to have the switch in the middle position, lift the bolt handle up, and with the rifle muzzle elevated, the bolt would simply fall out of the gun.



Magazine cut-off switch (above thumb cutout in top middle of stock) in the "Neutral" (bolt release) position



Magazine cut-off switch in "Off" position



Magazine cut-off in "On" position

That is exactly what happened to Corporal Davis in a dark, freezing cold, water filled ditch. Collecting his wits, he alerted his fellow crewman who fell out of their shelters grabbing for weapons and cover. Corporal Davis located the lost bolt, slammed it back into battery chambering a 147 grain full metal jacket cartridge in preparation for dealing with the unseen sniper. Taking a deep breath and again peering over the edge of the ditch, WHAM, the impact drove him back into the ditch. He could feel the cold water and the pain in his face so at least he was not dead. Putting his hand to his face he felt a sticky goo, but it did not feel like blood. Again checking his condition he found "bullet fragments" embedded in the goo on his forehead. These fragments contain pieces of wings and body parts of some June bug looking

critter. Sticking his head up out of the ditch for a little longer than previous, there were several more "shots" zinging about. Apparently there are some cold hardy bugs that inhabit South Korea in November. Said bugs are rather large, fly pretty good, and are nocturnal. At least the "enemy" had been located and identified, although not subdued. It seems that fly swatters were also not standard issue for a M26 tank.

A few weeks after the "sniper" attack, Corporal Davis was evacuated to a hospital ship for treatment of severe jaundice. He left his tanker '03 with a buddy, but upon return to duty did not recover his rifle in useable condition.

The genesis of the Springfield 1903 "Tanker" rifle, and the desire to replace it now fills in a gap in my knowledge base concerning military variants. With sufficient feedback and configuration data I was able to construct a reasonably accurate '03 Tanker rifle for my friend Les Davis. The bolt will smoothly fall out of the rifle if the magazine cut-off switch is placed in the neutral position and the rifle muzzle pointed up at an appropriate angle, just as it should. ♦



Jack's Corner Continued . . .

the most well equipped military the world has ever known, what the troops need and what the government thinks they need are not always in complete synchronization. Besides, who doesn't know of a case where your grunt unit ordered badly needed replacement desert uniforms and small arms ammo and got instead 50,000 gallons of JP4 and 500 pound bombs, and the uniforms and guns went to a communications outfit in northern Alaska?

While this may have given every unit's unofficial "Trader" a fertile field to till, entrepreneurially challenged units sometimes did without stuff they really needed. Additionally, the military doesn't send out Baby Wipes, Slim Jims (Lord!! Could we have used those in the lush tropical climes of Southeast Asia!), or the other odds and ends that help make everyday life in the Green Machine more bearable. Not only comfort items are available, but how cool would it be to be able to get infrared game cameras when your job is to deny Abdul night time access to your AO? TroopsNeedYou.com listens to what the boys and girls at the sharp point of the spear want and need and uses your donations to buy them and send them direct. No waiting on procurement or supply approval and action. How cool is that?

I know times are tough economically for many of us, but nobody, for the most part, is trying to blow you up on your way to work or deliver bombs to your door. Let's all pitch in and give a few bucks at least for a VERY worthy cause during the time of the year they will most miss their families.

♦