

THE MILITARY MARTINI

THIS MONTH we decided to stray a little beyond the normal parameters of our black powder column, for once, and into what is popularly and rightly referred to as 'vintage', by taking a look at the 'miniature' Martini actioned rifles that were produced from the time of the Martini Henry service rifle to the early years of the present century.

Initially, these were solely produced as sporting arms, the 'rook and rabbit' rifles which replaced the muzzle loading 'pea rifles' of earlier days - so called due to the small calibre balls they fired, usually of .36" or so.

The earliest rook and rabbit cartridge was, in fact, much the same calibre; .380. An early paper case version loaded with round ball was replaced by a metallic cartridge during the early 1870's, a centrefire cartridge although a rimfire version was also manufactured



Greener patented features of both ladder and aperture sight, presumably the traverse adjustment for the windage. Sight was very finely made.

(presumably the American .38 rimfire revolver cartridge adapted for rifle use). Loaded with a 125 grain conical bullet and a powder charge of 15 grains, muzzle velocity was some 1050 fps. Bullet diameter was .375" and it was of heel seated design, being the same size as the cartridge case. The problem with the new loading was its tendency to range too far in the event of a ricochet or a miss, and although a round ball load appears to have been available (and Greener, writing in the 1880's considered this ideal), the lack of surviving examples may be an indication that it was not in common use.

By
GEOFF ALLEN

The answer, of course, was a reduction in calibre and the 1880's saw the introduction of .320 and .300 calibre rook rifle cartridges. The .300 (which came to be interchangeable with the later .295 and is often now referred to as the .295/300) came to be considered the ideal, having a reasonably flat trajectory out to 60 yards or so and thereafter dropping steeply to ground. The same case necked down to .25 calibre was another favourite (called the .297/250) and in 1883 Herbert Morris patented his 'Morris tube' training adaptor for the .45 Martini together with a diminutive bottle necked cartridge for use in it, the .297/230. This won itself an enthusiastic following both on and off the ranges.

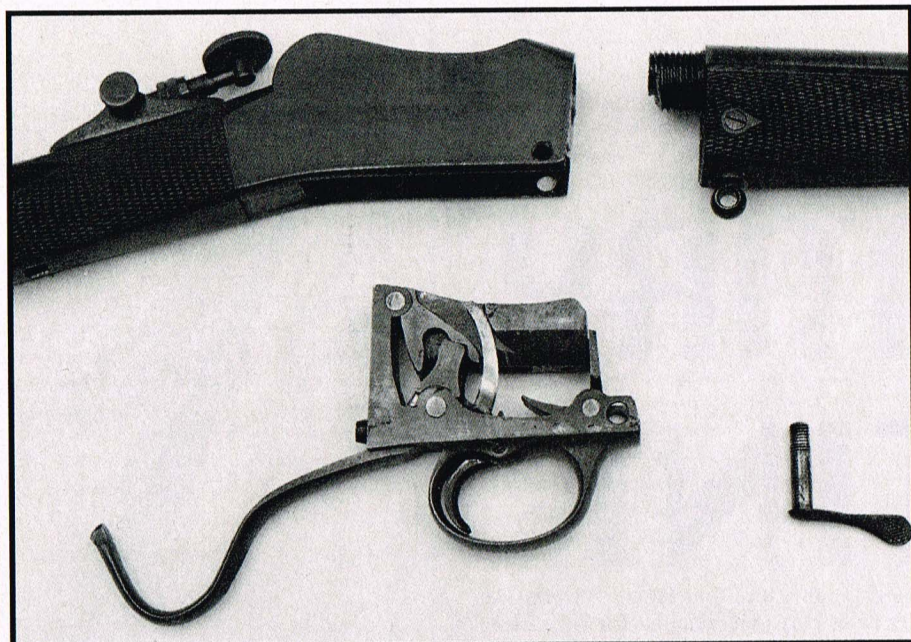
While the rural England of Victorian times would hardly be considered crowded by today's standards, having around one fifth of the present level of population, it was considered poor form to go about potting unfortunate farmworkers with an inopportune miss or ricochet and these small calibre centrefire cartridges were widely used up to the Great War. The .22 rimfire cartridge, an American invention (well, adaptation of Flobert's primer powered bullet breech cap if you like), had appeared in 1857 as the .22 Short for Smith & Wesson's diminutive No.1



.22 Greener 'Miniature Martini' c. 1900, with two sets of sights — open sights in use here.

revolver, followed by the more powerful Long in 1871 and the .22 Long Rifle in 1887 (developed by Stevens for their single shot rifle), but was considered too diminutive for anything larger than rooks - it had yet to be loaded with a hollow point bullet.

While the Sporting gentry of the British Isles had an interest in the neatly turned out rook and rabbit rifles for the huntin', shootin' and fishin' activities with which they occupied their days, the rifle really came into popular use after the Boer War. Earlier generations had taken up the rifle during the great Volunteer periods of the Napoleonic War and the French invasion scare of the 1850's, when long range target rifle shooting as we know it today, came into being with the adoption of the .577 muzzle loading Enfield. Then, as now, target rifle shooting continued to be a popular pastime with the artisan and professional classes, with a fair sprinkling of such gentry as could be tempted off their horses and away from the pursuit of more exciting quarry, but such activity took time, and money. Obviously, the further down the broad social spectrum that constitutes British Society one was, the scarcer these two commodities became. Consequently, the lowest strata had neither the opportunity nor the money to become skilled in the use of



These rifles were of 'take-down' construction, and are still sometimes found in their canvas covered carrying cases. Details of Francote's removable action can be seen.

arms (a state of affairs the higher orders were doubtless extremely happy with and one that those who see themselves as the new ruling class are making every effort to impose now upon everybody in this new egalitarian age).

Marksmanship

The Boer War caused a change of heart. The poor marksmanship of the British troops (rightly or wrongly) was given much of the blame for the early reverses of that conflict and the good shooting of the Boer irregulars much highlighted. The British Army had certainly forgotten the lessons of past times and allowed marksmanship to become a very neglected skill with unfortunate consequences. No longer was warfare a matter of massed ranks and volley fire, individual marksmanship was an important skill for any soldier and the cost of neglecting this aspect of training could be grave. (A hundred years later, the British Army appears to have come full circle in this respect, and one wonders what the consequences will be this time around).

The realisation that marksmanship was a lifesaving skill every soldier should possess caused a new interest in rifle shooting among

Tang sight raised and also hooded bead foresight. The reason two sets of sights were used is not known.



TARGET GUN

became an extremely popular pastime in its own right. Most villages of any size had their Miniature Rifle Club, indoor ranges were attached to many pubs -some still exist, now serving as skittle alleys. The newly improved air rifles developed by Lincoln Jefferies, Bonchill and Greener also elevated air rifle shooting to the same level, and of course where a military range was within convenient reach by road or railway, full bore rifle shooting also prospered.

Eventually, the .22 rimfire eclipsed the original .230 Morris as the predominant 'miniature' round (it was cheaper) and naturally, the trade were quick to develop suitable rifles, the Birmingham maker W W Greener apparently being the first to offer a purpose made miniature Martini target rifle. Introduced in 1900, these were made in both .22 rimfire calibre and .310 centrefire, the 'club' model for shooting at ranges up to 300 yards and much shorter ranged and quieter than the .303. Both rounds were initially black powder loadings and Greener himself introduced the .310 cartridge with its 120 grain bullet and 10 grain charge of black powder and a muzzle velocity of around 1200fps.



Cocking indicator of Greener's Martini seen protruding when striker at full cock.

Greener was not the first to offer a scaled down Martini action: that honour seems to be due to the Birmingham based Braendlin Armoury of the 1870's, who made the action of the .380 rook and rabbit rifle by Pape featured here. References to Pape's records indicates this was finished in 1875, and unlike the later diminutive Martini's, its receiver has the same sloping back as the military action, as well as the side mounted sliding safety catch featured in Martini's patents and on the early trials rifles. This slides forward to lock the intermediate tumbler of the hammerless lock, and in its rear, 'Off' position lines up with the lug on the receiver to make it easy to see or feel whether the safety is on or off. A screw in pin secures the rear of the breech block rather than the split pin used in the full sized Martini, but other than this and the safety catch it is a perfect miniature of the Mk1 Martini Henry action. Unfortunately, the same applies to the trigger pull, which although nice and crisp, is heavy.



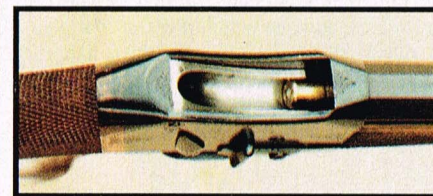
.380 centrefire Rook & Rabbit rifle by W. R. Pape. Gun was superbly preserved, but how does one go about making ammunition for these?

As one would expect of a product of so highly regarded a maker as Pape, the rifle was superbly finished, with quite a bit of neat scroll and border engraving to lighten up the flat sided Martini action. A 30" octagonal barrel, rifled with seven wide, shallow grooves is fitted -a notable point as so many of these arms from this early period were rifled on Henry's system, the same as the military Martini. Sights were a fixed rear with flip up leaf, neither graduated for range but presumed to be for 50 and 100 yards, and a 'Barleycorn' blade foresight. All in all, the Pape seemed a nice little rifle and very usable for the Historical Breechloading Smallarms Association's rook rifle competition. The only difficulty, as always with these early breechloaders, lay in making up suitable ammunition.

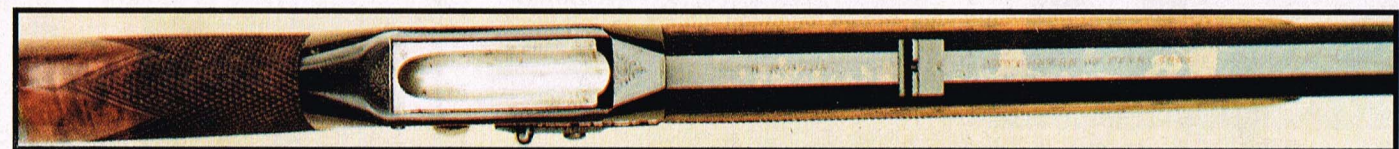
Unlike the other vintage rook rifle calibres, the .380 does not appear on the Home Office 'antique centrefires' list, and remains on certificate due to its chambering current .38 revolver ammunition. Chambering and shooting are two different things however, because while the .38 Special and S&W revolver cartridges are loaded with .357" diameter bullets, those for the old .380 were .374" and .357" bullets simply fall through the bore. It was opined that all one had to do was to use .38 Special hollow base wadcutter loads, because the bullet would expand to fit the oversized bore. They don't, really. I tried some and at 30 yards they were just about staying on the target but no more.

380 Ammunition

Messrs Eley's last catalogued .380 ammunition in 1955, but in fact it (and .380 Short) is still manufactured from time to time



.380 S&W brass fitted chamber best, though it was a little shorter than original. Only source of the .374" bullets necessary is Lee conical bullet or .36 percussion revolvers.



.380 rifle was exquisitely finished and remained in near new condition. Octagonal barrel marked 'W. R. Pape, Newcastle on Tyne.'

by Fiocchi of Italy and should be available at some time in the future from Tim Hannam Ltd. It is reputedly interchangeable with the .38 Colt revolver cartridge -now no longer in production. The .38 Short Colt certainly works, I tried some. However, this too is obsolete and none appears to be available in the UK.

Cartridges for the .380 have therefore to be made up if the rifle is to be at all usable, and as with any breechloader this involves going to a certain amount of trouble. The closest readily available cases are .38 S&W, which are more or less the correct diameter although slightly short. Bullets are the main problem. The only .374/5" diameter bullets of a suitable weight available are those for the .36 cap and ball revolvers, which have to be cast. Lee manufacture a mould, and the base band of their bullet is slightly undersized, so it can be seated into a widely belled .38 case in loading. However, it proved impossible to obtain satisfactory accuracy with these and I transferred my attention to the only other alternative, the .375" round ball. This proved a success, with some particularly fine groups being obtained that equalled those illustrated in Greener's contemporary work 'The Gun'.

It was obvious that the ball could not be seated and crimped into the case in the conventional manner, so the following procedure was adopted with good results. Fired .38 S&W cases were slightly resized in a .38 Special bullet seating die. This ensured they would drop into the chamber but left the case the correct diameter for the .380. 15 grains of powder filled the case to within 1/8" of the top (I used Gevelot brass), leaving just enough room to press the ball into the case mouth. In order to keep it in place, the loaded case was fed into a .45 ACP seating die just hard enough to press the ball onto the case mouth in the same way the .22 BB cap is loaded. Enough of the ball was gripped by the case to ensure its retention during normal handling and loading, in fact the resulting cartridges were quite sturdy. It was found best not to bell the cases prior to reloading, or to attempt to 'crimp' by pinching them in the resizing die. Presumably the residual crimp of the fired case bit into the lead better when the ball was seated. Once

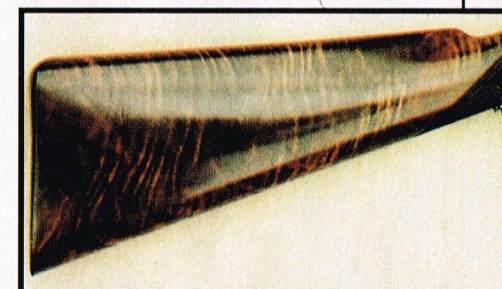


Left side of receiver bears the stamp of the Braendlin Armoury - who would seem to be the first to supply scaled down Martini actions. Pape's records indicate this rifle was made in 1875.

this procedure was established, loading ammunition for the Pape actually turned out to be quite easy.

With the cases filled as described, charges of 9 grains by weight of Pyrodex P were used, and 15 grains of Krank's 'Fine' grade black powder. The next step was to provide sufficient lubrication to control the fouling. Here, the only really practical option was to dip the loaded ball into melted lubricant, Krank's tallow based mixture usually works well and did the trick in this case too, though on one really hot, dry day caked fouling began to appear in the last three inches of bore and it was necessary to supplement this with a smear of Hodgmdon's 'Minnie Lube' on the ball.

Out of curiosity, some ammunition was also prepared with the longer .38 Special



Superb walnut stock of the Pape.

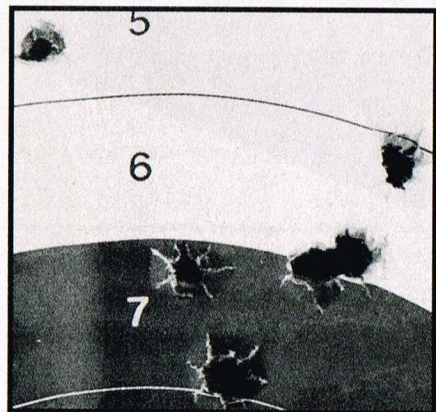


Groups with Krank's 'Fine' black powder and .375 swaged Hornady ball at 50 yards were excellent. Note original round of .380 long to right for comparison.

brass. This would chamber but was rather undersized and a degree of gas leakage was noticed, evidenced by powder stains down the outside of the cases and fouling appearing around the breech. Powder capacity was greater, obviously, but the cases were almost touching the rifling lead and some cartridges were hard to insert fully. With the longer case filled almost to capacity and loaded with round ball, an average velocity of 1387 fps was recorded and it was thought this might shoot well at 100 yards, but unfortunately accuracy was poor. Best results, it seemed, were to be had with the .38 S&W case.

Chronographing the 15 grain black powder load showed its average velocity to be 1102 fps, and trying them at 50 yards produced some excellent groups. The report was reasonably quiet (the heavier charge of the .38 Special case had a real 'crack' to it) and recoil can only be described as pleasant. The fatter .38 S&W cases sealed the breech properly and ejected cleanly.

The same bulk load of Pyrodex P (weight, 9 grains) gave an average velocity of 1042 fps, slightly down on that of the black powder charge and the same was true with 13.5 grains in the Special case. This averaged 1291 fps. It is surmised that the lack of a crimp on the ball was reducing the efficiency of the Pyrodex, while the black was unaffected and had plenty of time to burn in the rifle's 28" barrel. Accuracy though, was not at all



Nice 100 yard group with Pyrodex and round ball. All shooting done from rest.

inferior and in fact the best 50 yard group obtained, four shots touching and only spoiled by a slight flier outside the main cluster, was made with Pyrodex.

Moving back to 100 yards showed that the round ball was still shooting well at this distance too, groups of around 3" being obtained with the Pyrodex load, again shooting from a rest. The rifle seemed to be shooting high with the improvised ammunition, but a six o'clock hold on the black at 50 yards centred the group nicely and, with the leaf sight up, the balls were just cutting into the top of the black at 100. All in all, quite a success and the advantage of the .380 to the shooter is that, being subject to certificate control, prices of .380 rook and rabbit rifles tend to be lower than those realised by the .297 etc.

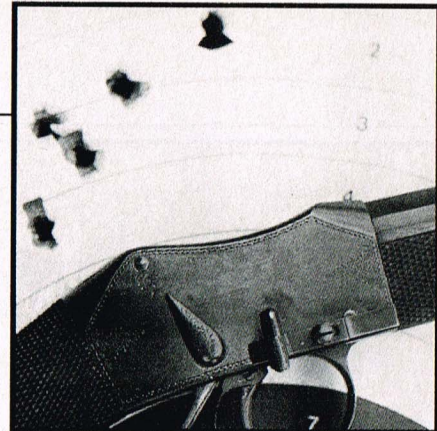
Vintage Martini

Turning now to our 'vintage' miniature Martini, it has been very noticeable that prices of early .22 target rifles have been rising of late, no doubt due to the rather tardy inclusion of competitions for them. At a time when the smallbore shooter is faced with spending ever larger sums on the latest match rifles to keep pace with the competition, it is understandable that a number are asking themselves if it has taken much of the fun out of it all, and are turning to the vintage scene instead.

It would certainly be more difficult to find an earlier specimen of the .22 Martini than the one featured. It was black powder proved and, most unusually, had its original, unlined bore. Such was the problem of bore corrosion when the change from black powder to smokeless came about, that most .22's were ruined within a very short time. The reason was quite simple; for as long as black powder had been the propellant used, it was customary to clean your rifle by washing the bore out with water. This also removed the chlorate salts from the early corrosive primings, so when smokeless replaced black and all that was required was to wipe out the bore with an oiled patch, those chlorates were left behind to cause rust. In the .22 rimfire, where a large amount of detonating composition is present relative to the quantity of powder, the problem was particularly acute until it was realised that the chlorate deposits, not 'acidic' nitro powder residues, were the cause.

Given its 90 odd years of use, it was not surprising to find the rifle was now a little fussy about its ammunition. Some wear at the chamber had obviously occurred and, the .22 rimfire being particularly sensitive in this respect, many brands simply would not group at all. In the end, the CBC Magtech ammunition distributed by Viking Arms did the trick: it has a very slightly larger diameter bullet than usual and has worked well in other old .22's. The trigger pull of the old Greener was hardly up to modern standards, but with this ammunition is proved capable of still holding the 'bull' at 50 yards.

These rifles were fitted with Greener's



.38 Short Colt ammunition worked well, but this round is also obsolete now and unobtainable (50 yard group). Safety catch seen above trigger appeared on early trials military Martini's.

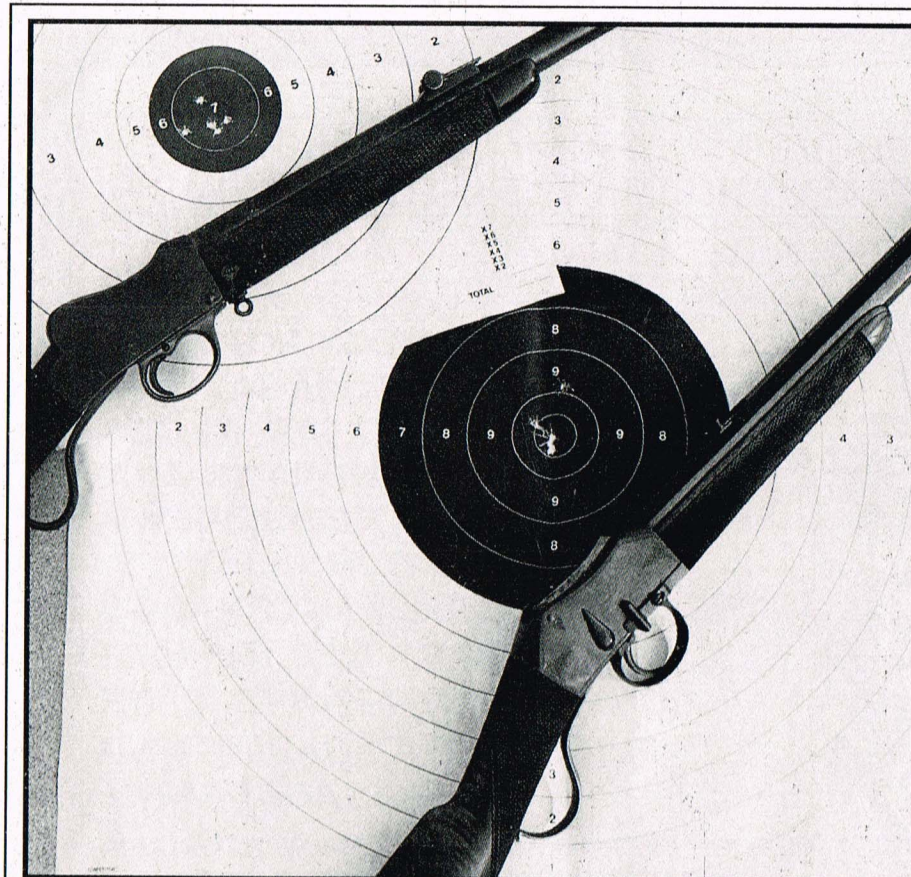
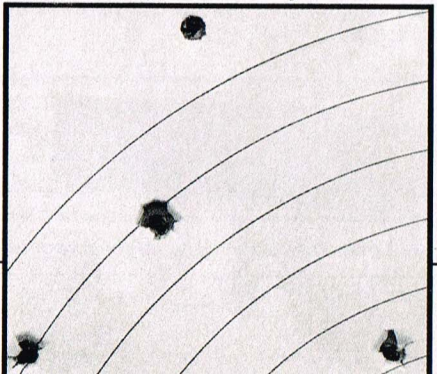
patent 'flip-up' tang rearsight, the first of a long line of later instruments by BSA and Parker, with an interesting swivelling plate with a choice of three apertures for different light conditions. The foresight was a flip 'barleycorn' blade or hooded bead and a military type ladder rearsight sat atop the barrel. Quite which sights were required for which competitions I do not know, perhaps a reader might?

Both sights were adjustable for windage by means of a traverse screw and graduated plate on their mounts, the ladder sight being graduated for 25, 50, 100 and 200 yards. Both bear 'Greeners' Patent' stamps, presumably for their traverse mechanism, and they worked well.

Unusually, the Greener's stock was chequered and fitted with a horn forend tip in the fashion of a sporting rifle. These models were usually very plainly finished to keep the cost down for the working men's rifle clubs that used them, so 'de-luxe' versions such as this must be rare.

It was of take-down construction and had the Francotte detachable action used on the later BSA Martini's, the lever headed screw at the front of the action being removed to allow the action to be taken out and the barrel unscrewed. August Francotte's patent of 1877 (no.1051) provided for the easy removal of the Martini breech mechanism for cleaning by mounting it on a frame that slid into the receiver from below, an arrangement that was never bettered. Greener's miniature Martini's are scarce, and one wonders at the connection between these and BSA's Martini action target rifles, the first of which was introduced in 1912. These continued in production until 1950, being replaced by the 'International' model.

100 yard group with .38 Special case and ball. Heavier charge of powder produced higher velocity, but accuracy was inferior.



Accuracy of the .22 and .380s compared at 50 yards, admittedly the .380 group was above average.

Greener also produced his rifles as cased sets with two barrels and breech blocks, one centrefire and one rimfire, chambered for the .22 and .310 ammunition. This particular example, however, came with two .22 barrels, each of them numbered to the gun. It was such an early specimen of Greener's miniature Martini that the cartridge designation was engraved rather than stamped on the barrel. The proof marks are those used prior to 1904, placing its date of manufacture was between 1900 and 1904.

So, we have two rifles which are by definition antique, in the accepted sense of the term but which remain on certificate because they will chamber readily available ammunition. Strongly constructed antique .22's such as the Greener are certainly capable of shooting now as well as they ever did with black powder ammunition, but that does not really apply to the .380. There have certainly been cases where .22 rimfires, even a .303, have been accepted by the courts to be antique and therefore exempt from the licensing provisions of the Firearms Act, but as long as the Home Office defines what is and what is not an antique firearms by whether or not it can chamber a modern cartridge there will be anomalies such as this. Our European neighbours use the simple definition of age and obsolescence, regardless of chambering but this requires a degree of trust on the part of the authorities in the people which simply does not exist in Britain.

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Pistol shooters

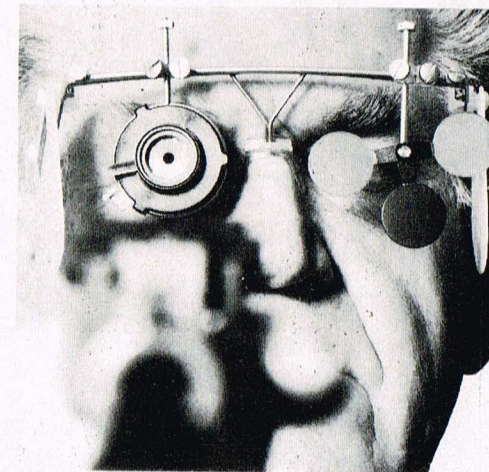
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