

THE THOMPSON COLLECTORS ASSOCIATION 13TH ANNUAL SHOW AND SHOOT AUGUST 2004

By Murray Willis, Thompson researcher and collector

Early in August we were lucky enough to attend the 13th annual Thompson Collectors Association Show and Shoot, which this year was held at the **National Rifle Association headquarters at Fairfax, Virginia, USA.**

This show coincided with the exhibition in the William B Ruger Gallery at the National Firearms Museum of eighty-five years of history of the **Thompson Sub Machine Gun**, designed and later manufactured by the Auto Ordnance Corporation of New York.

The Thompson Collectors Association and the National Rifle Association organized the display, entitled **“Thompson, on the Side of Law and Order.”** The motto “On the Side of Law and Order” first appeared on the Auto Ordnance advertising and letterhead around 1929.

Prime organizer had been Thompson author and researcher Tracie Hill, along with many other **TCA** members. This resulted in an outstanding display of Thompson guns and memorabilia, beginning with the original “Blish lock” pistol prototype and including most of the prototype Thompson guns. These ranged from the “Annihilator,” the first model of 1919 serial number 17, models of 1921, and the original Thompson Auto rifles to dozens of other Thompson model SMG s developed during WW2, all loaned by **TCA** members for the display. .

The “Blish Lock”, the “H” shaped piece of bronze in the Thompson bolt assembly, claimed the principal of two dissimilar metals adhering to each other while under firing pressure but was discontinued after the model of 1928A1 as being superfluous. The New Zealand and Australian soldiers who in WW2 often replaced it with a 3/8th nut and bolt also discovered this!

Like many of my fellow **TCA** members, my interest in the Thompson submachine gun goes back to when my father made me a toy wooden “Tommy gun” about 55 years ago. In those days, aged 7, we played wars all day and listened to the chatter of the Thompson on the radio serials at night, or watched Edward G Robinson or Humphrey Bogart battle it out at the Ascot in Newtown, Wellington, on Saturday afternoon.

Little wonder I am now a fully addicted Thompson researcher and collector and today drag my ever-suffering wife Jan to this, the latest Thompson show and other gun shows around the world.

But “**On the side of Law and Order**” was for the Thompson enthusiast a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the “Tommy guns” only ever seen before in reference books.

The 13th Annual TCA show and shoot was held over three days at the **NRA** headquarters where facilities include the auditorium and lecture room, the massive dining room capable of seating well over 150, and the National Firearms Museum and the Thompson display.

Day one was an organized bus tour of the Arlington Military Cemetery in Washington DC which was a memorable and moving visit, including a stop at the Kennedy memorial graves and then the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknowns.

A highlight for Jan who, with her interest in the civil war, had days before dragged me around Gettysburg and Harpers Ferry, was a visit to Arlington House, the home of General and Mrs. Robert E Lee before the civil war. Day one concluded with a visit to the Smithsonian museum of American National History.

Day two was a conducted tour of the FBI Training Academy at the US Marine base at Quantico. Now here is a place one does not often get to visit. The Academy, which featured

recently on a New Zealand television documentary, is a very large establishment primarily dedicated to training special agents for the FBI. Police and Drug Enforcement Agency courses are also held there.

Everyone wears a gun all the time for familiarity, with new entrants wearing an orange plastic imitation. A tour of the gunrooms and ranges was completed and a lot of practice shooting was seen on the ranges. A group photo taken in “Hogan’s Alley,” the incident training town, was interrupted by a bank robbery shootout much to the surprise of the 70-odd TCA members. Worst shock was our return to the group hotel to find that our hotel room door key cards had been “erased” during our visit to the FBI and no one could enter their rooms. Funny that!

Day three was the all day Thompson sub-machine guns shoot. That evening, a conducted tour by Tracie Hill of the **“Thompson, on the side of law and order”** display was followed by dinner and prize-giving.

The machine gun shoot was held in the large basement NRA range and started at 7am sharp! The range master was Tracie Hill assisted by eight Range officers, two for each shooter, and they maintained perfect safety at all times.

There were forty shooters competing and I found myself in group six of the ten groups of four shooters. I was kindly loaned a very nice Thompson model 1928A1 made by West Hurley of New York in the early 1980s. This gun was loaned to me by long time **TCA** friend Mike Hensley of Indianapolis, Indiana (see <http://www.mikesmachineguns.com>)

Sadly, Mike chose to use his other gun, an M1 Thompson that jammed twice in the first round and severely hampered his score, while the West Hurley 1928A1 he loaned me functioned flawlessly.

We had considered taking my own Thompsons to the show, but taking a rifle overseas today for a competition shoot is difficult enough let alone taking a couple of sub-machine guns!

The shoot was divided up into three stages and was very competitive, with 100 rounds of 45ACP allowed in five magazines of 20 rounds each. Stage one was at 50 yards, standing shoot at standard military body target, semi-auto for a 20-second duration. On command, competitors entered the range with guns open bolt and safety on with an NRA rigid plastic safety flag in the breech and barrel of the gun. When in position, one's range safety officer checked the gun and removed the flag. On command a loaded magazine was inserted, the command was given for "safety off" followed by "fire." No cocking is required as the Thompson fires from an open breech position and ends firing "open breech" if your ammo has run out. Then "mag out", "safety on" and the safety flag was re-inserted.

I did not do too well on the 50 yard shoot as I had not remembered to wear my glasses and the target at 50 yards on the indoor range was a bit blurry, but I got 15 on the target and five scoring shots. Stage two was a 25-yard standing shoot in two sub-stages of 20 rounds each at 3 targets over 20 seconds at **full auto** bursts. Wow! Now we were starting to cook with gas! The same very safety conscious range rules applied again. Stage three was the same as stage two but the firing time was **five seconds total**. Surprisingly, here I did my best shooting, scoring 38 out of 40.

After the completion of the formal competition, random shooting was allowed with a number of **TCA** members and **NRA** officials trying their hand at emptying 50 round "L" or 100 round "C" drums while the targets quickly became so much shredded paper and the floor ankle deep with brass.

At 5pm the **TCA** members assembled at the **NRA** museum's Ruger Gallery for a conducted tour of "**Thompson, on the Side of Law and Order**" by Thompson researcher, collector and author **Tracie Hill**. Some fascinating information was imparted, including comments from the son of the original Thompson designer Theodore Eickhoff about co-designer Oscar Payne's wife having originally named the very first Thompson prototypes as the "Persuader" and "Annihilator".

Dinner and prize giving followed in the **NRA** dining room, with George Rich of Baltimore, Maryland, taking first prize with a 100 out of 100 shoot while new **TCA** member John Anderson of Minnesota came a close second with a 98/100 shoot, much to his own amazement.

Jan and I were awarded the “furthest distance traveled” prize in conjunction with Peter Laidler, the well-known British Sten gun researcher and author from UK.

Other honored guests included Frank Iannamico, author of numerous books on machine guns of the world, and Dr. Ted Eickhoff, son of the famous Thompson designer.

Of special interest was a short address by Peter Laidler on the drastic effects of the recent uncontrolled and crazy gun ban in the UK and the resulting mayhem, with West Indian gangs and illegal hand guns in proliferation. Watch out New Zealand!

It was ironic that in the 1930’s the British government told the Thompson SMG makers Auto Ordnance Corporation that it wanted nothing to do with “**that tatty American gangster gun.**”

In 1941, in real danger of invasion and after having dis-armed the British population in the same manner as they have recently done again, the government was placing huge orders for Thompson guns, “**as many as possible,**” after they declared war on Germany in 1939.

As once described by Winston Churchill “General Thompson’s gun, pound for pound, the most devastating weapon ever devised for war” that tatty American gangster gun to a large degree became their salvation.

It is thus little wonder that today the Thompson sub-machine gun or “Tommy-gun” as it is often known, is still the most highly recognised and respected of all fire-arms, and to date the most popular special display in the NRA National Firearms museum.

Originally planned to be on show for the year ending December 31, “**Thompson, on the Side of Law and Order.**” has now been extended until end March 2005 due to the immense public interest.

Murray Willis

Acknowledgments.

William J Helmer: “The Gun that made the Twenties Roar.”

Tracie L Hill “Thompson: the American Legend”

Frank Iannamico “American Thunder”