

Old Framlinghamians at the World Championships

John Halahan (S72-75) and James Mehta (S67-75) were honoured to be selected for the Great Britain Veterans team, shooting in the World Long Range Championships, held in Bloemfontein, South Africa in March 2024.



The Great Britain Rifle Team consisted of not only our Veteran team, but the “Palma” (a senior GB team) as well as Under-21s and Under-25s, so all in all there were about seventy UK shooters assembling in Bloemfontein. Competition is truly international, with similar teams from Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Kenya, Channel Islands, Japan, Germany, and of course the hosts South Africa. The World Championships are held every four years, although this was extended to five years because of Covid with the last event held in New Zealand in 2019 (where James was selected as well). In all there were about 450 competitors, and this includes some independents, who are able to enter for the individual events.

Selection for this team started three years ago, with a large squad of about forty gradually being whittled down to the twenty chosen to travel after a “reconnaissance” tour to Bloemfontein in March 2023. Although Veterans (i.e. over 60 years old) this was a very accomplished team with five Sovereign’s prize winners, and multiple Commonwealth medallists in the crew, and so we both felt fortunate to win selection.

Many team training weekends were held to hone team drills, align firers with coaches, and to develop an ammunition load suitable for the conditions to be encountered at Bloemfontein which are very dissimilar to our native Bisley, being hot and high, at around 5,000 feet above sea level. It is difficult for northern hemisphere teams to hit the ground running as we had not been able to train much in the winter weeks immediately leading up to the event, compared to our southern hemisphere opponents.

After our reconnaissance last year we decided we needed more time to acclimatise to the weather. As a result our first destination on arrival in South Africa was a two-night stay in KwaZulu Natal, which included a guided tour of the battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift. Having first seen the film “Zulu” in the Athlone Hall, this was fascinating and moving.

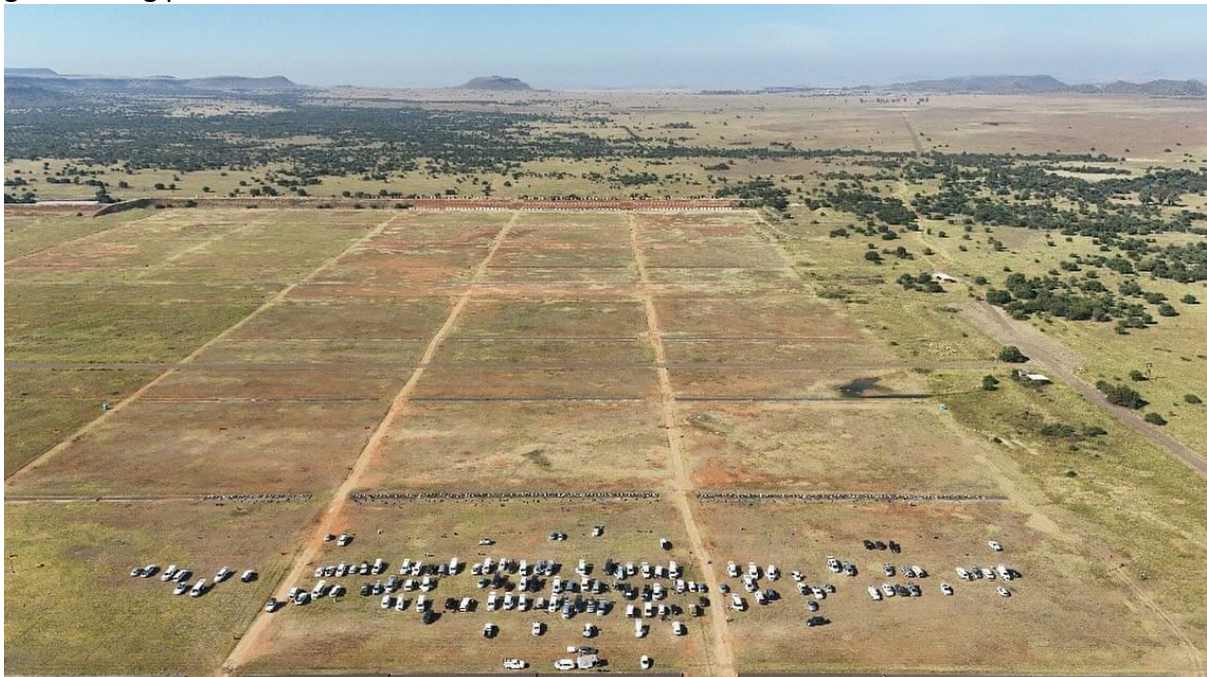
Our guides were Zulus, descendants of the original combatants (one's grandfather and great-grandfather had participated at Isandlwana). Consequently we received a different perspective than we might have gathered from Michael Caine. White stone cairns mark the site of mass graves of British troops buried where they fell at Isandlwana and who were annihilated almost to a man. Rorke's Drift is equally atmospheric, where the site is notable for its small size.



We then departed for Bloemfontein, a long drive starting with an hour on rough dirt roads dodging potholes and wildlife, happily with no flat tyres. We arrived at Shawu Lodge, a small hotel in the University area of the city occupied entirely by the Veterans and which was our base for the next three weeks.

Then a day to sort out our kit, reassemble rifles carefully packed for the long journey, and stock up our vehicles with supplies for days on the range. One problem with shooting tours is that you can't pack a sufficiency of anything, as kit takes precedence. So shops were visited for everything from sun protection, to range chairs, to toiletries, and even underwear. Our carefully made ammunition, tuned to each rifle, had been shipped out previously, and there were sighs of relief when it was delivered.

Shooting takes place on the General de Wet range, about a twenty minute drive from the hotel. Situated on a South African Army base, it is a wide open space, with little shade and very few facilities. Those facilities that existed were basic, and best avoided. But care had to be taken if venturing into the bush as there was a big increase in the Puff Adder population. The range is wide and starts from 300 metres (not yards!) going back to 900 metres. It can accommodate all the competitors in two details, shooting from reasonably comfortable gravel firing points.



We soon came face to face with what was to prove our biggest adversary: the heat. Day after day the ambient temperature in the shade was in the high 30s, and on the firing point obviously much hotter. At one point our NZ friends measured 55 deg C. I have visited this range three times previously and not encountered this relentless assault. Our South African hosts said this was very unusual, and were complaining too. With little shade in which to hide it became essential for performance to keep hydrated and maintain electrolytic balance. We were advised to follow the Australian advice to drink five litres of water, and at least one litre of electrolytes per day. This is actually quite hard to do, and personally I never exceeded four litres without feeling very uncomfortable. Sun protection was liberally applied to any exposed skin. If you were sitting by a pool with a drink to hand you might think it was very pleasant, but lying down in the sun dressed in a thick leather shooting jacket for up to an hour became quite dangerous. There were some casualties to heat stroke, but happily not within our team.



The shooting started with an introductory day, the Free State Provincial Championship. We were able to use this as an opportunity to confirm rifle zeroes, and to get used to the conditions on the range.

The range is commanded by Brigadier General Mac Alexander, a former South African Army officer, and a living legend. Ramrod straight, it is rare to encounter somebody who exudes such quiet natural authority, but combined with kindness and tolerance. He starts the day with a scripture reading and a prayer (in English rather than Afrikaans in deference to the visitors) and it is a sobering sight to see the range silent in contemplation with heads bowed and hats off.

Mornings are generally quite pleasant with light winds and cooler temperatures. However, as the sun rises in the sky and with it the mercury, the wind becomes increasingly thermal and tends to follow the sun. So a light left wind at 8am turns into a stronger wind by 11am, and comes from behind, fishtailing for a while before establishing into a right wind. The African mirage is so thick it can be detected with the naked eye, and is very helpful for detecting direction. But often the wind was different in different parts of the range, and anyway would quickly alter whilst on aim.

Interruptions for wildlife are not uncommon. Whilst the trajectory of the bullets is well over them, they block your sight picture. Wildebeest and Ostrich were frequent visitors, and as the range is a nature conservation site accidental dispatch would cause great distress.



The next seven days was the South African Bisley Union Meeting, the equivalent of our Imperial Meeting. A mixture of individual and team events, with up to four shoots each day. This became exhausting in the heat. Whilst JH and myself had our moments of glory we were both disappointingly inconsistent. Our foray into team shooting for the Vice-Presidents Cup resulted in an embarrassing defeat by the GB Under-25s, but perhaps not so bad as they later went on to become World Champions of their age group.

In the Republic of South Africa International match the GB Vets came third to South Africa and Australia. In the Tony Loughnan Memorial Match, GB Vets came second to Australia. Happily a GB Palma member Parag Patel won the SABU Championship, and was chaired from the range.



With the end of the SABU Meeting began the World Championships. These were all shot at long range, that is 700, 800 and 900 metres, and all on the punishingly tight International Confederation of Fullbore Rifle Associations (ICFRA) targets. A minor transgression which at home would cause you to drop to the inner (scoring 4 points) might take you easily into the magpie (3 points) or even worse the outer (2 points). With these fickle African winds it was not unusual to see targets “sawn in half” with shots left and right across the waterline, and with consequent scoring.

This meeting lasted for three days, with three shoots per day. At the end a shoot-off between the top ten resulted in GB member Glynn Barnet (a Greshamian, but a nice chap in spite) just pipped at the end by an Aussie.

With this concluded, most of the GB Veterans packed their gear and commenced the long journey home, no doubt relieved to return to log fires, drizzle, mist, and a more familiar climate. A rump stayed on to assist the main GB team in the Palma Match.

The Palma Match origins are lost in the mists of time, but probably started in 1874 (five years before the battle at Rorke’s Drift!) between USA and Ireland, but then extended to GB and to other nations. This match is the Blue Riband of our sport, and fired over two days at long range. GB was determined to win having lost Australia in 2019. This time it was nip and tuck until the very end, when Australia won by the merest margin of four points out of a total of 7,200. In the process both team and individual records were smashed, and already this match is being described as the most thrilling match of all time.

And so our tour finished. An epic adventure, probably not to be repeated as the next World Championships will be held at Bisley in 2028. Hopefully we both will be in consideration for the team, as long as we’re still upright.

Our grateful thanks go to our families for putting up with our repeated absences for long periods, to our chums in the Old Framlinghamian Rifle Club for their encouragement over the years, and indeed to the College for some financial support for our fabulous team brochure which can be found here: <https://gbrt.org.uk/tours/palma24/tour-information/brochure/>

We've come a long way since firing .303s on the range at Bromeswell under the tutelage of Mr Pritchard and Jack Meynell, but they started a love of a sport that has lasted for over fifty years, and for that we owe them a great deal. It is encouraging to see shooting starting to make a resurgence at the College after some years absence, and we hope to help that continue.