

Land, sea... & AIR-GUN!

Teaching youngsters proper airgun handling is a vital part in securing the sport's future – and the uniformed Cadet Forces is an oft-overlooked avenue of shooting tuition. **Neil Hallam** steps off Civvy Street to see how such programmes work...

With a history that spans more than 150 years, the Cadets pre-date even the Scouts as a youth organisation. There are separate branches for land, sea and air – even a Marines Cadet Force – and it's open to anyone. Since 1982, women have been allowed entry into the organisations, too, and with airgun shooting high on the programme, the Cadets offer a truly universal route into the sport.

They're not small scale operations, either. The Army Cadet Force (ACF) alone has over 47,000 members across the country, while the Air Training Corps (ATC) is of a comparable size, boasting 40,000 Cadets. No fewer than 257 schools and colleges have a Combined Cadet Force (CCF), where students can learn military skills alongside their regular academic studies.

All Cadets have the opportunity to shoot under the supervision of instructors who have been trained by the regular forces and research from 2010 shows that 81 per cent of Cadets were attracted to join by, guess what? Yes – the shooting side of the organisation!

While airguns are high on the agenda, shooting them in the Cadets can branch off in different directions. The Army Cadets, for instance, see airguns as the first stage towards becoming proficient in smallbore and fullbore gun handling in a programme they call 'Skill at Arms'. Yet the Air Cadets have embraced the more formal Sporter Air Rifle discipline as their specialist focus.

ARMY CADETS

I was invited to the Chetwyn Barracks in Nottinghamshire, where a group of Army Cadets, from Mercian Regiment and Royal Artillery Units based in north Nottinghamshire, were taking part in a training camp.

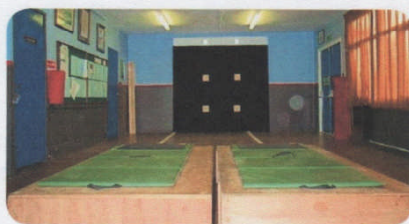
Captain Kate Steventon explained that many of the army's shooting facilities are designed for fullbore guns, which are used by regular army recruits. As these are obviously too long for airgun shooting, the Cadets have built a portable range that's housed inside a 12 x 12-foot Army tent,

which can easily be moved around the units as necessary.

When I oversaw them shooting, the Cadets were using rather aging, underlever springers which, in their words, were "old fashioned" and "wonky"! However, from what I also witnessed, despite their hardware presenting challenges such as setting the zero, the Cadets were still able to shoot them in a very proficient manner. Indeed, they demonstrated an adeptness at adjusting their aim point based on their first shot. Since my visit, I hear they've taken delivery of 12 BSA Cadet Scorpion air rifles – something they were eagerly looking forward to when I spoke to them.

Main image: A cadet shoots in the prone position during the inter-cadet tournament in Barbados

Below: A portable air rifle range allows cadets to practise shooting in a number of locations



SPAR

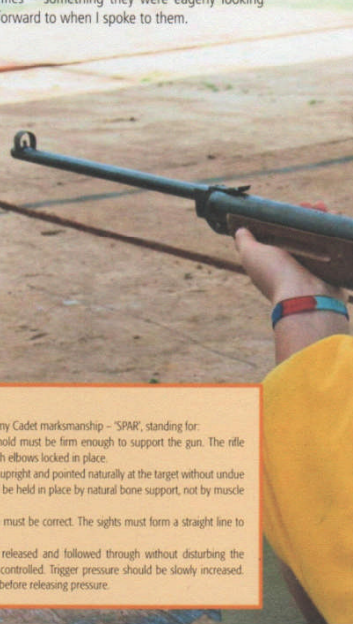
There are four principles of Army Cadet marksmanship – 'SPAR', standing for:

SUPPORT: The position and hold must be firm enough to support the gun. The rifle should be firmly supported with elbows locked in place.

POINT: The gun must be held upright and pointed naturally at the target without undue physical effort. The rifle should be held in place by natural bone support, not by muscle tension.

AIM: Sight alignment (aiming) must be correct. The sights must form a straight line to the target.

RELEASE: The shot must be released and followed through without disturbing the position. Breathing should be controlled. Trigger pressure should be slowly increased. Pause momentarily after firing before releasing pressure.





FEATURE: CADETS

Left: The Nottinghamshire army cadets display the trophies they won in Barbados

Below: Sergeant Mike Archer delivers instructions to his Sea and Marine Cadets

The Army Cadets' training programme is based around four key tenets, made memorable by the helpful acronym 'SPAR'. This stands for: Support, Point, Aim and Release (see panel below).

The cadets experience shooting in competition situations, with regular inter-detachment shooting matches. Three of the Cadets I met – Sergeant Jonathan Stoner, Corporal Daniel Wheat (the top individual shot at the inter-detachment contest I witnessed) and Cadet Ellie Morrell – were part of a 16-strong UK team that had recently returned from Barbados, where they competed against Cadets from the host nation, Trinidad and Tobago, the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent.

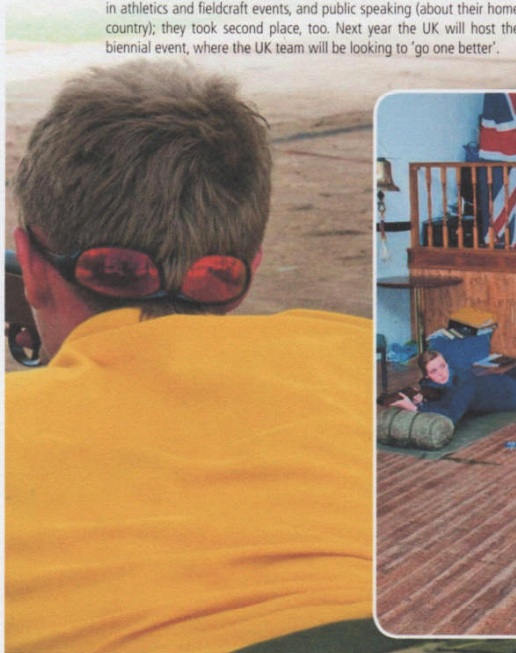
As well as airgun shooting over a 10-metre range, the Cadets competed in athletics and fieldcraft events, and public speaking (about their home country); they took second place, too. Next year the UK will host the biennial event, where the UK team will be looking to 'go one better'.

As their standard of shooting improves, the Cadets move onto smallbore and fullbore rifles, starting with .22 rimfire before graduating to handling the SA80 assault rifle at 100, 200 and 300 metres. The best will later progress to target rifles, shooting at targets set at distances of 600 and 1,000 metres.

SEA CADETS

I was taken to the Mansfield Marines Cadets' detachment and met up with Sergeant Mike Archer, a Royal Marine for nine years before volunteering his time to the Sea Cadets. He'd only recently taken charge of this detachment and, upon his arrival, he discovered that the air rifles hadn't been used for two years. When he showed me what was in the air rifle armoury, let's just say they were of a 'significant vintage'.

In Cadet units, adults take the senior instructing roles, but are assisted by the older generation of Cadets – and Mike was supported in his airgun



FEATURE: CADETS

**SQUADRON LEADER
DAVE SIMPSON MBE**

More than any other single person, Dave Simpson (right) deserves credit for bringing airgun shooting to the Air Training Corps (ATC). His efforts earned him an NSRA Special Service Award, recognising his outstanding service to shooting sports. Now retired, Dave was the National Range Inspecting officer for the ATC, a position he took after leaving the Army in the mid-1990s.

Recognising the difficulties in running fullbore shooting for Cadets, he began their move to airguns. As well as improving existing facilities, Dave designed his 'self help' airgun range to help Cadets access shooting more easily. This was a range that could be easily constructed within an Air Cadet HQ for around £250. He even obtained grants for any unit wanting to build his range.

Dave was instrumental in leading the Cadets towards the 'Sporter discipline, too, beginning with postal competitions shot at two- (prone and kneeling) and three-position (standing, prone and kneeling). Around 70 teams take part each year. Despite ATC progression to larger, live competitions, Dave's postal competitions remain a popular part of ATC shooting and he continues to oversee these competitions.

Dave also negotiated a deal with British manufacturer BSA to provide a modified version of their Meteor air rifle. This allowed standardisation of equipment and training across all ATC units.

Under Dave's guidance many Air Cadets have gone onto national competition, with two of his students going on to become British 3P Sporter champions and gaining Great Britain records.



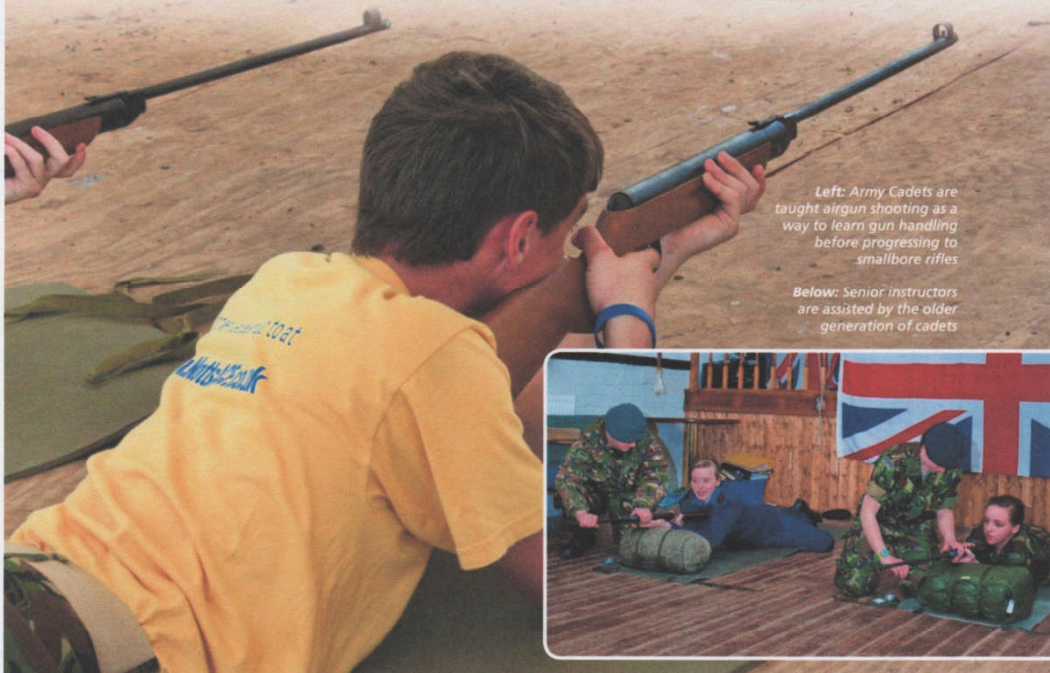
session by Marines Cadet Sergeant Amanda Clifton and Air Cadet Flight Sergeant Mayan Goddard. Mayan was benefiting from Mike's airgun shooting and combat skills programme in his ambition to become a pilot, and spending 12 months with the Marines Cadets to help him join the Army Air Corps.

The session, which contained a mix of Sea and Marines Cadets, began with a safety briefing and a lecture on marksmanship principles. Once this had concluded, the Cadets moved to the Drill Hall where Amanda and Mayan had set up a 10-metre range. The cadets then took turns shooting at target cards, working towards their Marksmanship Badge.

Mike was particularly proud to tell me that, next summer, his region's Cadets would be awarded a Royal Marines Standard and the right to call themselves Royal Marines Cadets.

THE FUTURE

Many of the Cadets activities are made possible by Ministry of Defence (MoD) sponsorship. Uniforms and the use of military sites are provided free of charge. However, there is no expectation that Cadets will go on to join the adult forces. Many former Cadets have gone onto distinguished military service, though, including SAS-trooper-turned-author, Chris Ryan. But many others have taken skills learned at Cadets into other walks of life, like the late Sir Jimmy Saville, Olympic Gold medallist Linford Christie and actor Richard Burton to name three disparate, former Cadets. ●



Left: Army Cadets are taught airgun shooting as a way to learn gun handling before progressing to smallbore rifles

Below: Senior instructors are assisted by the older generation of cadets