

CLASSIC RIFLES: The Pre-19

“The Rifleman’s Rifle”



By John Marshall

U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock was in his element. The place was Hill 55, overlooking the place the leathernecks had nicknamed “Elephant Valley” in Vietnam, not far from DaNang. Hathcock had been waiting patiently for this moment, hidden camouflaged in thick jungle growth for many hours with his companion spotter. Below him at some distance, a column of North Vietnamese Army soldiers was route stepping carefully through drying rice fields. NVA officers and non-commissioned officers routinely carried pistols as symbols of their authority, a fact not lost on the two Americans in evaluating their targets. Hathcock’s grease-painted face broadened into a smile as his spotter noted the pistol-toters at the head of the column. He turned to his helper and said “I’m gonna shoot the one on the far right.”

Hathcock’s rifle that day was a classic pre-1964 Winchester Model 70. It was match conditioned, chambered for the .30-06 Springfield cartridge and equipped with a carefully crafted Unertl telescopic sight. The glass-bedded Monte Carlo-style stock was fastened to the receiver with precisely torqued screws. The barrel was free floated, allowing it to flex uniformly from shot to shot. It was the perfect instrument for the job in Hathcock’s hands. A sniper’s motto is “One shot, one kill,” and the “gunny” focused his crosshairs carefully on the NVA leader to achieve that goal. He breathed in and out, and then held his breath briefly for stability as he gently pressed the trigger. The rifle barked. A quick manipulation of the bolt chambered another round, and a second carefully aimed shot bore home on another NVA soldier wearing a pistol. Two enemy officers were decked, counted among Hathcock’s 93 confirmed kills in Vietnam.

The rifle he chose for his grim assignment was called “the rifleman’s rifle.” The pre-1964 Winchester Model 70 has long been noted by many experts as perhaps the best bolt-action hunting rifle ever made. Its predecessor was the Model 54, which

was produced from 1925 to 1936. This was a fine bolt-action rifle, but the bolt, safety and stock were not designed for the use of telescopic sights.

The much-improved prototype Model 70s were first produced in 1935. Although 19 rifles were manufactured in that year, none left the factory. In 1936, the first production guns were warehoused (through serial number 2,238). In 1937, these were cataloged and sales began. The Model 70 continued many of the features of the Model 54 including the 1903 Springfield-type coned barrel breech, the dual front locking lugs, the receiver-mounted ejector, and the Mauser-style non-rotating extractor, which gave controlled cartridge feeding. A gas port was placed on the right side of the receiver ring, allowing gas from a possible punctured primer to escape without being directed to the shooter’s face. The military-type wing safety of the Model 54 was scrapped and replaced with a bolt-sleeve safety working in the horizontal plane, allowing mounting of scope sights. The stamped one-piece trigger guard/floorplate of the preceding rifle was abandoned for one with a milled trigger guard and a hinged floorplate incorporating a plunger release. The bolt sleeve was re-contoured to a more attractive contour. While the Model 54 had a trigger-actuated bolt release, the Model 70 had a receiver-mounted bolt stop separate from the trigger. Finally, the new trigger mechanism, which was no longer encumbered by also being a bolt stop, was simple and easily adjustable by the user for weight of pull and for overtravel.

From 1937 until 1964, the Model 70 went through a number of cosmetic and mechanical changes. The original thumbpiece safety (which entered the field of vision when in the safe position) was modified with a transitional and later perfected thumbpiece. These latter two safeties operated on the right side of the bolt sleeve and operated silently with three positions – fire, safe with bolt manipulation possible, and safe with a locked bolt. This arrangement has been widely copied on custom and prestige rifles today. The shape of the