

MEXICO JOURNEY

by Barry Downs

Despite the pessimism of the pilot who claimed that QUANTAS had never flown directly from Honolulu to Mexico before, our plane landed on schedule at the Mexico City airport.

There we saw a gaily painted new terminal for Olympic teams decorated with Olympic flags and sports emblems. We were handed small flags by young black haired Mexican señoritas and mariachis played and sang as we waited for our buses. The people we passed in the traffic vigorously waved and smiled at us. This we were to find was one of the most impressive characteristics of Mexico — the genuine friendliness of the Mexicans coupled with their fierce nationalistic pride.

We travelled along modern freeways to the Villa Olimpica situated well out from the city, and were installed in one of the thirty odd nine storey brick buildings which housed the seven thousand athletes. About fourteen of us slept in one of the apartments composed of five rooms and three bathrooms.

Range Incomplete

We were dismayed to hear at this time that the new two million dollar Olympic range was not completed and that for four weeks we would not be able to use it. In the meantime another alternative range was offered to us.

After a day's acclimatising, and living on the fifth floor of our building with the lifts out of order, soon showed us the effects of altitude, we began to practice on the alternative range. It was situated twenty-eight kilometers from the village along what must be the longest street in the world — Insurgentes. It took just over an hour through the thick traffic and

smog of Mexico City to reach the range by which time we seldom felt like shooting.

Built of cement and stone with partitions between shooters and with pit marking (for 25 metre, 50 metre, and 300 metre shooting), little wind and good lighting — I found it ideal.

A problem then presented itself to us. Never had we been presented with such an opportunity to shoot. How to practice — as at home twice a week, or every day? And how many shots to shoot, — half a course, a full course or more? In the end I decided to shoot two days out of three and a full course each time unless there were problems and then one and a half or two courses. In retrospect I think this was the best programme.

Each Olympic sport had its own organisers who were responsible for practice times and transport, and our two girls Patricia and Esmeralda did a very good job. At the range we were considerably aided by young Mexican university students, particularly Alejandro and Antonio, who interpreted for us. All the Mexican range officials went out of their way to help us, and on several occasions took us sightseeing in their own time, up to one hundred miles from the city.

First There

We were one of the first teams to arrive and shortly after us came the Russians. Alex Taransky's ability to speak Russian then began to open doors for us. Once the Russians found we were interested in them non-politically they became very friendly. We were able to compare shooting programmes with Stoly-pin in free pistol and Suleimanov in rapid fire shooting and found the answers to all our

shooting problems in the extraordinary person of Haidurov. Haidurov was the pistol coach of his team, a very able shot himself, designer of the TOZ 35, maker of the Russian team's rapid fire pistol, and a very neat, polite, and gentlemanly intellectual. He has advanced my shooting considerably with his advice, which was always complete and freely given. To a lesser extent we were able to do the same with the Americans who were also kind enough to offer the services of their gunsmith Lew to us at any time. Frank Green, silver medal winner in Free Pistol in Tokyo Olympics, designed and made the Free Pistol used by Vitarbo and Hamilton. He made five of these pistols with bolt actions, electric triggers, variable trigger position and trigger pressure, and variable position of the barrel on the grip. Vitarbo later shot 575 with this gun in practice.

The whole shooting fraternity was easy to get on with, in my case particularly the Canadians, English and Luxembourg's single entry. We were pleased to see from our own country Bob Morgan, Rita and George Rogers, who were taking endless rolls of movie film to make a documentary for the APSUA, and our international referee Peter Garrett.

Our Manager Don Lyall was always on hand to act as a buffer between us and any of the irritations that always arise with range procedures in other countries. At this stage I would like to state that there was never any friction between the members of the Australian team even though we lived in the same room for over six weeks. I would personally be happy to go in the same team again anywhere.

I found my scores were creeping up on the practice range once the daily smog came out of my lungs and on the last three days on this range my scores were 562, 562, 569, and my average of all courses was 555.5. Then we transferred to the new Olympic range. It was

not quite so far away and there was no smog to go through, but it was entirely different. No partitions between shooters resulting in wide open glare, targets below average height, baffles overhead were just a few of the things that struck me. We had only five practice days on this range before our event and on only one of these days was I allocated the early morning period that coincided with the time at which we were to compete. In an effort to overcome this I began shooting more. My best score then was 558, but as it included 2x96 and 1x98 I considered it just a lucky one. I shot 1½ courses the day before the competition which would not normally have been wise, and with the poor lighting on the line almost decided to shoot the match with open sights, but it was too late to change. The mirror sight was a little better on the day of the competition but the best I could manage was 541, my lowest score there. Another lesson in this school of international shooting. This was disappointing, but was not confined to me as I saw looking at the scores of Stolypin, Denev, Yoshikawa, Hamilton and to some extent Vitarbo. I hope that since then with the help of Haidurov I have found the answer to some of the problems.

The equipment used on the Olympic range was very sophisticated. This I would expect to cut down considerably the number of pit staff required. The army staffed the range, which included all the shooting competitions — rifle, pistol, and shotgun, and total personnel numbered 1,000 men and 110 officers.

The altitude did little to directly effect our shooting. Our aiming times were not noticeably decreased, and we did not have to try to shoot more quickly. I did not find I had to wait longer between shots, but I did find a tendency to fatigue easier during a difficult course. Stolypin was holding over 10 seconds, and Vitarbo claimed to hold 20-30 seconds, and made no concessions to the altitude.

As far as I could tell most Free Pistols were

Vostoks or Hammerlis, except the Americans. One shooter had an extended foresight on his Hammerli, and there was one other mirror sight besides mine. A couple of interesting features were that one of the Swiss team was using a Vostok, and the Free Pistol Gold Medalist at Tokyo was this year unable to make the Finnish team.

Ammunition varied, the winning Russian (562) used R50, the Americans Remington, and everyone agreed that Eley Tenex was the most accurate. I used Winchester Xpert made in Australia.

Meals at the village were good. There were twelve dining rooms to cope with the different food needs of 115 countries, and food was available from 6.30 a.m. until midnight. The Mexicans showed a reluctance to cook the food as much as we do, but the variety available made it easy to obviate this discrepancy. It was nevertheless not like being at home.

The shooting team finished the games satisfied with their results. While the competition scores could have been better, the practice scores and the approach we developed towards shooting, combined with the knowledge obtained from more experienced people from other countries made this trip well worth while. Our Rapid Fire and Free Pistol practice scores exceeded the Olympic and World rec-

ords, and it is now our hope that we can consolidate all we have learnt. If so, the time is approaching when Australia will have a reasonable chance amongst the best in the world, despite our amateurism and our isolation.

I have deliberately refrained from commenting on the technical side of Rapid Fire shooting as I know Alex Taransky can do this far better than I can. As I have already stated Alex shaped up very well to his first international shooting match, more so than anyone could reasonably have expected. His natural ability plus the close association he had with the Russians and with Josef Zapodski, who won the match, make it very unlikely that any overseas team for the next twelve years will not include Alex.

As a Rapid Fire Shooter in a foreign country in his first international competition without the company of any other Rapid Fire Shooter in his team and with no coach he was in a most unenviable position. If you want to get the most you can from an overseas trip, emulate Alex Taransky.

Both Alex and myself were very pleased to have Don Tolhurst in the team competing in his fourth Olympic Games, and I hope he goes to many more. And finally my thanks to Don Lyall for undertaking the unrewarding job of team manager and being able to satisfy three different personalities.

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