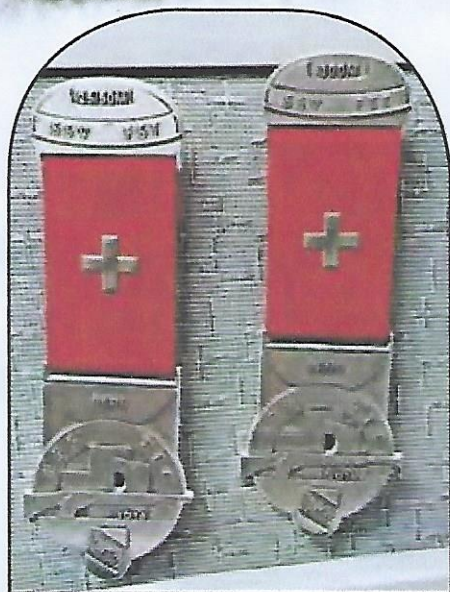


# AN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIR

Reed Hubbell

*For centuries, every able-bodied Swiss man has taken part in the tiny nation's militia, helping to preserve Switzerland's sovereignty and neutrality. Annual marksmanship qualifications are part of this martial tradition. Reed got to try his hand with a Stgw. 90 (SIG 550), making all of us readers very jealous!*

## Participating in the Annual Swiss Military Marksmanship Trials



**Reed's two kranzauszeichnungen: 25-meter pistol on the left and 300-meter rifle on the right.**

**S**ituated at the Alpine crossroads, serving for centuries as the gateway to Western Europe, the small nation of Switzerland has a long history of neutrality and careful national defense. Even today, the key martial tradition of Switzerland lives on, in which each able-bodied man takes part in mandatory military training, storing his service rifle at home to guard against invasion. This tradition has allowed neutral Switzerland to guarantee its sovereignty, deterring invasion through both World Wars with its large force of well-armed and well-trained militia reservists. Key to this militia system is a long tradition of excellent marksmanship, aided largely by a Swiss firearms industry responsible for centuries of durable, reliable and superbly accurate firearms. In order to maintain their famous marksmanship skills, the Swiss militias convene once a year for marksmanship qualification trials to ensure each militiaman is meeting expectations.

As a dual citizen of the US and Switzerland, I had the rare opportunity to participate in these trials. I was visiting family in Switzerland following my college graduation with my younger brother, Jake, just before I began my career as an engineer at

SIG SAUER. Thanks to the fastidious arrangements of my Swiss grandfather, Werner; my great-uncle, Ernst; and their friend, Erich; we were able to fire the venerable and accurate SIG P210 pistol and the 550 series assault rifle through the full qualification



Reed's brother, Jake, preparing to fire at the 300-meter silhouette target. Note the electronic scorekeeping screen to his right.

sequence of the Swiss militia reserves, alongside Swiss militiamen in the Canton (state) of Bern.

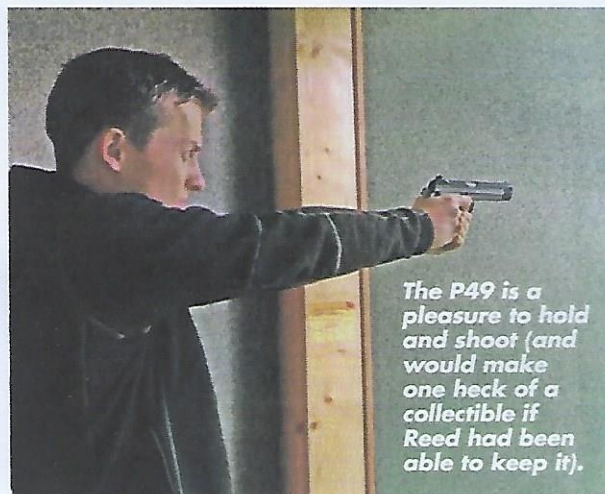
### Wringing Out The P210

We convened on the rainy morning of May 29, 2016, and drove to the pistol range, a set of sturdy concrete buildings with covered bays. A series of retro pistol diagrams in German, French and Italian covered the bulletin boards, along with information about national shooting competitions. The facility was equipped with two ranges: A 50-meter course with electronic scoring displayed on very "old-school cool" CRT monitors, while the 25-meter course used retrievable targets on pulley-mounted cables. Our course of fire was the 25-meter *pistolenfeld-schiessen*, involving 18 rounds fired in four segments at a roughly torso-sized oval bull's-eye target. The bull's-eye was worth 10 points, graduated down to 6 points at the target's edge. The first segment was *einzelfeuer* (single fire), consisting of 3 shots fired with a time allowance of 20 seconds per shot. The remaining three segments were *schnellfeuer* (fast fire), with 5 shots fired in time allotments of 50, 40 and then 30 seconds each. This allowed for a maximum score of 180 points. The goal was a silver, red and white *kranzauszeichnung* (medal), which signifies *feldschiessen* (field shooting) qualification. A *kranzauszeichnung* required 159 points, while an *anererkennungskarte* (honorable mention) could be earned with 153 points. Qualification scores were slightly reduced for young men under 21 years of age and seniors aged 60 or older.

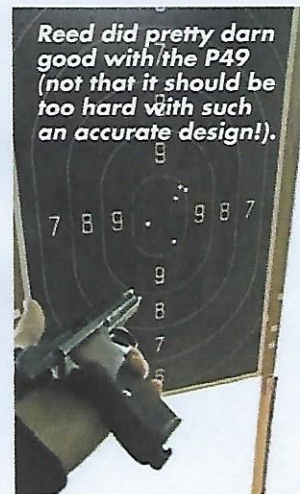
My brother and I hadn't brought our own firearms across the pond from the United States, so my grandfather's



The Swiss P49 (SIG P210) Reed fired for the qualification.



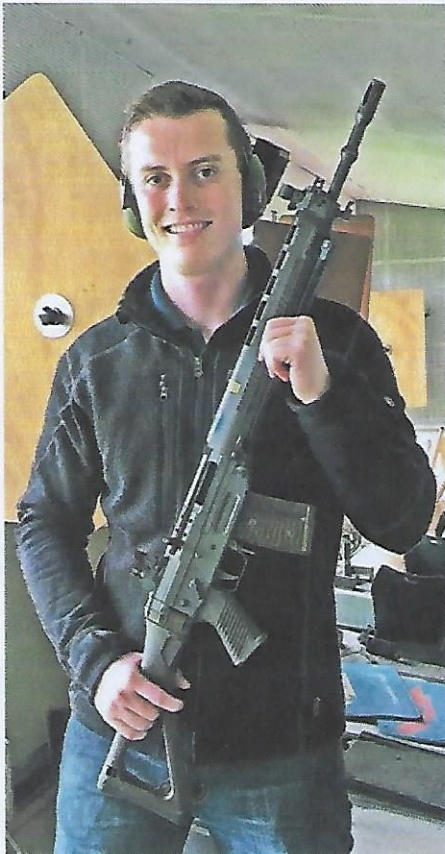
The P49 is a pleasure to hold and shoot (and would make one heck of a collectible if Reed had been able to keep it).



Reed did pretty darn good with the P49 (not that it should be too hard with such an accurate design!).



Erich helps Jake adjust his aim (above left). The electronic scoring device shows each impact as a small white circle on the target diagram. The scoring apparatus for the 50-meter pistolenfeldschiessen course (above right). The 25-meter course used pulley-mounted, retrievable targets of the type commonly seen in the United States. Reed's "personal" rifle for the event — a real-deal Stgw. 90 (SIG 550) assault rifle (left).



friend Erich produced two leather-clad items from his personal range bag and handed them to us. Inside were two treasures, prized on the US market for their legendary accuracy and build quality. I stepped up to the firing line, opened the flap on my holster and withdrew a deeply blued and shining slab of precision-machined steel. It was a Swiss P49, the military version of the famous 9mm SIG P210, adopted as the Swiss Army's standard sidearm in 1949. Unlike a commercial P210, this P49 bore the Swiss cross and shield engraved atop its slide, just forward of the rear sight. The slim pistol wore checkered wooden grips, a European-style heel-mounted magazine release, and sported an 8-round, single-stack magazine.

After a range briefing, we stepped up to the firing line, locked and loaded our pistols and began the course of fire. The pistol shot like a dream. It pointed naturally, recoiled lightly and

the crisp, light trigger broke like one on a precision, multi-thousand-dollar bolt gun. The all-black steel sights were well made, with a fine, almost target-style front post. I found myself easily outpacing the allotted time limits and still landing all "10's" and "9's." This trend continued through *einzelfeuer* into the *schnellfeuer* stages.

I had a hiccup in the last string of *schnellfeuer*. As I sped up the firing sequence, I "rode the reset" like I tend to do with my personal P226. Unfortunately, the extremely light, short trigger of the P49 was not very compatible with this technique. As the pistol cycled in my hand and I tensed my trigger finger, I let loose an unintentional double tap. Thankfully both rounds went safely down range, with the second missing low. Beside a bit of personal embarrassment, no one was the worse for wear, and I finished the course of fire. Despite one complete miss I still scored 166 points and passed within a comfortable margin, earning the pistol *kranz*. My younger brother also fared well, scoring 163 and earning a *kranz*.

### Shooting A Rare Classic

Following the pistol qualification, we hopped in the car and headed to another location for the rifle range. We arrived to the crack of gunshots and a clearing sky. The range consisted of a number of neat, sturdy buildings and 300 yards of gently sloping hillside terminating in about a dozen target bays. For this qualification, each target consisted of a small, dark torso-shaped silhouette on a camouflage background. Three generations of Swiss militiamen lay prone in shooting bays, peering through peep sights and carefully unleashing precise rifle fire. The oldest participants fired straight-pull



Reed's scorecards. The qualification score for rifles was 57, but all of his hits struck within the silhouette, qualifying for a kranz. His qualification score for pistols was 159.



**Jake, Werner and Ernst enjoying the traditional post-feldschiessen meal of bratwurst and bread.**



7.5mm Schmidt-Rubin K31's while the next generation fired the oddly shaped but superbly accurate SIG 510/Stgw. 57 battle rifle. The youngest fired current-issue 5.56x45 mm SIG 550/Stgw. 90 rifles.

The rifle course consisted of a zeroing round, followed by three rounds of 6 shots each. The first, *einzelfeuer* (single fire), allowed a full minute per shot, or 6 minutes total. This was followed by *kurzfeuer* (short fire), which consisted of two, 3-round sessions, allowing 60 seconds per session. Last was *schnellfeuer* (fast fire), which allowed 60 seconds for the final 6 shots. Scoring consisted of 4 points for a center mass hit, 3 points for a hit on the silhouette around center mass, 2 points for a near miss and 1 point for a miss in the general vicinity of the silhouette, while still striking the "background" portion of the target. This made for a maximum possible score of 72 points. A score of 57 points was the general baseline for the qualifying *kranzauszeichnung*, while 55 points were required for an *anerkennungskarte*. Additionally, a *kranz* could be earned on a technicality if one scored below 57 points but landed all shots within the silhouette target (meaning a baseline of 54 if all shots were at least 3-point hits).

After another range briefing, a SIG 550 was pulled from the range's armory, and Erich began familiarizing my brother with the rifle. Adopted in 1990 by the Swiss military as the Stgw. 90, the SIG 550 is a 5.56x45mm assault rifle based on a thorough evolution of the AK-47 platform, similar to the Israeli Galil or the Swedish AK-4. This rifle has a well-known reputation for excellent accuracy and, following the Swiss doctrine preferring accurate rifle fire to suppressing rapid fire, is issued with 20-round magazines and an integral folding bipod. Settling down

with the rifle in a prone position, Jake began the course of fire with a five-shot sight-in session and then proceeded to shoot for score. Shooting an unfamiliar rifle with sights initially calibrated for another shooter's eye was a bit difficult, but Jake still finished with a score of 56, earning a *kranz* by surpassing the 55-point baseline for shooters 17 to 20 years in age.

Next, it was my turn. I settled in prone behind the 550 and quickly gained an appreciation for how far 300 meters feels when using iron sights. I grew up elk hunting in Colorado, and always had the luxury of a magnified optic for longer shots like this. This time, though, I had a thoroughly military peep sight setup: a sturdy but fairly fat front post, with a circular rear peep mounted in a rotating drum rear sight (very similar to an HK MP5). At this distance, the front post was nearly as wide as the silhouette's shoulders! Despite the bulk of the sights, the integral bipod created a sturdy rest for the rifle and I began the 5-round zeroing cycle. I found the trigger to be light and crisp for a service rifle, much superior to a mil-spec AR-15 trigger. I focused carefully on a consistent sight picture, working to align the center of the top plane of the front sight post with the center mass of the silhouette, and was rewarded with good hits on the scoring screen. Next, it was time to shoot for a score.

With the start of *einzelfeuer*, I found 6 minutes for 6 shots to be more time than I could make valuable use of. I paced myself carefully, controlling breathing and squeezing the trigger when my sights aligned just how I wanted them. This took a couple of minutes, and each shot landed within the silhouette. Next, for *kurzfeuer*, I continued at a similar pace, firing 6 shots within 2 minutes and hitting con-

sistently as well. However, my shots were grouping in the left half of the silhouette, earning more 3-point hits than 4 pointers. Instead of trying to adjust fire I instead opted to keep focusing on center mass for *kurzfeuer*, aiming to improve my consistency. Firing 6 shots in 60 seconds, however, proved to be a game of pulling the trigger as soon as the sight picture aligned on the target, and I was not able to make a significant improvement over the previous round. As I cleared the weapon and stood up, I learned my score: 56 points. I was just 1 point shy of the 57-point benchmark! However, I had a saving grace — each shot hit within the silhouette, with no misses. I qualified for a *kranz* on a technicality, just by the skin of my teeth!

## Wrapping Up

We left the firing area, but Jake and I soon discovered as with many Swiss shooting ranges, this facility included a simple restaurant. Participants in the marksmanship trials earn a free bratwurst with mustard and a generous chunk of fresh-baked bread. We sat down with Werner, Ernst and Erich and enjoyed our meal with some Swiss beer. These men were an absolute pleasure to shoot with, and I'm thankful for their help in allowing my brother and me to gain an insight into Swiss firearm culture.

Shooting with the Swiss was an exciting and fascinating look into another country's firearm culture and practices. I gained a newfound respect for the precision maintained by Swiss riflemen using standard-issue iron sights, and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know two famous military firearms, the SIG P210 and 550. I was also able to return to the United States with two *kranz* medals, which I now display at my desk as a unique conversation piece. 🗡️



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