

Fort Knox major's rifle skills earn military honors

By Ally Rogers, Turret Sports Editor

FORT KNOX, Ky. - Setting a West Point air rifle record was just the beginning of a long list of shooting accomplishments compiled by Maj. David Cloft of the U.S. Army Accessions Command.



Cloft began shooting competitively at age 10, beginning with a 4-H junior shooting program in his hometown of Alpena, Mich., shortly after completing a hunter's safety course, which he took so he'd be able to go hunting with his father.

"My father was an avid hunter and I wanted to join him. However, he made me take a hunter's safety course first," said Cloft. "At the end of the course we were required to go to the shooting range, where I first realized that shooting was a sport, just like Little League baseball. (So) I joined a 4-H junior shooting program; it was something that I was naturally good at. (Shooting) became my sport and my passion."

In high school his main goal was to earn an NCAA scholarship for shooting, but his longtime plan to join the Army made the decision to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., an easy one.

"My dad served in Vietnam as an artilleryman for four years, and my grandfather served as a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne during the Battle of the Bulge during WW II. It was expected that I, too, would serve at least an initial enlistment in the Army; it's sort of a family tradition," he said.

"In seventh grade, we had a cadet from West Point visit my junior high school and give a presentation. After that I never looked back and decided that West Point was where I wanted to go to school."

Before graduating in 1997, Cloft set an academy record, of 390 hits out of 400 attempts in an air rifle event. He soon found himself serving in Germany, but missing his sport. So he joined the Buedingen shooting club. In 1999 and 2000 he was knighted by Princess Elizabeth von Ysenburg for winning Schutzenfest, a German marksmanship festival and competition. Cloft also set, and still holds, the Hessen state record after hitting 397 out of 400 in an air rifle event.

"After I returned to the U.S. for the (Fort Knox) Armor Captains Career Course, I set goals to win local and state competitions. So far I've won state championships in every place I've been stationed stateside," said Cloft.

"I won the Virginia state championships twice (2001, 2006), the Colorado state championship (2002), and most recently the Kentucky state championships (twice in 2008). I've also set eight national records, won four national championships as part of teams, and obtained my Army Distinguished Rifleman Badge."

Competing with a .22-caliber smallbore rifle in prone and three position, .177-caliber air rifle, highpower (M-16/AR-15), and long range (.308) rifle competitions, Cloft said his favorite competition, is smallbore prone because it is "probably the most demanding and hardest competition and it also allows me to train for all the other shooting disciplines."

In order for Cloft to be the best shooter he can be, he participates in at least 30 competitions each year, and during the summer enters into a rigid training regime. His schedule consists of shooting three times per week. Most of his training is dry firing using a simulator called a SCATT. But he tries to include real bullets in training and incorporates them for about a third of his training.

"In 2007, when I finished fifth in the country during the President's Match, I shot in matches every weekend from Easter until after the Nationals in August," said Cloft. "I fired over 8,000 real bullets that summer, and probably twice that amount in dry firing."

Participating in the President's Matches is an honor; more than 1,300 people compete each year. The top 100 scoring military and civilian shooters in the President's Pistol and President's Rifle Matches are awarded the President's Hundred Tab, one of the highest shooting honors. Military competitors wear it like a Ranger Tab on their uniforms. Cloft has been awarded the tab twice.

With all his shooting expertise, why isn't he shooting with the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit of Fort Benning, Ga., or in the Olympics?

"When I was younger, the Olympic Games were a goal until I realized I'd have to choose between a career in the Army and being a full-time shooter," he said. "I shot for the AMU for one summer in 2004. While I'd love to just shoot full time, and I respect those who can do that at the AMU, I know that as an officer I must focus on other jobs in the Army."

Instead of continuing with the USAMU, Cloft was selected in 2005 for the Army Reserve Shooting Team and enjoys the time he is able to "get dirty" and go to the range to shoot with his teammates.

"(Now) my goal is to assist my team in winning the 2009 National Championships. We won the NRA National Championships in 2007, and I feel we have a strong team for this upcoming season," he said. "With some training we can beat the Army Marksmanship Unit, the U.S. Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard shooting teams at Interservice and National Competitions. I also want to make the 'cut' to be on the 2011 U.S. Palma Team, which will travel to Australia for the World Championship."

Aside from the Army and shooting, Cloft takes time for his family -- his wife Maj. Susan Orcutt-Cloft, and his two boys Zachary, 1, and Tyler, 3.

Tyler says he wants to go shooting with "daddy," and when Cloft's boys are old enough he hopes they will want to go shoot with him, just like he did with his father.

"Some of the best memories with my dad are on the rifle range," said Cloft.

(The mission of the USAMU is to raise the standard of marksmanship proficiency and combat readiness throughout the Army by sharing knowledge gained from competing and winning in national/ international competitions, research and development and advanced training programs while enhancing the Army's recruiting effort through an active public information and public relations program. For more information on the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit, contact the Public Affairs Office at (706) 545-5436, Paula.Randall@usaac.army.mil or www.USAMU.com.) Photo by Paula J. Randall, U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit