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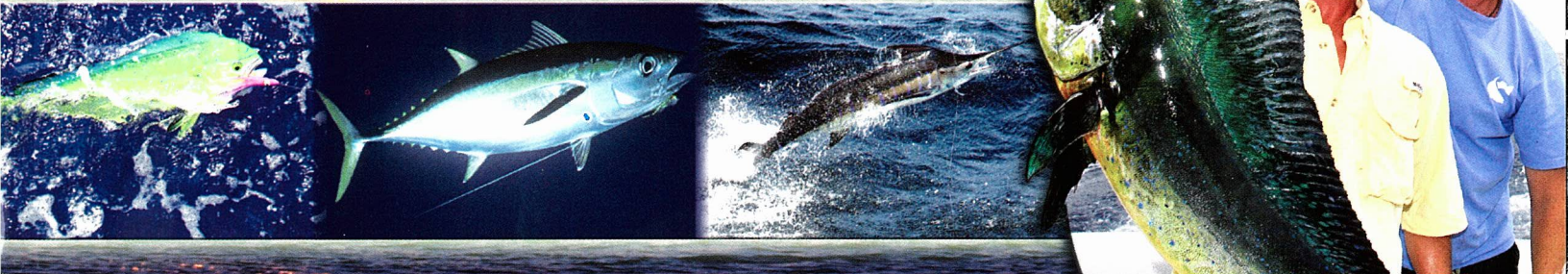
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COLUMN

What tales it could tell. OUR By Stephen Ramirez SPRINGFIELD RIFLE

I remember it distantly—yet just as if it were today—when I sat high upon a wooden stool, milk and cookies on the homemade workbench, feet dangling as my dad worked on our Springfield rifle. The dim light in our cold garage added to the mystery, and I watched as Dad carved and sanded the walnut tree's heart into the smooth, rich, brown stock of our Springfield. The grain of the wood told the story of the tree. In time each mark or worn place would tell some of our story too.

Dad is a post-Depression child and as such is a rear guard of the “greatest generation.” The son of Spanish and Italian emigrants who came to America looking for opportunity and found that hard work was the only way to open its doors. Serving during the Korean War provided the opportunity for an education. He worked hard and, like his son, always felt a little guilty if he spent any money on himself instead of his family. He loved hunting and the outdoors, so the surplus 1903 Springfield was another American opportunity for him and for so many other postwar sportsmen.

I don't know if our Springfield ever saw combat. I have often wondered if it had ever rested in the arms of a young soldier as he wrote home from beneath the branches of a European chestnut tree or if it was dragged through the sands of the South Pacific by one of my Marine Corps brothers. When I served in the Marine Corps many years ago I learned how my rifle could become an extension of me. I remember sleeping under the stars with my M16 by my side and making sure that every inch of her was clean and the simple pleasure of how naturally she rose to my cheek. Our Springfield feels like that to me.

Our Springfield's first sojourn into the hunting woods was among the snow-covered hemlocks of Central Pennsylvania. Dad took his first whitetail, a fork-horned buck, after hours of cold anticipation among the deep-green branches that hung heavy with fresh white powder. By that time the Springfield had already become an extension of his natural hunter spirit. He had carved every curve of her American walnut Monte Carlo stock. Then he spent hours and days with me out on the edge of the Everglades shooting our Springfield at a target taped to a cardboard box. She was the first big-game rifle I ever shot. The truth is that at 12 years old I was a little afraid of the blast and

the recoil, but I didn't want Dad to know, so I concentrated on the target and the squeeze of the trigger. The little bit of fear helped me to concentrate, and the concentration helped me hit black every time. Dad was proud of me because he could see the shooting, but he couldn't see the fear—or did he?

I took our Springfield out to Chinati Peak in West Texas to hunt aoudad sheep several years ago. My best friend from the Marines had died suddenly of a heart attack at only 41 years of age. I booked the hunt as my 40th birthday present to myself right after I left Dave's funeral. Dave and I had worked through life and death together as young Marines overseas. His passing left its mark on me, and the hunt was a journey that would leave its mark on me and on our Springfield rifle. As I hold her today and feel the indentations left on her walnut skin from when we fell in the scree near the top of the mountain, I am reminded that, as in life, it's not the falling that is important, it's the getting back up that really counts.

A year later, I took our Springfield rifle to Northwest Colorado to hunt pronghorn antelope. Each morning it was the crisp, cool breeze coming off Black Mountain that carried the sweet, pungent sage mixed with the smell of coffee and bacon that brought me fully awake into a day of great adventure. We had a wonderful crew of guides and hunters. Each hunter had his own story of his connection to a place or a game animal or some solid aspect to the hunting experience. Even though each hunter held factory-new rifles that resonated dependability like a tried-and-true bird dog, they all examined the Springfield, and the deep understanding of her value reflected in their faces.

After my Colorado hunt I returned to Africa. I lived there some 20 years ago, mostly in the Ivory Coast in West Africa, although I also spent time in Kenya. Africa gets in your soul, and it continues to visit you in memories and dreams. This time I went to Namibia, where heavy animals are taken at long distances in empty lands. The old rifle did not make the trip. Although I had many practical reasons I still felt a bit guilty about it. I'll have to find a way to make it up to her. I'm thinking maybe a white-tailed deer hunt in South Texas. Maybe on that hunt my daughter Megan and I can shoot a few rounds at a target taped to a cardboard box. After all, our Springfield belongs to her, too. •