

The Hilton Trophy: History and Mystery



The Hilton Trophy as it appeared after 1929 when the additional shields were affixed to accommodate the engraving of winning team names and scores. The ornate detail in the bison hunting scene can be easily discerned in this photo as can the details engraved in the various shields. The center shield reads:
“Presented By Henry Hilton For Rifle Shooting by Military & Naval Teams of Twelve.”

Editor’s Note: As part of the CMP centennial celebration, *The First Shot* will feature a series of articles on the history of some of the older trophies in the National Trophy Collection. The National Trophy Collection has been displayed in CMP Headquarters at Camp Perry since 1999. The trophies themselves are presented during the Annual National Matches. The winners’ names are engraved on them and each winner receives a relief or photo plaque depicting the trophy. This famous collection includes some of the largest and most valuable trophies that are contested in any sports competition in the United States. The stories of these trophies are a key part of the history and tradition of the shooting sports in America.

The Hilton Trophy initially appears quite modest to someone who looks at the National Trophy Collection in the CMP Headquarters display windows at Camp Perry, Ohio. It is usually not considered to be among the most attractive National Trophies. Highly prized trophies like the National Trophy, the Daniel Boone Trophy, the Wimbledon Cup and the Navy Cup overshadow it in prestige. Nevertheless, for the long line of highpower rifle teams that have won the Hilton Trophy, it represents a major achievement. Today, the Hilton Trophy is awarded to the highest scoring reserve component team in the National Trophy Rifle Team Match. Even though its present appearance is modest and the

competition to win it may not be as storied and celebrated as some other National Trophies, the Hilton Trophy is, in fact, the oldest trophy in the collection and at one time, was considered to be the most beautiful National Trophy.

The Honorable Henry Hilton of New York donated the Hilton Trophy to the National Rifle Association in 1878. When it was first placed in competition, teams from the Army, Navy, National Guard and Reserves, as well as militia and volunteers of foreign countries, could compete for it. In 1903, when the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice (NBPRP), the predecessor to the CMP, was created the NRA transferred the Hilton Trophy to the NBPRP so that it could be awarded during the new National Trophy Matches. That year when the first National Matches were conducted at Sea Girt, New Jersey and for several years after, the trophy was presented to the second place team in the National Trophy Rifle Team Match. Subsequently, the Hilton Trophy remained in the National Trophy Collection, but later was presented to the high state National Guard team and subsequently to the high Reserve Component team.

In its original form, the Hilton Trophy was a bronze and steel plaque approximately forty-five inches wide and fifty-six and one-half inches tall. The Honorable Henry Hilton paid Tiffany & Co. of New York \$5,500 to design and fabricate the original trophy. When the trophy was completed in 1879, *The Spirit of the Times* described the trophy this way:

The trophy itself is a unique work, and possesses many attractive qualities to commend it to connoisseurs and art lovers, apart from its higher interest as an emblem of victory. The form is that of a shield, an irregular, oblong shape, drooping like a curtain. The center presents a superb picture, in repoussé steel, of an Indian buffalo hunt. In the foreground three Indian riders, mounted on their spirited ponies are pursuing with bow and lance the leaders of a herd of buffaloes, which extends in interminable numbers, far away in the distance. The action of horse and rider is admirably expressed, and the headlong fright and fury of the hunted brutes shown with striking reality....The whole design is surmounted by a sculpted eagle, and in the detail of the ornament, silver, copper, gold, and the new Japanese metal [mokume], which has lately been developed, here are successfully employed.¹

The accompanying photographs show the centerpiece of the trophy that is a three-foot wide oval relief engraving depicting a Native American Great Plains bison hunting scene. Tiffany's Eugene J. Soligny, a European trained designer who began working for Tiffany & Co. in 1858, designed this relief plaque. At an auction held in 2001 by Christie's of New York, an identical plaque was estimated to have a value of \$6,000 to \$9,000. On either side and below this plaque were affixed carved, steel and bronze Native American war shields. The names of the trophy winning teams and their scores were engraved on these original shields. An eagle resting on branches of oak and laurel perched on top of the original trophy.

¹ P. 129, *Magnificent Tiffany Silver*, by John Loring, Henry N. Abrams, Inc., New York; 2001. Quoted from *The Spirit of the Times*, May 17 1879

The trophy, unfortunately, had a fragile physical stature that was not suitable for the practice that prevailed at the time of allowing the team that won the trophy to take it to their home state for display in the state capital or headquarters. The shape and weight of the trophy made it a difficult item to protect during shipment via the trains, trucks and wagons of the time. As a result, the Hilton Trophy was repeatedly battered and broken in shipment to and from these locations. CMP archives document dozens of invoices from Tiffany & Co. as well as from Bailey, Banks & Biddle jewelers for repairs to the trophy after it completed these trips. The CMP even has documentation verifying that the trophy received damage in return shipments from Tiffany & Co. where it had just been sent for repairs.

In the late 1920s, the NBPRP commissioned the addition of five larger shields, 6 ½ inches in diameter, to be affixed to the plaque by means of decorative “piping” similar to that already used on the border of the original plaque. These shields were to have each year’s winning team and score engraved on them. Each shield could accommodate as many as twenty team names and scores. This idea was adopted as a solution to save space since the trophy was not large enough to have enough individual shields affixed for each winner, as was contemplated in the original trophy design.

The paper trail documenting the history of the Hilton Trophy fades out in the late 1930s. Photographs on file at CMP depict the trophy being presented in its slightly altered original condition through those years. The trophy apparently remained in this configuration from the late 1920s, when the new shields were added, until approximately 1962. The last photo the CMP has of the Hilton Trophy in its original form is from the 1962 National Trophy Awards Ceremony.

Whether it occurred in 1962 or shortly thereafter, someone in the Department of the Army apparently decided to significantly modify the Hilton Trophy from its original configuration. The original trophy that was commissioned and donated by the Honorable Henry Hilton was dismantled and most of its pieces were reassembled onto a large rectangular mahogany panel, measuring forty inches in width and seven feet in height.

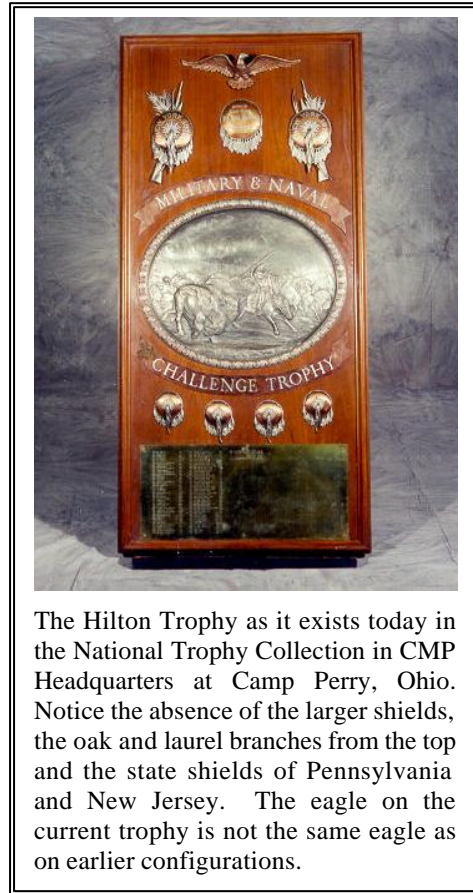


Along with the original trophy elements, a brass plate was added onto which the names and scores of the winning teams are now inscribed. The original trophy heading, the “Military & Naval Challenge Trophy,” was lost and new lettering was affixed to the mahogany panel.

This picture was taken during the 1962 National Matches. The Hilton Trophy appears in the background, still in its second configuration.

Today the Hilton Trophy is still awarded to the highest scoring reserve component team in the National Trophy Rifle Team Match. But unfortunately, today's Hilton Trophy is a transfigured and significantly devalued variation of the original trophy. Whether the trophy's 1960-era military custodians dismantled and reassembled the trophy because it was difficult to transport or for some other reason is not know, but experts on 19th century Tiffany works tell the CMP that this action transformed a valuable work of art into a collection of trophy pieces with a value that is a fraction of the value it would have in its original condition. In his work on Tiffany's silver artistry, John Loring reviewed the original and altered condition of the Hilton Trophy and urged the CMP "to restore it to its original condition."

Despite its changes, the Hilton Trophy remains as the oldest and one of the most historic trophies in the National Trophy Collection. It also testifies to the critical importance of understanding the history and value of these trophies and to conscientiously preserving them and their history.



If any The First Shot readers have early photos of the Hilton Trophy or information regarding its history and different configurations, the CMP welcomes your correspondence. Please send e-mails to dmiles@odcmp.com or letters or photos to the Civilian Marksmanship Program, ATTN: Dale Miles, P.O. Box 576, Port Clinton, OH 43452. If you send photos or documents, please send only copies; retain the originals.