

How the gun lobby raised a real quick \$1 million

By James Coates
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — Gen. Maxwell Rich (Utah National Guard, Ret.) holds the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Croix de Guerre and the executive suite at the National Rifle Association. He needed \$1 million for the upcoming battle with the "antiguns."

So he set aside a weekend and raised it.

He did it in a fashion that would bring tears of envy to the eyes of the most astute politician — through \$10 donations from 100,000 newly recruited supporters.

All 100,000 also agreed to help at the precinct level. By joining the NRA they swelled the ranks to 1.1 million dues-paying members.

In the process of raising membership by 10 per cent, almost at will, Rich gave outsiders a rare glimpse of the machinery that makes the NRA among the most effective lobbies in Washington.

In a letter to the then 1 million NRA members, Rich asked each to sign up as many friends as

The riflemen simply unsheathed their main weapon — NRA's mailing list

possible and phone the amount of the pledges to a special toll-free number in Washington on July 4, 5, or 6. From his command post atop the eight-story black marble NRA headquarters, Rich spent three days listening to the music of phone bells.

T. A. Hodges, NRA public affairs director, recalls that "we stopped counting" after donations reached \$1 million.

With 51 separate gun-control measures now before Congress — including one with White House support — NRA needs \$41,666 every month, even before the real fight starts, just to pay legal, research and publicity costs for its lobbyists, Rich said.

The strongest weapon in NRA's

is its mailing list. Operating on the premise that nothing shakes a politician like a pile of angry letters from the voters back home, the NRA has been using the mails to turn aside gun laws since 1934.

The NRA starts the mail avalanche several ways, Rich explained. If there is time, an editorial simply is inserted in the monthly American Rifleman magazine that goes to each member. Ads pay half the magazine's expenses, so this is the most economical way.

The editorial urges members to write to key congressmen and tell in their own words why they oppose whatever gun law is under debate. Be civil, they are advised, for you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

Congressional staff people active in writing gun laws say this is particularly effective because it shows a constituent is deeply involved in the issue.

"We're not all that impressed when somebody tears an ad out of the newspaper and mails it in," said William Wise, an aide to Sen. Birch Bayh, D-Ind, a leading gun-control advocate.

"When you get a thoughtful letter you know that you can be right on 10 different issues with the writer," Wise said. "But if you are wrong on that one (gun control), not only will he vote against you, he will go out and work against you."

Besides the editorials, mailed bulletins alert the entire membership, or the NRA membership in a key state or district, that one of their politicians needs talking to.

When debate gets hot, as it did when Bayh was pushing for a hand-gun law in 1972, the NRA will use these selective mailings to trigger a flood of letters, telegrams, and phone calls timed "for the best effect" — just before a crucial vote.