

Military Excellence-in-Competition Matches*

1902 – 1906*

* Rifle Courses Extracted from “Days of the Krag” by Townsend Whelen

By Dick Culver

Background:

The 1902 –1903 timeframe marks a turning point in military service rifle shooting. Our service rifle had been some version of the venerable Trapdoor Springfield since 1873. Undeniably it was more accurate than its predecessors, the rifled muskets and early Armory Conversions of the old front loaders, but it had several drawbacks when it came to rapid fire and long range rifle shooting:

1. It was slow to reload, making true “rapid fire” unobtainable in modern terms. The automatic extraction and ejection helped some, but not a heap!
2. While the .45-70 was an internally primed, fixed projectile cartridge, it still utilized Black Powder and fired an extremely heavy projectile that had a trajectory that can only be described as “rainbowesque”. Its velocity was low, and while instances of extreme accuracy of the old .45-70 at 1000 yards with excellent ammunition are documentable, the individuals marking targets for the shooters in the Wimbledon Cup Match described the exercise as being more nearly like pulling butts on a mortar range than marking targets for a rifle match. The “danger space” for the .45-70 at 1000-yards was almost non-existent except directly in front of the target.
3. The black powder propellant was *not* clean burning and tended to deposit powder fouling in the bore that required frequent cleaning to maintain accuracy in any sort of match shooting. Fighting Indians and Spaniards was one thing, match accuracy without continued cleaning was quite another.

A test held in 1879, firing the Trapdoor at extended ranges (1000-yards and beyond), indicated that the lack of powder charge uniformity resulted in groups that were roughly twice as long as they were wide, giving a long oval appearance to the “beaten zone” (target groups) of the military issue .45-70. Commercial ammunition (such as that produced for match shooting by the *Union Metallic Cartridge Company*) was noted for its accuracy, but sadly, this was not the case for the government-issue fodder. In true hide-bound fashion, the (military) brass looked at the results of the testing and decided on a fix to the pesky group shape. The answer? Tighten up the ammunition quality control? Nope, wrong again “*Gopher Breath*”. The *obvious* answer was to redesign the military targets to more closely match the elongated groups caused by the sub-quality military ammunition.

In 1885, the Department of the Army decreed that the targets were to be equipped with elliptical bullseyes! Holy Catfish, Batman! The old time experienced rifle shooters howled loudly, but to no avail. The new elliptical target was to remain in place when cooler heads and the general availability of the flat shooting Krag Rifle began to dominate the Service Rifle Shooting scene. Even the initial Distinguished Marksman’s Badges (first issued in 1887) sported the elliptical target face. The hated elliptical bullseye was abolished in 1903, but no exact date is given for the replacement of the “football shaped bullseye”.

The Coming of the Krag:

Money was tight in the Military Establishment around the turn of the last century, and even though the *U.S. Magazine Rifle caliber .30* had been available to the regular military establishment since the mid 1890s, only the U.S. Regulars were armed with the Krag by the time of the Spanish American War in 1898. The lone exception was the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry (The Rough Riders), who were armed with Krag Carbines. This was, no doubt, due to the fact that their Executive Officer, Teddy Roosevelt, was the former Assistant Secretary of the Navy. All of the Militia and National Guard Units took the venerable "Trapdoor" to Cuba. Spanish use of the Mauser Rifle did wonders to speed the equipping of the Guard and Militia Units with Krags after their return from the war.

It is interesting to note some of the experiences of Lt. (later Colonel) Townsend Whelen with the Krag in service. Whelen was a noted early day shooter and ordnance expert, later to be stationed at both Frankford Arsenal and Springfield Armory. By 1906, Lt. Whelen was one of the top Army Infantry Rifle Shooters, and his experiences and observations help us to better understand the mental changing of gears necessary to span the eras of the black powder Trapdoor to the flat shooting Krag.

Serving as a National Guard officer until 1902, Colonel Whelen did not have an opportunity to see, handle and test the New Springfield (Krag) until 1900. He was commissioned a Lt. in the Regular Army in 1902 and joined a Regular Army Unit (the 15th Infantry Regiment) just returning from "pacification duty" in the Philippines... His statement that only a few of the older officers had any experience with the Krag would lead the reader to believe that the unit carried Trapdoors in the Philippines or never had a chance to gain any (rifle range) familiarity with the Army's newest service rifle. There was a practice in those long ago days *not* to hold the Excellence-in-Competition Matches with a rifle not yet readily available to *both* the Regular Army and the National Guard. It is entirely possible that the Krag was not used as the standard service rifle (for service rifle competition) until at least 1900 or possibly as late as 1902.

By 1902 the standard Army Qualification Course (and by default, the Army leg match of the day) consisted of firing two separate courses of fire, a KD (**K**nown **D**istance) Course and a Skirmisher's Course. Before firing the Army rifle qualification course (as opposed to the Match Course) each individual fired approximately 450 rounds of practice ammunition in preparation for the annual unit qualification effort. The KD course required a total of 60 rounds for a single run and the Skirmish Run an additional 20, making a total of 80 rounds for a single run. Thus firing through the course twice as required for both the Requalification Course, and the Excellence-in-Competition Course (Leg Match) required a total of 160 rounds for record.

Both the Qualification Course and the Leg Match were fired on two consecutive days.

The Courses of fire are listed below:

1st Course of Fire: The “KD” Course

Total number of rounds fired = 60

# Rounds	Range***	Type of Fire	Position	Time Limit
10 Shots	200 yds.	Slow Fire	Standing	Average of 1 min per shot*
10 Shots	300 yds	Slow Fire	Sit or Kneel	Average of 1 min per shot*
10 Shots	500 yds	Slow Fire	Prone	Average of 1 min per shot*
10 Shots	600 yds	Slow Fire	Prone	Average of 1 min per shot*
10 Shots	200 yds	Rapid Fire	Standing	2 strings of 5 shots fired** in 20 seconds per string
10 Shots	300 yds	Rapid Fire	Sit or Kneel	2 strings of 5 shots fired** in 30 seconds per string

* No specific time limit, was specified during the slow fire stages. In the old days slow fire was understood to be “a reasonable amount of time”, and usually averaged approximately 1 minute per shot.

** The Krag Rifle was reloaded with five individual cartridges with no “stripper clip” to assist, Hence rapid fire strings were fired in two individually timed 5 round strings.

*** No specific target types (except for the skirmish targets) were mentioned by Col. Whelen in his notes.

2nd Course of Fire: The Skirmish Run

Total number of rounds fired = 20 per Skirmish Run (a total of 40 rounds per individual for the match)

Each shooter fired two Skirmish Runs utilizing the targets called in slang, the “Squaw” and the “Papoose”. Officially, the Squaw (the larger of the two) was called the “E Silhouette Target” and the Papoose (the smaller of the two) was called the “F Silhouette Target”.

The Skirmish Run was fired in the following manner (this was a sort of individual version of the “rattle battle” or *National Trophy Infantry Trophy Match*):

Conduct of Fire for the Skirmisher's Course:

1. Each shooter had one (each) Squaw and Papoose Target sitting on top of the butts in front of his firing point – any firing position was allowed at all ranges (you could shoot prone at all distances if you wished).
2. The line of shooters formed just to the rear of the 600 yard line in a skirmish line. When the line was formed, it was ordered forward ("**well dressed**", needless to say) to the 600 yd. firing point and halted. On command, each shooter fired 2 rounds at the target(s) within a time limit of 30 seconds.
3. Upon expiration of the 30 second time limit, the line was ordered forward to the 500 yard line. The first half of the distance was covered in "quick time (120 steps/minute), and the last half at double time (180 steps/minute).
4. Upon expiration of the 30-second time limit, the line was ordered forward to the 400 yard line. Again, the first half of the distance was covered in quick time, with the last half at the double. At 400 yards, **3 rounds** were fired in 30 seconds (vice 2 at 500 and 600 yards).
5. Upon expiration of the 30-second time limit, the line was ordered forward to the 350 yard line using the quick and double time routine (which would be continued through the end of all courses of fire during the Skirmish Course). Again the shooter/competitor was required to shoot 3 shots in 30 seconds, just as at 400 yards.
6. Upon expiration of the 30 second time limit the line was ordered to the 300-yard line. Here you had a total of 10 rounds of ammunition remaining. The individual shooter was allowed to distribute these in any way he wished between the 300 and 200-yard line. He had another 30-second time limit at 300 yards, but was shortened to 20 seconds at 200 yards.

Old timers were said to have favored the prone position at all ranges, with a few diehards using the sitting position at 200. Total possible score was 100. An extremely accomplished shooter of the day was thought to be doing well if he scored 80 or more points on a skirmish run.

Put into table form, the Skirmisher's Course would look like this:

Skirmisher's Course – total number of rounds fired = 20

Range	# of Rounds Fired	Time Limit	Position
600 yards	2	30 Seconds	Any
500 yards	2	30 Seconds	Any
400 yards	3	30 Seconds	Any
350 yards	3	30 Seconds	Any
300 yards	10 rounds to be used at the shooter's discretion	30 Seconds	Any
200 yards		20 Seconds	Any

Summary of Skirmisher's Course Rules

Two targets per shooter located on top of the Butts at the 600 yard line
Movement between Yard Lines = ½ quick time, ½ double time
Shooters move as a "skirmish line" down range on command at each yard line

As a strategy, most competitors fired at the "squaw (kneeling) target" down to and including 350 yards. They then fired at the "papoose" target at 300 and 200 yards. Colonel Whelen recounted that he personally used the junction of the target and the ground as an aiming point, and set his sights to hit into the (wider) shoulder area of the kneeling target.

Sergeant Emmitt Hawkins of the 24th Infantry is thought to be the only man to make a perfect score (100 points) on the skirmish run when it was run in competition.

Qualification Designation(s) in that far off time, the classifications were:

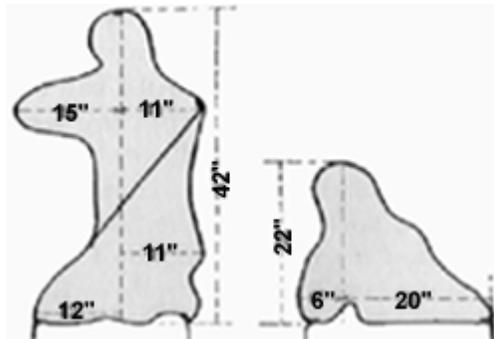
Highest = Sharpshooter

2nd = Marksman

3rd = 1st Class

Actual scores necessary to attain the above qualification(s) are not listed.

The Skirmish Targets



Skirmish targets, the "Squaw" (left) and "Papoose" (right), used at Sea Girt and elsewhere in military shooting. These targets were also used as a part of the National Trophy Individual Rifle Match in the early days, when the "leg" course required the individual to add his Skirmish Run to his National Match Score Total.

Hits on Squaw Target = 4 Points

Hits on Papoose Target = 5 Points

The Selection of the Departmental Teams:

As in previous years, each Army Department held annual Departmental rifle competitions (such as the Department of California, the Department of Arizona, etc.). As a matter of course, the two best rifle shots from each company of Infantry and the two best rifle shots among the officers of each Infantry Regiment were ordered to attend the Departmental Matches as competitors. All competitors fired the course(s) as described above. In keeping with the method of selecting the "Departmental Team" of the day, the top 12 shooters in the Departmental Matches represented the Department in the Army Competition (All Army Match).

Medals in the Departmental Matches were distributed as follows. The winner was awarded a gold medal, the second two individuals were awarded silver medals, and the last nine shooters were awarded bronze medals.

Each Department sent a 12-man team to the Army Competition held bi-annually in a location selected by the Army. In 1903, the All Army Competition was held at Ft. Sheridan, Illinois. The course of fire for the All Army Match was the same as for the Departmental Matches, and the 12 highest shooters were awarded medals on the same basis. These 12 medal winners became the Army Infantry Rifle Team and were ordered to Sea Girt, New Jersey in 1903 to compete in the National Matches. Army General Order # 61 established the first *National Trophy Match* to be fired annually at the Nationals starting in 1903. The winning team of the 1903 National Trophy Match would be awarded the *National Trophy* later to be called "*The Dogs of War Trophy*".

The National Match Course¹ fired at Sea Girt in 1903 consisted in firing once through the Army Qualification Course (including the Skirmisher's Course) plus ten shots at 800 and 1000 yards. While the Army Team did quite well, the more experienced shooters of the National Guard and hard holding civilian teams from the east coast with 1000-yard ranges available trimmed the Army Team's tail feathers at the extended ranges. Following the National Matches, the Army Teams were ordered back to their regiments to take with them the lessons learned in competitive rifle shooting to assist the individual regiments in their rifle practice instruction.

The same routine of selection of the Departmental and All Army Rifle Teams (on alternate years) was continued throughout the 1904 (no All Army Competition being held in 1904) and 1905 shooting seasons, but difficulty with shooting at 800 and 1000-yards resulted in a different method of selecting the Army Infantry Rifle Team in 1906.

While Departmental Matches were still held, 30 of the best rifle shots in the Army were ordered to Ft. Niagara, N.Y. for a two-month stint of concerted long-range rifle team training prior to the Nationals. The Army was still operating on a schedule of "every other year" for the All Army Match, and since 1906 was an "off year" for the All Army Match, this training camp scheme had much to recommend it. Ft. Niagara was chosen because of the availability of 1000-yard shooting facilities, a luxury not found on all rifle ranges. An Army team with 1000-yard experience would allow the Army to compete on a more even basis in the upcoming National Rifle Matches. The final 12 man Army Infantry Rifle Team was selected from the 30 man practice squad. Colonel Whelen speaks of "seeing" mirage at Ft. Niagara for the first time.

The Army Infantry Team won the National Matches and the National Trophy Match in 1906 as a result of their newly attained 1000-yard shooting prowess. This was a fitting end for the Krag as our Service Rifle. By the end of 1906 the entire U.S. Army and the National Guard had been armed with a new rifle, destined to become *the* rifle of legend – The U.S. Magazine Rifle, caliber .30, M1903 better known as the “Ought Three” or simply (if somewhat incorrectly) called, “*The ‘03 Springfield*”. The year of 1907 marked the beginning of a new era in rifle competition, with a new rifle to be fired at a new location for the National Matches – Camp Perry, Ohio.

End Notes:

¹ The course described here (the Army Qualification Course plus the Skirmisher’s Course plus 10 additional shots at 800 and 1000 yards) is taken from Col. Whelen’s writings. Conversely, Headquarters of the Army, Adjutant General’s Office, General Order No. 61 published 21 April 1903 gives a slightly different version. The General Order established a new “*National Trophy Match*” to be held annually. In calendar year 1903, the National Trophy Match was to be fired on 8 and 9 September at Sea Girt, New Jersey. Teams, each consisting of 12 men designated (by General Order No. 61) to compete were:

- An All Army Team
- One team from each military Department (Department of California, Department of Arizona, etc.).
- The U.S. Navy
- The U.S. Marine Corps
- The National Guard and uniformed militia of the several states and the District of Columbia on the basis of one team from each state or territory and the District of Columbia.

Distances (ranges) to be fired were as follows:

- 200, 300*, 500, 600, 800, 900 and 1000 yards. *(The 300 yard range was not actually mentioned in the ranges to be fired, but **IS** mentioned in the positions to be utilized at each range – a bit confusing here).
- Number of shots, 10 by each competitor at each range.
- Shooting positions: Standing at 300 yards, prone with the shooter’s head toward the target at all other ranges – this would have precluded the use of the prone “*Back or Texas Grip*” positions.
- Arms to be used: United States Service Rifles and Carbines with not less than a three (3) pound trigger.
- Ammunition: The service cartridge as manufactured and issued by the Ordnance Department, U.S. Army.
- This contest was to be held on two separate days with the first day being fired at 200, 500 and 600 yards (no mention of 300 yards is made). The second day was to be fired at 800, 900, and 1000 yards. The team having the highest aggregate firing in the two days was to be the winner of the “National Trophy” (now known as “The Dogs of War” Trophy, but yet designed in 1903). Second place winner was awarded the “Hilton Trophy” and the third, “The Soldier of Marathon Trophy”.
- Recommendations for the 1904 National Trophy Match were to have the match include one run of the Skirmisher’s Course, and two (2) full scores “timed fire” at *rectangular targets(?)* and rapid fire *if possible*.

Personal Conclusions:

Since the course(s) described in the text come directly from Col. Whelen’s personal notes and remembrances, and since General Order number 61 was issued more in the nature of guidelines, it is my personal opinion that the match was conducted as outlined by Col. Whelen, that is: The Army Excellence-in-Competition Match including the Skirmisher’s Course with the addition of a slow fire string at both 800 and 1000 yards. Many things happen “on the ground” at the match sites when the suggestions of higher ranking officers must be executed according to plan. Until an official Match *Bulletin* of the National Trophy Match of 1903 can be located, Col. Whelen’s notes are most likely best source of the way the way the match was actually conducted.