

The 1909 Military Excellence-in-Competition Matches ©2002

(Courses of Fire Extracted From the Provisional Small Arms Firing Manual of 1909)

By Dick Culver

While the Krag Rifle had been the prescribed rifle for the National Trophy Matches through 1906, starting in 1907 (the first year for the Nationals to be held at Camp Perry, Ohio), the M1903 Rifle became the official (and only approved service rifle) allowed in the E-I-C/National Trophy Matches. As an interesting side note, the Army had not yet grasped the greater firepower available to them using the stripper clip and the clip slot on the M1903 receiver. As a result, the rapid fire stages of fire were still conducted in two separate 5-round strings, much as had been done with the venerable Krag. By 1913 however, the rapid fire regulations for both rifle qualification, and E-I-C Rifle Match competition specified 10-round strings of fire.

An interesting adjunct to requalification firing (but not required in competition firing) was that both the Infantry and the Coast Artillery shooters were required to fire rapid fire at 200-yards with the bayonet fixed on the rifle. For any who have ever tried this, you will realize that having a 16" bayonet rattling around on the end of a rifle during precision shooting is usually ruinous to accuracy. Our predecessors had much to contend with in maintaining their rifle qualification.

An Explanation of the Rear Sight of the M1903 Rifle:

The standard issue sights on the "Ought-Three" were exceedingly fine, and difficult to pick up in reduced light or when the barbarians were coming over the wall. They were fine for the firing line where the most vicious thing you might encounter would be an untoward puff of wind or a switch in drift of the mirage, but up close and down dirty, it took a bit longer to "acquire" a proper sight alignment than was good for the health. Each little marking on the rear sight base was said to be a "point of wind" which in modern parlance translates to 4 clicks... When you put on a "quarter-point" of wind (1-Click), you had to have a "calibrated eyeball"!

The "slide" that carried the aperture up and down on the "extended M1903 ladder sight" had an open notch that was visible when the ladder was in the "flat" position. This notch was designated the "*Battle Sight*", and when used with the issue front sight (using the original .30-'03 cartridge) gave a point of impact dead center at 441 yards as originally designed... Unfortunately, when the '03 was modified to take the (then) new .30-'06 cartridge instead of the original .30-'03, they changed the ladder to accommodate the new trajectory, but neglected to modify the notch in the slide or the height of the front sight to account for the flatter trajectory of the much faster bullet. The battle sight had suddenly become 547 yards! Those of you who have been in combat will realize that 547 yards isn't exactly an "ideal" battle sight range!

A quick explanation of the "battle sight" follows so that you can appreciate the problems encountered. Your battle sight (by way of a "quick and dirty" explanation) is that sight setting that will allow you to hold approximately belt buckle high on your target, and get a killing or disabling hit on the enemy from "point blank" (up close!) all the way out to the Maximum (listed) Effective Range of the Rifle. In the Marine Corps we usually figure(d) that the Maximum Effective Range of a rifle was approximately 500 yards for the M1 Garand, the M14, (and incidentally the M16A2). The Battle Sight for

the M1 has always been considered to be your 300-yard dope. This means if you crank on your 300-yard dope and you aim at the enemy's belt buckle, you will get a fatal or disabling hit on the target, (meaning somewhere between the chest and the knees) all the way from "up close and down dirty" out to 500 yards. If you use your 547-yard dope (the standard Battle Sight with the .30-'06 with the M1903) the flatness of the trajectory will not give the desired results... Actual combat has shown (especially in heavily forested or jungle environments) that a 200 yard zero may well be a more practical approach.

An often overlooked aspect to the military's hate and discontent about the M1903's Battle Sight, was that at least through WWI, the courses of fire (both qualification and match courses, to include the Skirmisher's Course) required that the rapid fire stages of fire be fired using the Battle Sight, which of course had no way of changing the elevation. The one exception to the use of the "Battle Sight" in rapid fire was during the 600-yard line stage of the Skirmisher's Course where you were allowed to use the "peep sight". For 500-yards and closer, you were stuck with the natural "battle sight's" elevation.

Since during both requalification and match shooting, you were required to fire rapid fire at 200, 300 and 500 yards, you had to *hold* low (a distance that would probably be slightly different for each rifle) on all rapid fire stages. The exact amount of necessary "hold off" for elevation would be noted in your score book (they didn't call 'em "Data Books" until the 1960s). Your rapid-fire scores would depend on just how well you could "eyeball 'em in"... The only saving grace was that all rapid fire (BOTH requalification and match shooting) prior to WWI was fired on a version of the "Dog Target" (a sort of silhouette target, simulating an opponent in the prone position) The black of the Dog Target was much larger than the 8" (and later 10") circular bull's-eye used at 200 -300 yards and the 20" bull's-eye normally used at 500 & 600 yards. The Marine Corps still uses a version of the Dog Target (now called Delta Target, of course), for rapid fire on the requalification course. Because of the unrealistic M1903 battle sight zero, there are numerous references to the Marines in combat during WWI being cautioned "*Ok, you birds, battle sight, aim low!*" ... I never truly appreciated those instructions until I first tried to shoot rapid fire using the "Battle Sight notch on the M1903 Rifle.

In order to appreciate the vintage Rifle Competition circa 1909 in light of the difficulty encountered with sights on the "U.S. Magazine Rifle, caliber .30 M1903, and the growing pains being experienced in learning the advantages of the greater potential firepower of the "*Ought Three*", let's look at the matches themselves.

As in times past, the War Department specified in the 1909 Small Arms Firing Manual that

During each *alternate* year, there will be four competitions, as follows:

- 1) The Departmental Rifle Competition (comparable to the more modern Army Area Matches)
- 2) The Army Rifle Competition (recognizable as the later "All Army Match")
- 3) The Departmental *Revolver* Competition (the adoption of the Semi Automatic Pistol, caliber .45 M1911 was still two years in the future).
- 4) The Army Revolver Competition

The above competitions were to be held at such places and times as may be designated in orders from the War Department.

**1909 Army Qualification Course,
Departmental and Army Competition Course**

Course of Fire for the Departmental and Army Rifle Competition					
Range in Yards	Target	Type of Fire	# of Rounds	Position	Time Limit
200	A	Slow	10	Standing	1 minute/shot
200	D	Rapid	10 fired in two separate strings of 5 shots	Standing <u>to</u> kneeling	20 seconds per 5 shot string
300	D	Rapid	10 fired in two separate strings of 5 shots	Choice of Kneeling <u>or</u> Sitting Position (the position was assumed <u>before</u> string of fire)	20 seconds per 5 shot string
500	B	Slow	2 sighting shots plus 10 rounds	Prone	1 minute/shot
500	D	Rapid	10 fired in two strings of 5 shots	Prone (assumed before string of fire)	30 seconds per 5 shot string
600	B	Slow	2 sighting shots plus 10 rounds	Prone	1 minute/shot
<p>This course of fire was to be fired twice, on two separate days for the total aggregate score. This score plus the results of two individual runs through the Skirmish Course were added together to determine the medal (leg) winners who would receive credit toward the designation of "<i>Distinguished Marksman</i>".</p> <p><u>Note:</u> All Rapid Fire (including the skirmish course) was conducted using the M1903 Battle Sight (not adjustable, but supposedly set for 547 yards as a result of the change from the original .30-'03 cartridge to the .30-'06 round. The sight <u>leaf</u> was changed for the lighter, faster projectile, but the <u>battle sight slide</u> remained unaltered). Appropriate "hold off" (Kentucky Elevation) was used at all ranges for rapid fire!</p> <p>The signal for the targets to appear from the Pits for a string of Rapid Fire was a "trumpet", "whistle", or "telephone".</p> <p>The Infantry and Coast Artillery troops were required to fire the 200-yard Rapid Fire stage of the <u>qualification</u> course with fixed bayonets! Fixed bayonets were <u>not</u> required at 300 or 500 yard Rapid, however, fixed bayonets were <u>NOT</u> required at <u>any</u> range during the "Leg Match."</p>					

Total E-I-C (Leg) scores were determined by the aggregate of two runs of the Skirmish Course, fired on separate days in addition to shooting twice through the National Match/Qualification Course for the Departmental and Army Competition.

Skirmish Course of Fire for Competition					
Range in Yards	Target	Type of Fire	# of Rounds	Position	Time Limit
600	D	Rapid	5	Choice of prone, kneeling, or sitting	30
500			5		30
400			5		30
350			5		30
300			5		30
200			5		20

Use of the Battle Sight was required at all ranges except for 600 yards where the peep sight was permitted.

The earlier version of the Skirmish Course utilized two individual abbreviated silhouette targets (the “Squaw” and the “Papoose”) that simply sat on top of the butts. In an effort to streamline the course, by 1909, the new “D Targets” were mounted on “disappearing carriages (similar to modern day target carriers). The “Dog Target” maintained the same format as the earlier silhouette, that of a man in the prone position (See the illustration of the D Target at the end of the article). Later versions of the D Target would take on a more symmetrical outline, but some form of the Squaw/Papoose target outline would be utilized in the Skirmishers Course until it finally faded into history after the 1913 shooting season.

A signal to the pits that the competitors were ready to proceed was a trumpet or telephone. Thirty seconds after receiving the signal from the firing line, the Pit Officer or NCO caused the targets to appear.

The competitors started just to the rear of the 600-yard line with the rifles loaded and locked. The competitors were “advanced” to the firing line and halted. Commands to fire the requisite five rounds were given. As soon as any portion of the target appeared, the competitor commenced firing. Firing continued as long as any portion of the target was still in sight or until all five rounds were fired. When the targets disappeared, the command or signal to cease-fire was given. The rifles were reloaded and locked and the advance immediately resumed. Movement between firing lines was conducted with the first half of the distance covered at quick time (120 steps per minute), with the second half covered at double time (180 steps per minute). While the instructions for firing the course are not specific on this point, it is assumed that the competitor was allowed to take the preferred firing position prior to the targets being raised. All reloading was accomplished from a full five round stripper clip.

Making the “Departmental Team”

Consider how the Departmental Team was chosen. Rather than the top 10% of the non-Distinguished Shooters receiving medals, it was more or less selected on the basis of the top 20%, but not quite. The table below was taken directly out of the 1909 Manual. Individuals placing in the Leg Match made up the “Departmental Team.” The “Team” was chosen on the basis of one member for every five competitors, or essentially the top 20% of those firing in the match, with fractions not being considered.

For example, if there were 75 rifle competitors, a “Team” of 15 would be chosen and presented Leg Medals. As far as the fractional non-consideration, the example given was that a field of 100 competitors would yield a 20 man “Team”, but that competitors 101 through 104 would not increase the number of medal winners. However, competitor number 105 would increase the “Team” (medal winners) to 21.

Unlike today’s Army Competition, gold, silver and bronze medals were presented to the competitors in the following ratio:

Number of medal winners (size of “Divisional Team”)	Gold Medals	Silver Medals	Bronze Medals
6 or less	1	1	One to each remaining member of the Team (leg winners)
7 to 9 inclusive	1	2	?
10 to 12 inclusive	1	3	?
13 to 15 inclusive	2	3	?
16 to 18 inclusive	2	4	?
19 to 21 inclusive	2	5	?
22 to 24 inclusive	2	6	?
25 to 27 inclusive	3	6	?
28 to 30 inclusive	3	7	?
31 to 33 inclusive	3	8	?
34 to 36 inclusive	3	9	?
37 to 39 inclusive	4	9	?
40 to 42 inclusive	4	10	?
43 to 45 inclusive	4	11	?
46 to 48 inclusive	4	12	?
49 to 51 inclusive	5	12	?
Additional Medal Winners were calculated using the above formula if there are more than 51 men on the Divisional Team			

As was pointed out, the legs were awarded on the basis of 20% of the non-Distinguished Competitors, as opposed to today’s 10%. Then as now, however, a “Distinguished Marksman” did not count against the non-Distinguished shooters.

In order for a previously Distinguished Shooter to “make the Departmental Team” and be eligible to fire in the Army Competition, he had to make an overall score exceeding the last “medal winner” by 5%. In order for a Commissioned Officer to win a bronze leg medal, he was required to exceed the score of the lowest scoring enlisted (bronze) leg winner by 5%. An officer could win a silver leg medal by exceeding the lowest scoring enlisted silver leg winner by 5%, etc.

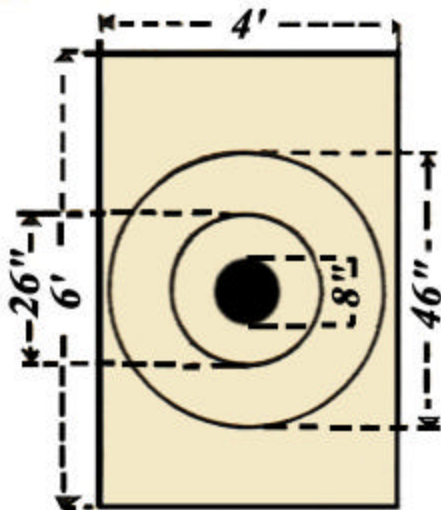
The (All) Army Match was fired with the competitors comprising the Departmental Teams from each Department. The course of fire was identical to that fired for the Departmental Match.

Regardless of the total number of competitors participating in the Army Match, the total Army Rifle Team (Army Competition Leg Winners) was composed of only 12 shooters. The first four members of the team (by score) received a gold medal, the

remaining eight members received silver medals. Medal winners in the Army Match received credit towards the Distinguished Marksman award.

While the arms and ammunition used in 1909 are different from those of the present day, most of us would have been right at home on the firing line during the Army Competition or the National Matches at Camp Perry almost 100-years ago.

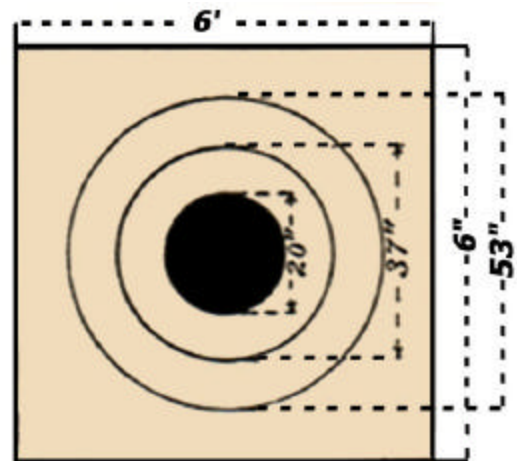
Targets Utilized in 1909



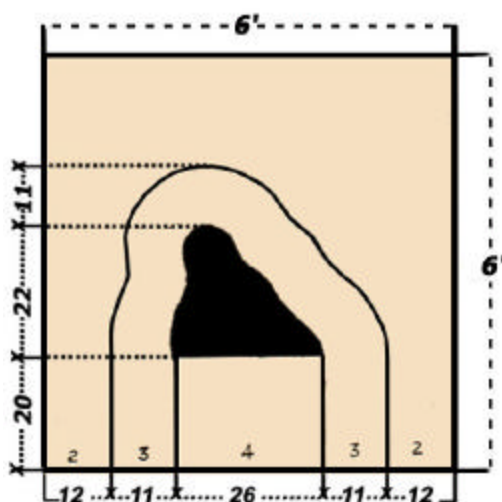
TARGET A

The "A" Target was used for 200-yard standing slow fire and remained essentially unchanged from the initial 200-yard target utilized for the first Excellence-in-Competition Match held in 1881. The only break in this routine was the adoption of the elliptical bullseye in 1885 and lasting until 1903. By 1904 the 8" A Target was back in place until 1920 when it was replaced with a 10" target.

The "B" Target was used for 500 and 600 yard slow fire. The 20" bullseye without the tie-breaking "V-Ring" was replaced in 1922 with identical dimensions, but having a 12" "V-Ring" designed to break ties in the event of two individuals shooting identical scores. The version using the 12" "V-Ring" remained the standard 500 and 600-yard target until the introduction of the "Decimal Target" in 1967.



TARGET B



Target D

The "D" Target in 1909 was used for both rapid fire stages and the Skirmish Course of fire. This replaced (but was somewhat similar to) the earlier pair of Skirmish Targets commonly called the "Squaw" and "Papoose" targets. The "D Target" retained the format of the earlier "Papoose" target (the smaller of the two), but had the utility to be used on a target carrier instead of simply placed on top of the 600-yard butts. The 1909 version of the "D" Target cut down on the number of targets necessary to conduct requalification or match firing. During the conduct of the Skirmish run, only shots in the black or in the four ring immediately below the black counted as hits.

Part III of this series will note several interesting changes to the courses of fire in E-I-C competition and requalification firing that had taken place by 1913. The continuing evolution of courses of fire for the U.S. Magazine Rifle, M1903 in many ways reflects an evolution in tactical thinking of the War Department and an expanding of the appreciation of the capabilities of our new instrument of battle that would take us into the early days of WWII. History and weapons development are closely intertwined making service rifle competition over the years truly a window into a history of our country, and the freedoms we enjoy today.

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