

AMERICA'S 'FOREIGN' SERVICE RIFLE



PART VI This is the sixth of an 11-part series on the shoulder arms that waged America's wars from the Revolution to Afghanistan.



Springfield Krag-Jorgenson 1898 model

The famous Norwegian-designed Krag-Jorgensen rifle saw combat on Cuba, in China and during at least five years of conflict in the Philippines.

BY JOHN PLASTER

From San Juan Hill to the gates of Peking (now Beijing) and the streets of Manila, the Krag-Jorgensen rifle saw more foreign combat than any previous American rifle. Yet the Krag, as it was called, had a service life of just 12 years, the shortest for any standard-issue U.S. shoulder arm.

The Krag-Jorgensen represented

many “firsts,” beginning with its very selection, which resulted from the U.S. Army’s first shoot-off between different rifle designs.

In 1890, America remained the only major power yet to adopt a repeating rifle using a smokeless powder cartridge. It was high time to replace the single-shot, black powder, .45-70 Trapdoor Springfield.

After examining 29 U.S. and 24 foreign rifles, a U.S. Army board selected the rifle designed by Norwegians Ole Krag and Erik Jorgensen. The board was especially impressed by its smooth action and its unique magazine well. Wrapped under the action, the well enabled a soldier to reload via a side gate without opening the bolt.

This foreign creation was adopted as the “United States Magazine Rifle, Caliber .30, Model of 1892,” and manufactured by license at the venerable Springfield Armory in Massachusetts.

The American version sported a 30-inch barrel, an overall length of 49 inches and weighed 9.4 pounds. Its cavalry carbine variation had a shortened stock and 22-inch barrel. Minor changes resulted in newer models in 1896 and 1898.

The Krag represented a slew of still more “firsts”—the first standard U.S. bolt-action, first standard repeater and first internal magazine rifle.

Its .30/40 cartridge was revolutionary, too, as America’s first .30-caliber round, whose smokeless powder propelled a 220-grain bullet at 2,000 feet-per-

Marines armed with Krag rifles went ashore at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in June 1898. They later encountered determined Spanish troops.



U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO

second. The bullet was half the weight with twice the speed of the .45-70's hefty 500-grain slug.

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR, 1898

By late 1895, all regular Army infantry units were equipped with the Krag. The Spanish-American War erupted in 1898. Yet mobilized National Guard forces and new volunteer units went to war with obsolete Trapdoor Springfield rifles. The great exception was the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, better known as Col. Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

This wild assortment of volunteers were among the first to land on Cuba, and fought in the U.S. Army's first skirmish at Las Guasimas on June 24. In that fight, no Rough Rider employed his Krag rifle more aggressively than Thomas Isbell, a tough half-Cherokee volunteer.

For 30 minutes, he swapped shots with hidden Spaniards, suffering seven gunshot wounds before finally allowing himself to be carried away. When he returned to the States, Isbell had the honor of bringing home his treasured Krag rifle.

During that same firefight, a period account notes, "Colonel Roosevelt, in front of his men, snatched a rifle and ammunition belt from a wounded soldier, and cheering and yelling with his men, led the advance." Roosevelt's charge proved successful, sending the enemy fleeing.

Seven days later came the Rough Rider's famous bloody charge up San Juan Hill—or more accurately, on the adjacent Kettle Hill. Despite heavy Spanish fire from state-of-the-art Mauser rifles, Roosevelt and his men shot their Krags all the way to the top, seizing the key terrain outside Santiago. In fact, overall 7,000 Krags were engaged at San Juan Hill.

The finest rifle-shot on Cuba had to be 1st Lt. Charles Muir of the 2nd U.S. Infantry. A national-level competitive rifleman and Indian campaign veteran, Muir disregarded heavy enemy fire to pick off the entire crew of a Spanish artillery piece, firing one well-placed Krag shot after another. Awarded the



SIEGE OF CATUBIG by Richard Hook. **U.S. soldiers make a break from a burning convent. From April 15-18, 1900, 31 men of H Co., 43rd Volunteer Inf. Regt., withstood an attack by hundreds of Filipino guerrillas.**

Distinguished Service Cross (retroactive from 1918), the sharpshooting lieutenant went on to make major general and to command the 28th Infantry Division in WWI.

PHILIPPINES WAR, 1899-1902

The Krag rifle saw its heaviest action in the Philippines. Although Spanish forces soon were defeated, within months the U.S. Army was fighting a major insurrection (1899-1902) by Filipino nationalists, and later, Pulajanes and Islamic Moro tribesmen (1902-1913).

It was in the inlands that the Krag was immortalized in a marching song. It included the verse, "Underneath the starry flag, civilize them with a Krag, and return us to our beloved homes."

Often the combat was brutal. For example, Cpl. Seth Weld of the 8th U.S. Infantry, his arm slashed by a bolo knife and his Krag disabled, wielded his rifle as a club to beat back 40 attacking Pulajanes and rescue two wounded

comrades on Leyte on Dec. 5, 1906. Weld was awarded the Medal of Honor.

For most of the decade of the 1900s, the Krag was used in the Philippines until it was completely phased out in the regular Army in 1907.

BOXER REBELLION, 1900

In 1900, Americans also found themselves fighting in China against fanatical anti-foreigner "Boxers." When these radicals began killing foreigners in then-Peking and thousands surrounded the city's embassy district, China's government refused to take action. American forces joined an international relief expedition that fought its way from the coast to the capital, some 100 miles inland.

During the advance, U.S. Navy Seaman William Seach and six sailors were attacked by 300 Chinese—they fixed bayonets to their Krags and fought them off. Later they repulsed a Chinese cavalry attack. Seach also was credited with cleaning out "nests of Chinese snipers." And then breaching a fort's wall to capture a cannon and turn it upon the enemy. Seaman Seach was awarded the Medal of Honor.

When the expedition reached Peking, its entry was blocked by formidable walls and barricaded gates.

At the Tung Pien Gate, Russian troops were pinned down until a U.S. 14th Infantry soldier, Musician Calvin Titus, volunteered to climb a wall unarmed. He led the way, covered by rifle fire, and then more soldiers followed, retrieving their Krags with a rope fashioned from rifle slings. Titus' entire company breached the wall, opening the way to rescue the besieged foreigners. He, too, was awarded the Medal of Honor.

LAST ARMY-INDIAN COMBAT, 1898

The Krag also figured in the final fight

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of the Indian campaigns, at the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. Angry at being defrauded by white loggers and their braves being unjustly arrested, a Chippewa mob set free two Indians held by the U.S. marshals.

On Oct. 6, 1898, 20 Krag-armed soldiers of the 3rd Infantry arrived at Leech Lake to reinforce the lawmen. As they stacked arms, one rifle accidentally discharged. Heavy fire erupted from a nearby wood line, killing six soldiers outright and wounding another 11. Five civilians and a tribal police officer also were hit and one police officer killed.

There were no casualties among the Chippewa gunmen. The Indian campaigns' final Medal of Honor was earned that day by Pvt. Oscar Burkard, a



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Pvt. Oscar Burkard

German-immigrant medic, who “rescued several wounded in the action, continuously exposing himself to hostile fire.”

As for the Krag, its .30/40 ammunition proved inferior to the German 8 mm and British .303 rounds. But before it was replaced, 442,883 Krag rifles and 63,116 carbines had been made by November 1904, when manufacturing ceased.

Col. Philip Schockley paid the greatest tribute to the weapon in his 1960 pamphlet, *The Krag-Jorgensen Rifle in the Service*: “The story of the Krag occupies an important chapter in our military annals. It ranked among the finest of military shoulder arms during the decade it was in use as a regular Army issue, and so did its cartridge. The Krag is today—as it was in all its yesterdays—a grand weapon. No American military arm was ever employed in more diversified purposes in so short a span of years.”



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