

Fort Mackinac Rifle Firing Demonstration Bulletin

Program Overview: In the 1880s, soldiers at Fort Mackinac sat at a crossroads of American firearms training. For much of the Army's history, marksmanship was not a priority. Most soldiers fought in long, compact lines with weapons that only had a range of 200 yards or so. After the Civil War, new rifles allowed soldiers to fire faster and accurately beyond 1000 yards. Still, the Army needed to train its soldiers properly. This program explores the capabilities of the Springfield 45-70 "Trapdoor" Rifle and Army training program of the 1880s.

The Springfield .45-70 "Trapdoor" Rifle: From the 1770s to the 1860s, the Army gave its soldiers muzzle smoothbore or rifle-muskets. Soldiers loaded their weapons from the muzzle (the end of the barrel). Loading was an extended task of 3 or 4 movements, often taking 20-30 seconds. This changed with the mass production of repeating and breechloading rifles during the Civil War. Immediately after the Civil War, the Army began experimenting with various breechloading rifles. In 1872, the Army selected the Springfield .45-70 Rifle as their weapon of choice.

The Springfield .45-70 is a breechloading rifle loaded from the back. It fires a .45 caliber bullet with 70 grains of black powder, all contained in a metal cartridge. The barrel of the Springfield has grooves, called rifling, causing the bullet to spin when fired. Rifling makes the weapon shoot faster, farther, and more accurately. To load a .45-70, a soldier pulls back the hammer two clicks and opens the breechblock. Then, they place the cartridge into the rifle and close the breechblock. Now, the soldier can pull the hammer back one more click, aim, and fire the weapon. Well-trained soldiers can repeat this process every 5 seconds or so, firing their rifles 12-15 times a minute.

Training the Soldiers: The Army may have equipped its soldiers with a new rifle, but the Army didn't give them any new training. The Army never had to concern itself with a comprehensive marksmanship training program. Individual officers determined how much target practice their soldiers received, but they often lacked resources to make training effective or consistent. Soldiers lacked confidence in their rifle skills. Some new soldiers often went on campaigns against the Native Americans, only having fired their rifles 6 or 7 times.

Captain Stanhope Blunt developed new training guidelines, requiring soldiers to do target practice at least twice a week. On Mackinac Island, soldiers utilized two rifle ranges for their weekly practice. The Army gave soldiers awards for their marksmanship skills to encourage them to take training seriously. Soldiers who could hit targets at 600 yards at a high consistency earned the Marksmanship distinction. A soldier who could hit targets at 1000 yards at a high consistency earned the Sharpshooter distinction. Of the 80-100 soldiers stationed at Fort Mackinac, 40 earned the Marksman award, and around a dozen earned the Sharpshooter award, making Fort Mackinac the 3rd most accurate garrison in the United States Army in 1887. The newfound focus on marksmanship in the 1880s carried over into the 20th century as the Army modernized, becoming renowned for its marksmanship skills.