



Army Heritage Center
Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

Highlights:

- The Army hastily needed to equip a fresh cadre of Soldiers in preparation to battle Spanish forces.
- Soldiers benefitted from the development of the self-contained cartridge, especially in the wet tropical areas during the Spanish-American War.
- Krag-Jorgensen rifles and Colt revolvers became the standard issue firearms for American Soldiers in the conflict.

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Spanish-American War Equipment

(United States, 1890-1900) For a Soldier, equipment is a matter of survival. Even something as simple as a button can make the difference between victory and defeat if it fails to function properly at the wrong time. For this reason, Soldiers have a strong tendency to become attached to equipment they like, and to modify or discard equipment they find unreliable or useless. Among the Infantry, who have to carry their equipment wherever they go, this tendency is even stronger.

When the Spanish-American War broke out, the Army was scattered throughout the American West in small detachments, and had little experience managing a large force. The Army scrambled to train and equip new Soldiers, and virtually every type of accoutrement and equipment used by the Army back to 1874 was issued to the volunteer force at the beginning of the war. The Army even pulled some Civil War canteens and knapsacks out of storage to equip the troops. Troops embarking for Cuba were ordered to leave their blanket bags behind and use a blanket roll instead. Soldiers tied their blanket rolls in a horseshoe shape and wore them over their shoulders. Individual states raised volunteer regiments and, as in the Civil War, there were some variations in uniforms and equipment among these locally outfitted units.

The Infantryman and his rifle remained at the heart of the Army, but in the years between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War the Soldier's individual equipment had undergone significant changes. Most notably, a



Soldiers from Company M, 2nd Regiment, Illinois Volunteers display their equipment. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, Spanish-American War Miscellaneous Collection.

Soldier's weapon changed from single-shot muzzle-loading black powder firearms to repeating firearms which used a self-contained cartridge and smokeless powder. The new firearms had a much higher rate of fire, increased accuracy at longer ranges, and no longer produced thick clouds of smoke when fired. Self-contained cartridges also resisted wet weather better than the loose powder used for muzzle-loaders.

In 1892, the Army held a competition at Governors Island, New York, to select a new Infantry rifle. They compared



Infantry accoutrements and equipment as worn by the Regular Army beginning in 1894 and throughout the Spanish-American War. This set of equipment shows modifications due to new technology. Cartridge loops on the belt replaced cartridge box and percussion cap pouches of the muzzle-loading era. Soldiers carried their cartridges with the bullet tips down so that the rounds would not slip out of the loop and so that any water that got on the casings would tend to run off rather than gather at the lip where the casing gripped the bullet, seep in, and wet the powder. Image courtesy of CMH.



Top: Colt Caliber .38 Double-Action Army Revolver.

Bottom: Colt Caliber .45 Single-Action Army

rifle designs from Lee, Krag, Mannlicher, Mauser, Schmidt-Rubin, and about 40 other military and civilian designs. The Army selected the Danish .30 caliber bolt-action Krag-Jorgensen magazine. The Krag has an unusual magazine that extends out to the side which allowed Soldiers to “top-off” the magazine by adding one round at a time, rather than waiting until the magazine was empty, as with a typical top-loading rifle.

The Krag .30-40 was also the first smokeless powder cartridge adopted by the U.S. Army. While not truly smokeless, the new powder had several advantages over black powder. Black powder firearms produce clouds of thick smoke that make coordinating actions on the battlefield difficult. Large smoke puffs from black powder weapons could reveal sniper positions and expose them to return fire. Black powder also left a heavy residue causing weapons to jam or misfire. The residue was also highly corrosive, requiring Soldiers to clean their weapons frequently.

Production began at the Springfield Armory in 1894. Right away the design team began making changes, and an improved Model 1896 went into production. Many of the original Model 1892s were returned to the armory to be rebuilt to the new specifications.

The Model 1896 was the Regular Army's

standard rifle during the Spanish-American War. During the war, the Army developed the Model 1898, a version of the Krag that was easier to make. The 1898 saw use by troops on occupation duty in Cuba and during the Philippine Insurrection. The Springfield armory continued to make Krags until 1904, and the rifle remained in service use until 1907 when it was finally replaced by the Model 1903 rifle.

The Model 1896 Krag-Jorgensen carbine was used by the cavalry of the Regular Army and the majority of Volunteer cavalry units during the Spanish-American War. A small number of Model 1898 carbines were produced and issued during the war as well, and in 1899 a newer version of the Krag, known as the Model 1899 carbine would take the regular cavalry into the new century fighting insurgents in the Philippines.

The Army continued to issue Cavalry sabers despite their increasing obsolescence. Cavalry equipment therefore included saber straps along with a holster for a sidearm and ammo belt. Note that the belt in the upper-left corner includes ammo loops for both rifle and pistol cartridges.



Model 1896 .30 Caliber Krag-Jorgensen Rifle (top) & M1896 .30 Caliber Krag-Jorgensen Carbine (bottom). Images courtesy of CMH.

Spanish-American War Equipment

In the late 1800's, Colt began experimenting with double action revolvers. Single action revolvers must be cocked by hand before they can be fired. Double actions cock and fire with a single pull of the trigger. In 1892, the Army adopted a double action revolver, appropriately designated the M1892, in .38 caliber.

While the double action mechanism of this weapon was on the cutting edge of firearms technology during the Spanish-American War, the Army learned .38 caliber ammunition was not up to the task of stopping an attacking opponent in his tracks. Soldiers in the jungles of the Philippines often fought at close quarters, and stories abound of fanatical insurgents continuing to fight despite multiple wounds from a .38.

In response, the Army re-issued the M1873 Colt Single Action Army revolver, (also known as the Colt Peacemaker) to the troops in the Philippines. Reports from the troops confirmed that the .45 round was more effective. This convinced the Army that it needed a modern .45 caliber sidearm, and led to the adoption of one of the Army's most famous firearms, the Colt M1911 automatic pistol in 1911.

Adapted from:

"Survey of U.S. Army Uniforms, Weapons, Accoutrements." Courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History: http://www.history.army.mil/html/museums/uniforms/survey_uwa.pdf.

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The Soldiers here are wearing their blanket rolls as they advance in linear formation. The photo's caption reads: "Note in the photograph the compact, regular advance of the infantry contingent in the attack. This formation would be made obsolete by modern weapons technology evidenced in such machine weapons as the machine gun and the automatic rifle. However, prior to the First World War, the United States Army continued to employ the doctrine of the linear attack as shown here. Photo by U.S. Signal Corps, Courtesy National Archives. Photo can be found at the USAHEC.

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