

# In Distinguished Company

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The First Distinguished Badge  
1887 - 1903

By Dick Culver

It has now been over 118 years since the first Excellence in Competition Match was held and 113 years since the first Distinguished Marksman's Badge was issued. The story of its origins is one rich in history and worthy of recounting.

While both Military and Civilian marksmanship prior to the 1870s was a sometimes sort of thing, the readily available supply of rifles and pistols utilizing metallic cartridges had become almost universal by 1880. The military services had been officially supplied with metallic cartridge rifles since the Allen Conversion of 1866 (eventually evolving into the so-called "Trap Door Springfield" of 1873) and pistols since the adoption of the 1873 Colt Single Action. Even though consistent accuracy was now a possibility, target practice and proficiency with the issued weapons had not kept abreast of the technology. Fortunately, in this case, civilians and citizen soldiers led the way. Military target practice (during Custer's time, for instance) was virtually non-existent due to the perennial lack of funding common to the frontier army of the time. Depending on the unit, the allocated funds for target practice allowed for fewer than 50 rounds per year, in some units considerably less. Individual citizen soldiers who had a personal interest in developing their marksmanship skills often bought ammunition out of their own pocket and practiced on their own time.

Following the Civil War by only six years, a group of National Guard Officers formed the National Rifle Association, chartered in New York State in 1871. A statement by General Winfield Scott Hancock, serving as the President of the NRA in 1881, sums up the goal of the organization: "The object of the NRA is to increase the military strength of the country by making skill in the use of arms as prevalent as it was in the days of the Revolution." This worthy attitude was to guide the efforts of the NRA, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, the Director of Civilian Marksmanship and our citizen soldiers for generations to come.

The importance placed on marksmanship by the hierarchy of the United States Armed Forces of the day may be seen by some of the individuals occupying the position of President of the NRA. General Hancock had watched in awe during the battle of Gettysburg as the 1st U.S. Sharpshooters had been instrumental in defending "Little Round Top". Other noted soldiers moving into the job of NRA President were no less than General Ulysses S. Grant, former President of the United States, and General Philip H. Sheridan, Commander-in-Chief of the U. S. Army. We are, however, getting ahead of our story.

Records of the time indicate that, due to budgetary limitations, many of Custer's men at the Little Big Horn in 1876 had fired as few as 7 rounds during the year to learn and maintain rifle proficiency. New recruits were trained by their units, since no Army wide basic training program had been established. Basically, it was a case of on the job training. If your commanding officer was an advocate of aimed rifle fire, you received more training than your counterparts in other units.

Whether the Custer massacre was responsible for building a fire under the Army hierarchy to improve the Army's marksmanship ability is open to question. However, by 1880 a new pattern of Army wide marksmanship was beginning to take place under the watchful eye General Philip Sheridan, a great believer in rifle marksmanship, who was then serving as the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Army. General Sheridan would have had great encouragement from his former associates then active in training the National Guard Units. Sheridan, perhaps more than any other active duty soldier, was responsible for the coming of a new attitude and a new era in Army marksmanship. Command guidance and patronage from the "top echelons" always assures success!

By 1880 a pattern was beginning to emerge. Local match competition in the various Army "Departments" had begun to identify some truly remarkable rifle shooters. For several years these soldiers had competed and won virtually all the marbles, and those of lesser but still talented competition had begun to get discouraged. In 1881 General Sheridan decreed that a system of competitions would be established to pick the best and brightest shooters from the entire U.S. Army.

In order to understand the system, you must get a quick overview of how the Army was set up in the early 1880s. The Army was divided into three Divisions:

- 1) Atlantic Division
- 2) Division of the Missouri
- 3) Pacific Division

These "Divisions" were subdivided according to their geographical locations into 9 identifiable Departments:

- |                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1) Department of the East     | 6) Department of Dakota       |
| 2) Department of South        | 7) Department of the Columbia |
| 3) Department of Texas        | 8) Department of California   |
| 4) Department of the Missouri | 9) Department of Arizona      |
| 5) Department of the Platt    |                               |

A course of fire was devised using the then issue rifle of United States Army, the U.S. Rifle M1873 Trapdoor Springfield. The course of fire consisted of three seven round strings of slow fire at three different ranges, 200, 300 and 600 yards. These three seven round strings were to be fired at each range for three straight days. Seven rounds would be fired offhand (standing) at 200 yards, seven rounds would be fired kneeling at 300 yards and finishing up with seven rounds fired prone slow (using any approved position of the era, i.e., standard prone, Creedmoor and/or Back Position). The three day aggregate determined the score of each individual. The top 12 individuals were designated "medal winners" and composed the "team" of each Department. This rang up a total of 108 medal winning shooters from the collective teams culled from the 9 departments. These Departmental medal winners were sent to their respective Division Competitions according to their geographical location.

Each Division Match chose the 12 best rifle shots from those teams competing from the Departmental teams. The 12 best Divisional shooters (picked from the competing Departmental Teams) were awarded medals and comprised the Division Team (i.e. The Atlantic Division Team, The Missouri Division Team and the Pacific Division Team). This Departmental and Division Competition was to be held annually, leaving a total of 36 medal winners from the total of Divisional Shooters (12 medal winners from each Division).

By 1882 the Army had decided to conduct an "All Army Match" on a bi-annual basis, that is, in 1882, 1884, 1886, 1888, etc. The match would be fired in the manner described above. The competitors would be the 12 medal winners from each Divisional Match, chosen in the same manner as the medal winners in 1881. This would leave three Divisional Teams of 12 men each along with excellent rifle shooters selected from the Army Engineers. The course of fire would be identical to the original and fired three times (on three separate days). The All Army Team (selected from the top shooters competing in the All Army Match) would consist of a total of top 12 shooters (medal winners). These individuals would be the top two shooters from the Atlantic Division, the top three shooters from the Pacific Division, the top six shooters from the Missouri and the top shooter from the Battalion of Engineers.

Awards presented to the winners in the Army Match were expensive and ornate, designed by no less a firm than Tiffany's Jewelry of New York, and fabricated (struck) by the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia. The winners were allowed to wear their medals on their uniforms when medals were authorized and were quite a welcome addition to an Army that was rather skimpy on awards. Consider that the Medal of Honor was the only medal (individual decoration) authorized in that far off day and time. Distinguished Service Crosses and Silver Stars would not be approved and authorized until WWI. The soldiers authorized to wear these ornate marksmanship awards were set apart from their less talented comrades.

The medals awarded to the Departmental and Division Competition were designed by each Department and each Division and purchased from allocated funds. The medals were apparently not of uniform design, but were the brainchild of each command. The medals were usually real gold and were designed by known jewelers such as Jens Pedersen in New York. Much like the All Army Medals, these too were authorized for uniform wear. One of these Departmental Medals was to become the basis for our current Distinguished Marksman's Badge.

The course of fire for the Departmental, Division and All Army Matches became the first “Leg Matches” and on paper, looked like this:

<b>Course of Fire For The Departmental, Division, and Army Rifle Competition (1881)</b>				
Range in yards	Target	# of Rounds	Position	Time Limit
200	8" Bullseye 4 Ring of 26" 3 Ring of 46" All other hits on the 4x6' target counted 2 points	7	Standing	Reasonable for slow fire, probably the usual 1 minute/shot
300	"	7	Kneeling	"
600	22" Bullseye 4 Ring of 38" 3 Ring of 54" All other hits on a 6'x6' target counted 2 points	7	Prone (any of the then current normally used prone positions were accepted, including the “back position”, the “Creedmoor”, etc.)	"
<p>This course of fire was fired on each of three match days after “several” days practice. Medal winners from the Departmental Matches were ordered to the Divisional Matches where the top twelve shooters would be awarded prize medals or “credits” (later to be called “leg medals” by the shooters). These top twelve were designated the Departmental Team. Each Departmental Team was sent to compete in the Divisional Matches.</p> <p>The authorized rifle for this competition was the issue Trapdoor Springfield service rifle with a 6-pound trigger and using standard issue (.45-70) service ammunition.</p>				

Individual skill with a service arm was indeed commendable, and the Army had seen fit to authorize relatively munificent expenditures on medals to encourage young shooters to hone their skill with arms. The high-ranking brass of the U.S. Army felt that precision marksmanship would increase the Army’s overall effectiveness during times of conflict, and that the award of gold medals would encourage competition throughout the Army. While this was a worthwhile **goal**, there was one fly in the ointment... the same individuals seemed to be winning all the medals on a perennial basis. The young shooters and those of only slightly lesser skill than the annual medal winners were becoming discouraged.

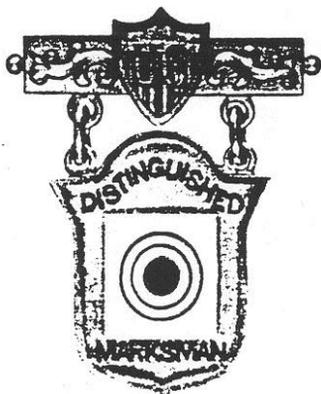
General Sheridan, a great believer in Marksmanship (he went on to become the 9th President of the National Rifle Association), came up with an equitable solution to the problem. He noted that there were many shooters with great promise that were becoming discouraged by a number of extremely talented old timers who traditionally laid claim to the Army awards. The question was, what to do about the situation and not alienate the icons of the Army shooting community? If he could just “retire” the perennial winners to a non-shooting status to make room for the youngsters, his problem would be solved. His solution was to create “*A Distinguished Class of Marksmen*” that would henceforth no longer be eligible to compete for medals during the annual competitions.

General Order 12, issued by General Sheridan early February 1884, established a class of *Distinguished Marksmen*. To become a Distinguished Marksman, a man had to have been selected for a Departmental Team three (3) times (the term “Departmental Team” in those days indicated that he had been a “medal winner” in the Departmental Matches), or had to have won any three of the Army authorized marksmanship medals in Departmental, Division or All-Army competition. These men were transferred to a distinguished class of shooters no longer eligible to compete for such marksmanship honors without special permission from the Commanding General of the Army

The first 15 perennial Army medal winners were transferred to the Distinguished Class of Shooters by the publication of General Order 24 issued in March of 1884. These 15 individuals were our first Distinguished Marksmen (although the Distinguished Badge itself was not issued until 1887). A minor (if peaceful) revolt of these “benched” and greatly talented shooters was seething, and a considerable amount of “distinguished lobbying” resulted in the establishing of a Distinguished Shoot-Off (so to speak) on the years that the All-Army Matches were not held. These matches would be open to only those shooters who had already attained the title of Distinguished Marksman. Since the All-Army Matches had been instituted in 1882 to be held bi-annually, i.e. 1882, 1884, 1886, etc., the first “All Distinguished Match” (an unofficial but descriptive title) was held in 1887, appropriately enough the same year the Distinguished Badge itself was first issued.

The medals issued to the individuals placing in the Departmental, Divisional and All Army matches soon became known as “Leg Medals”. Why the term “Leg Medal?” No one is totally sure, but it has often been theorized that the three legs necessary to become a Distinguished Marksman represented the three “legs” on a milking stool, all of which were necessary for the stool to stand alone. True? Who knows? The origin of the terminology has been lost in the mists of history, but it certainly represents one explanation. Don’t forget, the milking stool was a much more familiar item to the soldiers of 1887 than it would be to today’s competitors!

Although modern shooters would certainly recognize the original Distinguished Marksman’s Badge, a change in Army regulations in 1885 did away with the circular bullseye and went to an elliptical one to be used in Army rifle qualification. The rationale for the new bullseye was supposedly that the “beaten zone” on the target face (an incorrect but understandable description) produced by the Trapdoor Springfield shooting issue black-powder .45-70 cartridges was longer than it was wide. A long range test conducted in 1879 confirmed that the mean windage at 1000 yards was roughly twice as long as it was wide. It held its windage well enough, but the quality control in the manufacture of the black powder cartridges gave a rather wide range of varying velocities resulting in vertical stringing of shots.



Distinguished Badge  
1904 -1959

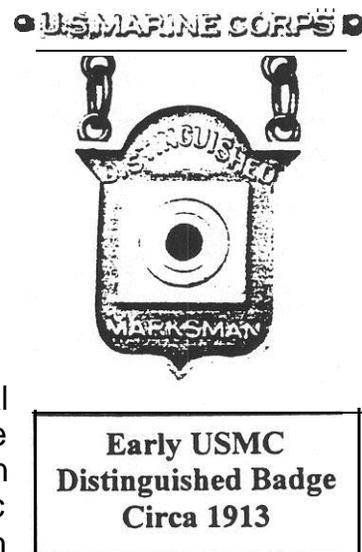
Rather than fix the ammunition problem, the typical military mind went about treating a brain tumor with an aspirin. Rather than work on tightening up the quality control on the ammunition, they simply rearranged the target shape to fit the shape of a typical group. The shooters (especially the National Guard shooters who were the vanguard of the precision target

shooters of the time) protested loudly, but to no avail! The elliptical bullseye was to remain the standard Army target until 1903. Since the first Distinguished Badges weren't issued until 1887, it was only natural that the Army would use the elliptical target shape for the enameled target gracing the badge. Shortly after the re-adoption of the round bullseye in 1903, the Distinguished Badges followed suit and also went to the round bullseye once the supply of elliptical badges was exhausted.

The badge itself was apparently the design of a certain Captain Stanhope Blunt. Captain Blunt first designed a similar badge for the Department of Dakota rifle competition in 1885 while he was serving as Inspector of Rifle Practice for the Department. Capt. Blunt had it manufactured by a company called Jens Pedersen in New York. Capt. Blunt was transferred to the Ordnance Department in Washington, D.C. shortly thereafter and was assigned to rewriting the Army's Rifle and Carbine Regulations (which included the newly adopted elliptical bullseye). Apparently Capt. Blunt liked his own design and had the same Pedersen Company produce the new Distinguished Marksman's Badge in a format that closely followed his "Dakota design". The stars and stripes were added to the familiar "US" shield that still adorns the Army and Civilian versions of the badge today.

The first 60 Distinguished Marksman's Badges were delivered by Pedersen in June 1887, and 10 additional badges in October of that year.

Military marksmanship began to catch on in the other military services around the turn of the 20th Century, with the Marine Corps, Navy and Coast Guard hopping on the bandwagon. Each service devised its own set of in-service Excellence in Competition medals, based on the "three leg rule" that had proved so successful for the Army. The Marines had their (geographic) Divisional Matches (now called Division Matches) followed by a (All) Marine Corps Match (called simply the Marine Corps Match); The competitors for the Marine Corps Match were the medal winners from the Division Matches. The first four Marines had qualified for the distinguished award by 1905 and General Elliott (the Commandant of the Marine Corps) approved the award of the Distinguished Marksman's Badge to Marines in 1908. The Navy held (geographic) Fleet Matches (Atlantic Fleet, Pacific Fleet, etc.) followed by an All Navy Match with the more or less standard rules applying.



Pistols were not neglected, and although the initial guidelines for establishing a Distinguished Badge for Pistol Shooters were a bit hazy, the pistol competition began to take hold after the turn of the last century with the first badges being issued in 1903. Although there are no available pictures of such a badge, manuals written *before 1911* (the year of adoption of the Colt Service M1911) mention a Distinguished "Revolver" Shot Badge. Medals for handguns were won and issued in a manner similar to the rifle badges. Since the Marine Corps didn't issue any Distinguished Pistol Badges until 1920, all Marine Corps Distinguished Pistol Badges would have depicted the 1911 Pistol.

The National Trophy Rifle Match was instituted under the guidance of the newly created National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice in 1903 (fiscal 1994) to allow the teams of each service to compete against one another. While the first National Rifle Match in 1903 was only a service rifle team event, it marked the first competition for the coveted “*Dogs of War Trophy*” that has come to represent the epitome of service rifle shooting. Subsequent years saw the National Trophy Match(s) expand into team and Individual matches to include both rifle and pistol competition. The National Trophy individual Match starting in 1904 allowed individuals to qualify for personal leg medals to count towards the designation of Distinguished Marksman. Participation was initially restricted to regular service and National Guard teams and individuals until 1923, when civilians who were already “leg medal holders” from their service days were allowed to continue to compete until they became Distinguished Marksmen or Distinguished Pistol Shots. A wise Congress opened the National Trophy Matches to civilians in 1926 with an eye toward preparing the citizenry for service in times of national emergency, a policy that served the country well through the Vietnam War.

While the criteria for selecting Leg Medal winners has changed since the 1880s from a set number of individuals competing in a Departmental or Division Competition, the basic idea has remained the same. Medal winners are now selected by a percentage of Non-Distinguished shooters competing in authorized “Leg” or “Excellence in Competition Matches.” Over the years the criteria for winning a Leg Medal have changed from the top 12 competitors in a Divisional or Departmental Match to the top 20 percent of non-distinguished shooters in a match, and finally to the top 10 percent, where it remains to this day. In 1960 the individual leg medals were assigned points (a bronze leg was worth 6 points, a silver 8 and a gold 10). It now became necessary to accumulate a total of 30 points to become distinguished, but if you were of considerable talent you could still become a distinguished shooter by attaining three gold legs. Any combination of legs that equalled 30 or more points resulted in the individual being designated a Distinguished Shooter.

In retrospect, General Sheridan’s scheme to prevent talented new shooters from becoming discouraged by the perennial medal winners was a resounding success and his basic rules have guided service rifle competition every since. Since the first Excellence in Competition Badge was issued, we have fired six (6) different rifles in the pursuit of being recognized as belonging to a Distinguished Class of shooters. Distinguished Badges and Leg Medals have been issued for firing competitive scores using Trapdoor Springfields, Kraggs, M1903s, M1s, M14s and M16s, but the original idea has not changed. General Sheridan’s dream of having an Army well qualified in the use of their basic service arms remains the goal of the Excellence in Competition Program.

The designation “Distinguished Marksman” originally inscribed on the badge continued until 1960, when the U.S. Army and the DCM (now the CMP) decided to change the terminology to “*Distinguished Rifleman.*” To those wearing the Distinguished Badge in the 1950s the term “Distinguished Marksman” seemed a bit archaic. In the 1880s, the term “Marksman” conjured up visions of a man or woman especially skilled with a rifle. By the late 1950s the term “Marksman” usually indicated the lowest rung on the weapons qualification



**DCM/CMP  
Distinguished Badge  
1959 - Present**

ladder following after Expert and Sharpshooter. When the designation was changed, the Army pushed the Adjutant's Shield up on the suspension bar slightly and added "U.S. Army" to the top bar. Aside from the Army inscription on the suspension bar, the Army and the Civilian badge remain identical. The Naval Service (Navy, Marines and Coast Guard), always a vanguard of conservatism, continued to designate their Distinguished Medal winners as "Distinguished *Marksmen*"; a term still inscribed on the badges issued by the Naval Service.

The Air Force entered the competitive service rifle and pistol shooting game in 1960, compliments of General Curtis LeMay. Being of a trendy bent, they of course went with the newly established inscription of "*Distinguished Rifleman*" rather than "*Distinguished Marksman*".

Until well into the 1970s some 90 + years after the adoption of the first Distinguished Badge, the Distinguished Badges were made of 14 k gold, weighing in at almost a full ounce. Since the price of gold was set at \$20 until the 1930s it should be no surprise that the cost of replacing a lost badge was \$20 coming out of a soldier's pay should he misplace or lose it – a sizeable sum of money for a private who only drew \$21 .00 per month. President Richard Nixon, by allowing the price of gold to "float" on the international market starting in the early 1970s drove the price of gold steadily upward sometime exceeding \$400 per ounce. Even with gold currently hovering around \$300 per ounce, it should be no surprise that by the time the stock of the 14k gold badges was exhausted in the late 1970s the "golden day" of the



USMC  
Distinguished  
Marksman's Badge  
1920s - Present

Distinguished Badge was doomed. While the current issue of the Distinguished Badge is still attractive, and little changed from Captain Blunt's original design, it is, alas, no longer made of precious metal. This perhaps says something about the seeming decline of our national character and without disregard

of the desirability of a trained citizenry of modern-day yeomen ready to defend our country from the barbarians ever increasingly knocking at the gates.

**Acknowledgements:**

My personal thanks to Maj. E. J. (Jim) Land USMC (Ret.), currently serving as the Secretary of the National Rifle Association. Without Jim's invaluable assistance in acquiring pictures of the various Distinguished Marksman's Badges from the earlier eras, much of the narrative would have to have relied on the reader's imagination. Many of the Badges illustrated are currently in the collections of either the NRA or Marine Corps Museums. Of particular interest is the 1913 Marine Corps Distinguished Marksman's Badge awarded to Lieutenant Littleton Waller Taswell Waller, noted Marine Corps Shooter and later hero of Belleau Wood and many other battles during WWI. The Distinguished Marksman's Badge identified as the badge issued from 1904 – 1959 once belonged to Lt. Col. Bill Brophy, noted ordnance expert and author of "*The '03 Springfield*".