

A History of Target Marking
By
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The shooting sports have long been known for camaraderie. Down time between relays offers untold opportunities to make new friends, renew old friendships, and partake in the inevitable yarn spinning that often educates, elucidates, and amuses. What sets the highpower discipline apart from smallbore and pistol is the extra time to fraternize which offered by having to mark targets.

For most contemporary highpower competitors rapidly servicing targets in a professional manner is part of the regular match routine and doing so is the hallmark of a good rifleman, but it was not always so.

The first rifle targets in the United States were little more than a black circle drawn on a blazed tree trunk with a piece of charcoal pulled from a campfire. Frontiersmen would shoot three or five shots at the mark, insert pegs into the holes, and stretch a string around them. The rifleman with the shortest string was the winner.

When long range target shooting became popular in the mid 1860s 12 feet by 6 feet metal plates with a black square marking the center were set up at 800, 900, and 1,000 yards. Marksmen would launch a huge 475 grain soft lead bullet in front of 50 grains of black powder at the metal plate; the clang of its strike could be heard at the firing line. Target boys, crouching in a pit in front of the target, would then mark the shot location with a paddle and dab a little paint over the mark with a brush on a long stick.

Later the more familiar window sash target frames became popular, and more practical, with the advent of printed paper targets. Some of the earliest paper targets were not circular but rather elliptical. The ammunition issued for the .45-70 Trapdoor Springfield was not well manufactured and shot groups were usually roughly twice as high as wide. It was easier for the military to redesign the target than to address the real problem: poor quality control at the ammunition plant. As a result the earliest Distinguished Marksman Badges display an elliptical target, common at the time.

With the advent of the 1903 Springfield the ammunition issues were ironed out and the targets were printed with round circles. The "C" target had a black center, 12 inches in diameter worth five points, a 24 inch four ring, and a 36 inch three ring. After a while shooters were racking up perfect scores and a six inch "V" ring was added to break ties. After several 250X250s had been fired at the National Matches the "5V" target's days were numbered. The "10X" target with its six scoring rings, three inch X through 37 inch five ring, made its first appearance in competition in 1967.

The "5V" and "10X" targets are military in nature, as a matter of fact the 200 yard "10X" target's nomenclature is "Military Target, Rifle, Competition, Short Range." That got me to thinking about how military marksmanship training units in the ancient days dealt with teaching armies of unlettered peasants how to employ their weapons effectively.

There was no greater ancient organized army than that of Rome. Infantry Legionnaires were armed with a short thrusting sword, the *gladius*, a half dozen or so lead weighted throwing darts called *plumbatae*, from the Latin for lead *plumbum*, and a short javelin, the *pilum*. They must have had to practice throwing the *plumbatae* and *pilum* to develop both skill and accuracy in their employment. Its importance was so great that Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus wrote in his treatise *De Re Militari* (Concerning Military Matters) that, "The centurion in the infantry is chosen for his size, strength and dexterity in throwing his missile weapons..."

The *Baleares*, Balearic Islands mercenaries who used the sling as their primary weapon, as well as the *Sagittarius*, archers, also mercenaries, who used the *arcus* which shot a wooden shaft and iron pointed *sagitta* also needed to train regularly. After all, marksmanship is a most perishable skill.

Imagine, if you will, the Roman equivalent of Camp Perry, a military camp located on Lake Como or Lake Maggiore, where the Legions camped each summer and competed with *plumbatae*, *pilum*, and *arcus* for a place in the coveted "Emperors C."

Under the command of the likes of General, or *Legatus*, Marcus Licinius Crassus the Legionnaires practiced that most fundamental all military skills, marksmanship. Just imagine firing lines of Legionnaires throwing their missile weapons and calling their shots, "Centurion, my first shot for record was an IX and IV o'clock!"

But, like most troops they grouched and complained about the Sisyphean task of pulling targets and the nuisance of looking for missed shots. It was there that they took to cursing under their breath, both the poor marksmanship of their peers and the general who consigned them to the drudgery of the pits, by derisively calling a request to pull and check a target as a "Marcus," which has come down to us as marking targets.

But the real question is just how did Roman marksmen break ties? Their targets already had either a "V" or an "X" ring. Just what did they call the smaller circle within highest scoring ring of their targets?

My first high power match happened to be on the 15th Infantry range at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in 1967. Those were the waning days of the old V target and marking and scoring shots was different than it is now. After you shot the target was pulled, marked, and pushed up. The pit crew would then indicate the location of your shot by holding a white disc on a long stick over the shot and fluttering it. A specific placement and movement of the paddle would then indicate the value. V was marks with a round white paddle swung across the target from nine o'clock to three o'clock. A five was marked with a round white paddle raised from six o'clock pausing for a couple of seconds over the bull and then withdrawn. A four was marked with a round red paddle placed over the center of the bull. A three was marked with a round white paddle with a black cross on it raised over the center of the bull. A miss was marked with a red flag or paddle waved across the target from nine to three o'clock

Since then the target has changed to the decimal bull and the marking system has been revised several times. Flags are no longer used, being replaced by value panels and chalk boards. However, one term from the flag days has held on with a tenacity that is indicative of the strong traditions of the high power community. If a shooter had the misfortune of firing a miss a red flag was waved across the front of the target. The flag, for was commonly known as "Maggie's Drawers," the term based on a ribald old soldier's song of the era entitled *Those Old Red Flannel Drawers That Maggie Wore*.

Target marking is an essential procedure on rifle ranges in all military organizations and there appears to be some sort of commonality in the signals across national boundaries. Perhaps this is a legacy of the organized international shooting movement that has been a fixture since the International Shooting Union, now International Shooting Sports Federation, was created 1907.

With that in mind a target marking tale related by a World War I British infantryman makes some sense. For most of the war the zigzag lines of the combatant's trenches were just a few hundred yards apart and any readily observable activity quite often drew fire from the opposing side. One muddy spring day a young soldier noted the blade of a shovel and the top of a helmet pop up at regular intervals from the German trench as a Hun was trying to make things either more safe or comfortable. Beckoning over his sergeant, who in turn called over their officer, the trio watched and timed the regular movement while the rest of the squad carefully positioned themselves behind sandbags; their Enfield magazines fully charged, safeties off, and aimed at a spot just even with the spoil that was building up in front of the trench.

After a little bit all was ready and when the shovel and helmet next burst into view the command for independent rapid fire was quickly given and a swarm of .303 bullets were sent buzzing on their way toward the German trench. Magazines emptied the British soldiers quickly dropped behind their parapet and reloaded. Their officer peered through his trench periscope across No Man's Land at the bullet pockmarked section of German trench as the breeze blew away the smell of cordite and gun smoke revealing the Hun's shovel thrust straight into the air, it then was vigorously waved back and forth from left to right, the universal symbol for a miss. After spending 72 hours, 51 of which it was raining, waist deep in mud and water the strain of combat was broken for an instant and the riflemen broke into a raucous laughter at the spunk of the German.