MIT Rifle: 1899-1919

Justine Li

STS.050: History of MIT

Professors Mindell and Smith

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Dedication

To MIT Rifle team members, past, present, and future, but especially to Jennifer Paek (2010), Emily Houston (2010) and Rifle Coach Jerry Mulloy for experiencing every miss and every inner 10 with me for the last four years, and to Pistol Coach Will Hart for happily providing extra words of encouragement. – Justine Li, 2010
This document chronicles the origins and early evolution of the MIT Rifle Team from class battalion teams to the Institute-wide Rifle Squad, roughly resembling the Rifle Team today in 2010. Given the assignment of writing a paper chronicling an aspect of student life at MIT, research began in the online archive of old issues of The Tech. Since the telephone and internet did not appear until after the newspaper, the students used The Tech as a way of announcing events and meetings to their peers. As such, an abundant amount of information regarding the origins of the rifle team has been gleaned from such announcements of club meetings, practice and competition logistics, as well as competition results.

Based on the information gathered in the newspaper regarding the MIT Rifle Team, further research was done to get a full picture of its situation. Relying on photographs and brief descriptions of facilities and equipment, one is able to obtain a glimpse of the conditions under which the original MIT Rifle Team (or ‘Squad’ as they called it back then) trained and competed. This paper documents the Rifle Team from 1899 to 1919, tracking its divergence from the military cadets of MIT past to the individual rifle team it became by the end of the Great War.

The Founding of MIT and Military Cadet Training

In 1861, William Barton Rogers published a plan for an Institute of Technology for establishment in Boston. He argued that to further industrial progress, the community must study the “phenomena of nature and... physical laws”¹ as European institutions have done. As the need for technological development flourished in New England, Rogers argued that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology based on practical arts and sciences would increase knowledge through

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¹ William Rogers. *Objects and Plan of an Institute of Technology including a Society of Arts, a Museum of Arts, and a School of Industrial Science*. (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1861), p.4.
research and publication. In order to create an institution that would succeed in advancing practical knowledge, Rogers wanted to develop specialties and lab research. His model for education in practical sciences was West Point. As the first engineering program in the United States, West Point prepared its students for field work and trained in military tactics and the science of war. Unlike West Point, which is a federally regulated institute, MIT would be able to change its admissions requirements. The influence of West Point was seen in the “First Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students” in 1865. A section titled “Military Tactics” stated that all regular students would be educated in the use of small-arms and organized into companies to train. As the students developed their small-arms skill through institute training, competition between the companies naturally arose.

Origin: 1899-1906

The term “Varsity Rifle team” was first seen in the April 20th, 1899 issue of The Tech. Through the rest of the school year, The Tech published articles regarding competition arrangements and results. In this article, “The Freshman Battalion”, The Tech announces the formation of Class Rifle teams by April 22nd, 1899 and the arrangement of interclass matches. This is also the first and only mention of the formation of a Varsity Rifle team for a match against the Harvard Rifle and Pistol Club. The search for records of the match against Harvard proved fruitless. In this first match, the class of 1900 defeated the class of 1902 by six points.

From the posted results of the interclass match, it can be seen that each competitor had a total of ten shots, with each perfect shot awarded five points to the shooter for a total possible score of 50. Each class with a seven man team, the total team scores were a maximum of 350.

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2 Angulo, 86.
3 First Annual Catalogue, 23.
The last sentence in the article prior to the table of scores notes that the shooters were affected by the “novelty of match shooting.”

The match took place at Walnut Hill Range, the location of the Massachusetts Rifle Association (MRA). Chartered in 1875 by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Walnut Hill Range is located in Woburn, MA. The marksmen participating in competitions at this range were able to shoot up to a distance of about 1000 yards. While it is unclear of the distance at which the students shot, we can assume that since many students practiced simultaneously that they practiced shooting at 50 yards with eight positions opened in 1887. A composite target showing the Creedmoor and the Massachusetts scoring systems may be similar to the competition targets of the MIT Class Rifle teams and Rifle Club during this time period. With the beginning of competitive rifle shooting within the school, the basis of the Rifle Team in the form of smaller class rifle teams laid the path towards MIT’s participation in intercollegiate rifle competitions.

National Rifle Association and the Militia Act of 1903

After the suggestion of the formation of a team in 1899, however, there was no further mention of a team or club until the Tech issue published February 18th, 1907. It can be inferred from the absence of notices that the idea was dropped possibly when the plans for the match against the Harvard Rifle and Pistol Club fell through. Without the external influence of the National Rifle Association (NRA), the MIT Rifle program could have potentially vanished entirely.

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6 Walnut Hill History
In 1871, William Church wanted to restore the practice of precision shooting within the military. Modeled after the *Schützenbunde*, Church sought aid from the New York National Guard to set up the NRA. With the connection to the National Guard Association, the NRA was established to promote precision shooting since it was evident that they must turn “the Guard into sharpshooters.”\(^7\) Since the NRA was not actually a part of the military, though it still maintains close ties, the competitions at the NRA’s first range in Creedmoor, Long Island were sponsored by manufacturers. In the decline at the turn of the century, the NRA suggests to Congress that a National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice (NBPRP) through the War Department to build facilities for civilian use. Through this Militia Act of 1903, the NRA was able to promote military preparedness. Furthermore, the NRA utilized their position within this board to pass Public Law 149 in 1905 allowing for the sale of surplus military firearms and ammunition to established rifle clubs.\(^8\) With the close ties between the government and the NRA, Congress agreed in 1912 to fund NRA shooting matches annually to provide a venue in which competitors could demonstrate their sharpshooting skills.

With federal support through the National Rifle Association, the MIT Rifle Club regained its momentum. The NRA provided a venue through which the students could compete amongst their peers and improve the United States’ “military preparedness.”\(^9\)

**MIT Rifle Club: 1907-1916**

The revival of the Rifle Club was in part a result of the inception of the National Rifle Reserve. In an effort to prepare the United States for war, the government recognized that the army will be composed of young men. To cultivate marksmanship and general shooting skill, the


\(^8\) Davidson, 27.

\(^9\) Davidson, 27.
National Rifle Reserve was created and the federal government arranged the construction of facilities for 500,000 to 1 million men to train.\textsuperscript{10} By reinstating the Rifle Club, MIT would receive funding to be put towards supplying their marksmen with the necessary equipment to train.

Ending the silence regarding the status of the MIT Rifle Team, a notice for interested students was posted on February 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1907. Two days later, on February 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1907, The Tech announced that the constitution had been accepted. While the constitution itself was lost in 1919, it was implied that the purpose of the Rifle Club was to increase the shooting skill of all willing members. The members of the Rifle Club announced the results of the first regular shoot in the March 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1907 issue. For this time period, there has been little evidence as to the rifles that were used. Since Public Act 149 of 1905 provided evidence that surplus military rifles were being sold to rifle clubs, it can be inferred that the MIT Rifle Club utilized the deal to its full potential. The first regular shoot composed of five 5 point shots. The scores ranged from 11 to 20.\textsuperscript{11} Since they still practiced outdoor at the Walnut Hill Range, it can be assumed that they still fired at 50 yards. The competition within the club would compel each member to improve and instill pride in the members. By October of that year, the club shot to qualify for the National Marksman’s Reserve (NMR). In order to receive the bronze membership button from the government, the shooter had to score at least 50 out of 75 possible points at the match. As the first of many federally granted awards for marksmanship, these awards were used both to motivate the young men through reward but also to keep a list of marksmen with the federal government that could be called up for military service. A short three years after the federal government created the National Rifle Reserve, eight members of the MIT Rifle Club

\textsuperscript{11} “Rifle Club Shoot,” \textit{The Tech}, 20 March 1907, 1.
qualified. The NMR qualification shoot required five shots each at 200, 300, and 500 yards. The people who qualified were listed in an eligible volunteer list at the War Department. This idea of a standing, skilled, volunteer militia would greatly enhance the military might of the United States in the near future.

Three years later, in the October 28th, 1910 issue of the *Tech*, the procedure of the MIT Rifle Club’s match against the Columbia University shows a slight change from the previous competition rules. Since previous competitions were either institutional or individual qualifiers in the national scope, the rules and processes involved in deciding the winner of the match changed. Due to the distance between the locations, each team was to shoot the match on its own range to avoid high-cost travel. Each shooter had two sighting shots and 10 scoring shots for each distance 200, 300, and 500 yards, similar to the distances for the NMR qualification. The team score, a sum of the individual scores of six team members, as well as the highest individual score were exchanged via telegraph at the conclusion of the match to determine the winner. While the *Tech* did not report on the winner of this first match, the existence of similar clubs at other educational institutions implied the existence of a governing body.

The match against University of California less than four years later had a team of five shooters instead of the original six in the match against University of Columbia. The top five shooters of every match were chosen to represent the MIT Rifle Team. After shooting ten shots standing and ten shots prone (lying on the ground) both at 50 feet at a half inch bull’s eye, the team score was sent to the NRA for comparison with the University of California scores. Using

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15 “Rifle Team Meets Univ. of California,” *The Tech*, 7 Jan 1914, 1.
the same scoring scheme, in 1916, the Indoor Rifle team shot an intercollegiate match in which the targets were sent into the NRA by the local NRA judge for scoring. It can be seen from the article that the scoring team was still composed of the top five shooters within the Rifle Club.\footnote{\textquoteleft\textquoteleftRifle Team Wins: Results of First Intercollegiate Match Announce,	extquoteright\textquoteright The Tech, 7 February 1916, 1.}

In the time period, since much of the land near MIT was undeveloped, the outdoor shooting facilities were nearly boundless. However, since weather in the northeast tended to decline quickly in the fall, it was necessary for the MIT Rifle Club and other local shooting clubs to find indoor facilities in which to practice. The first ranges at which MIT students competed, either as part of a class team or as part of the Rifle Club, were those in existence and use prior to their inception. Since rifle competition began prior to MIT’s move to Cambridge, the Walnut Hill Range (outdoor), the First Corps of Cadets Range (indoor), and the Wakefield Range (outdoor) provided sufficient space to conduct both intercollegiate and national matches during the institute’s time in Boston.

The First Corps of Cadets building on Columbus Ave. provided the indoor shooting facility for MIT’s shooting teams in Boston. Built for the First Corps of Cadets such that they would have sufficient drilling room, the building housed a Northeast and South armory as well as an indoor rifle range.\footnote{Joseph Antenucci, Christopher Ripman, and Kurt Zumwalt, \emph{Armory First Corps of Cadets 1887-1973} \textup{(Cambridge: John L. McAdams Industries, 1973)}, 25 and 33.} While it is not explicitly stated in the \textit{Tech} articles, I speculate that the South Armory the rifle club notices refer to the South armory of this building.
Wakefield Range, also known as the Camp Curtis Rifle Range, was where the qualifying matches were held for the members of the MIT Rifle Club. Located in Reading, MA, the Wakefield Range was large enough to host large shooting events.

Finally recognized as an official sport on March 8th, 1916, the following Friday issue of *The Tech* described the insignias the MIT Institute Advisory Council awarded to both the indoor and outdoor rifle team members. The “Class” ranking system, “Class A” through “Class C,” was the first criteria for the award. Only members of the top third of all shooters participating in collegiate competitions were eligible for the insignia. The letters “rTt” were assigned to both the outdoor and indoor rifle teams. This was also the first mention of the “T with crossed rifles” that adorns current (2010) *Tech* articles regarding the MIT Rifle Team.19

MIT Rifle Team: 1916-1919

Having been assigned insignias, and the opening of the Walker Memorial Range in November 1917,20 the Rifle Team was allowed to hold practices every day from 4 to 6 specifically “to promote interest in shooting at the Institute…[ and to] give each member a chance to develop his marksmanship to the greatest degree possible.”21 The Walker Memorial Range permitted shooting distances of 50 and 75 feet and had motor driven targets.22 The new shooting facility on campus gave the Rifle Team the opportunity to practice more frequently which helped the shooters meet the increased national qualification standard for marksman and sharpshooter.

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The biggest clue into the rifles the MIT Rifle Club used from 1899 to 1919 was an article in the *Tech* regarding an order in 1916. The members of the team purchased Krag magazine carbines and Springfield service rifles.\(^2\) While the article was not entirely clear on the specific model of the rifles, for the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that both rifle models were those commonly used in infantry at the time. For the “Krag magazine carbine,” the .30 caliber model 1892 and for the “Springfield service rifle,” the Springfield Army Rifle model 1903 were representative of the rifles the MIT Rifle Club purchased and used in competition. While the performance of these rifles is not within the scope of this discussion, the fact that the rifles used in competition were nearly identical, if not exactly the same, as the ones that would have been used in combat. This was an example of how the original intent of forming these shooting clubs on the collegiate level was to train young men in skilled marksmanship.

Following the Great War draft on May 18\(^{th}\), 1917, MIT became the only school left with access to Springfield rifles, the rifles used both in competition and in the Great War. Without sufficient target rifles in other college teams due to the war effort, the original MIT Rifle Club was unable to compete on the intercollegiate level. The MIT Rifle Club members continued to shoot in National Rifle Association hosted matches.

For the period between 1899 and 1919, the marksmanship program at MIT blossomed with the help of the federal government mostly due to the facilities and equipment made available to those students passionate about pursuing “rifle shooting on a scientific basis.”\(^24\) Without federal legislation, the Rifle Club/Team would not have met success. The creation of the National Rifle Association in promoting the same ideals as established in the Rifle Squad back in


1899 allowed for organized competition and standards for marksmanship. The additional financial support through subsequent legislation made it possible for the institution and its students to cultivate relationships with other institutions through competition.

While the ultimate goal of improving marksmanship remains the same as at the founding of the MIT Rifle Squad, the MIT Rifle team now participates in only recreational shooting. With the original intention to train young men for war, the rifles used were the same or similar to those used in the infantry. Today, the rifles used on the MIT Rifle Team are for recreational target shooting. Similarly, with the advance of rifle technology, accuracy has increased and the targets themselves have gotten much smaller. The NRA and various governing bodies continue to organize competitions to encourage the practice of precision riflery.
Appendix A – Pictures

Figure A: Tech article reporting the results of the first interclass rifle match, 11 May 1899

Figure B: Tech article reporting the results of an intercollegiate match, 7 January 1914
Figure C: Sketches of the Krag magazine carbine, Model 1892

Figure D: Picture of an advertisement for a refurbished Springfield Army rifle, Model 1903
Figure E: Plan for Walnut Hill Range in Woburn, MA from Walnut Hill History
Figure F: Rifle Range in the basement of the First Corps of Cadets building

Figure G: South Armory in the First Corps of Cadets building
Figure H: Postcard image of the 1000 yard range of Wakefield, MA.

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