

US Army Weapons Qualification Badges and Certificates, 1880-1921

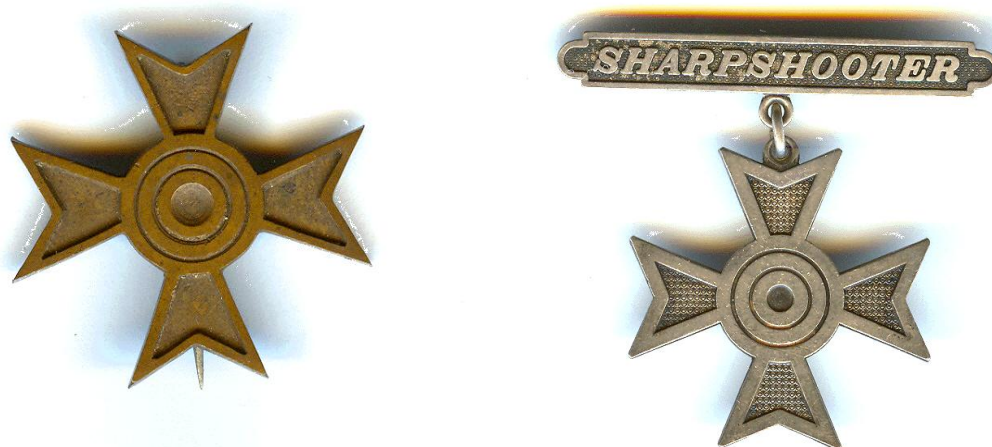
Beginning in 1881 the US Army began to give marksman buttons to any soldiers who made required scores at various ranges. One of the original square buttons is shown below. Soldiers could wear the pair of buttons on their collar during the year they were qualified. Men qualifying in two consecutive years wore two pairs of the buttons. Beginning in 1884, men who qualified as a marksman for three years received an ornate bronze marksman bar (to the right of the marksman button) for permanent wear on their chest. Rock Island Arsenal made 2,500 of these bars that are shown below. The next year a more plain silver bar replaced the bronze ornate style and this style lasted until after World War I.

During the late Indian Wars the scheme of buttons and a marksman bar was complex but Regular Army rules can be summarized as follows:

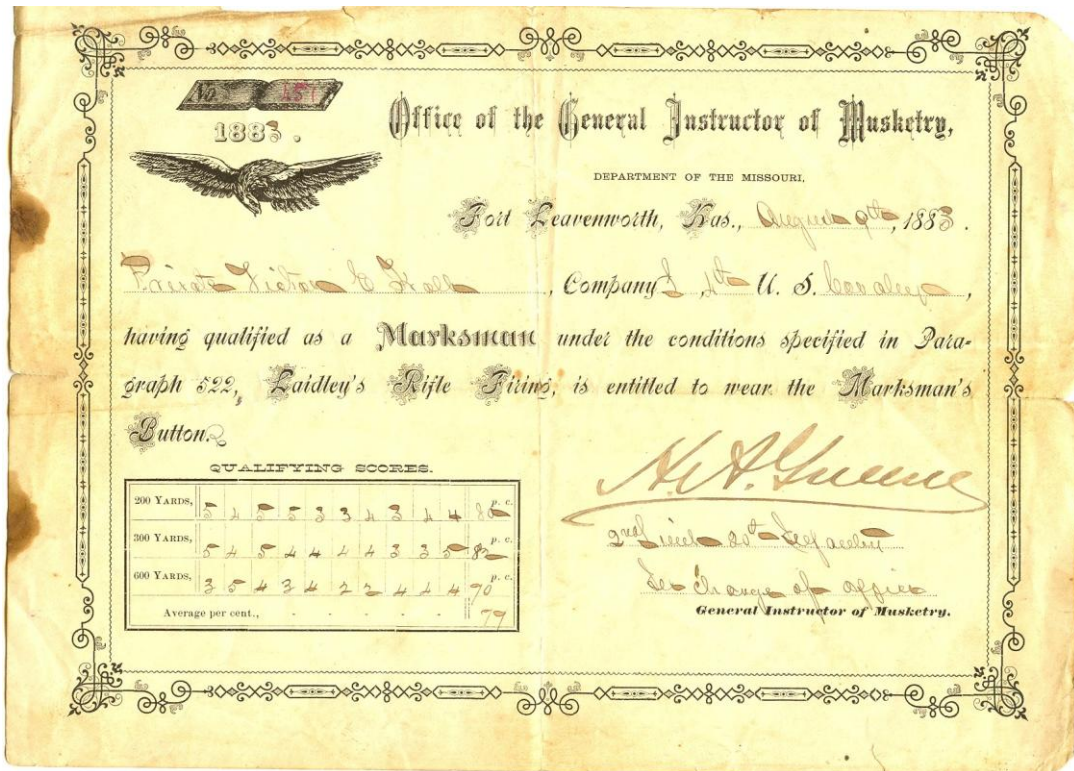
- One pair = currently qualified.
- Two pairs = qualified currently and qualified the previous year.
- One pair and marksman bar = qualified a total of 3 years & currently qualified.
- Marksman bar and no buttons = previously qualified for 3 years (until 1897).
- Initial buttons were black squares with silver edge and rings (shown). The second style is silver rectangle with black rings and inner edge. Made by Rock Island Arsenal after 1897, these were for militia units. Both have button shanks.



In 1884 men who qualified as a marksman could the fire an additional course at ranges from 600 to 1,000 yards in an attempt to qualify as a sharpshooter. Soldier who qualified received a bronze cross (shown below), which was “worn at the neck” while the men were qualified. The army intended for sharpshooters who failed to requalify to wear the bronze cross on their chest rather than at their neck. Like the original marksman bar, the design was unpopular although the army had 1,000 of them made, and the next year Rock Island Arsenal designed and made a replacement silver version with a top bar that lasted into the early 1920s.

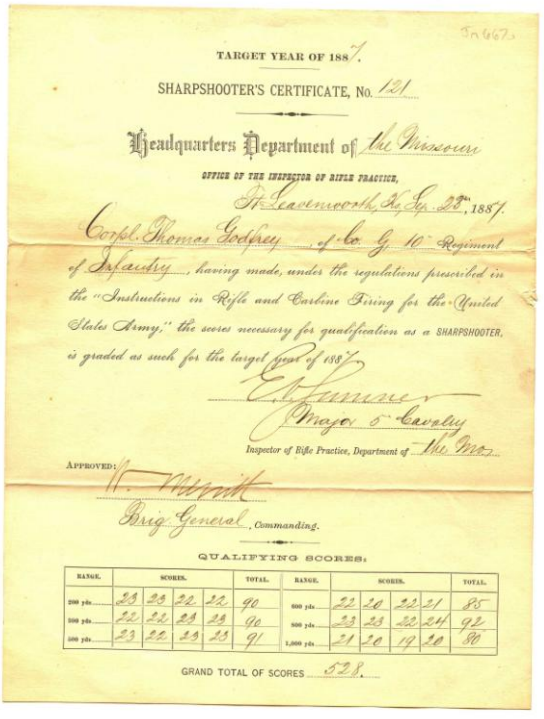
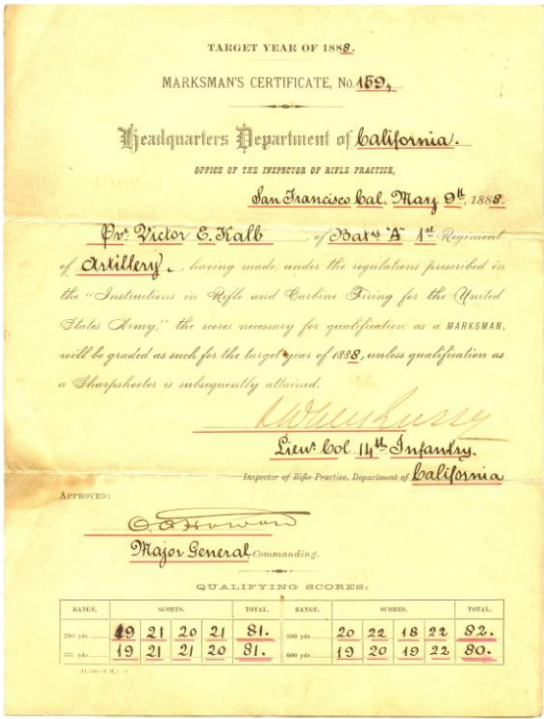


Starting in 1884 the Adjutant General’s Department supplied blank certificates to the various Department Headquarters for issue to soldiers qualifying as marksmen and sharpshooter. Department commanding generals signed the early certificates, making these documents sought by autograph collectors as well as military collectors. Before these standard army certificates, the Department of the Missouri created and issued their own certificates, as shown.



The army gave certificates for Marksman qualification from 1884 through 1897 and for Sharpshooter qualification from 1884 through 1904. Certificate changed format and content over time, with each version lasting from six months to several years. Since each early certificate was signed by a general officer, the certificates are sought by autograph collectors as well as those interested in military history. Throughout this time each certificate was also signed by department inspector of rifle practice. One sample of a marksman certificate is shown (below left).

In 1884 the army first issued Sharpshooter's Certificates (below right). The initial design had not only boxes for scores at various ranges, but also included the qualification criteria. In 1886 the criteria changed and the second style of certificate appeared: one with only boxes for qualifying scores. Over versions appeared over the years.



Major General Oliver O. Howard signed the above marksman certificate. Howard graduated from West Point in 1850, fourth in his class, and resigned in 1861 so he could become the colonel in the 4th Maine Volunteers. He became a general during the Civil War and a major general in the Regular Army in 1886. It was during this time he signed the certificate. He retired in 1894.

The right certificate was signed by Wesley Merritt who became a general of volunteers during the Civil War. After commanding the 5th Cavalry between July 1876 and April 1887, he became a brigadier general on April 16, 1887. He signed the above right sharpshooter certificate just five months later. The US Army quit issuing sharpshooter certificates in 1904, and the army never issued certificates for the Expert Badge, which was created in 1903 and first made in 1904.

Rock Island Arsenal made expert rifleman badges initially came with the cross rifles made separately and applied to the wreath. These remained until 1915 when the army started to make them out of one piece of silver, although privately made expert rifleman badges were constructed from one piece of metal before 1915 and from two pieces after 1915.



Starting in 1903 the army gave a special *Marksman A* badge (below) only to coast artillery troops who qualified on a course that emphasized defensive fire at 200 and 300 yards.



The US Army specified the first pistol qualification badges for National Guard troops in 1907. To set them apart from Regular Army badges, the army made them is a gold color that regulations called "bronze." At this time the Regular Army did not have any pistol badges. Regulations allowed these bronze badges until 1914 when only the pistol expert remained, and that lasted only one more year.



The US Army finally authorized a silver pistol expert badge of the same design as the National Guard version, in 1909, but never allowed any other badge until 1913 when it authorized a pistol shot first class bar in silver.



In September 1915 the army changed the design to crossed .45 automatic pistols, replacing the original revolvers.



With these expert and sharpshooter badges came requalification bars. Bars came in a variety of designs and with one year and three years inscribed. Details of the bars, other badges, and more on the various certificates used before 1904 are in *Marksmanship in the U. S. Army*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.

These silver rifle and pistol badges remained until replaced by the current style of badges in 1921.

