

Winchester Firearms Exports to France in World War I

By Michael F. Carrick

It is a little-known fact that the Winchester Arms Company supplied 15,100 Model 1894 .30-30 carbines to the French Army in 1914.¹ They also supplied a significant number of models 1907 and 1910 to the French Aeronautics Division and a quantity of Model 1903 .22 W.A.R. semiautomatic rifles for training (Figure 1).

In this article, I discuss the contract for the Model 1894 carbines and leave the others for another time. Perhaps one of the reasons that we do not see too much about this sale of 15,100 carbines and 15.1 million rounds of full metal jacket cartridges² to France is that Winchester actually sold the lot to the Remington Arms Company. The contract was dated September 22, 1914.

Sifting through Winchester factory records in the McCracken Research Library in Cody, Wyoming, for this transaction, I finally found the record of sales to the Remington Arms Company. I believe that Remington must have had an exclusive contract to supply arms and ammunition to the Government of France.

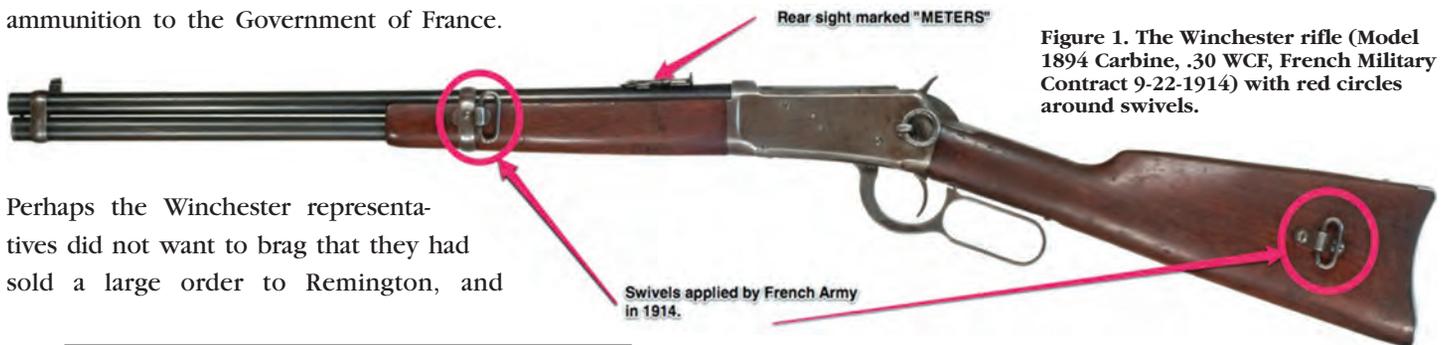


Figure 1. The Winchester rifle (Model 1894 Carbine, .30 WCF, French Military Contract 9-22-1914) with red circles around swivels.

Perhaps the Winchester representatives did not want to brag that they had sold a large order to Remington, and

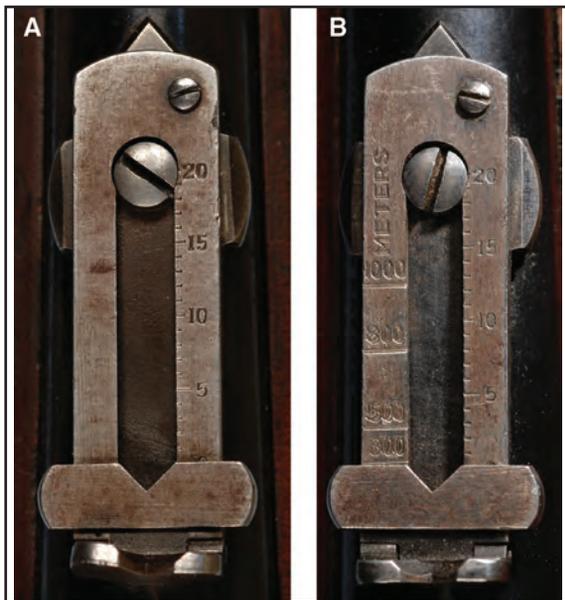


Figure 2. (A) Winchester standard Model 44A rear sight. (B) Modified sight found on the French carbines. When compared to the standard Winchester sight, it can be seen that the word METERS has been added to the left side as well as gradations from 200 to 1000.

Remington representatives did not want to brag that they had sold an order of Winchesters; therefore, there would have been little publicity.

The carbines were the standard 20-inch barrel, .30 Winchester Center Fire (WCF), with saddle ring. The only deviation from guns supplied domestically was the addition of the word “meters,” and a scale of 200 to 1000 to the left arm of the ladder of the standard Model 44A Winchester rear sight (Figure 2).

Polishing room records indicate that these carbines were produced in mid-1914. Serial numbers of these carbines that I have seen have all been in the 600,000s (e.g., 649,XXX; 659,XXX; 661,XXX; 683,XXX).³

After the carbines were received in France, side swivels were installed so that the carbines could be slung across the back of motorcycle- or horse-mounted couriers. Apparently, the entire lot was destined for the French Department of Military Transportation. One Belgian



Figure 3. Side swivels added by French armory.

researcher told me that he saw a 1915 French military manual for the Winchester titled “Compagnies de Transport” for horse- and motor-powered vehicles (Figures 3 and 4).

I found only one photograph of a French Military Courier with one of the Winchesters strapped across his back⁴ (Figure 5).

ALLEGED BELGIAN CONGO CAVALRY CARBINE

There is a variation of this French WW1 carbine that many collectors call the Belgian Congo Cavalry Carbine. This terminology is very likely a result of George Madis illustrating



Figure 5. French motorcycle courier with Winchester strapped to his back.



Variety 3, Full Patch, (1915-16) R3/125-225

Figure 4. The French Contract of September 22, 1914, called for 15,100,000 rounds of .30 WCF Full Patch ammunition (box with labels shown here). Winchester shipped 1.5 million rounds immediately, and approximately 500,000 per week thereafter, completing the order on April 6, 1915.

one of the standard French military models that has a series of Belgian proof marks added, and stating it was from a purchase for the Belgian Congo Cavalry in 1913.⁵

The Belgian marks are B. Blindee, a crown over an R, a star over an F, a flaming bomb with a script L inside, and PV. These marks are above the standard Winchester factory caliber marking .30 WCF. The star over the F and the flaming bomb are repeated on the receiver (Figure 6).

Balle Blindee is a French/Belgian term for full metal jacket ammunition. The Crown over the R indicates a rifled arm, the star over the F is the inspector's mark, and the flaming bomb with the L (Liege) inside indicates that a foreign-made firearm is being proof tested. This did not indicate much until I discussed this gun with Alain on a Belgian gun collectors' website.⁶ Alain told me that the use of the M1894 Winchester by Belgian Cavalry is a fable, and more importantly, the Flaming Bomb proof mark did not come into use until June 30, 1924.

I speculate that a private Belgian firm purchased a quantity of surplus 1915 French military Winchester 1894 carbines. That purchase would have to have been later than June 1924 because of the flaming bomb proof mark. Because the purchaser was from a Belgian firm, and the guns were destined for the Belgian Congo, they were proof tested in Liege. I also speculate that the sale was not to a Belgian



Figure 6. The Belgian marks on a Winchester.

Government entity (these are not military proof marks), but was to a private army or guard force, perhaps a large mining or agricultural company or perhaps to the Railway.

The Congo gained independence from Belgium in 1960; just about the time these carbines were sold in Canada. This fits well with some Belgian-owned companies closing down and selling their assets.

My attempt to trace the importation of these Belgian-marked carbines found that they apparently first came into

Canada between 1959 and 1960. A long-time Canadian dealer, who is now in the United States, Joe Salter, had many of these carbines in the early 1960s. He is fairly certain that Century Arms International (CAI) imported them from the Congo to their offices in Canada in or around 1959. A senior manager at CAI recently told me all their factory records were lost in a fire in the mid-1980s, and no one who had been working with them in 1959 is still in their service.

END NOTES

1. MS 20, Series 1, Box 6, Folder 4, The McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.
2. Ibid. MS 20, Series 1, Box 8, Folder 37.
3. Ibid. Polishing Room Record Books, Model 1894.
4. Malingre, Bruno, *Le Tir Sportif au Fusil Réglementaire*, Chaumont, France: Crépin-Leblond, 2006, p 81.
5. Madis, George, *The Winchester Book*, Brownsboro, TX: Art and Reference House, 1961, 1985, p 437.
6. Accessed at: www.littlegun.be