THE 'EIGHTYNINER'

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THE 'EIGHTYNINER', OR THE DANISH '1889 GEVÆRET'

'Whatever happens we have got
the eightyniner and they have not'

The above adaptation of the last two lines of Hilaire Bellocs' poem 'The Maxim Gun' sums up the attitude of many of the Danish soldiers who had occasion to be trained in the use of the 'Eightyniner' during the period 1890 until 1945, which was the period of service for this interesting and not that well known rifle. In common with most nations, recruits are told their rifle is 'The Best', and not informed of what the opposition is using.

Top: *Infantry Carbine 1889/24* ***Bottom:*** *Artillery Carbine 1889/24* ***Photo:*** *E. Kandborg*

The period 1880-1900 was a most interesting one in the area of small arms development. Prior to that time almost all the military calibers ranged from .45 - .50 (*11 –12mm*) and the propellant was black powder. The projectiles were invariably lead or lead alloy.

The invention of smokeless powders and jacketed projectiles permitted drastic reductions in bore diameters

to .25 - .32 (*6.5 – 8 mm*) which caused an arms race of sorts in Europe, with the United States peripherally involved.
The majority of the military firearms of the period were based on that basic bolt action which could be traced back to the Dreyse and Chassepot. These two rifles, made by Prussia and France respectively, used breech loading paper cartridges . Denmark had two wars with The Germans in the 19th century, one in 1848 and another in 1864. The Danes used muzzle loaders in both conflicts. They also ascribed their defeat to this technical small arms gap. Their solution was the adoption of the Remington Rolling block rifle in 1867.

Top: *Artillery Carbine 1889/24* ***Bottom:*** *Infantry Carbine 1889/24* ***Photo:*** *E. Kandborg*

Denmark had to fall into line when the adoption of small caliber turning bolt repeating rifles became the norm in Europe.

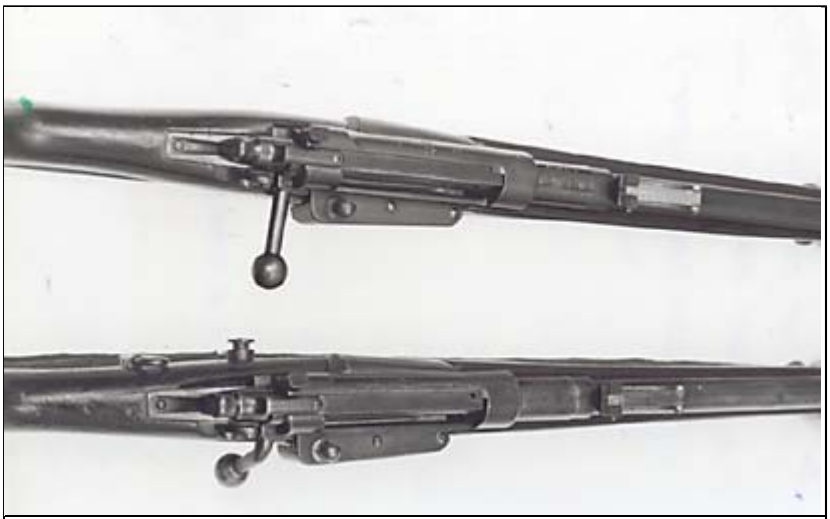
The Mauser brothers were responsible for some of that development and turning bolt rifles with front locking lugs was basically what the repeaters of the period were based on. Without getting into the specifics of split bridge receivers, 'packet loading', detachable bolt heads etc. . Suffice to say, that a handle stuck out on the right rear side of the rifle which you lifted , or pulled back on to begin the loading process! The bolt unit's locking lugs, when engaged, served as the means of locking the cartridge case in the chamber during high pressure period of firing. It held the means of ignition (*the firing pin*). The means of removing the cartridge (*or cartridge case*) from the chamber (*the extractor)*. The 89er had a bolt which had a single locking lug at its front and the bolt handle served as an additional locking lug when in the locked down position. The action was amply strong for the cartridge it used, but any consideration of using a more powerful cartridge was limited by its relatively weak locking system.
The methods of cartridge feed also varied considerably, what with cartridges being housed in the buttstock (*Schulhoff, Hotchkiss*) in a tube under the barrel (*Lebel*) in an integral box magazine (*Mauser, Mannlicher, Krag*) or

in a detachable box magazine (*Lee*).

Infantry Carbine M1889/24 ***Photo:*** *E. Kandborg*

Since these were all repeating rifles, the bugbear of ammunition consumption arose. The General Staff (*assumed to be a superior race of course*) of most countries armies universally felt that the poor ignorant mutt of a conscript would bang off all his cartridges, and then run for it.

Probably not a bad idea! For that reason, a cut-off was fitted which would keep your magazine in reserve while you loaded and fired singly. If an emergency came up permission might be given to shoot 'from the magazine'. The 89 was no different. It had a five round box magazine whose cover hinged forward rather than down as was the case with the Norwegian and American versions. It had a magazine cut-off and it was always intended that the rifle be fired as a single loader. It was very rare to be given permission to fire 'from the magazine'.



Top: *Infantry Carbine 1889/24* ***Bottom:*** *Artillery Carbine 1889/24 (****Note:*** *Bent Bolt Handle).* ***Photo:*** *E. Kandborg*

The rifle in service in Denmark since 1867 was the single-shot Remington Rolling Block, chambered for the 11mm Danish cartridge, almost a 45-70 clone. The Rolling Blocks days were basically numbered with the introduction of all the new developments, but even prior to that period Denmark had established a Commission (*The Hand Weapon Commission of 1864*) which adopted the Rolling block, but also experimented with repeating firearms available then. The Spencer and Henry were both tested, and were impressive, at least as far as rapidity of fire was concerned. The Spencer was suggested for cavalry, but sense prevailed, and Danish cavalry were issued with a Remington carbine which preserved the commonality of ammunition.

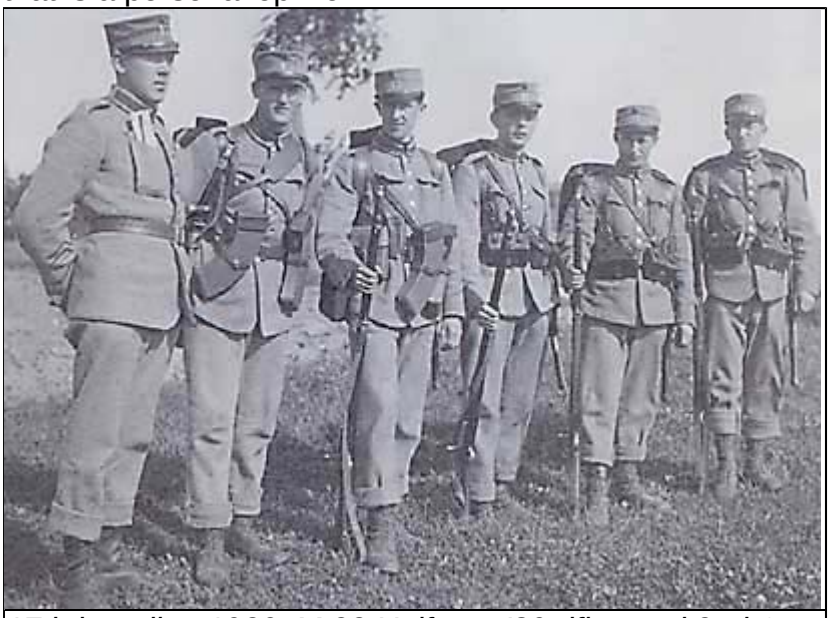
Experiments were carried out with other repeaters in the 1870s. This resulted in the purchase of 100 some Krag-Peterson carbines which were issued exclusively to the Navy. These are very rare firearms on this side of the pond, I have only owned one and it soon wended its way back over the water to a happy Norwegian collector. (*We are but custodians…..*)

Rifle inspection in the village, also 17th Battalion. Note the gleaming barrel shroud. No rust there! Owner of rifle has bolt in his hand. ***Photo:*** *Troldhuus*

More tests were carried out in 1878 with new repeaters. Bear in mind that these are still the big bore lots – of – smoke blasters. Smokeless powder is still years away. The following rifles were tested, among others:

Kropatschek : Tubular magazine bolt action. Made in France and by Steyr. Used by French Marines.
Fruhwirth: Austrian, bolt action.
Hotchkiss: Bolt action with tubular magazine in butt. Made by Winchester and also Springfield Arsenal. Some American military use.
Ward – Burton: Bolt action single-shot. It is interesting that Denmark managed to get one of these as there were very few made. Disliked by American troops when tested there.
Remington – Keene: Bolt action with tubular magazine under the barrel. Used in small quantities for military tests in USA.

An Evans, of all things, also found its way into the tests and was suggested for use by the Navy. Its large 28 or 34 cartridge capacity must have aroused interest, but it was deemed too complicated for military use. I had always thought they were too complicated for anybody's use, but that is a personal opinion.



17th battalion 1930. M.23 Uniform. '89 rifles and 2nd & 3rd man from left with Madsen LMG magazine pouches. 2nd man is gunner. ***Photo:*** *Troldhuus*

The upshot of these tests were that tubular magazines were not well thought of, but the bolt action systems were looked at favorably, especially if they had been coupled with an integral non-tubular magazine, which of course none were at that point in time.

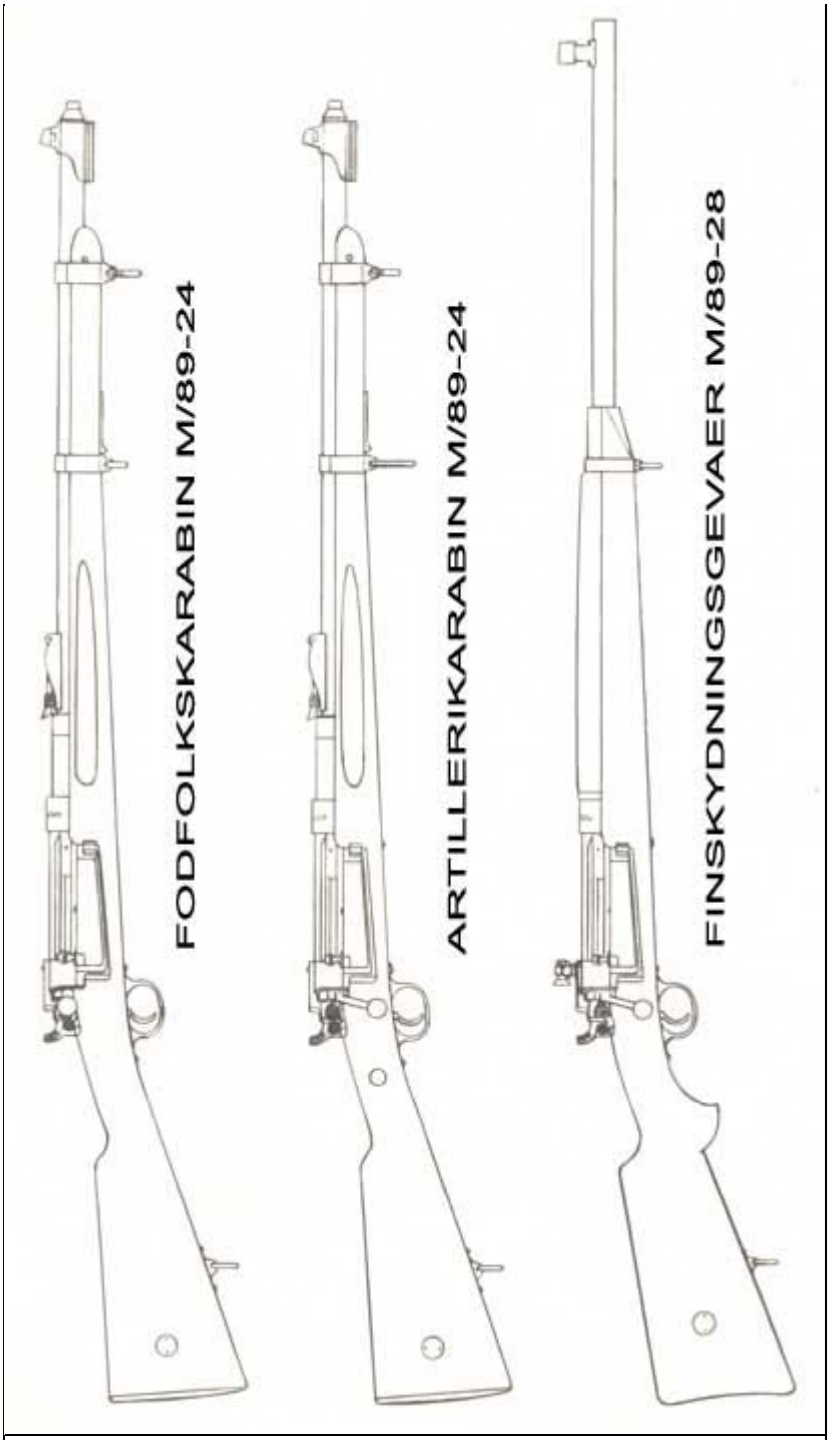
Another Commission was was established in 1883 to determine whether or not it was time to replace the M1867 Remington. Once again during the period 1884-5 an eclectic assortment of large caliber rifles with various feed systems were tried, but none found favor. The tubular magazine antipathy had not changed, if anything it

had worsened, and this type of feed mechanism would not be further considered.

Palace Guard at Kings Palace in Copenhagen late 30's. Today they carry G3's, but the uniform is the same.

The results of American rifle tests in 1882 reached Denmark and the decision was made to purchase the front runners of the American competition. The fact that two of them (*Hotchkiss and Chaffee-Reese*) had tubular buttstock magazines did not seem to make a difference. The third one, Lee's invention, was met with more than passing interest because it had the detachable box magazine coupled with the bolt action mechanism that they had been seeking.

The consensus at the time was "This is it". Wait for the Norwegians though!



Courtesy of: *Ingvar Nilsson/Sweden*

This led to the construction in 1887 of some hundreds of the ”Danish Experimental Repeating Rifle I”. They were based on Lees’ system, a bolt action with a detachable magazine. The cartridge was 8mm rimmed and it was loaded with a charge of compressed black powder, just like the soon-to-be issued .303 British cartridge. They were issued to a Regular Army Battalion for tests in the field, and apparently were really ’put through the hoops’, as was to be expected..
In anticipation of complete re-equipment of the Danish Forces with a new rifle a new rifle factory was constructed, which was destined to produce all examples of whatever was adopted.

The Norwegians in the persons of Captain Krag and Engineer Jorgensen also got into the picture with their rifle development, as they were aware of the Danish tests. This resulted in the construction of 50 ”Danish Experimental Repeating Rifle II,” which was Krag's submission.
Fifty of the initial batch of Lee’s were refurbished and tested in the field again by one Battalion and the new batch of ’II’s’ were tested by another. The bottom line was that the Krag system won out, but by a narrow margin.

Courtesy of: *Ingvar Nilsson/Sweden*

Thus, Denmark adopted a rifle in 1889 which was really already obsolete. Had they gone with the Lee, they would have had a rifle which would not really be outdated until the reliable self loaders were developed. As it was, the US dropped their Krag after the realities of The Spanish American War set in, and adopted what was a poor copy of the ’98 Mauser. The British who fought the Boers with the same type of ’single-shot, magazine in reserve’

concept, the doctrine which also applied to the 89er, quickly adapted the Long Lee to charger loading early in the new century.
One may also wonder why else the test Lee lost out. Could nationalistic, 'buy Scandinavian', fervor have had anything to do with it? I still prefer an FAL to an M14, for what that's worth. For instance, Denmark retained their Madsen light machineguns to the bitter end, although there arguably were better designs available, at least later on.
To call the rifle a 'Danish Krag' may well be a misnomer. There is one school of thought (*Danish*) which feel that the only part of the rifle which is Norwegian is the magazine.
The barrel jacket came from the M1888 Mauser and the bolt and receiver were designed by Danes. The sights of course are just the standard ladder pattern found everywhere. The Danes feel their beloved 89er is a combination of things which they thought were thought best to use at the time.
The other school of thought (*Norwegian*) is that it is completely their design and nobody else's! I wonder of fist fights break out at Scandinavian Gun Shows (*they have them, good ones, Shows that is*) over this?

FAULTS WITH THE 89er:

Denmark soldiered on the with the 89er despite all the things that were wrong with it, but many were not discovered until it had spent time in the field in sometimes indifferent hands. My first Danish Krag I purchased for a nominal sun when just a youth. It was polished bright all over and actually had Belgian proof marks in addition to the Danish ones. A well traveled old club. Ammunition was impossible to find.
I found out later that the reason for the bright 'finish' was because the barrel jacket tended to rust badly, and of course to remove the rust you polished it. To say that this caused problems in the field would be an understatement. Imagine trying to keep 30 inches of gleaming barrel from reflecting sunlight! In fairness, let us not forget that camouflage and concealment for the individual infantryman was a largely unknown concept at the time of its introduction.

The problem of a rapid means of filling the magazine had not been solved, although experiments with 'boxes' which held five cartridges, and an integral clip guide had been carried out, but then not followed up on.
It was too long! This resulted in the modification called the 1889/24. This was the 'Fodfolks', Infantry, carbine. It retained the barrel jacket, and, if nothing else was at least the same length ,approximately, as all the other manually operated military rifles which were superior to it.
There also exists the Artillery Carbine M89 (*bolt handle bent down*) These two variations have retained the barrel jacket. Other '89 modifications are the Engineers and the Cavalry carbines, same length as the other two, but they have shed the barrel jacket.

Last, but not least, was the M89/28 'Finskydninggevaer' or 'precision shooting rifle'. It was equipped with a new stock and fitted with peep sights. An extra heavy barrel was also installed. Experiments with optical sights were carried out, but nothing was ever adopted. Denmark was never a rich country and the military usually took it on the chin when it came to appropriating public monies for experiments.
The actual use of the 89er in anger was very limited. Denmark gets along with everybody, and was neutral in World War 1. Naturally the Armed Forces were mobilized and many of those men were issued Remington M1867 rifles because of '89 shortages, in fact the Remington is actually the longest serving Danish military rifle, still having been issued on a small scale in World War 2.

USE IN WAR:

The first shots fired in anger at enemy from an 89er was on April 9, 1940 at a place in South Jutland called Lundtoftebjerg. It was also used in minor skirmishes

during the war between the German occupiers and Danish authorities. In 1943 the Germans 'borrowed' some 60.000 of them and they disappeared south, never to return. A Us Air Force veteran friend who was shot down and captured recall that his camp was guarded by 'Litvaks' armed with a mixture of M1886 Lebels and 89rs. I would probably prefer the 89er, the Lebel has that tubular magazine we didn't like you know.

A PERSONAL NOTE:

I have collected military rifles for a lot more years that I like to think about, and I like to shoot as well research them. I found that the 89er has a lovely smooth action, which it has in common with the Krag designed rifles of both Norwegian and American manufacture. Ammunition which I use is cobbled from other brass, as well as some being original Danish. I use .323 projectiles, the heaviest I can find, and use 8mm Mauser loading data.

There is many other aspects of the 89er I could have covered such as the pouches they issued and other accessories of all sorts. The trench periscope, the grenade launcher and how the rifle was used to construct a tent from shelter halves. All riveting stuff, for perhaps another time.

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