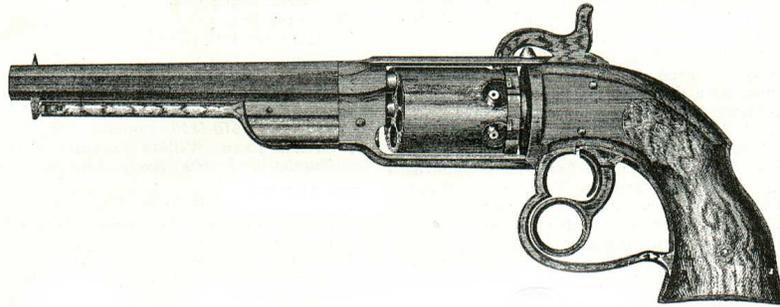


THE SAVAGE REVOLVING FIRE ARMS CO.
 MANUFACTORY AT MIDDLETOWN CONN.
 SOLE AGENTS
W. J. SYMS & BRO.
 300 Broadway New York



SAVAGE SOLDIERS

By Bill Adams



Unidentified soldier of the 56th NY, organized as the “Tenth Legion” and initially armed with two-band Enfields (Enfield scabbard is visible). The Savage was either a prop or was borrowed.



George C. James, Co. A, 9th Virginia Cavalry wearing a Type II Richmond jacket and sporting a captured Savage. James enlisted on 3/5/62. The photo likely predates Nov 1863.

The .36 calibre Savage “Navy” revolver is one of the lesser-known revolvers of the Civil War. Its unique design was awkward and complicated – factors that contributed to the revolver’s limited popularity. The Savage utilized a reciprocating cylinder that moved rearward to revolve, then forward “so that the chamfered end of the Bbl. adjusts readily into the recessed muzzle of each chamber, & thus prevents escape of gas.” The gas seal thus provided was said to produce less fouling, higher muzzle velocities, and better accuracy.

The standard charge for the Savage was a long blunt-nosed 158-grain bullet and 17 grains of “musket powder.” The company claimed that the revolver was accurate at great range and that General Hay of the British Musketry School

at Hythe, England fired the revolver at a range of 450 yards “putting six balls in the target.” In a later test, the revolver put five balls out of six into a target at 500 yards. The advertisement did not state the size of the target. While the revolver was judged to be reliable, it was cumbersome and did not operate like the typical revolver of the period. Pulling the lower ring trigger, called a “cocking lever,” cocked the hammer and revolved the cylinder, and releasing that trigger locked the cylinder against the barrel. The revolver was then fired by pulling the upper trigger. The cylinder was held in the forward position by a toggle joint.

One is tempted to ponder just how a Savage-armed soldier used to a single action revolver would react during the adrenaline rush and confusion of battle when he had to get off a shot in a hurry and might not get the firing sequence correct.

Another potential problem faced by a soldier or sailor with a Savage was that the standard government caps furnished for Colt revolvers were not suitable for the Savage or Starr revolvers because their mainsprings were too weak to fire them. Contracting officer Major Robert Whiteley concluded that “a cap suitable for Savage’s or Starr’s pistol does not suit Colt’s, because the hammer drives it in pieces, a fragment often lodges in front of the cock, and renders the arm useless after the first fire.” Whiteley concluded that it would be necessary to have two styles of revolver caps manufactured, thick copper caps for Colts and thin caps for the Savage and Starr revolvers. That would obviously present a supply dilemma, so on July 12, 1862 Chief of Ordnance General Ripley mandated that “all revolvers made for this Department are suited to fire the same caps as Colt’s Army pistols.” The last purchase of Savage revolvers was made on 6/10/1862, a month before Ripley’s mandate, so it is unlikely that any Savage revolvers had the nipples or mainsprings replaced to work properly with the Colt style caps manufactured at Frankford Arsenal.

The U.S. Army purchased 11,384 Savage revolvers and the U.S. Navy acquired 1,126 Savages. At the end of the War, seventeen mustering out Union veterans bought their Savage revolvers to take home, whereas 9,047 veteran cavalrymen bought their Colt revolvers. The Savage may have been well liked by those that tested it before hostilities, but it clearly wasn’t a favorite of the average soldier.

Savage revolvers were carried by at least 26 different Federal cavalry units, and saw service in both the Western and Eastern theatres. Confederate cavalrymen used a small number of captured Savages.

From original Savage directions:

Before loading snap off a round of Caps, to blow out the nipples. Be particular to lubricate the Balls.

FOR LOADING AND FIRING

1st – Draw the hammer back to half cock.

2^d – Hold the muzzle of the Pistol erect, with the hammer towards you; place a charge of powder in each chamber on the right, draw back the cocking lever gently until it touches the base of the hammer, which will enable you to turn the cylinder. Repeat the charges of powder, then place a ball upon the mouth of each chamber to the right; turn the cylinder until the ball comes under the plunger; then with the lever force the ball down – repeat until loaded.

3rd – Reverse the arm, and place the caps upon the nipples.

4th – Draw back the cocking lever, which will cock the hammer and revolve the cylinder; then let the lever return to its place, which will lock the cylinder and barrel. The arm is then ready for firing.

Union cavalry units fully or partially armed with Savage revolvers:

6th, 10th, 13th Illinois Cavalry

5th, 15th Kansas Cav.

11th Kentucky Cav.

3rd, 4th, 7th Missouri Cav.

7th New York Cav.

3rd Ohio Cav.

7th Pennsylvania Cav., Army of the Cumberland

Potomac Cavalry Brigade

1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 14th Missouri State Militia Cavalry

1st, 2nd Wisconsin Cav.

1st Vermont Cav.

Confederate units with some Savage revolvers (there may have been only one revolver in a listed unit):

7th, 9th Virginia Cavalry

34th, 35th Battalions Virginia Cav.

11th Texas Cav.

Sources/credits:

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