

The Spanish Escopeta

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Ugly yet functional, the Escopeta Miquelet defended the Spanish Empire in Western America in the 18th and 19th centuries.



A ghastly aesthetic nightmare, the miquelet is nonetheless very functional and rugged, especially on the frontier, far from any supply or repair sources.

Every once in a while, an encounter with a seemingly inconsequential firearm opens a window to another world that is astonishingly rich in history. Such is the arm here, in the humble Spanish 'escopeta' (smoothbore or shotgun) using the antiquated miquelet lock.

Since the early 1700s, the French-pattern flintlock with socket bayonet was issued to the Spanish soldiers in Europe and at the main Spanish colonies where many ships and much wealth passed through in Louisiana, Florida, and down towards Mexico City. Outposts farther from the coasts or way up the supply chain were supplied only sporadically, and those soldiers were all-around more ill equipped. Far-flung outposts relied more on militia troops than regular army, too. The flintlock may have ruled Europe, but they proved fragile in the New World and arming this most far flung end of the Spanish empire required thought.



The slim, graceful Catalan-style stock is light and fast to shoulder.

Spanish America, especially the frontiers north of the Rio Grande, were still rough with most reliant on locally produced pottery, homespun cloth and roughhewn furniture due to Spain's mercantilist trade policies. Fine material things beyond local abilities had to come via Spanish ships only, and no outside trade permitted. The unhappy result was outlying regions were desperately poor. The deeper into the its vast holdings Spain ventured, the harder it became to supply (and the poorer the people were). Perhaps Spain was smarter than we know, since trade with America by the fledgling Mexico led to vast swathes of the old empire joining the United States one way and another.

Flintlocks required civilization beyond the village blacksmith to keep in good order. The sturdy miquelet lock with many external parts and not even many parts at all proved far easier to repair in these far flung areas. Its simple plug bayonet doubled as a knife off the muzzle, where the socket bayonet was good for little else than a spit for chickens. Otherwise, its solid Moorish influence suggests the Spanish Inquisition might have shown uncharacteristic leniency to Mohammedan gunmakers.

The only law in this world west of the Mississippi river from New Orleans to California and Mexico City north to Utah were the Spanish light cavalry backed up by local militia, all armed with a few of these guns. They had to deal with murderous Apaches, Comanches, Filibusteros Americanos (among other desperadoes) and up north, even the odd Russian hunters armed with rifles, albeit of equally odd 16th and 17th century origins. There was much to defend (and Christianize) and very few resources.



Dated 1777, this ancient design was reintroduced for use in on the frontier of New Spain.

From the early 1500s Spain considered its claimed territory north into what is now modern California, as “too far.” That is, they did until rumors of English and Russian colonization prompted them to move in the late 1700s with an ambitious and impressive series of missions up the coast of California. The escopeta provided the security, along with pistols, lance, shield, sword and, of course, the cross in the new line of missions built up along the coast by Father Junipero Serra.

The many long trails of these explorers spread all across wild Southwestern America. Along the way, small forts or Presidios were built for defense, many of which are now major cities, while many of the trails were major highways then and now. These Presidios were the first line of defense for more settled, prosperous Mexico, and did much to prevent marauders both indigenous and alien from plundering south unchecked.

Spain aided the colonials in their fight against England in the American Revolution. More to get even with England for losses in the 7 Year’s War, Spain nonetheless sent many stands of arms to the Americas. This simple, ugly escopeta is possibly the same arm given to George Rogers Clark by Spain in the American Revolution for battle as far north as Detroit, in what is now Michigan.



The stock has modest carving around the panels and the trigger guard has a few flourishes to give what was an inexpensive arm some panache.

These may be the arms used in the attempt to intercept and arrest Lewis & Clark and the ones used in the interception and arrest of Zebulon Pike. It is also possible that these were the rusty Spanish arms General Andrew Jackson had discovered in a warehouse and hurriedly threw into battle against the British at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814.

These long (and short) large-caliber miquelets are often spoken of with derision. They served Mexico after her revolution and many were encountered by Texans and American troops all the way through the Mexican-American War. Literacy was rising by then in America and the many such arms written about after the Mexican-American War had already been repaired numerous times or put together from parts, giving them a disheveled look. It is proof these guns were simple and rugged, however ancient a presence it gave to men armed with percussion arms. While long at almost 55 inches, the Escopeta is also light at 8.3 pounds, with a unique balance and lively feel unusual for military arms in the day. With most of the weight back around the lock and thin forestock, the arm swings like a fine shotgun (its other frontier duty). This one here is .69-caliber (a little bigger than 14-gauge).



*The octagon to round barrel often had a wedding band at the junction of the transition.
The big, broad sideplate has lock bolts positioned awkwardly in order to clear the rammer.*

These humble escopetas with their antiquated 16th-century miquelet lock offered rugged simplicity the Spanish colonies needed where an arm had to be easy to repair far from skilled workmen and tools. Of the few survivors, many show extensive amateur rebuilding along with mixed parts salvaged from others.

These men were always undersupplied. That frontier lead roundballs were sometimes cast in stone molds, gives you an idea of how primitive conditions were.

Shooting a Miquelet lock is an adventure. The trigger is kind of like a Mosin-Nagant's but lighter, so it's difficult to hold on the target, since the trigger breaks a little differently each time. Ignition was mostly sure and on par with other muskets. This lock requires a longer flint than usual and luckily, I had few on hand. The one I started the day with – ended the day – albeit much dented and chipped from the frizzen.



The top jaw yearns for engraving into a crocodile's head, and the ring to tighten the flint resembles an antenna wishing to rotate, and yet these features proved rugged and reliable under harsh conditions.

A 'turtle' style front sight gave a better aiming reference than the original's bayonet lug (which isn't included in the Rifle Shoppe kit anyway) and the initial accuracy delivered begged for a rear sight to be included. The group pictured nearby shows three 3-shot groups. Because none of the groups have 'three shots from the same sequence' would lead one to believe a pursuit of accuracy was a meaningless quest, I knew I had placed my face differently each time.

For shots closest to point of aim, my focus was on the tip of the slightly crooked rear sight blade. A slightly crooked rear sight would normally send me howling back to the gunsmith, but in this case, when just the tip of the sight was put on the aiming mark, the group was more centered. Straightening the sight would move the group off center.

The gun tended to give me an uppercut when my face was firmly on the stock, even with the light 60-grain charge of powder. Lifting my face off the stock created other problems, since the point of reference now shifted subtly enough to enlarge groups dramatically.

The solution was a rear sight. My friend Roger, who put the musket together, fabricated the rear sight. As a model, we used an Albanian Tanchika rear sight, since the Escopeta has Moorish influence. One range trip gave the measurements for centering the group and the second range trip showed the group at the predicted 6" high at 50-yards.

The frizzen is showing severe wear already and I believe will need rehardening. The musket also began to hangfire quite a bit toward the end of the shooting session, when the final group was made. And with that it delivered a 9-shot group with 7-shots into 4" and the overall group is just 5-1/2" at 50-yards.

It might seem odd to put a sight on an infantry musket, but since these were used all over the Southwest of the Spanish Empire, it is conceivable that an Officer's Model might have some embellishments like a sight or maybe even some engraving. Hmmmmmm, this project just might be at another beginning!

At the range, two different people asked if I was shooting a Brown Bess. I guess it's like a Brown Bess ... just completely different.



Three 3-shot groups at 50-yards with a patched .678" roundball over 60 grains of Old Eynsford FFg. Not too bad for the first time shooting, and the addition of a rear sight may prove beneficial.



The target is 9-shots at 50-yards, all I could shoot between 2 ceasefires at the range and after adjusting the sights, 7 of 9 in 4"; and hangfires didn't help. But even so, the overall group is 5-½".



The rear sight shows the slight Moorish influence one might have had, were one included.

This is now an 'Officer's Model' escopeta and I am contemplating a little engraving to seal the deal. It shoots well enough now, but it might as well be as fun to look at as it is accurate!



The front sight is simple cast brass "turtle" sight. It gets quite dirty during the loading and shooting.