



This study of the M1859 Marine sergeant's sword is a revision of my article first published in the October 2018 edition of "Man-at-Arms" magazine. It includes additional information developed since that time, but the most significant change is a re-evaluation of when the Marines first added the initials "U.S.M.C." to the blades of their sergeants' swords. The conventional thought is the change was made in 1875; my analysis of the data suggests a much earlier date. If any readers have thoughts on the matter or can address some of the questions posed at the end of the article, I would welcome your input.

USMC M1859 Sergeants Sword

The Model 1859 sergeants' sword is a cherished part of the United States Marine Corps' proud tradition and a link to its storied past. When first adopted, the sergeants' sword was intended as a true fighting weapon. Although no longer a practical weapon in modern warfare, it remains a symbol of NCO leadership and plays an important role in ceremonial occasions. The Marines are proud of the fact that it is the oldest and longest-serving American weapon design in continuous use. The officers' mameluke sword was adopted earlier, in 1826, but its use was suspended between 1859 and 1875.

Pre-M1859 Sergeants' Swords:

Sergeants' swords are not discussed in the earliest Marine uniform regulations but were apparently items of issue by at least 1798 when in a note Commandant Burrows observed "Sergeants' swords have brass handles". There are occasional early mentions of purchasing swords for sergeants and musicians, but little is known about the designs prior to the adoption of the model with the stylized eagle head pommels which were the subject of the excellent article by Stan Smullen in the August 2010 edition of "Man-at-Arms". This Marine sergeant's sword is frequently referred to as the M1832 but is believed to have been adopted at about the same

time as the officer mameluke, i.e. 1826. They were initially acquired from the Philadelphia firm of F.W. Widmann, and, after his death, from the firm of W.H. Horstmann and Sons which acquired Widmann's business assets. Most collectors do not believe this pattern was exclusive to the Marine Corps because there are too many survivors. The Marine Corps was a very small organization in the first half of the 19th century and would have needed only a small number of such swords to equip its non-commissioned officer force.



*Figure 1 **Eagle Pommel Sergeant's Sword.** This model was worn by Marines from at least 1831 until replaced by the M1859.*

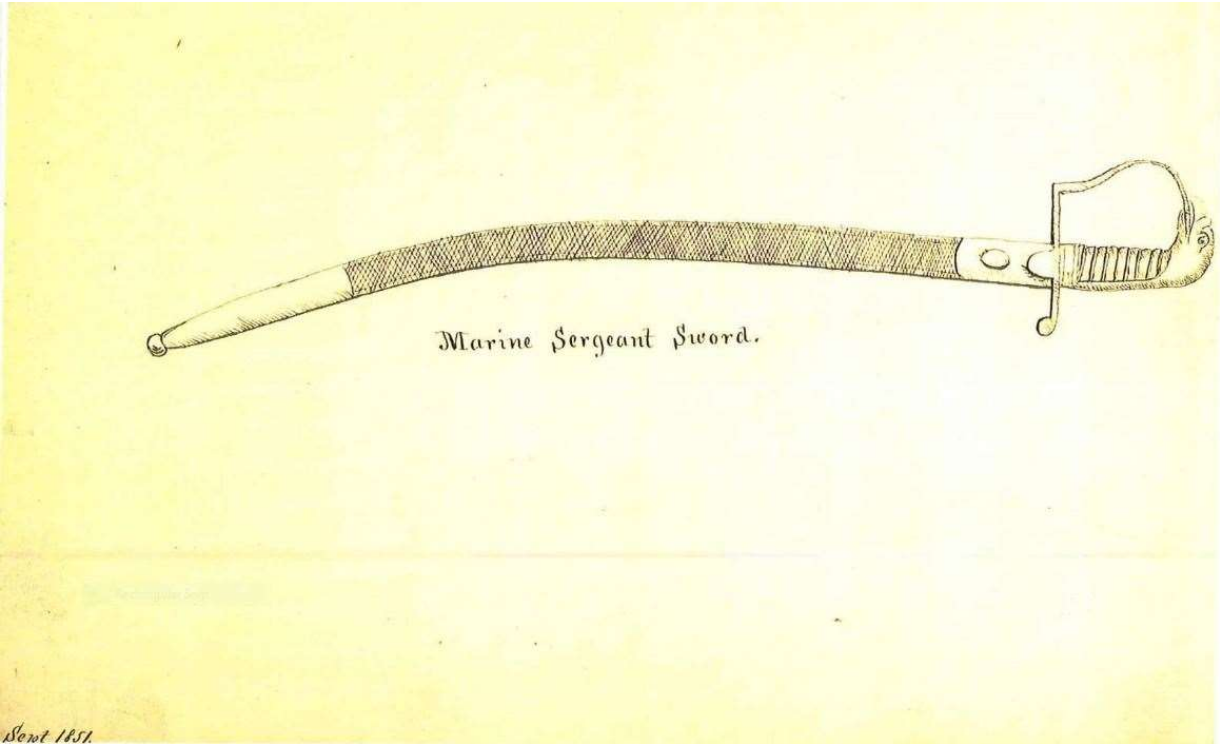


Figure 2 *Drawing of the Marine Sergeant's Sword from Horstmann Pattern Book, c.1851*

Adoption of the M1859:

In 1859 Marine enlisted men, like Marine officers, received new swords. Whereas the Uniform Regulation of 1859 was explicit about the design of the new officer's sword, it was anything but with regards to enlisted swords. It said merely "*Same as U.S. Infantry*". Because of this, modern collectors and authors, including Col Rankin, the author of the well-regarded "*Small Arms of the Sea Services*", assumed the swords the regulation intended were the Army M1840 NCO and musician swords. As a result, the Horstmann version of the M1840 NCO sword with the turned-down counterguard has been widely regarded as the sword carried by Marine sergeants during the Civil War and immediate post-war period. Unfortunately, this is not correct. That sword was merely the Horstmann version of the Army sword, most of which were sold to militia and volunteer Army elements.



Figure 3 **Horstmann M1840 NCO Sword with Distinctive Turned-Down Rear Counterguard.** The Assistant Quartermaster initially proposed Marine sergeants use this model. After the Commandant rejected it for sergeants, it was adopted for use by Marine musicians.

We should not be too critical of modern collectors and authors, however, because the Quartermaster personnel responsible for procuring the new swords and the company responsible for supplying them, made the same mistake in 1859. Horstman Brothers and Company of Philadelphia had the 1859 contract to provide swords for the Marine Corp. They submitted a sample of the proposed new sword to Marine Corps headquarters through Capt. Maddox, the Assistant Quartermaster in Philadelphia. On 11 October 1859, Capt. Maddox received a letter from his boss, the Headquarters USMC Quartermaster, stating that *“The Commandant informed me that it is ascertained that the sword, presented sometimes since, for use of the non-commissioned officers of the Corps, is not the one intended by the board of officers establishing the uniform of the Corps. It is intended to be of the same pattern as that adopted for officers, except the hilt is brass instead of gilt. Be pleased to procure and forward one to me for examination.”* A new sample was procured and forwarded to Headquarters USMC. On 15 October, Capt Maddox received a letter from the Quartermaster informing him *“The sword first sent by you has been adopted for the musicians of the Corps, and the one the same pattern of the officer’s sword, with brass hilt to be worn with a frog, has been adopted for the sergeants. I have retained it here and will return the other to you. You will be pleased to purchase three more of the sword adopted for the sergeants and send one to Capt Bravoort, New York, and Col Deleny, Boston, and retain the other in your office.”*



Figure 4 **Drawing of First Sergeant and Drum Major from Uniform Regulations of 1859.** The regulation was printed in October 1859, too late for the illustrations showing the proper sword to have been seen by Horstmann before submitting the incorrect sample



Figure 5 **Early Horstmann M1859 Sergeant's Sword.** Horstmann produced these early models with unetched blades stamped "HOSRSTMANN/& SONS" on the reverse ricasso and "PHILADELPHIA" on the obverse. A variant had the name and city together on obverse ricasso and the Weyerberg king's head logo stamped on the reverse.



Figure 6 C. 1863 photo on NCO armed with M1859 sword with squad at Washington, D.C. Marine Barracks

Although the M1859 sergeant's sword was based on the Army M1850 foot officer's sword, there were several differences. Sergeants' swords had plain brass hilts and scabbard mounts, whereas officers' hilts and scabbard mounts normally were gilt. The grips on sergeants' swords were wrapped with leather, whereas officers' grips were usually covered with sharkskin. Officers' swords had etched blades, while Marine sergeants' blades were polished bright with no etching. Finally, and the most visibly obvious difference, the scabbards of sergeants' swords had only two mounts, a top mount with a frog stud and a scabbard drag, whereas officers' scabbards bore three mounts, i.e. a throat and middle mount fitted with carrying rings, and a drag.

The Sword Contracts:

In the last half of the 19th century the Marines procured enlisted swords through competitive contract. An ad would be placed by the Quartermaster in leading newspapers around the country

soliciting bids for the provisions of various items of supplies and equipment, including swords, and the low bidder would receive a contract for the next year. Up until 1867 the contracts were awarded by calendar year, i.e. 1 January to 31 December each year. In 1867 they transitioned to fiscal years, i.e., 1 July to 30 June the following year.

Horstmann received the first contract in 1859 calling for it to provide 150 sergeants' swords. However, probably due to delays in defining the design, Horstmann came nowhere near to providing that number. In addition to the four sample swords discussed above, it made only one regular delivery of 24 swords which occurred in November of 1859. At the end of the year the Quartermaster told Horstmann the Marines would still accept 50 additional sergeants' swords if they were ready for immediate delivery. On 7 January 1860, Horstmann advised the 50 swords were ready, but the Quartermaster replied it was too late and declined to receive them. (There is, however, a possibility that Horstmann did deliver these 50 swords or some other delivery beyond those shown in existing records. There is a receipt in the archives dated 12 July 1860 showing Horstmann was paid \$606.18 for swords he delivered, which is substantially in excess of approximately \$350 he would have been due based on the known sergeants' and musicians' swords he delivered.)

Ames received the contract to provide swords for 1860. Based on the under-delivery of swords by Horstmann in 1859, one would expect Ames would have received large orders. In fact, it received orders for only 36 Sergeants' swords which it delivered in November 1860. I have only seen one possible example of a sword from this contract, one owned by Dave La Slavic of Arizona Swords. Although it is unmarked, it can be attributed to Ames due to certain peculiarities in the construction of the hilt which was used only by Ames in 1860 (see footnote). It is very similar to the Horstmann examples, the primary difference being the use of laurel leaves rather than oak leaves around the periphery of the pommel.



*Figure 7 **Probable Ames M1859 Sergeant's Sword:** This sword is totally unmarked, but on stylistic grounds is thought to be one of the 36 Sergeants' swords produced by Ames under its 1860 contract with the Marine Corps. The decoration around the periphery of the pommel features laurel leaves as opposed to the oak leaves used by Horstmann. Note the cruder casting than usually found on officers' swords.*

(Explanation provided by Dave Slavic for attribution to Ames: "The guard on this sword was made by Weyersberg. In 1860 Ames incorporated these guards into some of their hilts. Ames used their own pommels and the heel portion of the knuckle guard to assemble these hilts. The Ames knuckle guard was thicker than the matching section of the Weyersberg guard, so the Ames part was filed to match the Weyersberg part. Once you note the Weyersberg guard (which is easily identifiable), look for the taper of the knuckle bow at the heel. Invariably, when the taper is there, it is an Ames product.").

In 1861 the contract again went to Horstmann, and, probably due to the initiation of hostilities, there was a large uptick in the number ordered, i.e. 80 swords, half to have 30.5" long blades, and half 28.5" blades.

In 1862 the contract went to Bent and Bush where it remained for the remainder of the CW. Bent and Bush delivered a total of 475 Sergeants' swords between 1862 and 1866.

At the end of the CW, the Army and Navy stopped procuring enlisted swords. The war-time production provided enough swords to fill their needs for the next 50-plus years. The Marines, however, were different. They continued procuring new swords on a regular basis throughout the rest of the century. Bent & Bush retained the contract until 30 June 1869 except for the period between 1 January 1867 and 30 June 1868 when the contract went to the company of Henry Eggeling. Henry Eggeling produced 25 sergeants' swords during his contract.

Horstmann regained the contract to provide the Marine Corps swords for the fiscal year beginning 1 July 1869 and retained it for most of the remainder of the century except for FY1889 when it went to Ridabock.

Although a total of 500 sergeants' swords were produced between 1 January 1862 when Horstmann lost the contract, and 30 June 1869 when it regained it, there are no known examples of swords marked to either Bent & Bush or Henry Eggeling, nor are there unmarked examples which could be attributed to them. All known examples have Horstmann markings. The likely explanation is that since both Bent and Bush and Eggeling were general military goods retailers and not sword makers, they used Horstmann as a sub-contractor to provide the swords they needed to fulfill their contracts.

Etched Blades:

At some point the plain polished steel blades of the Sergeants' sword were replaced by decorated blades. At first this decoration consisted of etching with generic foliate designs and military trophies with no specific references to the Marine Corps or even the United States. These swords included the manufacturer's name, "W.H. Horstmann/& Sons/ Philadelphia", at the base of the etching on the obverse side of the blade, and most have the king's head mark of the Solingen sword-making firm of Weyersberg stamped on the ricasso below the name. Other than the etching, these swords appeared the same as the previous swords, including the oak leaves around the periphery of the pommel.



Figure 8 Horstmann M1859 with Generic Etched Blade

Later, the generic design was replaced by a design similar to that Horstmann used on the M1850 foot officers' sword, but with the initials "U.S.M.C." replacing "U.S.". When they added the initials "U.S.M.C." to the blade, they also made a number of modifications to the hilt. First, and most noticeable, they replaced the oak leaves around the pommel with laurel leaves; next they added rosettes to the foliage on the guard; and finally, they removed the squiggle design from the face of the quillon. The reason for such changes is unknown, but apparently they were no big thing at the time since they were not mentioned in the archives' correspondence between the Marines and Horstmann. Horstmann continued to make the blades in both 28" and 30.5" lengths. Collectors sometimes call this variant the M1859/75 or even just the M1875 sergeant's sword.



Figure 9 **Horstmann M1859 Sergeant's Sword.** The designs on the hilt were modified and etch pattern was changed to include the initials "U.S.M.C.".

Timing for Adoption of Decorated Blades:

When did the Marines first start etching the blades of their sergeants' swords? The conventional wisdom among collectors is that the uniform regulations adopted in 1875 directed the etching of the initials "U.S.M.C." on the blades of the M1859 sergeants' swords. The assumption is that the generic etching preceded that, probably in 1872. In fact, the 1875 regulation had no such requirement. It did describe the new officers' M1875 mameluke in detail, including the requirement that the blade be etched with the words "UNITED STATES MARINES". However, the only thing it said about the design of enlisted swords is that *"For patterns of belts, complete, and swords, see patterns in the Quartermaster's Office, Headquarters."* It is possible more detailed guidance was provided in some other document, but despite a thorough search of USMC Quartermaster records held in the National Archives, no such document was found. If anyone is aware of such a document, the author would appreciate the details.

I suspect the adoption of etched blades predate the Uniform Regulation of 1875 and also 1872. The primary reason is that there are so few unetched swords compared to etched-bladed examples. Given that between 1859 and 1872 a total of about 720 sergeants' swords were produced, which is more than the combined total of all sergeants' swords produced for the rest of the century, one would expect to see a much higher percentage of unetched blades. However, at least 80% of the wide-bladed M1859 sergeants' swords found on the market today are etched. A related fact is that so many are found with the Weyersberg king's head mark. This would imply they were made before 1883 when Weyersberg merged with Kirschbaum, another Solingen sword-making company, to form WKC. Given the relatively small number of sergeants' swords made between 1875 and 1883 (about 90), this would suggest an improbably high survival rate. An alternative explanation for the scarcity of unetched blades is that at some point the Marines retro-etched their old blades, but I have found no evidence in the Quartermaster's files to suggest this. My theory, therefore, is that the Marines adopted etched blades for sergeants' swords at a much earlier date, perhaps as early as 1862 when Bent and Bush took over the contract from Horstmann.

Scabbards:

When first adopted in 1859, it was specified that the sword was *"to be worn with a frog"*. By 1875, however, this had changed. The 1875 regulation now read *"The non-commissioned staff, field and band musicians shall wear a white waist belt with sword attached to the belt by a sliding frog, except the Sergeant Major and the Leader of the Band, whose swords will be slung as prescribed for officers"*. Thereafter authorization to wear swords with scabbards fitted with carrying rings, for attachment to sword belt slings, was expanded to include other senior Staff NCOs, e.g. quartermaster sergeants. These senior Staff NCO swords are frequently misidentified as Civil War USMC officer swords.



*Figure 10 **M1859 Sword with Staff NCO Scabbard.** The majority of Marine scabbards have only two brass mounts, but some have three as shown here. Most Marine sergeants wore their swords with a sliding belt frog. However Marine Uniform regulations from 1875 until WWII specified certain senior NCOs, e.g. sergeants major and quartermaster sergeants, wear their swords with slings which required a scabbard with carrying rings.*

The leather scabbards for the M1859 sergeant's sword were more fragile than the swords themselves and thus were more easily damaged or worn out. Therefore, beginning in 1873, the Marines started ordering replacement scabbards on a regular basis, usually in lots of 10 to 30 at a time. The replacement scabbards were generally the same leather scabbards as the CW-era swords, but at some point, the scabbards were changed from all leather with brass mounts to ones with leather-covered steel bodies. This was possibly in 1898, when, after a long hiatus during which no new scabbards were purchased, the Quartermaster ordered 50 new replacement scabbards from Horstmann. The new steel-bodied scabbards were slightly, but noticeably, wider than the old all-leather scabbards, i.e. about a quarter inch wider. Other than that, there were no significant differences.



*Figure 11 **M1859 Sword with Leather-Covered Steel Scabbard:** In the late 19th century the Marines began using leather-covered steel scabbards to replace earlier all-leather scabbards. They were slightly wider than the all-leather versions.*

Horstmann apparently sometimes had a quality control problem with his replacement scabbards. One occasionally finds examples with obviously out-sized scabbards, sometimes as much as a half inch wider than normal. These extra-wide scabbards are found in both the frog stud and carrying ring configurations. These are often so out of proportion that, in at least one case, the dealer

stipulated the scabbard was probably a reproduction. These are authentic, however, and appear to have been the result of manufacturer error. Quartermaster records show there was some uncertainty by the makers of replacement scabbards regarding the sizes required. Why there should have been any question given that Horstmann had produced almost all these swords as well as the replacement scabbards, I do not know, but on several occasions, the manufacturer asked the Quartermaster for guidance. On one occasion, in 1875, Horstmann received an order for 10 replacement scabbards. In response to a question as to sizes, they were given specific measurements, i.e. five scabbards were to be 31.5" long, 1 3/16" wide, and 3/8" thick; and five were to be 28.5" long, 1 3/16" wide, and 5/16" thick. On all other occasions the contractor was just sent sample swords and told to make scabbards to fit. On one examined example, the throat opening was 1 5/16" wide while the sword blade was 1 1/8" wide. The swords naturally fit quite loosely in these wide-bodied scabbards and had considerable rattle. One must wonder why such ill-fitting scabbards were accepted by the Quartermaster and then issued.



Figure 12 *Over-sized Scabbard*

Horstmann Markings on Wide-blade Sergeants' Swords:

Originally, the M1859 sergeants' blades were plain polished steel and were stamped with the Horstman name on the ricasso. Later the blades were etched and the Horstmann name was included in the etched design. One would expect this marking would evolve over so many decades as they did with swords made for officers and the civilian market. In fact, however, the Marine sergeants' swords continue to use the same patterns which were used during the CW and immediate post-war period. The

below are the seven Horstmann formats I have found used on Marine sergeants' swords. They also appeared on their look-alike Army M1850 Swords.

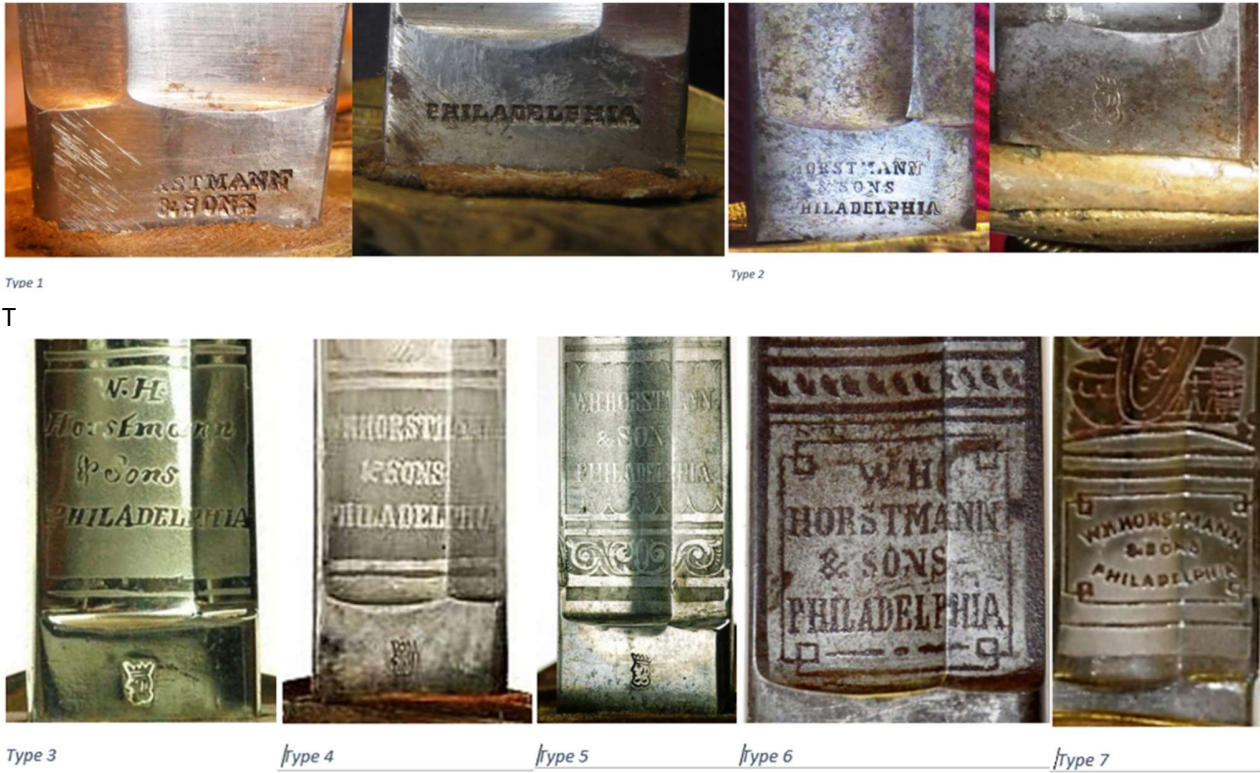


Figure 13 Seven Variant Horstmann Markings

The Type 1 and 2 marks are found on unetched blades. Type 3 through 7 are on etched blades. I believe they are in more-or-less chronological order, but it appears they were used concurrently and overlapped to a great extent, so they are of little use in dating. Other than Type 1, most blades were also marked by the Weyersberg king's head showing their origin with Horstmann's prime Solingen supplier. (The king's head stamp was discontinued in 1883 when Weyersberg merged with fellow sword maker Kirschbaum to form WKC.)

Inventory Control Numbers

Many wide-blade sergeants' swords with the modified hilts with laurel leaves and rosettes have numbers stamped on their guards and scabbard drags. I don't really know when and by whom the numbers were stamped on the drags and hilts, but I believe they are some form of inventory control number. I originally thought they were rack numbers assigned at unit level, but having seen more of them, I now believe the numbers were more likely assigned at the Quartermaster or other Headquarters level. If they were unit numbers they would be in several different fonts and formats and would likely have duplicate numbers, etc. These all seem to be in one of two formats and fonts. The most common format is "No. 123". These all seem to be on swords with the Type 6 Horstmann name and scabbards with leather-covered steel bodies. The lowest number I have observed is 94, the highest 252. The sword numbers are frequently mismatched with the scabbards.



Figure 14 **Variety 1 Inventory Control Numbers**

The other set of numbers use a smaller font and just the numbers themselves. They are also found on swords with the Type 6 Horstmann marks, but with all leather bodied scabbards. Since all examples seen of these numbers are in the 500 range, one would think they post-date the previous series, but since they are found on the earlier type scabbards, that is uncertain.



Figure 15 **Variety 2 Inventory Control Numbers**

Thin-Bladed M1859 Sergeants Swords:

The most significant change affecting Marine M1859 NCO swords was made shortly after World War I when Gen. Charles McCawley, then Quartermaster of the Corps, redesigned the sword. The narrow top fuller was removed, reducing the blade to its current width of 7/8", and the current etching design, which includes the spelled-out name "United States Marines" and the iconic USMC eagle, globe and anchor on both sides of the blade, was adopted. I have been unable to find a primary source for the precise date of this change. The date most often cited is 1918, but I doubt this is correct. Gen. McCawley didn't return from France until 16 December 1918, and it seems unlikely redesign of the NCO sword was a top priority of either himself or the Quartermaster Division either during or immediately after the war, so I suspect the introduction of the new sword was somewhat after 1918.



*Figure 16 **Post-WWI NCO Sword.** shortly after WWI Marine Quartermaster Gen. McCawley redesigned the NCO sword, reducing the width and redesigning the blade etching. This remains the current Marine NCO sword.*

Marine Corps uniform regulations through that published in 1937 continued to authorize two variant scabbards for the thin-bladed version of the M1859 NCO sword. One, as shown in the photo above, with two mounts and a frog stud for wear by most NCOs, and the other with three mounts and carrying rings for wear by NCOs of the first grade, e.g. sergeants major and quartermaster sergeants. This requirement remained in the regulations until WWII. The 1937 regulation stated: "*When sword is worn with the dress or blue undress, the dress belt with slings shall be worn by noncommissioned officers of the first grade, and the dress belt with dress frog*

by all other enlisted men." The regulation also included this illustration of regulations swords, scabbards, and knots:



Figure 17 Illustration of Marine Swords from Uniform Regulation of 1937, Note Staff NCO scabbard with carrying rings.

In practice it appears, despite the regulations, that most, if not all, NCOs wore their sword with a frog. I have searched widely for post-WWI M1859 scabbards configured for slings and have found just three examples. All three were marked with the circa 1920s circular Horstmann logo with the statue in the center and had inventory control numbers (340, 374 and 448) stamped on the guard and the scabbard drag. These numbers show the swords were procured by the Quartermaster, USMC, rather than private purchase by an individual NCO. The scabbards had a leather-covered steel body with three brass mounts with carrying rings for wear with a sling. To date, I have been unable to find even a single photo an NCO wearing one. One explanation may be that scabbards with carrying rings were just not available. Given the small size of the Corps at the time, there were very few first grade NCO, perhaps too few to justify the expense for major suppliers such as Lilley and Meyer to produce a scabbard for which there was so little demand.



Figure 18 Post-WWI M1859 Staff NCO Sword by Horstmann

Since the 1960s the Marine Corps Systems Command has required manufacturers obtain certification their swords meet requirements for sale to Marines, and that the certification number be place on the blade. Since 2002 the Command has specified the certificate number be etched "On the top of the sword spine behind the hilt." On some early NCO swords the certificate was just a number of the face of the blade (see "372" on the sword in Fig 16 above). Usually, it is on

the spine as “SERIAL No XXX” or “USMC XXX”. It would be useful to know all the various certification numbers, when they were issue, and to which company. Since the certificates must be periodically updated, this information could be used to date the swords.



Figure 19 MCSC Certification Number

Some Questions I’d Like Answered:

- Did Horstmann deliver any sergeants’ swords in 1859 other than the 24 delivered in November?
- When did the Marines start using generic etched blades on its sergeants’ sword?
- When did the Marines add the initials “U.S.M.C.” to the etching on its sergeants’ sword?
- Did the Marines use carrying rings on staff NCO swords prior to the Uniform Regulation of 1875?
- When did the Marines start using leather-covered steel bodies for their scabbards?
- Did Horstmann use any marking other than the 7 types identified above?
- Are there any survivors of the 25 sergeants’ swords produced by Ridabock in FY1889? How are they marked?
- When and by whom were the two varieties of inventory control numbers stamped on the hilts and scabbard drags?
- When was the narrow-bladed NCO sword adopted?

- List of all the MCSC Certification numbers issued with the dates and identity of the companies which received them.