

James Earl Ray's rifle is fired

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. — James Earl Ray's rifle, locked in an evidence box for nearly 20 years, was fired Wednesday in the first of tests that Ray hopes will clear him in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Ray, 69, imprisoned in Tennessee and gravely ill with liver disease, pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing the civil rights leader but almost immediately recanted. He has asked for a trial ever since.

The tests, which will use an electron microscope, were not

available when Ray went to prison. He hopes they will show the bullet that killed King came from another weapon.

A report should be released next month, said Robert Hathaway, the criminalist leading the testing team. He also said it is possible that the markings on the bullets being tested will not lead to a definitive conclusion.

Ray's Remington .30-06 rifle was retrieved Wednesday from a padlocked, black case and the three fragments of the bullet taken from King's body were displayed in a clear plastic container.

Later, researchers fired six

shots into a tank of water.

The first to pull the trigger, George Reich of the Suffolk County Crime Lab on Long Island, N.Y., fired two shots and was drenched when water splashed onto him.

"I felt this strong sense of history," he said. "It's been a highlight in my career to be involved in this."

The slugs will be compared to the bullet from King's body to look at the marks left by the gun barrel. Each gun barrel has one-of-a-kind markings that are transferred onto the bullet casing to create an imprint as unique as a fingerprint.

The marks will get a preliminary

in first ballistics test

examination at the University of Rhode Island before going to a private lab, CamScan USA Inc. in Cranberry Township, Pa., where the electron microscope will be used.

Hathaway and Marshall Robinson, an independent contractor who does firearms examinations for the Waterbury and Bridgeport police departments in Connecticut, also fired two shots each.

The tests are to continue today and Friday.

Defense lawyer Jack McNeil said even if the tests show the bullet came from Ray's gun, it does not prove Ray fired the weapon and he will continue to seek a trial

to prove his innocence.

"This is not the end-all and be-all," he said. "It's important, but the fact remains that from the very beginning James Earl Ray contended he was not there."

John Campbell of the Shelby County, Tenn., district attorney's office said the tests are useless and another trial will change nothing. King was gunned down April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn.

Ray has acknowledged owning the rifle, but said a gunrunner he knew only as "Raoul" dropped the gun — with his fingerprints on it — near the murder scene to frame him.