

James Earl Ray's rifle

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. (AP) - 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

fired after 20 years

criminalist leading the testing team. He also said it is possible that the markings on the bullets being tested will not be distinct enough to lead to a definitive conclusion.

Ray's Remington .30-06 rifle was retrieved Wednesday from a padlocked, black case marked "evidence" and the three fragments of the bullet taken from Dr. 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.