



THE KETCHUM HAND GRENADE

Like most wars, the American Civil War modified many tactics and weapons in use at the time and introduced many innovations into the prosecution of war. One of the most interesting new items was the Ketchum hand grenade. Patented in August, 1861, the Northern Navy and Army quickly adopted it for use at close quarters.

The Ketchum hand grenade consisted of three parts: a cast iron body that held the bursting charge, a plunger/percussion cap assembly that ignited the blasting charge, and a tail fin that stabilized the weapon in flight. For safety, each part was shipped to the field separately. Before a battle, soldiers filled the body with gunpowder, attached the tail fin at the rear, and inserted the percussion/plunger assembly at the front. When completed, the Ketchum hand grenade looked very much like a large, deadly lawn dart.

In battle, grenadiers threw the grenade so that its trajectory contained a high arc. This was necessary because the plunger only ignited the percussion cap if the grenade landed squarely on the face of the plunger. Many times the Ketchum bounced off its target and did not explode.

The Ketchum hand grenade was most effective in naval engagements. Navy grenadiers were more successful because the percussion/plunger assembly worked better when it struck the hard surface of a ship's deck. Throughout the war, naval officers employed the Ketchum more often and more effectively against their opponents than did their counterparts in the army.

Armies employed the Ketchum generally during a siege where the battle lines were fixed. Grenadiers could open holes in breastworks with the grenade and infantry could then charge through the gap. This plan often did not work. Soldiers quickly understood that creating a "soft landing" for the grenade would prevent its ignition. There are stories about soldiers spreading blankets on the ground in order to prevent the plunger assembly from igniting the charge. Soldiers then picked up the grenade and used against its initial owners. This method gave new meaning to the "catch – 'em" grenade and reduced its popularity and effectiveness on land.