



THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR – INFANTRY – CARTRIDGE BOXES

The armies that fought against each other in the American Civil War were basically organized in the same manner. At the start of the war, most units were comprised of volunteers. The primary unit was the regiment. It was made up of 10 companies of 100 men. Men from the same town or county often were in the same company. The Civil War infantry regiment rarely consisted of 1000 men. Death, injury and desertion thinned the ranks. Replacements were hard to find after the first year of the war.

In the North, state governments organized regiments until they could be incorporated into Federal government service. Most early units were volunteers. The length and harsh nature of the war forced both North and South to draft soldiers in order to fill the ranks. The South began its draft in 1862, the North in 1863. The average length of service was three years.

Civil War armies consisted of three branches of service: infantry, artillery and cavalry. The infantry were the “foot soldiers,” the largest part of the army. A typical infantryman in the Northern army carried his weapon, most often an 1861 Springfield rifled musket, a percussion cap box, a cartridge box, a canteen, a tent shelter, haversack, bedroll and extra powder and lead.

Because bullets as we know them today were not available in the Civil War, most infantrymen used paper cartridges for their muskets and rifles. Paper cartridges were issued in a packet of ten. To fire a round, a Civil War soldier needed a paper cartridge and a separate percussion cap. These caps looked very much like the caps for toy cap guns sold today. The percussion cap was inserted into the firing chamber. The paper cartridge was then torn open, emptied into the barrel of the gun and firmly packed with a ramming rod. When the infantryman pulled the trigger, the hammer came down on the percussion cap, which ignited the paper cartridge, which, in turn, provided the force to propel the musket ball or bullet downrange toward its target.

Cartridges were carried separately from percussion caps in a black leather box. The box held 40 to 60 cartridges. It was often slung from a strap that went over the left shoulder and crossed the chest to the right hip where the cartridge box rested. In this fashion, the infantryman could easily access its contents. The strap was usually adorned with a brass chest plate depicting an eagle. The cartridge box contained a brass “USA” plate on the flap.