



THE MINIE BALL

The deadliest weapon in the Civil War was a rifled musket that used Minie ball bullets. The word Minie is pronounced “Minnie.” Most experts believe that the musket and Minie ball caused 90% of the deaths in the Civil War.

The federal weapons factory made a very good rifled musket. A rifled musket had a barrel with spiraled grooves cut into its inside wall. This caused the bullet to spin as it left the barrel. A spinning bullet has a more stable flight. This made it more accurate at longer range. A Springfield rifled musket using Minie all bullets was accurate up to 250 yards.

The Minie ball was named after its inventor, Claude-Etienne Minie, a French army officer. His bullet had a pointed end and a hollow base with an iron plug. Two to four grooves were cut into the metal base. This bullet allowed muzzle-loading rifles to be used in battle. Before this invention, muskets were too hard to load. They often misfired. The Minie ball could be loaded quickly. A soldier in battle could load and fire three bullets in one minute.

The way the Minie Ball was packaged made it easy to use. At the factory, a paper tube full of powder was placed behind the Minie ball. Both were then wrapped in more paper. They tied off the package at the bullet end. The powder end was folded or twisted closed. To load the cartridge, a soldier bit off the folded end. Then, he poured the powder into the barrel. Next, he squeezed the ball from the paper wrapping into the barrel. He used the ramrod that came with the rifle to “seat” the Minie ball in the barrel. This ramming action also cleaned the barrel of leftover powder. It also helped to prevent misfires. The soldier then placed a percussion cap in the firing chamber.

When soldiers fired their rifles, the exploding percussion cap ignited the black powder in the barrel. The heat and force of the explosion caused the lead base of the Minie ball to expand. Because the inside of the rifle barrel had spiral cuts in it, the Minie Ball spun as it passed down the barrel.

Both the North and the South used rifled muskets and Minie ball bullets. Minie balls in the North had three grooves cut into the base. The South used Minie balls with two grooves in the base.