

THE BAYONET

by Martin Miller, Jr.

Bayonets have been around almost as long as the first firearms. Originally, units equipped with firelocks were supported by pikemen. As firearms became more reliable and common, there were fewer pikemen and more musketeers, so a substitute for the pike needed to be invented.

The first bayonets were plug bayonets. They were basically spear- or pike-heads with a tapering shaft or grip that literally plugged into the end of the matchlock's muzzle. The musket thus became a short spear for thrusting when close-quarters combat occurred. The plug bayonet was generally an eight- to ten-inch blade in the shape of a spear point.

Later, the socket bayonet was adopted to allow the musket to be loaded and fired while the bayonet was attached to the musket. The socket bayonet had an offset socket that fit around the outside of the barrel with a slot that allowed it to be fit over a stud or front sight, and was held in place by friction. Originally, the socket bayonet was hand-fitted to each individual bayonet. Later; as manufacture became more uniform and precise, they came to be mass-produced. The socket bayonet usually had a blade twelve to eighteen inches in length and a triangular cross-section for strength and weight. A tension ring that snugged up to the stud or front sight to lock the bayonet in place was the next improvement. Socket bayonets were used as late as the Second World War.

Saber bayonets, basically short swords of around two feet in length, were the rage off and on, but never widely adopted. The saber bayonet attached to the musket by a ring that fit over the varrel and a mounting stud, usually on the side of the barrel near the muzzle. The saber bayonet had a conventional sword or knife grip that allowed it to be used as a sword when not attached to the musket.

In the late Eighteen Hundreds the knife bayonet as we know it now came into common use with the adoption of the small bore rifle using the then-new smokeless powders. The knife bayonet, as its name implies, resembled a common belt knife with blade and grip. The knife bayonet varied in length, usually between eight and fifteen inches. When not attached to the rifle it could be used as a camp tool or as a close-combat weapon.

Today, bayonets are standard for most modern assault rifles, but are overwhelmingly used as camp knives and utility tools. However, there were times when attached bayonets were used in Vietnam in close-quarters combat.

Over the centuries the bayonet has been a weapon of psychological intimidation more than an actual weapon inflicting mass casualties.