



Buck and Ball: The Persistency of Early American Ammunition

During the American Revolution, maintaining the ammunition supply was a consistent challenge for American militia units. This was partly due to a lack of uniformity in the caliber of muskets coming from various manufacturers in Britain, France, Spain, and - to a lesser extent - the American Colonies. Although standardization of weaponry never became universal in this conflict, by the end of the war the most common rifle load would be buck and ball (buck-n-ball). It became standard ammunition for muzzle-loaded muskets through much of the 19th century.

Buck and ball was designed to combine the decisive impact of a large projectile (a .50 to .75 caliber ball, usually .69) with the wider spread of shotgun pellets. This ammunition was issued in paper cartridges consisting of one ball, three to six buckshot pellets, and a black powder propellant charge. The shooter would tear open the paper, load the powder, then ram the rest of the cartridge on top of it. Early smooth-bore muskets were not very accurate at long distances. The combination of buck and ball did not necessarily improve the accuracy of the weapons, but it greatly improved the damage done at all ranges by impacting multiple targets at once, particularly impactful during close combat, when the buckshot still maintained enough of its energy to rend flesh.

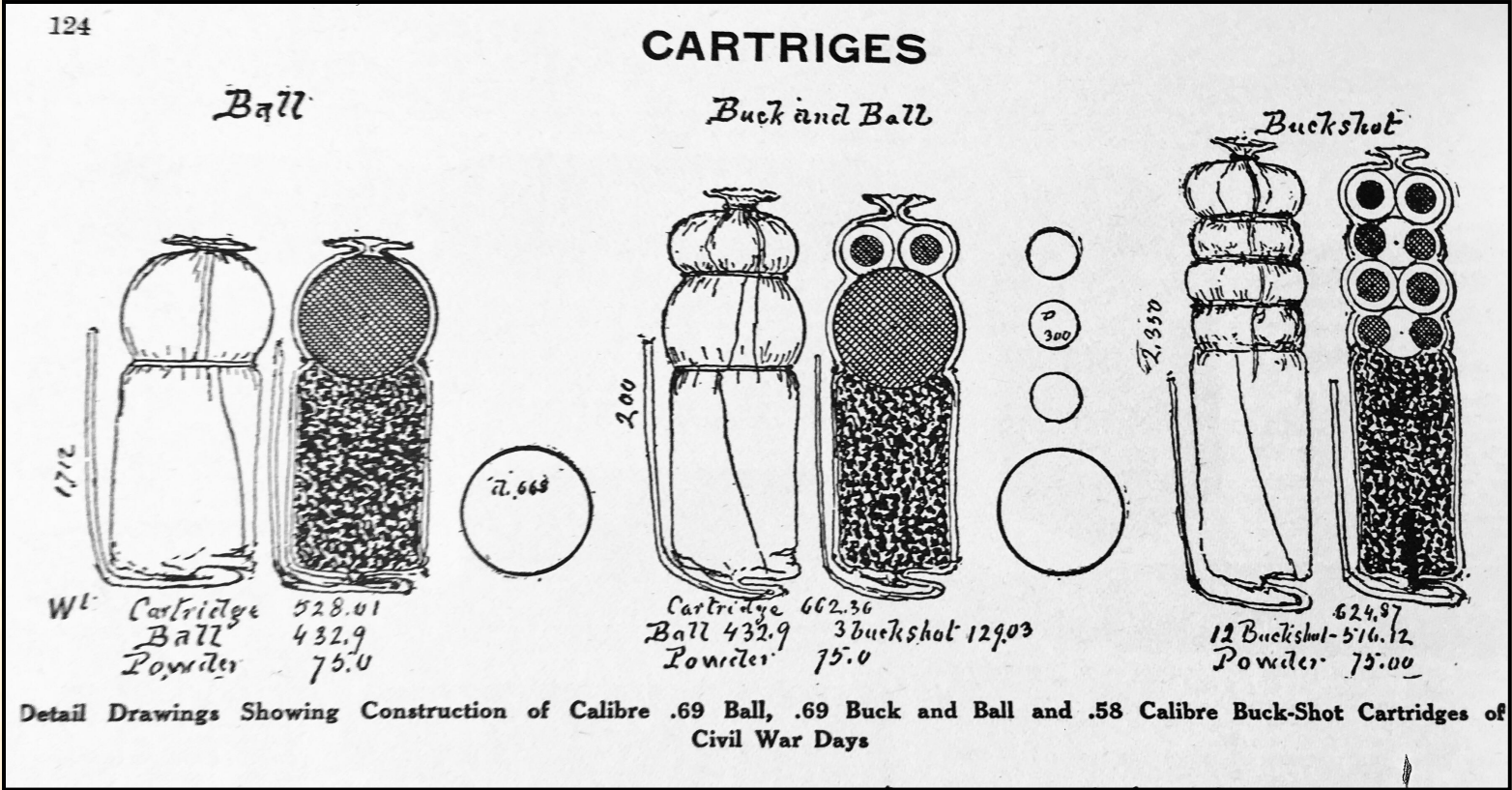
The U.S. Army used buck and ball cartridges in the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the Seminole Wars (1815-1845), and the Mexican War (1846-1848). Though rifled muskets would become the dominant infantry weapon by the end of the Civil War (1861-1865), buck and ball loading was widely used in the early stages of the conflict and played a significant role in several conflicts. Most notably, the Union Irish Brigade utilized smoothbore muskets with buck and ball loads to devastating effect against Pickett's Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg. Although buck and ball has largely been replaced by more efficient loads, some manufacturers of defensive shotgun ammunition mimic the old buck and ball loads in their designs.



Revolutionary-era "buck-n-ball" (MilitiaTreasures.com)



Detail of "Buck and Ball" from the monument to the 90th Pennsylvania at Gettysburg. (StoneSentinels.com)

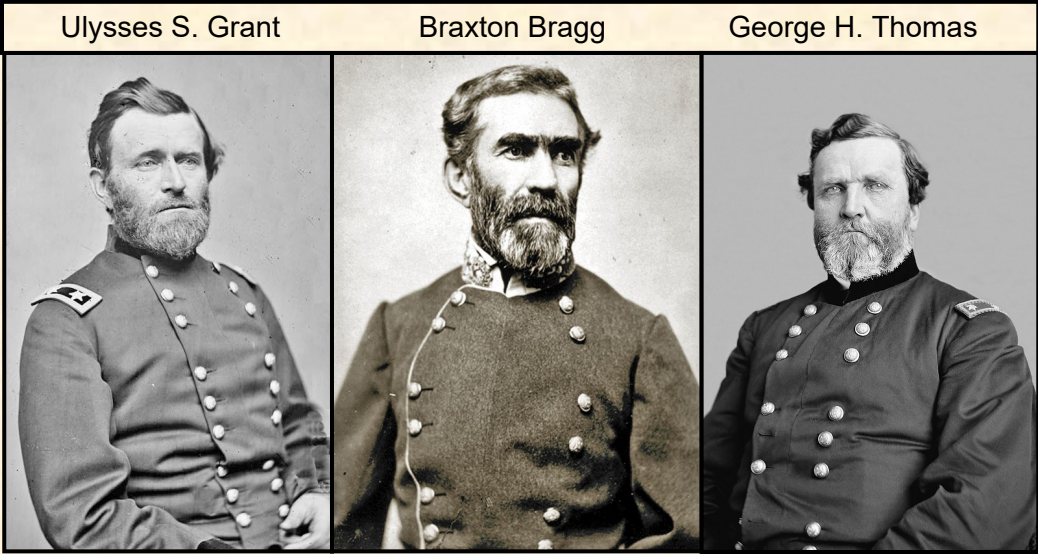


An Abolitionist at War, Part 10: Chattanooga Under Siege

Defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga (September 18-20, 1863) found Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland limping back to the comparative safety of Chattanooga. In the case of Maj. Caleb B. Cox, of the 84th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the limp was literal. He wrote to his wife on the 22nd, "I received a slight bruise on one ankle, made by a piece of shell... I can't recollect who all are killed and wounded. Our regiment has lost about one hundred killed, wounded, and missing, up to this time. The battle on Sunday was fearful, and the loss of life terrible." The Confederate Army of Gen. Braxton Bragg occupied the surrounding heights and laid siege to Chattanooga. Cox and his brethren expected an attack, but the armies would do little but skirmish and shore up their lines until November. Meanwhile, the Army of the Cumberland entrenched as political battles changed the playing field on both sides.

Bragg, embarrassed yet unrepentant about the missed opportunities at Chickamauga, blamed his subordinate generals for allowing the Union army to escape and relieved Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk and Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman of their command duties at the end of September. In response, twelve of his officers petitioned President Jefferson Davis to remove Bragg from command in early October. Davis declined to do so, while Bragg - in retaliation for the attempted coup - removed Lt. Gen. D. H. Hill and Maj. Gen. Simon B. Buckner from command. With Lt. Gen. James Longstreet too popular to remove, Bragg settled for sidelining him, sending Longstreet and his cavalry on a campaign against Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside at Knoxville. The Union army saw leadership changes as well. Maj. Gen. Alexander M. McCook and Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden permanently lost their commands on September 28 when the XX Corps and the XXI Corps were combined to form the IV Corps under Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger. On October 19, Rosecrans, who had not mentally recovered from the battle, was relieved of command. The army-saving efforts of Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas, "The Rock of Chickamauga," earned him command of the Army of the Cumberland and the reverence of his men. This included Caleb Cox, who sent his wife two photos of the general for safekeeping, along with his praise for "old George Thomas," while lamenting the fate of Rosecrans. On October 23, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant arrived to take charge in Chattanooga.

Despite assurances to his wife that he had escaped from battle largely unharmed, Cox fell ill shortly after returning to Chattanooga, seriously enough that he was given leave from duty to recover, during which time he stayed with the Quartermaster. By September 29, he was back with the regiment, though not yet fully recovered. According to Cox, the Army of the Cumberland spent this time "working on the fortifications and strengthening" its position. While struggling to establish supply lines across the Tennessee River, the army subsisted on half rations, with mail delivery coming intermittently, if at all. As Cox wrote, "It is impossible to get rations here, until we get the railroad opened." By the end of October, the 84th Regiment had established a supply line and was working to restore the rail bridges west of Chattanooga, camping each night in the shadow of Lookout Mountain. There, Cox and his brethren would wait for another four weeks before given a chance to seek redemption at the Battle of Chattanooga. (to be continued) ~ ~ PTF



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This Month in Military History

- May 3, 1861: Union General-in-Chief Winfield Scott proposes blockading Confederate ports from the coast of Virginia to the Mississippi River, known as the Anaconda Plan.
- May 10, 1775: One month after the battles of Lexington and Concord, a force of 83 New England volunteers (the Green Mountain Boys), under Ethan Allen and Col. Benedict Arnold, capture Fort Ticonderoga from the British.
- May 17, 1876: Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry leave Fort Abraham Lincoln (North Dakota), intent on rounding up free Native Americans refusing to report to reservations. Custer will die at the Battle of Little Big Horn (June 1876).
- May 24, 1856: In the Pottawatomie Massacre, abolitionists led by John Brown attack and kill five pro-slavery settlers in Kansas.
- May 31, 1279 BCE: Ramesses II, known as Ramesses the Great, becomes the third pharaoh of Egypt's 19th Dynasty. Popular culture often depicts him as the pharaoh of the Exodus, though there is no evidence of this.