

Bayonet Encyclopedia Article

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Bayonet

Bayonets may have been made for hunters in Europe sometime in the sixteenth century. They were introduced as military weapons in France in the next century, with their earliest recorded use being 1642. The bayonet at first was simply a dagger with a tapered handle that could be shoved into the barrel of a gun. It replaced the pike--a long wooden shaft with a sharp metal tip--typically used by foot soldiers. These early bayonets were known as plug bayonets. While still a formidable weapon, the plug bayonet was imperfect, as the gun could not be fired with the knife in it, and it was often difficult to remove the sharp blade. Various versions that fit the blade to the outside of the gun barrel followed. A French colonel, Jean Martinet, is credited with inventing the socket bayonet in 1687, and this was introduced to the French army around 1700. The socket bayonet consisted of a short tube linked by a curved neck to a blade. The tube slipped over the muzzle of the firearm and was held in place by a protruding stud which engaged a Z-shaped slot. With the socket bayonet, the gun could be fired with the blade in place. Another change came in 1781 when John Waters was granted a British patent for a hinged bayonet that was permanently fixed to the gun and could be folded back along the barrel when not in use. The success of the bayonet in hand-to-hand combat dramatically transformed battlefield tactics. Infantrymen could reload their firearms while being covered by their comrades' bayonets, fight cavalry soldier with better odds, and have a reliable weapon at their disposal even if rain soaked their gunpowder. Advances in gun technology eventually made the bayonet obsolete. However bayonets with smaller, detachable blades were still used throughout World War I and World War II.