

Grenade Encyclopedia Article

Grenade

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Grenade

The prototype of the modern grenade was created in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They were made of bark, glass, clay, or earthenware pots filled with large grains of black powder that was set off by a fuse of corned powder housed in a quill or a thin tube of rolled metal. Because they looked like pomegranates with their large seeds, grenades picked up their name from the Spanish word for pomegranate: "granada." These early grenades were primarily used as incendiary devices.

Later, they were replaced by grenades with round metal bodies that could injure or kill those near its explosion. These metal grenades proved to be dangerous: the fuses were unreliable and the powder occasionally went off before the user could release it. Nevertheless, grenades maintained their popularity with the military. For example, in the 1600s, each infantry company of the British army included five "grenadiers" armed with grenades. It was dangerous to be a grenadier because of the frequency of accidents, and men who volunteered for this duty received extra pay and benefits. Grenades were thrown by hand, and also fired from musket-like tubes. But after about 1750, risky grenades were largely abandoned in favor of more accurate and powerful firearms.

Grenades became more reliable and diversified in the twentieth century. They were equipped with firing pins held up by striking levers, which in turn were secured by safety pins. They were launched from rifles and guns as well as thrown by hand. They were used extensively in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, and were important again in trench warfare in World War I. Millions were manufactured in the United States for use during World War II.

Modern grenades are constructed for a variety of purposes. They can be constructed to produce anti-personnel fragments, to penetrate armor, to generate smoke or tear gas, or to fire signal and illuminating flares. Smoke-producing grenades and tear gas grenades are often used by riot police. Anti-tank grenades are essentially very large bullets. These can be shot from a shoulder-held tube called a rocket launcher or grenade launcher.