

# Shrapnel or Fragment

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It will surprise almost everyone to know that no one has been injured or killed by shrapnel since WWII, and then only in the Pacific Theater. Nearly everyone gets it wrong. The misuse of the term “shrapnel” has become commonplace in virtually all phases of writing, history, and cinema. In fact, “shrapnel” has a specific meaning and is not interchangeable with the term “fragment.”

Henry Scope Shrapnel was a Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery in 1784 when he began working, on his own time and at his own expense, on a new artillery projectile that he thought would be more effective against infantry. Previously, there were only four artillery rounds in common use against infantry. One was shot – a solid projectile. A second was canister – a shotgun cartridge-like round for use at close range. A third was grape – similar in performance to a canister but with much larger projectiles. The fourth was the shell – an explosive projectile that killed with the fragments of the casing itself.

All four had drawbacks when used against infantry. Shot only could only cause limited casualties. Canister and grape were only used when the enemy got close enough to charge, and shell, while partially effective, broke into only a handful of large fragments.

Shrapnel’s idea was to fill the shell with dozens of iron or lead balls that could be timed to explode over the enemy’s head at longer ranges. While the idea was sound, it took him several years to perfect the fuzing necessary to make the idea practical. It was not until 1803 that the Army adopted Shrapnel’s round and used it successfully in the Battle of Suriname against the Dutch. Its next major use was in 1808 against the French at Vimeiro (Portugal). After that, it became a standard British artillery round. The round was so effective, Wellington kept it a secret. It was not until after the Napoleonic Wars that it began to appear in other nations’ arsenals.

By the advent of World War I, the shrapnel shell had become one of the primary anti-personnel artillery rounds. It saw extensive use in World War I on all the land battlefields. By WWII, however, the technology to allow for better fragmentation of shell casings had advanced, and fragments from shells were numerous and razor-sharp. The use of the shrapnel shell fell from most arsenals, except for the Japanese. Shrapnel shells were exclusively used as a land artillery shell.

The term “shrapnel” was adopted sometime in the early 1800s and derived from the inventor’s name. Shrapnel itself is the name given to the small balls or bullets contained within the shell. When the shell fragments, the balls/bullets spread out like a shotgun blast. The outer casing of the shell breaks, creating “fragments.” To make matters even more confusing, Americans never used the “Shrapnel Shell” terminology, and called their 19th-century equivalent “Case Shot,” which also happens to be similar to the term “Tin-Cased Shot” or “canister!”