

Civil War Weapons and Tactics

by Michael Vogt

Many of our recruits never saw a gun before, and are about as competent to be trusted with a loaded firearm, as would be a mule or a half-witted jackass," wrote Iowa war correspondent Franc Wilkie. He described one "raw recruit [who] carried his gun very much as one would carry a fence-rail or a crow bar."

Although a few early regiments were consolidated with re-enlisting volunteers, Iowa primarily organized new regiments, which therefore lacked sizable cadres of battle-hardened veterans who could pass on important lessons. Therefore many units left without adequate training—or even weapons. When William Oake of the 26th Iowa reached St. Louis, he found that eight companies had "miserable old second-handed muskets [that] were worse than none, for the men had no confidence in them."

Some Iowa regiments initially received smooth-bore muskets, devastatingly lethal at 100 yards. Recent studies, in fact, indicate that the distance between opposing battle lines at the first exchange of fire between averaged 100 yards.

However, the single-shot muzzle-loading rifled musket, specifically the .57-caliber M1861 Springfield, was the standard infantry weapon. A trained soldier could reload and fire a rifled musket three times a minute. His first step was to tear open a paper cartridge with his teeth. The cartridge was filled with loose black powder and a conical bullet called a minié ball. Then he poured the powder down the muzzle and pushed the ball down to the base of the muzzle with a ramrod. He returned the ramrod to its place, pulled the hammer to half-cocked, placed a percussion cap over the nipple at the breech, moved the hammer to full-cocked, aimed, and squeezed the trigger.

The force of the gasses expanded the base of the soft-lead minié ball so that it engaged the spiraling "rifling" grooves cut inside the muzzle. These grooves im-

parted a stabilizing spin to the minié ball, giving greater effective range (more than 200 yards) and accuracy over that of the outmoded smoothbore musket. Accuracy, of course, depended on estimating the distance of the target and adjusting the site.

In terms of battle tactics, close-order drill and linear deployment tactics dominated soldiers' training. They learned to form into units, march in time, charge, defend, and retreat. In tight-formation columns, they marched shoulder to shoulder to the battlefield. Regiments were deployed for combat by company; each formed two straight, staggered ranks. This arrangement allowed a commander to form a skirmish line and concentrate his company's fire at

effective ranges up to 300 yards. On each side, a neighboring company took its place, and a few additional companies were positioned behind as a reserve.

Developed in Europe, these linear combat tactics were largely unchanged since the advent of the smoothbore muzzle-loading muskets

in the 18th century. The tactics were employed a majority of the time in the Civil War when topography and field conditions allowed.

Each company's movements during a battle were in response to orders of the commander (usually a captain) and synchronized with the other three companies in the battalion. The direction, position, and movement of the battalion (commanded by a major), in concert with two other battalions that formed a regiment, fell under the orders of the regimental commander (usually a colonel). The number of dead and wounded testifies to the brutal effectiveness of musket and cannon as masses of troops faced each other in close linear combat. ❖

Michael Vogt is curator of the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum in Johnston and has written often for this magazine.

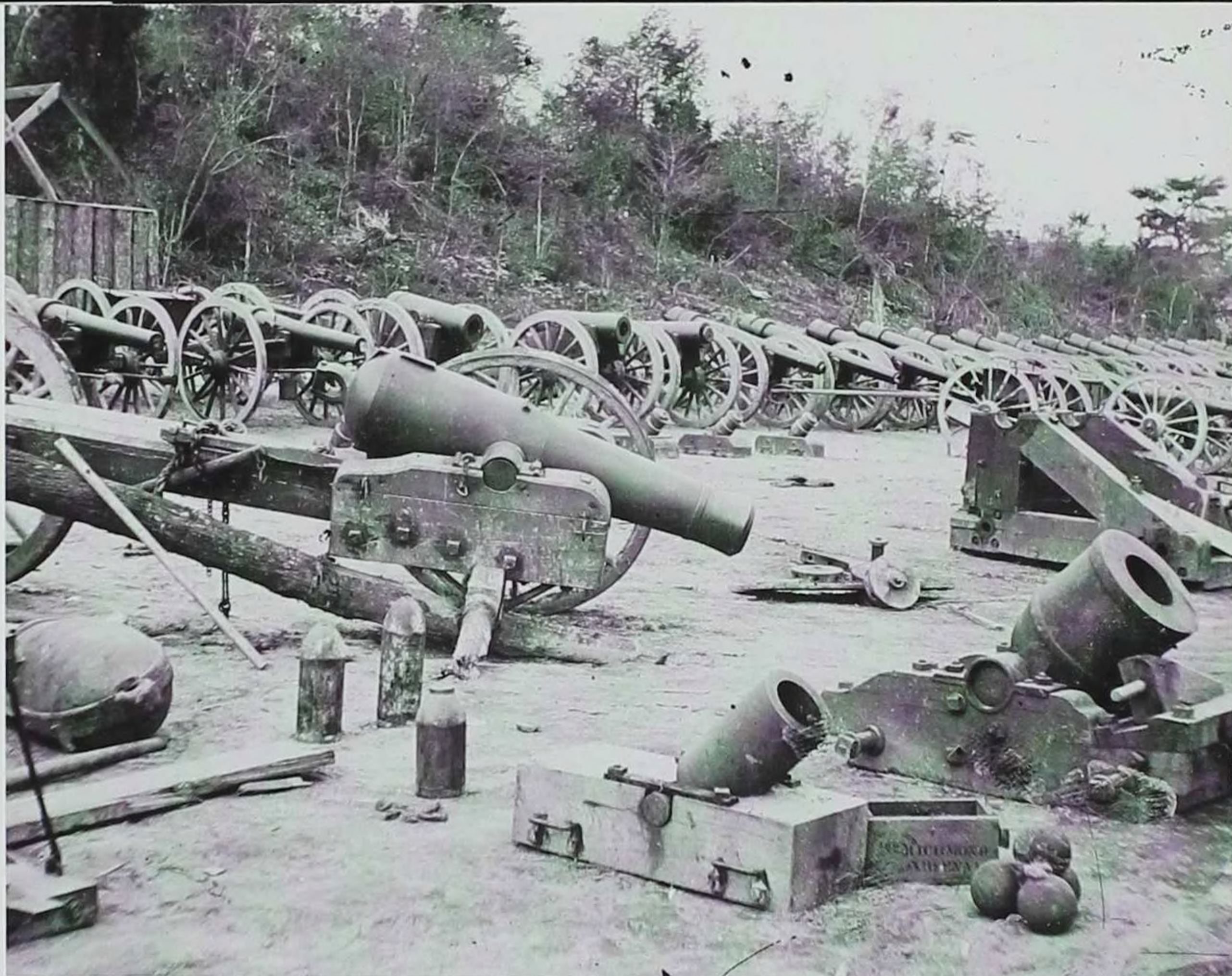
LAUMAN'S OWN, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Two hundred rifled muskets are made in the Springfield Armory every twenty four hours. Our whole army will soon be supplied with splendid rifles.

This optimistic newspaper report on Northern rifle production appeared in August 1861. To meet the high demand early in the war, rifled muskets were imported from Europe; the best was the British Enfield.



BOTH PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



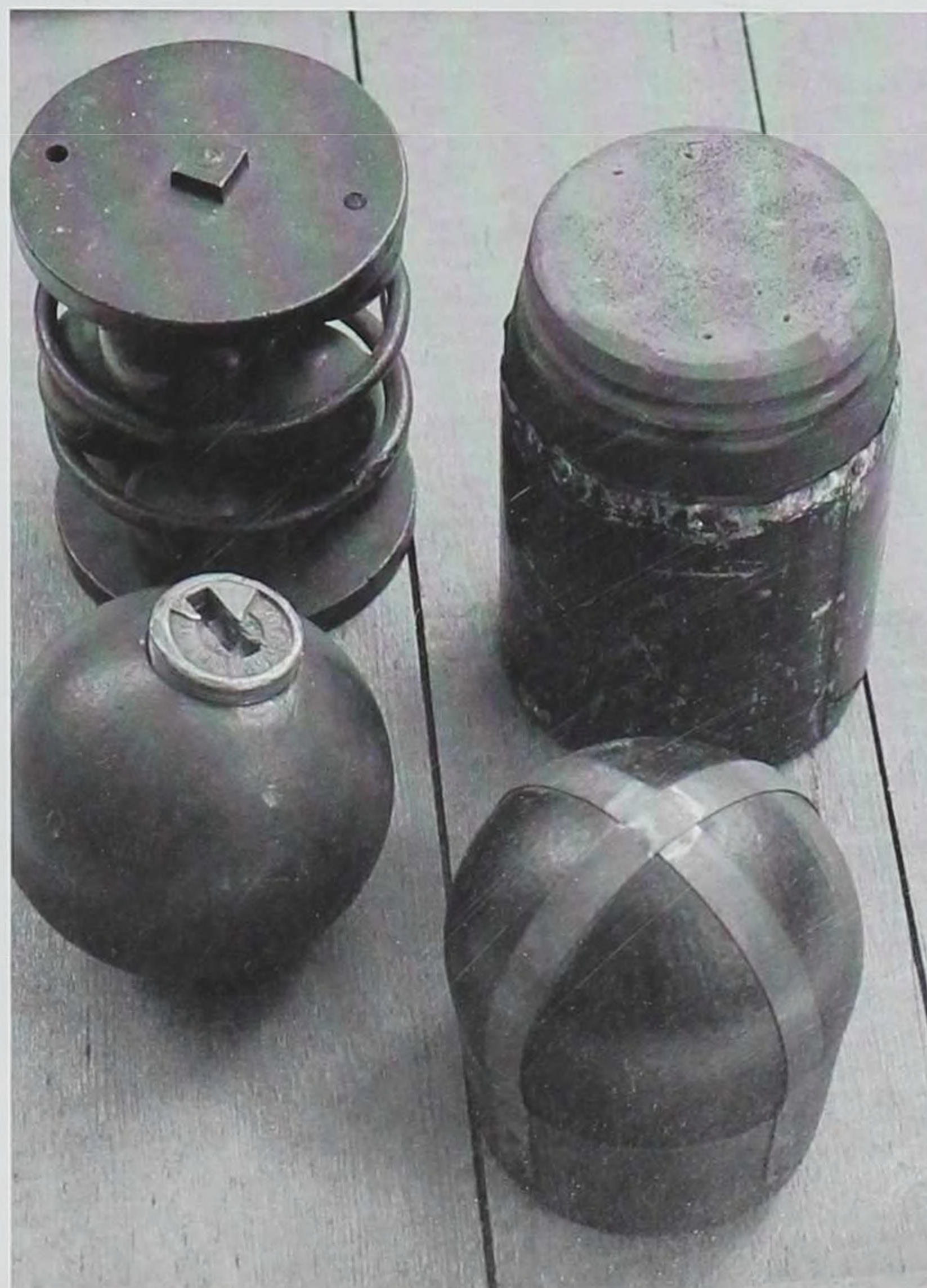
An unidentified private in the U.S. Colored Troops poses against a painted backdrop of a flag and armament. He holds a Remington-Beals percussion revolver (seldom issued to enlisted men) and an imported French musket. Top right: With shells and shot ranging from 6 to 300 pounds, field artillery created noise and smoke that could injure hearing and vision.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Bayoneted rifled muskets are stacked in a Union supply depot in Columbia, Kentucky, in 1864.

Four kinds of 12-pound cannon ammunition (clockwise from top left): Grapeshot comprised nine iron balls inside an open canister. Canister shot, packed with 27 iron or lead balls, was especially deadly against infantry. Cast-iron cannon balls with iron straps were used against massed troops, artillery emplacements, and fortifications. Spherical shells had five-second Bormann fuses; this one is from Vicksburg.



SHS (DES MOINES)