

Suggestions for Using the Civil War Canister Model

Author Ambrose Bierce remembered:

"Nothing could be heard but the infernal din of their discharge, and nothing seen through the smoke but a great ascension of dust from the smitten soil. When all was over and the dust cloud had lifted, the spectacle was too dreadful to describe. The Confederates were still there -- all of them, it seemed -- some almost under the muzzles of the guns. But not a man of all those brave fellows was on his feet, and so thickly were all covered with dust that they looked as if they had been re-clothed in yellow. 'We bury our dead,' said a gunner grimly."

- *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga*

A Confederate officer remembered:

"Never before in the history of war did a command of such small strength in so short a time kill and wound so many men."

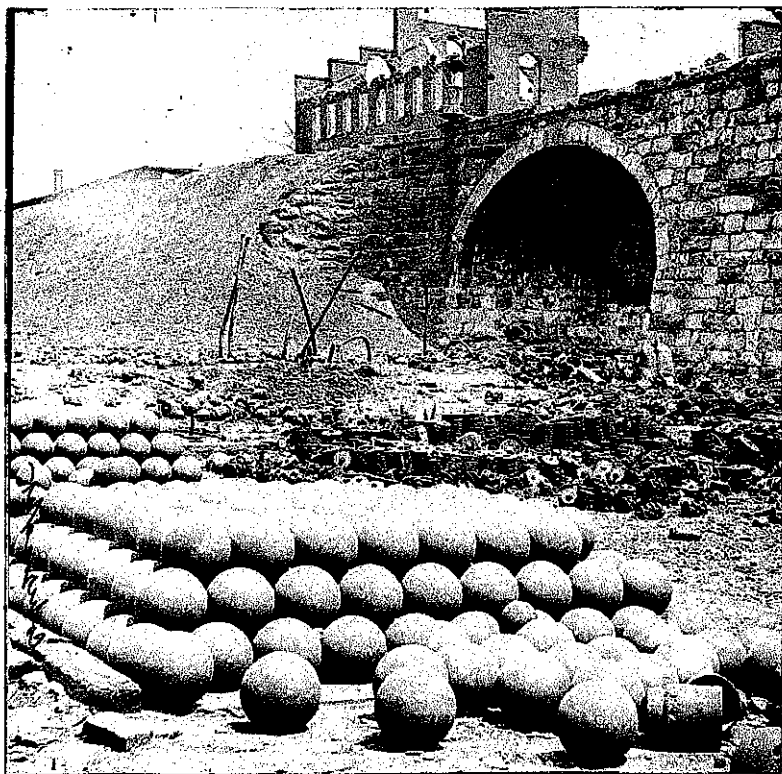
-*Courage Under Fire*

While not completely to scale, this model will give students a basic understanding of why Civil War artillery -- including canister -- was so deadly. For most students the idea of artillery damage is very abstract. They cannot envision the effects.

In a nutshell, canister was a metal "can" filled with metal balls and packed with sawdust. There were different sizes of canister and metal balls. This model approximates the size of some types of canister.

The effect of canister on the human body was terrible. In a nutshell, an artillery piece firing canister acted as a gigantic sawed-off shotgun. It was most effective when used at close range. If the situation was particularly dire, double-canister could be used.

There are many primary source accounts which show that canister could rip a whole in the enemy line. Several artillery pieces firing canister could make the enemy line melt.



Inside the small wooden box you will find an actual 1" metal canister ball. Allow students to handle this canister ball and feel how heavy it is. Then show them the metal can filled with the wooden canister balls. Ask them to imagine the can filled with the metallic canister balls. Ask them to imagine a line of men charging headlong *into* the artillery fire. Allow the information to sink in ... and then ask the students to predict what would happen.

By going to Flickr or doing a Google search you can find many images of actual canister. You can also find additional information on Civil War artillery at www.civilwarartillery.com/ or www.cwartillery.org/artillery.html.

"Richmond, Va. Piles of solid shot, canister, etc., in the Arsenal grounds; Richmond & Petersburg Railroad Bridge at right". Library of Congress, cwpb 02740