

THE MILLS BOMB

The Mills bomb, also known as the fragmentation bomb or hand grenade, was designed and patented in 1915 by William Mills, 1856-1932, a golf club designer. A brilliant metallurgist, he had also built the first aluminium foundry in Britain. In 1922 he was knighted for his services.

The Mills Number 5 grenade was introduced in May 1915 and became the dominant British grenade for the rest of the war, during which a staggering 35,000,000 were manufactured. It was of the familiar 'pineapple' construction, the cast iron casing deeply grooved to give the thrower a good grip and also to cause it to fragment upon detonation. It weighed 1.25 pounds and a competent thrower could hit a target at 30 yards with reasonable accuracy. Fragments often flew in all directions for more than 30 yards, so the thrower had to take cover if he had thrown from close range.

The Mills No. 5 was detonated by a central striker held closed by a hand lever and secured with a pin. To use the Mills bomb, the thrower first pulled out the safety pin, while holding down the strike lever beneath it. When the grenade was thrown, the strike lever was ejected and a 7 second fuse was set off. (This was sometimes long enough for the enemy to pick it up and throw it back, so soldiers often shortened the fuse to allow only 4 seconds before detonation, or thereabouts – information from George Body, G/23456, the Queens West Surrey Regiment).

British and Empire soldiers were instructed to use a throwing action similar to bowling in cricket and shortly before the Battle of the Somme specialist bombing platoons were formed.

Prior to the introduction of the Mills No.5, there had been various inferior grenades, the British Army's 1914 Mark 1 for instance, which had a 16" cane throwing handle and cloth streamers which, in the tight confines of a trench, often hit something and exploded prematurely. Also introduced in 1915 was the Number 15 grenade, but this deteriorated in wet weather, was very unpopular with the troops and was seldom used after the end of 1915, even though 500,000 had been manufactured. As a stop-gap, home-made 'Jam Tin' bombs, packed with dynamite or gun-cotton and bits of scrap metal, were made by the troops. They were dangerous to construct and there were many accidents.



A deactivated Mills No.5 grenade and a replica 'Jam Tin' bomb (Author's collection)

By the spring of 1916, Brigade bomb schools had been established to train 9 man teams the grenadier's art. The 23rd Brigade Bomb School was one such, where selected officers, NCOs and men of the 2nd Devons were taught the latest methods of bomb throwing.

The teams were typically organised as follows:

- 1 NCO in command, armed with a revolver or rifle.
- 2 bomb throwers, who carried as many grenades as they could comfortably manage. They did not carry rifles.
- 2 bomb carriers, each laden with 2 canvas buckets with 24 grenades in each. They did not carry rifles.
- 2 bayonet men, armed with rifles and bayonets, whose role was to protect the team and 'mop up'.
- 2 spare men to replace any casualties suffered. They were armed with rifles and bayonets.

To throw the grenades, the teams were instructed to adopt the same style as used to bowl a cricket ball. This was essential in raids on front line trenches because of the traverses, when the bomb throwers would have to 'bowl' their grenades over the top of the traverse into the next bay. All fighting trenches were designed with traverses between the fire bays to prevent attacking troops from enfilading the entire length. On hearing the detonation of their bombs, the team would rush round the traverse into the next bay, bomb the dugouts and 'mop up'. The intention was to compel the surviving occupants to surrender although, in the heat of battle, they were as likely to be shot or bayoneted as taken prisoner.

The grenade was also of immense value in trench defence, because of the traverses the defenders could not direct rifle fire back at the attacking enemy in the next bay, in which case they would bowl over a few Mills bombs. Even a single well aimed grenade would go off with a terrific explosion and would probably kill or wound all the enemy soldiers in that bay.