

The 'MINENWERFER' ('Mine Launcher', colloquially, 'Minnie' or 'Canister')

'Minenwerfers' were short range trench mortars, of various calibers, used extensively in trench warfare by the German Army to great effect during the Great War.

They were muzzle loaders, had short rifled barrels, and were manufactured in three basic sizes:

- 1) 25cm schwerer Minenwerfer (sMW) (25cm heavy mine launcher).
- 2) 17cm mittlerer Minenwerfer (mMW) (17cm middle sized mine launcher).
- 3) 7.58cm leichter Minenwerfer (LMW) (7.58cm light mine launcher).

On the outbreak of the war the German Army had taken delivery of 44 of the 25cm version and 116 of the 17cm versions. The light version, the 7.58cm, was still undergoing development, but was quickly put into production. The 5.8cm version was an extremely efficient weapon in trench warfare, compared to its artillery counterpart, the 7.7cm field gun (known to the Allies as a Whizz-Bang), which needed a team of horses to tow it around, whereas the 'Minnie' could be carried by four men, or towed by one horse when affixed to its small wheeled carriage, and the gun itself cost seven times less to manufacture. Also, rather like a small Howitzer, it could 'lob' its shells up and over into an Allied trench from its position in or near its own front line. Packed with scrap metal, the Minnie's projectile (canister) could easily destroy trenches and dugouts, and tear men to shreds.

The Germans reserved TNT explosives for artillery shells, but the low muzzle velocity of the 'Minnies' made it possible to use cheaper Ammonium nitrate-carbon explosives, although the unstable nature of this material caused a large number of detonations to occur in the barrel. This problem was, however, gradually overcome. By 1918 the numbers of 'Minnies' in use were: 1,234 of the 25cm version, 2,361 of the 17cm and 12,329 of the 7.58. A 38cm version had also been developed, the 38cm sehr schwerer Minenwerfer (ssMW) (very heavy mine launcher).

12th May 1916

Enemy were more active than usual. About 34 x 77mm shells, 12 x 15cm shells and 100 light Minenwerfer and rifle grenades were fired into our lines. The enemy opened heavy machine gun and rifle fire upon one of our patrols, one man being killed. Received a draft of 38 other ranks.

Captain Sidney Rogerson, 2nd West Yorks, 23rd Brigade, describes the effects of the Minenwerfer, in his book 'Twelve Days':

"Standing over 3 feet 6 inches in height and filled with nearly two hundred pounds of high explosive (this would have been the projectile from a Heavy Minenwerfer), they had a more demoralising effect than any other single form of enemy action. There was no sound of distant discharge to give warning of their coming. Ears had to be sharp indeed to hear the warning whistle blown by the German gunners before they fired their mortars. Eyes had to be fixed in the air to watch for the shape which would soar ponderously upward, turn slowly over and over in its downward flight....and with a woof! woof! woof! burst with a shattering crash, sending long jagged strips of metal whirring savagely for yards and rendering into fragments everything around. The very leisureliness of their descent was demoralising. The immense clamour of their explosion was demoralising. But most demoralising was the damage they could do. Men do not easily or soon throw off the shock of seeing all that could be found of four of their comrades carried down for burial in one ground sheet."

