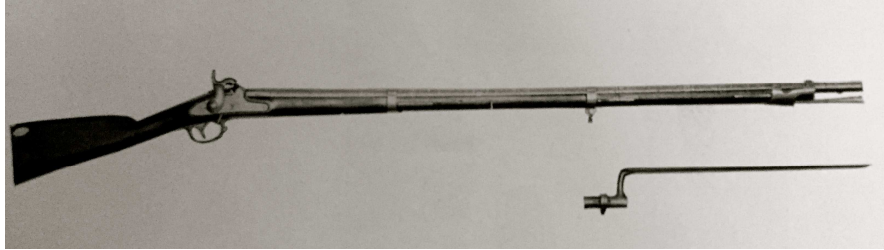


“Pumpkin Slingers” 69 Caliber Muskets



During the period between 1855 and 1863 a quantity of the older muskets were converted from .69 caliber smoothbore to rifled muskets and fitted with rear sights. A total of about 14,000 were done in federal arsenals and many thousands were done by government sub-contractors. Thousands of flintlock muskets were also converted to percussion and some were rifled. How many of you know that a company in Newark, New Jersey converted over 25,000 class one flintlock muskets to percussion. They cut off the breach end of the barrel and fitted a new percussion breech, removed the flintlock parts and fitted a new percussion hammer. Jim Altemus of our club did a lot of research on the company, Hewes and Phillips. They were located at the foot of Orange Street and MacCarter Highway; the building was still standing in 1974. Muskets converted by them usually have **H & P** stamped on the breech. Hewes and Phillips also made some of the armor used on Civil War Navy ironclads.

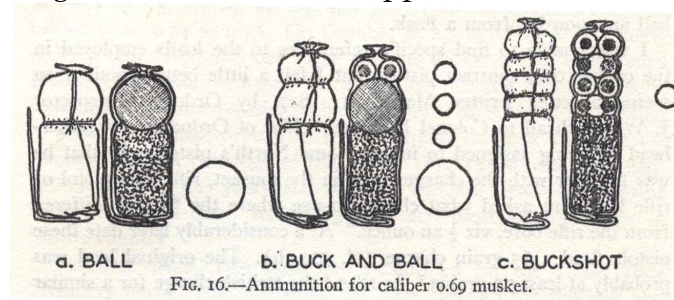


Original 69 caliber rifled muskets can be found at gun shows for far less than a good 58 caliber musket. Most of these 69 caliber muskets were issued and used so expect to find them in that condition. At the beginning of the Civil War the government had less than 100,000 .58 caliber rifled muskets and over half of those were in Southern Arsenals. The natural thing was to issue the .69 caliber smoothbores stored in the Federal Arsenals. For the reenactor the 69 caliber musket in both smoothbore and rifled version can be documented to almost every battle of the Civil War.

The same principles described in my booklet for the rifled .58 muskets can be applied to the .69 altered muskets. I do not recommend shooting these original converted rifled muskets since they were originally smoothbore and rifling grooves were cut into the existing barrels making them thinner. I may not recommend it but I have shot originals in good condition for years. The converted rifle muskets took a .685 minie ball, which weighted over 730 grains and really kicked like a mule when loaded with the service charge. Live fire tests that Angus Laidlaw and I ran during the 1990's proved that these converted rifle muskets were very accurate at 50 and 100 yards.

Shooting the .69 caliber smoothbores can also be fun since they can be shot with a variety of loads. They can be fired with a single round ball; a single ball with three buckshot, buckshot, or used as a shotgun with birdshot. This allows you to have fun with a wide range of loads. My first shotgun shooting at clay birds was with an 1842 Springfield smoothbore. I loaded it with 70 grains of FFG and one ounce of number 7 ½ shot using toilet paper for wadding. When I fired it I had little bits of toilet paper floating allover, but it worked well. I just recently used an 1842 smoothbore as a shotgun to get my Muzzleloading Instructors Certification and had a ball doing it.

The N-SSA has matches for smoothbore muskets and more and more are being seen on the firing line. I asked Al Asinari, of the 69th New York, how he loads his .69 since he does very well in competition. Al uses a round ball wrapped in aluminum foil, dipped in his musket lube and 80 grains of FFG powder. This is similar to the way we used to shoot smoothbore Brown Bess's and Charleville's in the Brigade of the American Revolution using foil cartridges with the ball end dipped in bees wax.



I served as a safety officer at the 119th N-SSA Nationals and was able to observe many of the smoothbore shooters using a naked round ball dipped in lube. Some of them indicated that they roughed an undersize ball up with a rasp and this would hold more lube. They also indicated they were using commercial Alox as a lube. It was astonishing to see the small groups they were shooting at 25 and 50 yards with no rear sight.

The question is why was the 69 caliber smoothbore musket considered to be very inaccurate if shooters in the N-SSA are proving that they are much more accurate than we ever thought. After researching I came to the following conclusions that first, the troops during the Civil War that were issued 69 caliber smoothbores never did any actual target practice. They were trained to load and fire and point in the general direction. It was thought at the time that the best use of the smoothbore musket was volley fire. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the military actually really started to have marksmanship training and target practice with rifled firearms.

The second reason was that these muskets would foul quickly with black powder so the actual ball that was loaded in the paper cartridge was undersized which contributed greatly to inaccuracy. Present-day shooters are using a .678 round ball which is only 12 thousandths under the .69 bore. Civil War paper cartridges were loaded with a .65 round ball which is 40 thousandths under the .69 bore size so even with considerable fouling they would load but in reality they would bounce down a clean barrel but would get more accurate as the fouling built up. Also not all .69 smoothbore muskets were a perfect .69 so the undersize .65 ball would fit any .69 musket on the field.

Any of you having a .69 smoothbore that would like to shoot it live I would be happy to cast some .678 balls for you. Shooting buckshot or birdshot in these muskets is also loads of fun.



John Rountree