

THE BRITISH NAVAL CUTLASS BAYONET

By John Carter

Bayonets for sea service muskets differed in no way from those used by the Army during the 18th century.

However for the 1858 pattern Naval Muzzle Loading Enfield Rifle and its Snider conversion a special bayonet was designed and manufactured based on the 1845 Naval Cutlass.

Two patterns of the 1858 Naval Cutlass Bayonet were approved and sealed. Each had the typical cutlass heavy, unfullered 28 inch (71cm) curved blade and a wide steel basket hilt with a muzzle ring and bayonet fittings added.



(a)

(b)

The first type had wooden grips 18th April 1859 (a)

The second type had diced leather grips 1st May 1859 (b)

The weight of the bayonet was 2 pounds 5 ounces and when attached to the rifle gave a total weight of over 11 pounds.

However it did keep you away from the enemy by about 7 feet! (225 cm).

The scabbard was the same as for Naval Cutlasses, black leather with steel fittings, some early scabbards were fitted with “Verney’s catch” to retain the cutlass bayonet in its scabbard when clambering in and out of ships boats. On 30th January 1862 the scabbards were improved on the recommendation of Colonel Dixon of the Royal Small Arm Factory and an internal spring was approved for retaining the cutlass bayonet. In 1887 the total production of pattern 1859 cutlass bayonets stood at over 80,000 .

Enfield
Scabbard
& Frog

Martini Henry
Scabbard



Note difference in size of scabbards



(c)

(b)

Bushed and notch cut for sighting.

When the Navy conducted trials in 1868 on the new Martini Henry Rifle it was intended to bush the muzzle ring on the 1859 cutlass bayonet to fit the smaller diameter barrel but it was found that the cutlass bayonet was excessively heavy for the new weapon and that a lighter version should be tested. (c)

A new cutlass bayonet with a lighter hilt and shorter narrower straight 26 inch (66cm) blade was tried in November 1869 with further trials being conducted in 1870.

This resulted in the introduction of the pattern 1871 cutlass bayonet (d) for the Martini Henry rifle the weight having been reduced to 1 pound and 15 ounces.

In 1874, three years after the list of changes announcement, Captain Boys RN inquired about the supply of the new cutlass bayonets for the Martini Henry rifle, he inquired again in November 1874 so its obvious that nothing had been done after 1871! Its doubtful if any were manufactured, so it was recommended that the pattern 1858 be altered by conversion.

Converted at Enfield in 1886 to fit the Martini Henry rifle, unlike the pattern 1871, the guard and blade were not altered. Only the muzzle ring was bushed. It is also likely that some other commercial or volunteer bayonets were similarly converted.

My 1871 Cutlass Bayonet (d) is manufactured and definitely not bushed !

Conversions at the Royal Small Factory Enfield of the 1859 pattern consisted of reducing and straightening the blade and reducing the hilt. During the period 1874 to 1880 a total of 50,711 conversions took place at a cost of between 8 and 9 shillings each.

The pattern 1871 Martini Henry cutlass bayonet closely resembles the pattern 1859 cutlass bayonet except that it is slimmer and lighter.



(d)

(c)

(b)



INCIDENTS WITH THE 1871 CUTLASS BAYONET

At Abuklea, in 1885 during the Sudan Campaign, a seaman bayoneted an Arab with such vigor that the point projected beyond his back. The man fell on the bayonet bending it so that the seaman could not withdraw it. Thus disarmed the seaman was killed by another Arab.

On another occasion a Gunnery Instructor in HMS Active whilst lecturing a class held his cutlass bayonet horizontally over his head with the hilt in one hand and the point in the other, without thinking he flexed the blade and it remained bent instead of springing back.

And yet again a seaman doing rifle drill dropped his weapon and the bayonet crumpled, the man straightening it again over his knee.

When complaints appeared in the press, a batch of 50 converted cutlass bayonets were re-tested and found to be satisfactory.

In the following year the Navy carried out further independent tests which in the opinion of the Ordnance “no cutlass could be expected to pass”.

A board of inquiry was set up in 1887 to enquire into the whole matter and of just over 2000 blades tested nearly 60% failed the test. The finding of that committee was that all converted cutlass and cutlass bayonets should be withdrawn from service immediately.

The top Cutlass/Sword Bayonet shown here is the 1879 pattern Saw Back (25.75 inch) blade for the Martini Henry Artillery Carbine, and is mentioned in Swords for Sea Service reference book on page 90 that “it is possible that the Navy may sometimes have issued the saw back artillery bayonet of 1879, instead of the Pioneers sword bayonet” For what use I do not know (unless it was in place of a cutlass) as I’m pretty sure the Navy were never issued with M/H carbines and this bayonet does not fit the M/H rifle. (e)



Ref;- Swords for Sea Service by Commander May RN & P.G.W.Annis