

Care of the New Breechloaders

By
Tony Beck

(note: The Author has graciously allowed us the use of the following article.)

It has come to the attention of the ordnance office that some of the troops have been experiencing difficulties with the new breechloading Sharps carbines now being introduced into our service. These arms are the most perfect yet invented, but do require special attention to keep in proper order. The armorors therefore wish to provide the following advise on the care and maintenance of the Sharps carbine, as manufactured in Richmond and the north, in order to improve our effectiveness in the field.

Comments on Reports from the Field

Reports of the Sharps bursting in battle have recently reached headquarters. It has been found that these instances are greatly exaggerated. There is a feature of the Sharps system weapons, both as produced in the north and by our government, which may cause the forestock to split on discharge. If the breech is opened with an undischarged round in the chamber, powder trapped in the breech block can accumulate under the lever spring in the fore stock. When the arm is then closed and fired, this accumulated powder may also explode. The stock will usually split and may injure the shooter. If there is a failure of the arm to take fire after repeated attempts, it is imperative that the following procedures be used to clear the weapon. Elevate the muzzle as nearly vertical as possible before opening the breech. With the breech open, use a cleaning rod introduced through the muzzle to drive out the cartridge. Insert a new round and close the breech. Only then can the muzzle be lowered. If the breech must be opened with the gun held level, remove the breechblock and clear any accumulated powder from the recesses at the front of the frame before reloading. When the arm is to be loaded after being cleaned, it must first be cleared by firing at least two caps. The vent channel in the breech block is rather long and tends to accumulate oil when properly cleaned, which can lead to misfires. A large quantity of smoke should be visible in the barrel on opening the breech, if the breech block's vent is clear.

Reports have also noted that excessive friction may develop in the breech after several rounds have been fired. This is due to an accumulation of fouling within the frame. The breech joint is as perfect as can be made by modern science, but it does still leak. This causes fouling to deposit between the breech block and frame. When the lever becomes excessively tight, spitting on the inside of the frame with the breech open will moisten this fouling and usually relieve the problem. Do not hesitate to take this action, it will not injure the mechanism. If the lever is bent in forcing the breech closed, the weapon may no longer fire as the block will not be restored to its proper position.

Cleaning

Most of the problems experienced with the Sharps pattern guns are the result of incomplete cleaning. Unlike the musketoons, which can be cleaned with little effort, the new carbines require complete disassembly of the breech mechanism to be cleaned properly. There are many

small parts which become clogged and jammed with accumulated fouling. These require careful attention. If not maintained, the joint at the breech will become excessively tight and leak gas, rendering the weapon unserviceable.

To clean the Sharps, the breech mechanism must be disassembled. To accomplish this, first open the breech. Next, the lever pivot pin must be withdrawn. Depress the catch ahead of the pivot pin arm and rotating the arm one quarter turn away from the frame. Next, gently rotate the pin back and forth while pulling it out of the frame. **DO NOT STRIKE** the pin or its arm. If the gun is very foul, the pin may be quite tight. Moisten the joint between the lever and frame to loosen the pin.

With the lever pivot pin removed, the breech block may be withdrawn. This is done by gently tapping the block out the bottom of the frame with a wooden dowel or the handle of a small hammer. In order to free the lever from the breechblock, remove the screw in the right side of the block. Soak the block in **HOT** soapy water.

While the block is soaking, clean the barrel and frame in the usual manner. Original Sharps, and some reproductions, have a sealing sleeve in the breech, which should be removed to be cleaned and oiled separately. Once the barrel and frame are clean and dry, they must be thoroughly oiled before being set aside.

With the barrel clean, return to the breechblock. The gas check plate must be removed and cleaned separately. This is done by gently prying up the sides of the plate with a knife blade. Finally, hold the breechblock cone under a stream of running water and check that water runs out of the vent in the front of the block. If it only drips, or fails to flow at all, remove the cone and cleanout screw. Thoroughly clean the vent channel with a pipe cleaner or small drill. Some guns have been found with undersize vents. If excessive fouling of the vent is a problem, it may be necessary to enlarge the passage.

Once all the parts are cleaned and oiled, the weapon can be reassembled.

Be careful not to strike the gas plate with anything but wood when seating it in the breech block, and then only gently. When reinstalling the lever in the frame, it will be necessary to push it firmly into place in order to drive the pivot pin home.

The federally made carbines have an automatic priming device incorporated into the lock. This will allow fouling to enter the mechanism. This area should be kept well oiled and the lock should be removed and cleaned occasionally.

When properly cleaned, the Sharps carbine will render reliable service in the coming campaigns. By using these simple procedures, the new breechloaders will greatly increase our effectiveness in the field.

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