

The Congreve Rockets in the War of 1812

While many Americans may not know what a Congreve Rocket was, any American who has sung the national anthem knows the effect it produced in the “red glare” of Francis Scott Key’s Star Spangled Banner. Developed by William Congreve, the Congreve Rocket was an invention inspired by the British experience in India at the end of the 18th century. The War of 1812 made the rocket famous, at least in American history. During the War of 1812, British forces used Congreve’s rockets against American forces to mixed effect as they rarely shifted the course of battle and, as Key’s famous verse illustrates, the rockets failed to win the British objective at Ft. McHenry.

The Congreve Rocket saw its first combat application against French forces on 8 October 1806. At that engagement the rockets proved useful, in part, because they caused the destruction of the French town of Boulogne. By 1812, Britain had incorporated the rocket into its arsenal in various forms and even created specialized units in its Royal Marine Artillery to employ the weapon against its enemies. In fighting Americans, British forces deployed larger Congreve Rockets, weighing approximately 32 pounds and equipped with incendiary charges, from ships of war, while land forces utilized smaller 12-pound versions tipped with case-shot carbine balls (shrapnel).

British ground forces successfully employed Congreve Rockets against American soldiers in numerous battles, chief among them the assault of Fort Oswego, the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, and the battles of Bladensburg and North Point (near Baltimore). One of the primary benefits of the rockets, besides the physical damage they could potentially cause, was the terrorizing of enemy forces. On more than one occasion the Royal Marine Artillery fired rockets at American militia only to watch in amusement as the defenders fled the field in horror. Congreve Rockets petrified some militiamen at Bladensburg, Maryland; their flight from the battlefield opened the pathway to Washington, D.C., where attacking British troops fired the White House and other government buildings.

British forces proceeded from the American capitol to Baltimore in September of 1814, where the British ship *Erebus* launched 32-pound rockets at Fort McHenry for twenty-five hours. Unable to control the flight path, the rockets had little effect in the British assault on the fort; as morning came on 14 September 1814, only four Americans had been killed by the bombardment and the fort was minimally damaged. Watching from the harbor was Francis Scott Key. Within hours he had penned the words that became the American national anthem, immortalizing the “rocket’s red glare” in words of patriotic flare.

In sum, Congreve Rockets worked best against enemy forces that did not have the benefit of defensive fortifications. In the open, such as at the Battle of Bladensburg, against forces unprepared for exploding rockets, the weapons changed the flow of the battle. Even here, such advantages were temporary as Americans responded to the threat posed by Congreve Rockets by building blockhouses for defense. Against well-constructed defensive positions, Congreve Rockets proved largely ineffective unless able to ignite fires.

Eugene Van Sickle
Assistant Professor of American History
University of North Georgia

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Contributed by Eugene Van Sickle, Associate Professor of American History at University of North Georgia.