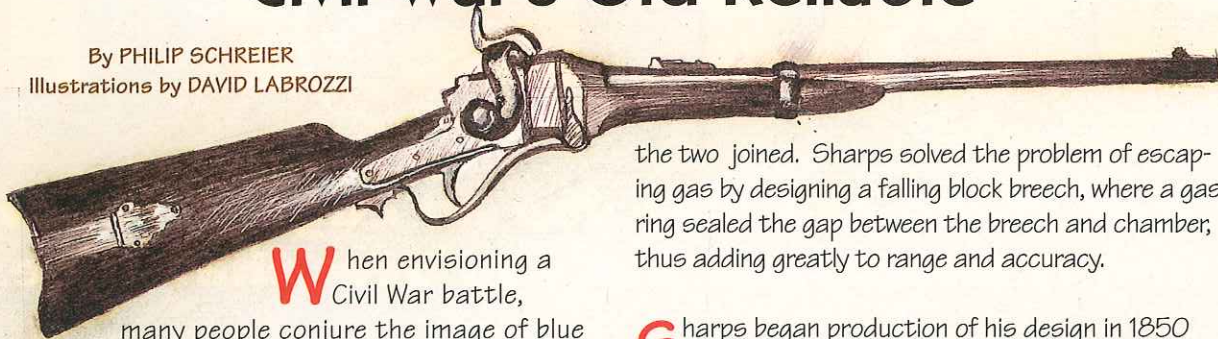


GREAT GUNS

The Sharps Carbine — Civil War's Old Reliable

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When envisioning a Civil War battle, many people conjure the image of blue and grey cavalymen fighting it out with drawn sabers, revolvers and breech-loading carbines. The carbine most recognized from the Civil War period is the famous breech-loader designed by, and bearing the name of, Christian Sharps (1811-1874).

The Sharps Carbine was one of the first practical breech-loading firearms of the Civil War era. Its simplicity of design and ease of use led to its adoption for mounted troops, resulting in contracts for over 100,000 by the Union government. Mounted Confederate counterparts were so impressed by the carbine that they copied the gun and produced some 5,000 of their own before the end of the war.

Breech-loading firearms were nothing new on the eve of the Civil War. Major John Ferguson's rifle design had been produced and field tested during the Battle of Kings Mountain in the American Revolution (1775-1781), but a breech-loader that was simple to produce, effective and easy to use eluded inventors for years. Christian Sharps developed his ideas for a breech-loader while employed by the U.S. Government at the Harpers Ferry Arsenal under the direction of John Hall, an inventor of a breech-loader then in use by the U.S. Army.

The Halls breech-loader was quick to load and fire, but it suffered severe flaws in its practical operation. Its tip-up breech design left a gap between the breech and the barrel, resulting in escaping gas where

the two joined. Sharps solved the problem of escaping gas by designing a falling block breech, where a gas ring sealed the gap between the breech and chamber, thus adding greatly to range and accuracy.

Sharps began production of his design in 1850 and hit pay dirt when the government ordered 10,000 of his Model 1853 "slant-breech" carbines for military use.

It was the Models 1859 and 1863 that saw a great deal of use during the Civil War. The rifle version of the carbine was used by Custer's Cavalry at Gettysburg as well as the two regiments of sharpshooters organized by Col. Hiram Berdan.

Following the Civil War, the Sharps breech system easily made the conversion from percussion ignition to the new self-primed cartridge systems. Later models of single-shot Sharps rifles enjoyed great popularity on the western plains as a buffalo rifle, earning the nickname - Old Reliable. 

