

THE STEEL FLECHETTE

The Flechette is a pointed steel projectile about the diameter of a pencil and 12 cms long with four flutes cut into its length for stable flight. They were designed and produced in thousands as ballistic weapons during the First World War to be dropped from aircraft to attack infantry. They contained no explosive charge but as they fell would develop significant kinetic energy making them lethal and able to easily penetrate steel helmets, several inches of sand or light armour. Later developments incorporated tail fins for extra stability. The name flechette comes from the French word for little arrow or dart.

This [particular item](#) was part of the personal effects of a sailor aboard the balloon ship H.M.S. Manica operating off the East African coast during the First World War. The ship had been requisitioned by the Royal Navy and converted to carry a large hydrogen observation balloon and associated equipment. After seeing service at Gallipoli the ship returned to England for repair and loaded a small seaplane together with the balloon. Leaving Birkenhead the ship sailed for Mombasa and arrived on 11 April 1916. During the next few months the ship was deployed along the German East African coast using the balloon to spot enemy activity ashore for a naval bombardment. The aircraft was used for reconnaissance and this is probably when the flechettes were used against enemy personnel. As space and weight in a small seaplane was limited, perhaps only a hundred were carried weighing around a kilo to be dropped over the side in handfuls to disrupt the troops below. Manica left East Africa in late 1916 for Bombay and conversion to a tanker and in 1931 was scrapped in Japan.

Submitted by Kevin Patience
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