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An informative service to the muzzle loading cannon enthusiast

SOME CONFUSING CALIBERS

Most people are aware that a smooth bore cannon is classified firstly by its calibre, then type and then by its weight. The noon gun is an 18 pounder Blomefield pattern of 42 CWT. This is because it fires an iron round shot which weighs 18 pounds, was designed by Sir Thomas Blomefield and the weight of the gun is important particularly aboard ships.

When rifled guns (RML) were introduced the artillerists continued using the weight of the projectile to define the calibre. This continued until the situation became confusing and subsequent rifled guns were classified by bore diameter such as 3 inch or 76mm.

One of the confusing remains of this transition period is the fact that a 7pdr RML and a 9pdr RML have exactly the same calibre of 3 inch. The projectile weight was increased for the 9pdr by making it longer than the 7pdr shell so that it could hold a heavier explosive charge. The 9pdr gun was made heavier and longer than the 7pdr but the calibre stayed the same.

The artillery world was not alone in its confusion with calibres because the pistol calibres can be just as confusing. When common revolver calibres are arranged in descending order of diameter it looks like this: .45, .44, .42, .38, 9mm, .36, .357, .32 etc. The problem is that the bore of a .36 revolver is actually larger than both the .38 and the 9mm. The explanation of the reason is a rather long story and is available from me on request.

THE CRANS FAMILY OF GUNFOUNDERS

There are many pieces of ordnance and bronze bells scattered around the world which were cast by members of the Crans family of Dutch founders. The eldest was Jan Crans who was the head founder at the Enkhuizen Foundry between 1714 and 1724 before moving to the foundry in Den Haag until 1730 when he was succeeded by his son Adriaan until 1745. Jan Crans marked his guns and other castings with "I CRANS" because the Dutch often used an "I" to represent a "J".

Ciprianus Crans (Ianszoon) [meaning son of Jan] took over the Enkhuizen Foundry from his father from 1727 to 1734 before moving to the Amsterdam Foundry until he died in 1755. There are many examples of his work still in existence.

Cornelis Crans, the brother of Ciprianus took over the Enkhuizen foundry after the departure of his brother in 1734 until he moved to the Den Haag foundry to replace Adriaan in 1745 until Cornelis died in 1751.

WORD HERITAGE FROM ORDNANCE ACTIVITIES

We very often use common words without knowing the origin of the word. Here follows a list of some words which originated in the artillery arena.

TRAIN – Long before locomotives were invented the long convoy of transport for an artillery detachment on the move was termed “A train of artillery”. This convoy could consist of several cannon, limbers, ammunition wagons, cooks wagon, blacksmith wagon, a mobile forge, officer’s luggage wagons, farrier’s wagon, medical wagon etc. And with each drawn by horses or oxen the whole train could be kilometres long. Not a choo-choo?

FIRE – When discharging a rifle, pistol or revolver the man in command of the activity would instruct the participants to “aim” and then “fire”. That word “fire” originated with the discharging of pieces of ordnance where the full instruction was “put fire to the gun” and the burning slow match would be touched into the priming powder. The word “fire” has survived many generations and types of weapon.

BOMBARD – Today we get bombarded with questions or anything that is repetitive. The term “bombard” was originally the act of firing guns repeatedly at an enemy position to break down their perimeter defences and permit entry to attacking troops. Eventually the larger guns used for this purpose were termed Bombards.

ROUNDS – “The man fired three rounds at the target”. The term “round” is today used in reference to a single bullet during loading or firing a weapon. However in military circles those “rounds” are termed “ball” in the markings on the box in which they are issued, this is to distinguish them from tracer or blank ammunition. The origin of both words “round” and “ball” lies with the artillery of old where the instruction was to load either round ball, grape, carcass or canister shot into a cannon.

A CANNON CALLED A “DRAKE”

A piece called a Drake was first recorded in the inventory of the Tower of London in 1627. Apparently first used in the siege of Bergen-op-Zoom in 1622 at which time their invention was attributed to Prince Maurice of Nassau, the first example was brought to England by Sir Edward Cecil in 1625 after which trial English examples were cast by the founder John Brown.

The Drake represented a deviation from the normally accepted proportions of cannon in that it was thinner, lighter and sometimes shorter than a piece of the same calibre. It is clear from the following quotations that a Drake was designed to fire multiple lighter shot rather than a single round shot.

“If the enemy approach neere, with these small ordnance wee will beate their men from the upper deckes, which with our great ordnance wee cannot doe”.

“Carried in the bows of Mediterranean war galleys these coushee drakes will doe much mischief among the men of the enemy”.

A SURPRISE VISIT

On Mandela Day, 18 July, a vehicle stopped in my driveway and Olivia looked out of the window to see who it was. It was a large vehicle boldly marked SAPS EXPLOSIVES UNIT. Our initial instinct was to lock the doors and pretend that we were not home, then we considered escape over the back wall but I am getting too old for such activity. I then sighed deeply, kissed Olivia farewell and went out to surrender myself.

At the front gate stood a Captain and a Sergeant in their working explosives uniforms bedecked in many badges, symbols and other intimidating paraphernalia. “We are looking for Gerry de Vries” said the Captain. “You have caught . . . er found him” I replied. “Good because we need you to identify something for us”, said he pointing to a box that the Sergeant was carrying.

On careful inspection and measurement of the item I informed them that it was a common shell for an English 4½ inch howitzer and that the round thing with a black spot in the middle which was visible in the hole was the bottom end of a fuse, meaning that it was probably still full of deteriorated gunpowder.

I showed them the drawings and photographs of howitzer ammunition and fuses, they took some photos of the drawings, shook my hand and left without me. I do wish Olivia had at least tried to hide her disappointment.

TIME LINE DISPLAY AT CHAVONNE’S

My contribution to the display at Chavonne’s Battery is now complete. James has had the pictures and basic text professionally laid out and a large proof print done which is presently under scrutiny and discussion prior to the final colour print. I have written 21 stories about key events in ordnance development and a few lesser known cannon events and surrendered these to those who will complete the display. The stories will be linked in some way to the display and will provide a greater depth and more info on their individual subjects.

CANNON AT AMSTERDAM BATTERY

With great courage and determination I argued and fought my way past grumpy security guards to get access to the new gun carriages which are in an area which is not yet open to the public. The concrete “carriages” do hold the guns at the correct height and elevation and they are pretty safe – never to collapse or topple. Regrettably they do not resemble any historical gun carriage known to me.

EASTERN CAPE ACTIVITY

We were all pleased to hear that our friends in the Eastern Cape were still active and providing a service to their community.

Debbie Mills reports that SABRE (SA Battle Re-enactments) was asked to start the G2C (Grahamstown to the Sea) bicycle race on the 9 June and that a very satisfactory send off for the charity fund raiser was achieved by the 1/2 pounder with Basil Mills and Benjamin Coetzee in attendance. A Photo will be submitted to our webmaster.

UBIQUE,

Gerry de Vries