

CANNON ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

Gunners Room, The Castle of Good Hope Cape Town

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An informative service to the muzzle loading cannon enthusiast

THE MASTER GUNNER

His descendants in Cape Town have presented me with the career details and training material of 1289 Warrant Officer Thomas Walsh. A 28 year long career in the Royal Artillery resulted in him becoming the Master Gunner at The Cape of Good Hope between December 1886 and October 1895 when he retired.

He joined the RA in Liverpool on 26 September 1867 at the age of 18. He took the Short Course in gunnery at the Royal Gun Factory at Woolwich in 1869 followed by the basic Royal Artillery Course at Shoeburyness in 1870 and the next higher level in 1872, also at Shoeburyness, he was then a member of 17 Brigade RA.

In 1874 and 1875 as a Corporal of 4/22nd Brigade RA he underwent the Long Course at Shoeburyness and was posted to Guernsey where he was promoted to Sergeant and married.

Sgt Walsh was transferred to Mauritius in May 1876 where he served as Battery Sergeant until his transfer to the Cape of Good Hope in 1880. Here Sgt Walsh served with distinction in several posts at batteries and in the Headquarters at The Castle of Good Hope before his promotion to Warrant Officer and his eventual appointment as Master Gunner.

In order to be appointed a Master Gunner, of which there was only one in any country at one time, he had to know all about cannon, carronades, mortars and howitzers, all about the ammunition and loads for every occasion, how to organise and run stores and magazines, how to build gun pits, emplacements and ravelins, how to man, equip and organise artillery and ammunition trains, how to build bridges and rafts to transport his artillery and then how to keep them all supplied and operational during a protracted battle.

All this with no internal combustion engines, no cranes, power machines, no radios or cell 'phones, just horses, oxen, wagons, manpower and a "can-do" attitude.

THE FIRST CANNON FIRED IN SOUTH AFRICA

Vasco de Gama, after a long and perilous journey, sailed his ship into what is now known as St Helena Bay and sent a party ashore to scout for fresh provisions and water. A group of Koina hunter-gatherers, intrigued by these pale skinned men wearing far too much clothing and the strange vessel in the bay, approached cautiously brandishing their primitive weapons. The crew aboard the ship decided to caution them with a cannon shot which put them to flight.

The date was 12 November 1497, perhaps CAOSA should plan around this date?

THAT UBIQUITOUS “SIGNAL GUN”

I have not kept count of the number of people who have referred to the smaller cannon as “signal guns”, but it is many. Divers are probably the chief source of this piece of misinformation.

A cannon that is made of the correct material and in the correct proportions is a fully fledged projectile firing weapon regardless of its size or calibre and should be referred to as either a small or miniature cannon.

It was common aboard ships to use one of their smaller cannon when they needed to pay tribute to a senior or signal to their dispersed crew by cannon fire. It was thus a small operational cannon that was economical to fire that was used for signal purposes and not, in the majority of cases, a gun that was designed for firing only for signal purposes.

The only possible candidates as “signal guns” in SA are Durr 447 and 448 at the Bredasdorp Museum. These 4 pdr guns, of questionable proportions and very thin trunnions for their calibre, may have been cast for signal purposes or they may have been cast by an apprentice that never left a significant footprint.

TERMINOLOGY

The *Artillerist's Manual and British soldier's Compendium* dated 13 October 1856 gives us insight into the terminology used in the serving of cannon.

HANDSPIKE – “The lever used in ordinary operations of artillery, it is 6 feet long and 3 ½ inches square at the point or large end. In the service of the heavier guns a 7 feet long handspike is used”.

SLEWING - “To rotate a gun and carriage on its axis without moving it from the spot on which it rests”.

PINCHING – “The operation of moving a gun or mortar [forward?] by means of handspikes without allowing it to rotate on its axis.

LIFTING JACK – “ Can be applied to as many purposes as the handspike is used but is commonly used to lift carriages by their axletrees to change or grease the trucks or to extricate them from holes” (Fancy that !)

SCOTCHES – “Wedge like instruments placed before and after the trucks of a gun carriage to prevent its undesired movement”.

THE GUNNER'S OFFICE

Riaan Conradie has located and copied a very early map of the Cape Settlement which shows the locations and names of all of the defensive gun batteries more clearly than any other map that I have seen. He has donated the map for display in the CAOSA office. Thanks for effort and support Riaan!

AEL CLOSING

Some rather alarming news for gunners is that African Explosives Limited are closing their magazines in Somerset West at the end of August and leaving us without a supplier for gunpowder. Those who use gunpowder are advised to stock up before they close, **but don't exceed your permitted storage allowance!**

CANNONS ON THE MOVE

Ke-Monate in Durbanville have bought a cannon that was not listed in the Durr Record from an estate. It is a 12 pdr Finbanker cast at Stavsjo in Sweden in 1782 and is now recorded as Durr No. 1010. Thus do CAOSA members prevent the loss of another cannon and give it a good home.

Bloemendal Restaurant has obtained on loan the 4 pdr Finbanker listed as Durr 789 from Hooggelegen Farm. Thanks to Erick Kellerman the gun now has a new wooden carriage and a dedicated set of loading equipment. This brings the Bloemendal Cannon Station collection up to five functioning guns and if anyone is interested in participating in one of their firings, feel free to contact Erick at erickkellerman@gmail.com.

Jurg Zimmerman took a ½ pounder to the Malmesbury Show grounds where the Mayor of the Swartland Municipality, Tijmen van Essen fired a shot to open the annual Veteran Tractor Exhibition. CAOSA has supported this event in the past through the efforts of Ryk de Wit and Martin Venter. I trust that Jurg has kept a copy of the newspaper article for our scrap book.

Riaan and Frikkie Conradie have been making more noise at the Taal Monument in Paarl. Riaan gives a brief talk about cannon firing in general and then fields the many questions that come from the public. Firings at this venue take place at noon on the last Saturday of every month. Riaan DID keep a copy of the article for our scrap book, thanks Riaan.

UBIQUE,

Gerry de Vries