

MUZZLE LOADING CANNON OF SOUTH AFRICA

A Guide For The Enthusiast

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NEWSLETTER No. 2 - December 2001

A free service to the muzzle loading enthusiast

We have decided to sent the December newsletter early to avoid the end-of-year rush and to avoid my annual bout of laziness that accompanies the silly season.

Herewith short articles on our blunders, new information and FAQs (frequently asked questions), which should help to bring your copy of **The Muzzle Loading Cannon of South Africa** up to date.

1. DURR GUN RECORD UPDATE

Thanks to Ian Cross of Pietermaritzburg, who sent us some neat drawings and dimensions, we now have several new guns on record. The total number of guns on record is now 740. This includes two 6,3 inch RML howitzers and an Armstrong 9 pdr RML in Ladysmith. Once the details have been entered and some questions answered, we will send out a comprehensive update to the list. Ian also noticed an error in the book, guns 619 and 620 on page 112 both show the crest of KG III, this is correct, but the date of manufacture as printed in the book cannot be c. 1850, it should read c. 1800. The next two guns on the list, 621 & 622 are correctly dated 1853.

On page 74 of our book, in the fifth paragraph, we refer to the shells being loaded into the piece with the wooden base toward the muzzle. Although this was occasionally the case, we have learned that this often resulted in damage to the fuze by the propellant pressure. This was rectified by means of increasing the sensitivity of the head of the fuze, and then loading the shell with the wooden base against the powder charge without any wadding. Sufficient flame bypassed the shell in the bore to ignite the fuze, which was now on the muzzle side of the shell. It appears that most countries eventually adopted this procedure, except for the larger mortars, where some forces, notably the French and the Dutch, continued to fire these with two linstocks.

2. GUNSMOKE

The restored 18 pdr gun at East Fort in Hout Bay was fired precisely at 11h00 on 11 November to begin the two minute silent pause for Remembrance Day. But wait ! There's more ! The neater portion of the trick was firing the same gun again two minutes later, and the reloading had to take place in total silence - no orders or instructions. The unpracticed gun crew of Jon, Leon, Randall, Peter and Gerry reamed the vent, sponged twice, loaded, rammed, pierced, inserted the vent tube, cut to length, primed and returned to position in 78 seconds. The 42 second wait for the second shot felt like a long weekend.

The reason for the double sponging was to ensure that any remaining ember or smouldering piece of the first powder bag, which would set off the second charge while loading, was drenched with water. As the member responsible for ramming, and not wanting my head separated from my shoulders, I was fairly generous with the water on the sponge.

3. BREECH PREPONDERANCE

When a gun is properly mounted it should be able to pivot relatively easily on it's trunnions. The gun would rest on the lower portion of the base ring with the muzzle free of any contact. This is due to the breech portion of the gun being heavier than the portion forward of the trunnions. The weight with which the breech rests on the quoin or elevating mechanism is termed "breech preponderance".

Breech preponderance is necessary to ensure that the gun remains stable in it's carriage aboard ship during rough seas, when setting the elevation and when manoeuvring the gun by it's trail in the field. The preponderance is determined by the positioning of the trunnions, the proportions of the gun and the size of the muzzle swell.

Small ML swivel guns had a relatively light preponderance as the gun was aimed by hand. The preponderance for these guns was often measured in shot weights. A preponderance of 6 lbs for a 2 pdr swivel gun would endure that the base ring would rest on it's support even when the gunner inserts the 2 lb shot into the muzzle.

4. "GRIETJIE" [nickname for Margaretha, Magriet or Margaret]

"Grietjie" was at Blood River, "Grietjie" was in Potchefstroom, "Grietjie" was used in the War of 1880, "Grietjie" was used at Thaba Bosigo, she is in Pretoria, Smithfield, Bloemfontein, Cape Town and in England at the same time. A remarkable gun indeed, she can even alter her shape and calibre.

The best known local "Grietjie" was apparently a small calibre carronade or gunade which was used in the Battle of Blood River. This is possibly Durr 700 which is listed as being at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. There are five guns, including Durr 485 at Smithfield which have the same name.

The original "Grietjie" never made it to South Africa. She weighs close to 15½ metric tons and used to fire a spherical stone shot which weighed 286 kg from a 63 cm bore. She was brought into the world in c.1450 AD, a difficult birth by all accounts. This gigantic bombard was famous in Europe, and most know her by the name "Dulle Griet", which translates loosely to "Stupid Margaret". She can be seen in Ghent, Belgium.

It is almost certain that many immigrants from the low countries in Europe to the Cape Colony would have been familiar with "Dulle Griet". It would have been quite natural for them to name a smaller gun "Grietjie", which is the diminutive form of "Griet". It is quite clear that there was more than one "Grietjie" in South Africa. This is the best explanation that we can find for the proliferation of the name.

5. SWIVEL GUNS

Some more information has come to light on swivel guns, which are often and incorrectly referred to as "signal guns". The VOC ships were armed since the mid 17th century with 4 to 10 breech loading swivel guns mounted in a crutch which had a central mounting pin. These, most often 1 or 2 pdr guns, were known as "bassen" or "basjen". The removable beer tanker type chambers were known as "caamers van basjen". The 'Resolutien Heeren XVII' as published on 28 August 1744 states that the new 150 ft East Indiamen would be supplied with 10 muzzle loading "draaijstukken" (turning pieces) in place of the now outdated "bassen".

Although the ML swivel guns had been manufactured for many years prior to this resolution, the standard issue to VOC ships appears to have been the older BL variety. The change did not take place overnight and the older BL guns would still have been in service for years after the decision to change. What did occur fairly rapidly was that the BL guns were no longer being cast and the ML guns were cast in stead.

6. GUN MOVEMENT

Commander "Mac" Bisset, Curator of the Naval Museum in Simon's Town, informs me that the Blomefield 32 pdr listed as Durr 409 (page 118) has been removed from the Camber in West Yard where it has served as a bollard for a century or so. The removal was essential to developments in the area. This gun is now the only Blomefield pattern 32 pdr in South Africa which is fully above ground and it is his intention to have the gun returned to the Martello Tower in Simon's Town, very close to where the gun was originally mounted.

THEORY ON THE ENGLISH GUNS AT BLAAUBERG IN 1806

According to Dutch reports on the Battle of Blaauberg, the English out-gunned the Dutch defenders. This could mean one, or both of two things : (a) The English had bigger or more effective guns than the defending forces, and/or (b) The English were better (in terms of accuracy, rate of fire and/or discipline under fire) gunners than the rapidly assembled Dutch forces. A combination of all of the above seems likely.

The English made use of their new experimental Shrapnel shells during the Battle of Blaauberg, (McConnell - Projectiles - P 325) this may have influenced the outcome somewhat. Shrapnel and other shells were, at that time, fired only from mortars and howitzers.

The English "Patterns of Military Stores" for the period 1790 to 1813 lists the following light field guns, howitzers and mortars as being "in service" :

- 5½ inch Royal Mortar of 1¼ cwt (63kg)
- 4½ inch Coehorn mortar of ¾ cwt (38kg)
- 5½ inch Howitzer of 4 cwt (203kg) ((Durr 553 and 565 on page 115 ?))
- 4½ inch Howitzer of 2 cwt (101kg)
- 12 Pdr bronze field gun of 4ft 6in and 5¼ cwt (267kg)
- 6 Pdr bronze field gun of 5ft and 6 cwt (305kg) ((Durr 619 & 620 on page 112 ?))
- 3 Pdr bronze field gun of 3ft and 2 cwt (101kg)

All of the above, when separated from their carriages or beds, were capable of being landed from a ship to the beach in a ship's boat.

Does anybody have information on the guns used at Blaauberg ?

READERSHIP

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