

THE CALL-UP GUN SIGNAL SYSTEM

Once a clear threat to the colony had been recognised, the authorities needed to be able to rapidly summon the part time forces at their disposal. These forces consisted of soldiers serving at remote posts, VOC company officials and *burgers* or citizens, who had undergone rudimentary military training but lived far inland.

The Call-up System had a modest beginning with one single gun being placed in 1687 on the farm "Rustenburg" situated on the lower slopes of Tygerberg, near the track which led from the Castle to Stellenbosch, (now Voortrekker Road). In the event of an emergency a horseman would be dispatched from the Castle to ride 10 miles across sand dunes and scrub to fire the gun. This would be the signal for all men so appointed to gather their muskets, bedding, horses and food and hurry to the Castle.

Expansion of the colony and the docking of more and more ships, combined with the pioneering spirit of some settlers led to the gradual occupation of land further from the Castle. The VOC authorities at the Castle ensured that the signal system was expanded to cover all of the occupied areas. By 1734 the Call-up System consisted of about 20 guns which formed a link between the Castle and Citrusdal in the north, Worcester in the north east and Swellendam in the east.

In 1757 a trial of the signal system proved to be a total failure. Some guns were not heard, some farmers were away from home and their guns were not fired, others had mouldy gunpowder which refused to ignite, yet others could not find their loading and firing equipment. The unhappy authorities summoned the signalmen to a meeting and issued a set of orders regarding their responsibilities, which if not meticulously obeyed could lead to imprisonment.

The authorities admitted that the failure of the signal system was not entirely the fault of the signalmen, and that some of the guns were inappropriately sited and other cases the distance between the guns and the intended recipients of the signal was too great. During 1758 and 1759 several more guns were added to the system and some existing guns were re-sited.

This signal system was refined by the replacement of the masts which stood at some of the signal posts and the provision to some posts of fire beacons in the form of back-to-back conical wrought iron stands. The signalmen were made responsible for a ready supply of suitable fire wood, (which was often consumed by passing travellers) and for the clearing away of all brush and grass around the gun as a fire break.

The signal was not meant to pass from signal post to signal post, rather from one signal post to an occupied farmhouse, settlement or company outpost which was within reasonable hearing distance. Here the person, mostly farmers, but often their wives, family or slaves, being advised of the signal, would gather the gun equipment, mount a horse and ride to the next gun in the system. Some farmers complained that they had to ride for more than an hour to get to the gun which they had to fire. After firing the gun the signalman would raise the designated flag and light the signal fire. The gun was often fired more than once to ensure that it was heard.

When the English fleet attacked Saldanha Bay in 1781 the Call-up System was used operationally for the first time, the effectiveness of the system was apparently not recorded.

The Call-up System was used again, to good effect in 1795 when the English landed in Simon's Town, it was fired as a false alarm once when a French fleet sailed past the Cape, and again in 1806 when the English landed at Blaauwburg.