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A service to the muzzle loading cannon enthusiast

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Please note the change of address above. The telephone and e-mail address remain unchanged.

REPORT ON THE RE-ENACTMENT OF THE BATTLE OF BLOUBERG

The Bi-centenary of the Battle of Blouberg was re-enacted in part on 07 and 08 January 2006. The event proved to be a resounding success from the point of view of the local businesses and for the community as a whole. This report deals only with the re-enactment and not with the myriad of other official, commemorative, historical and social events which made up the greater commitment by the community.

CANNONS

There were 13 functional original cannon brought to the battle of which 12 participated. Ian van Oordt's 9 pdr Armstrong Frederick proved a bit heavy for the soft sand and spent two days guarding the entrance without firing a shot except for the call-up signal. The participating guns were :-

- a. Ian van Oordt's 2 pdr on a replica Griebbeauval twin trail field carriage, served by Barbara George and Alan Martheze.
- b. Martin Venter's 7 pdr RML on a naval field carriage,
- c. A bronze French howitzer from Fort Beaufort manned by Basil Mills and his gunners from the Eastern Cape.
- d. A ½ pdr also from Fort Beaufort.
- e. Zane Palmer's 7 pdr RML from Port Elizabeth with Prof. Pat Irwin assisting.
- f. Ben Strydom and his noisy 6 pdr Armstrong from Worcester,
- g. Peter Wright and his 4 pdr Armstrong from Muizenberg.
- h. The SAS UNITIE 3 pdr ably manned by Jurg and Neville from the Tygerberg Reserve.
- i. The SAS UNITIE 2 pdr served by Miss Elize Van Niekerk and Leon de Vries, an efficient and expert team who drew much favourable comment.
- j. "Shorty", the 8 pdr Swedish gun from Sentinel Wines near Stellenbosch, expertly handled by a Pierre Malan, one of the Hout Bay gunners who only came to watch the battle.
- k. Ryk de Wit and his 4 pdr Finbanker from Hoogelegen (no misfires this time) , and
- l. MJ de Wit and his 6 pdr English "Merchants" gun from Hoogelegen.

TRAINING OF GUNNERS

Training of the additional gunners required for the battle began in late September. Each trainee gunner had to study the handbook on cannon safety and procedures, undergo "dry" training, learn to make up ammunition, attend and assist at three supervised firings and then pass a practical test. These "additional" gunners then assisted the more experienced gunners at the battle.

THE CALL-UP FIRINGS

On Saturday 07th a chain of nine guns was fired in the mountains between Blouberg and Durbanville to simulate the Dutch call-up system used to call the Burghers to arms in 1806. Four of these guns were originals from 1806 and they were still in their original positions. Martin Venter and Alf Parris did sterling work in getting their guns to the peaks of Blouberg and Koeberg hills respectively. Here the local 4 by 4 club and a neighbour of Alfs lent a valuable hand.

THE BATTLEFIELD

The owner of the preferred battlefield was still vacillating between “yes” and “no” two days before the battle and Douw Steyl wisely decided to abandon the negotiations and go for the alternative field which was kindly offered by a local resident.

The battlefield had been completely burned out three days before the battle, leaving a surface of fine sand, ash and soot. The 40 knot South Easterly wind on the day of the battle left faces sun and wind burned, sand blasted and blackened with soot and gunsmoke, particularly the English who were firing directly into the wind. The black faces served only to emphasise the broad white grins of very satisfied participants. There is an as yet undefined form of temporary lunacy which follows the multiple firing of several cannon and the resulting overdose of gunsmoke.

The switch to the alternative field turned the battlefield around, with the parking, and thus the majority of spectators, on the Dutch side and not on the English side as expected. In order to bolster the most visible Dutch side I asked Peter Wright to desert from the English and we had 7 guns on the Dutch side and 5 on the English.

THE MAGAZINE

Our best laid plans for a magazine in which to assemble the ammunition went awry when the van became stuck in the sand. Had the van had the decency to become stuck in the appropriate position we could still have had the shelter required for the important and delicate job of weighing out accurate charges for seven different calibres of gun, but no! it became stuck down wind from the battlefield, exactly where a magazine should not be.

This is where true artillerymen came to the fore. Alf Parris, Jurg Zimmermann, Neville Potgieter, Albert Van der Merwe and Dudley Malgas (of Noon Gun fame) spent the day in the sun, sand, wind and soot wrestling with pieces of aluminium foil, gunpowder, scales and whatever they could lay their hands on to produce the required ammunition. Ian van Oordt also made up ammunition on the English side of the field. Well done guys !

CONTROL OF THE BATTLE

As there was no opportunity for any form of collective practice, it was imperative that the leaders knew what was required and that others followed orders precisely. Basil Mills from Grahamstown took charge of the English infantry commanded by “General Baird” (Chris New). “General Janssens” (Johan Wolfaard from Bloemfontein) commanded the Dutch infantry. The Chief Gunner from Hout Bay, Allan Delbridge controlled the English artillery and Alf Parris the Dutch artillery.

Due to an oversight on my part, the order of battle and the sequence of events was not supplied to General Janssens but only to his Senior Gunner, Alf Parris. This led to a fair amount of confusion on the Dutch side and, in accordance with reality, the first casualty of the battle was the plan. Fortunately the two of them worked together well and nobody knew that the plan had been abandoned.

SUPPORT FROM NEAR AND FAR

In the absence of any form of re-enactment group in Cape Town, the local Black Powder shooting Club stepped into the breach and several of their members, dressed as Dutch gentlemen with ostrich feathers and all, participated to the bitter end. They also saved the day by providing the Eastern Cape contingent with additional percussion caps for their muskets. Not only did a few of their feathered hats make use of the wind to desert to the English side, but they aided and abetted the enemy by supplying them with percussion caps. No wonder the Dutch lost the battle!

One impressive figure on the Dutch side was MC Heunis from Pretoria. In genuine period dress of a Dutch farmer, broad hat, moleskin trousers, waistcoat, tinderbox (genuine and working) flintlock musket, powder horn, and his wife, Vicky, also in period dress diligently at his side encouraging him to shoot those bloody Englishmen. It was noted that MC was one of the last to retreat when the English launched a most impressive bayonet charge.

Martin Brookes from Pretoria was dressed as a *Predikant* (minister) and he prowled the battlefield administering the Last Rites to any human, animal or insect which appeared to be in need. To see this grey bearded "minister" expertly loading and firing his musket was a sight to behold.

GENEROUS GESTURES

I was very pleased to see the level of assistance rendered between the participating gunners. Wherever help was needed to off load, mount, move or load cannons back onto vehicles, all hands pitched in and helped. There were also many occasions where the owners of cannon allowed other gunners the opportunity to fire a few shots. Peter Wright surrendered his moment of glory to Martin Brookes when the first signal gun was fired at Melkbosstrand before a crowd of about 1,500 spectators and all-media press coverage. Ian van Oordt allowed Alan Martheze to fire Ian's 2 pdr on its brand new carriage which resulted in one of the best action photographs that I have ever seen.

STATISTICS

The training, call-up firings and the two sections of the battle re-enactment, including the infantry, consumed 38 kilograms of black powder of which 11 kg was FFG and the remainder coarse blasting powder. The 86 cannon and about 120 musket shots during battle re-enactment consumed 23 kg of the total 38 kg.

I am not dead sure of the figures, but it appears that seven participants (both artillery and infantry) came from Pretoria, two from Bloemfontein, twelve from Grahamstown, two from Fort Beaufort, two from Port Elizabeth and two from Worcester.

OFFICIAL SUPPORT

The South African Police Services Explosives Branch were most accommodating and provided an exceptional service to a crazy band of re-enactors who play around with ancient cannons.

African Explosives Ltd went out of their way to deliver a large quantity of gunpowder to a remote position early on a Sunday morning in the middle of their closed holiday period.

The Battle of Blouberg Heritage Committee, made up mainly of local volunteers who had never done anything like this before worked a miracle in achieving what they did with the limited time, expertise, experience and resources that they had. The hardest working member was the Chairman who appears to be incapable of losing his temper regardless of who does what when. I suspect that, for the next re-enactment, he will not work as hard, but a whole lot smarter and wiser!

The Disaster Control services of Blouberg and Melkbosstrand supported us with traffic control, fire tenders, first aid and policing. Fortunately the most serious medical requirement was for sand and soot to be flushed out of a few bloodshot eyes.

I, ME, MYSELF, PERSONALLY ?

I never fired a shot. In fact I did not participate in any way, shape or form. My single outstanding achievement was to identify, recruit, train and appoint people who each went the extra mile and overcame every obstacle and made the re-enactment section of the broader event a great success. Another clever thing that I did was to marry a woman who could put up with me squandering time and resources on a battle re-enactment in the middle of moving from one house to another.

Take note - The organisers are already planning a bigger and better organised re-enactment for January 2007. Keep your powder dry.

Gerry de Vries : Burned, battered, bruised & exhausted, but still smiling.