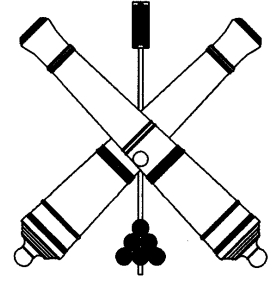


THE CANNON ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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NEWSLETTER No. - 23 August 2007

A service to the muzzle loading cannon enthusiast

NEW GUNS FOUND

In the June – July copy of the Cape Odyssey, a local history oriented publication published by CAOSA member Gabriel Athiros, I found a picture of a very corroded iron cannon lying on the rocks on Jutten Island in Saldanha Bay. The accompanying article suggested that the gun was off the MERESTEIN a VOC ship which was lost on the rocks at the island in 1702. Now recorded as Durr 914.

Andy May of Pietermaritzburg has sent me a picture of two ML guns which were photographed long ago at the Warriors Gate Moth Museum in Durban. One is a carronade or gunade with trunnions and the other appears very similar, but has no button, neck or breeching loop. I have e-mailed Ken Gillings in Durban to enquire about their present whereabouts.

A STROLL IN THE MOUNTAINS

I received a disturbing report about the condition of two guns (Durr 396 and 397) which are in the old Gantouw Pass which existed before the construction of Sir Lowries Pass. When I first recorded these guns in 1995 they were in good condition and standing on sturdy oak standing carriages. Erick Kellerman, owner of an historic farm at Hessewakloof where a signal gun was positioned, and bearer of these bad tidings, accompanied my son and I to inspect the guns. We found them lying on their sides in the mud in the most decrepit and corroded state. It appears that several years ago a bushfire consumed the carriages and the guns toppled to the ground and nobody has done anything about them. Rude letters containing expletives are being prepared !

FREEDOM DAY ECHOES

The Gunners Association, of which I am I believe, the only Naval member, has recognised the efforts of Dave Cowley in making the day a success and reported very favourably on the activities of CAOSA on the day.

In order to be accepted as a member of the Gunners Association an applicant has to write a motivation in which all gunnery experience is detailed. It appears that one is also expected to assume a nom-de-plume which removes any vestiges of out-of-date rank, I became Woer-woer. Having been urged by the late Cecil Graham to join, I wrote the following :

AND HE CLAIMS TO BE A GUNNER ?

The subject of this note is myself, Gerry de Vries, a retired Naval Technical officer (Electronics).

I was the Weapons Electrical Officer and later the Base Engineer for Strike Craft Flotilla in Durban. After seven years of successfully repairing, or causing to be repaired, the weapons systems and 76mm guns for a whole flotilla of SC, my superiors decided that I needed some

formal training, and I was instructed to undergo the seven month SC Weapons Officers Course. Now if any gunner has attended a midwife's course, he will have empathy for my seven months removed from my comfort zone.

Eventually we reached the practical part of the course, the gunnery section of which is naturally conducted out at sea, that vast open space where nothing stands still. Having been a base wallah on solid ground for seven years, my sea legs had been returned to stores, labelled "surplus to requirement". I thus directed the firing of the two 76's from a dark Ops Room with a bucket around my neck. The results are apparently still a state secret and I have never fired a 76 since.

Returning to civilised technical life with certificate in hand, I returned to work none the wiser about my functions as Base Engineer. The one sneaky pleasure that I did extract from the course is that the Great and Honourable Roll of SC Weapons Officers now has the name of a technical officer inscribed on it, albeit unobtrusively in a lower corner.

My baptism of fire occurred on a salt pan just south of Walvis Bay in 1976. I was ordered to construct, from drums, wood and tyres, and "enemy encampment" for a night time shore bombardment exercise. Two of us remained at the target until zero hour minus five minutes to light the "enemy cooking fires". We lit some tyres soaked in diesel and ran to the Land Rover, which immediately became bogged down in the sand. It was freezing cold, but we soon worked up a sweat which had little to do with physical exertion. That was a sensible vehicle that we had, at the first sound of incoming, which was mercifully two hundred metres long, the vehicle leaped from the sand and hurtled across the salt flats to safety, it was kind enough to take us with for the ride.

My gunnery days were not yet over, as on the following day I was sent to countermine the six unexploded HE rounds. Now I ask you, when a round is lying in the middle of a vast salt pan, and you only have 50m of wire where do you take cover? Behind the sensible Land Rover of course. We were expecting only HE rounds, but it seems that one of the ships had decided to dispose of some surplus ammo at the same time. Four rounds were HE which left a nice hole in the pan. One round appears to have been an anti missile round, because thousands of tungsten balls flew in all directions and did our valliant Land Rover no good at all. (We patched with putty and smeared the paint over the patches with thinners before returning it to the army).

The sixth round delivered the ultimate insult. Once a round has ploughed through the sand, it has no recognition marking left, it is bare metal. We placed a charge, retreated behind the holed Land Rover, and let rip. Following the bang there was a woer-woer-woer sound departing into the mid distance. It was the shell making a tactical withdrawal. We waited for a few minutes and tried again, same result woer-woer-woer - - thud. After the third attempt, and smelling a rat, I made a closer inspection of this, now slightly bent 76mm round. It was an inert practice round!

I have attended the mandatory seven months of torture, fired guns at sea, got my name in gold letters on a board at the Navy Weapons School, been fired on by my own guns, and caused the same shell to travel over land repeatedly without the use of a gun. Of course I am a gunner !

woer-woer

(And I was accepted into the sacred brotherhood ???)

WHITESMOKE

For those readers with an inclination towards web surfing, you might enjoy a visit to the site WWW//whitesmoke/co.za/powwow view forum / cannons.

A CANNON LOCK

Rolf Darfur, member No. 40, has sent me a very interesting piece of equipment, a beautiful and pristine brass cannon flintlock mechanism in full working order. Unfortunately he wants it back !!

The introduction of the cannon lock in England is generally attributed to Sir Charles Douglas at some time in 1778. When Sir Charles was appointed to command HMS DUKE in 1778 he requested that his ship be supplied with gun locks throughout, but this request was rejected by the Admiralty. Undeterred, he supplied the locks at his own expense. Subsequent battle successes by HMS DUKE against the French in the West Indies convinced the Admiralty of the advantages offered by the gun locks.

Fitted on one side of the vent block, particularly on Blomefield guns designated for sea service, the mechanism functioned much the same as the flintlock musket except that it was triggered by jerking firmly on a lanyard.

Sir Charles son, Sir Howard Douglas improved the design in 1817 by introducing a double headed flint jaw which could be speedily turned around in the heat of battle should the flint break.

Miller developed his version of the gun lock in 1820 and T. Ashton developed the percussion lock in 1835 which heralded the end of the flintlock era.

The example in front of me appears to be one of the early Charles Douglas variety. This was confirmed when my son and I visited Ryk de Wit and found that the lock fitted his 18 pdr Blomefield perfectly, even the channel gouged into the vent block ran to the middle of the pan on the lock.

Now let's see, will Rolf allow us to ? Who knows!

THE CANNONS OF SENTINEL - FOR SALE

With the liquidation of Sentinel Wines their collection of cannons will soon come up for sale. I have been contracted to remove and store the guns until such time as legal wrangles indicate that they can be sold. The guns that were on loan have been returned to guardians appointed by their owners.

The cannons include : one 2,5 ton bronze Bocarro C.1640, one Blomefield 18 pdr of 42 CWT, three iron Finbankers, one short iron 8 pdr, three bronze Lantakas, one bronze VOC 6 pdr and one Danish bronze 1 pdr dated C 1620 showing the "C" of King Christiaan IV.

The conditions of sale have a clause stating that, as heritage items, written permission would be required from the South African Heritage Resources Agency for the guns to be exported.

You may have to dig deep into the cookie jar for some of these.

Gerry de Vries
Secretary to the Cannon Association