

BRITISH NAPOLEONIC FOOT ARTILLERY (Part 1)

Welcome to the latest Victrix newsletter that looks at the complex subject of British Foot artillery. I had hoped to cover everything in one newsletter but even after some cursory research it soon became apparent that 2 written pieces would be required. A note for all academics both professional and amateur; this document is intended as an introduction to British Field Artillery for the newcomer to the world of Napoleonic wargaming. For those well read individuals who feel I should have covered such things as the 1793 range tests or the 64 types of British ordnance listed in Adye's *Bombardier and Pocket Gunner (2nd Ed 1802)* I apologise but neither time nor space will permit this. In this newsletter I intend to cover background, equipment, organisation and uniforms. I will follow this up with part 2 that will look at the use of British artillery in specific actions during the Napoleonic Wars.

Organisation

The science and organisation of artillery had progressed slowly from late 1500 up until the Napoleonic times. However, with the coming of Napoleon Bonaparte, a "gunner" by profession: the artillery arms race accelerated at a much faster pace. Napoleon put much emphasis on the development of the French artillery arm. "*Great battles*", he wrote, "*are won by artillery; fire is everything; the rest does not matter*". In particular Napoleon significantly increased the ratio of guns to men from 2 to 5 by 1813. In Britain these changes pushed technological development of guns and more importantly the method by which artillery was organised. Up until this time the artillery was organised into 3 parts – Battalion guns attached to the infantry regiments, horse artillery and heavy (siege) artillery. By 1800 this piecemeal approach of attaching guns to the infantry regiments had been abandoned in favour of central force known as The Field Artillery.

The Field Artillery was formed into brigades of 6-12 guns and sub units of 2 guns known as divisions. The term battery, at the time, was used to describe a gun emplacement and it was not until later the term was used to describe a brigade of guns.

Officers

In the British army of the day most commissions were purchased by the rich and wealthy. However, due to the scientific nature of artillery warfare, artillery officers were often appointed on ability and went through rigorous training at The Royal Military Academy on the site of Woolwich Arsenal. The training of officers included fencing, horsemanship, dancing, drawing and the military arts. Of particular note was the use of top landscape artists of the day to teach officers to paint and draw, an essential skill required on the battlefield to produce accurate sketches of enemy dispositions and gun position surveys. Along with Royal Engineers the officers of the Royal Artillery were the army's only "scientifically" trained men. As a result they displayed a remarkably high degree of professionalism and were not required to purchase their commissions, instead being promoted on seniority. This did have its own inherent problems with promotion to colonel taking up to 36 years to achieve.

Ordnance

The field artillery could call on a number of different pieces of ordnance to arm its brigades. The most common were the 3 pounder (the name relates to the weight of shell fired), 6 pounder, 9 pounder and 12 pounder. The artillery was also equipped with Howitzers, in most cases 5½ inch in calibre.



Guns were cast in bronze that was incorrectly called brass at the time. Bronze was a much better material than iron being lighter, more durable and less inclined to explode into thousands of pieces when it got too hot.

Throughout the Peninsular War British Field Artillery was normally organised with 6 guns per brigade of which 5 were 6 pounders and 1 was a Howitzer. To facilitate movement each gun would also have a limber that was used as the link between the gun and a team of 4-6 horses. The 2 horses harnessed nearest the limbers were known as “wheelers” and were always the biggest and strongest horses as they acted as the brakes. The other 2-4 horses were known as “leaders” and the whole horse team was controlled by 3 riders who mounted the right hand horses

The 6 pounder gun, long and short versions, was the most common British artillery piece throughout the Peninsular War. The French equivalent was the 8 pounder (incidentally the French pound weighed more than the British pound) and this easily outgunned its British counterpart, both in weight of shell and numbers deployed on the battlefield. To counter act this imbalance the British developed the 9 pounder which by the time of Waterloo had replaced almost all the British army’s 6 pounder guns. The 12 pounder gun was initially used in the field but due to its cumbersome weight and size was slowly relegated to the role of fixed artillery in fortresses or as siege artillery.



The Howitzer was a small short barrelled weapon firing hollow air burst shells. The short barrel meant that only a small charge could be used to fire the weapon and thus it had a low velocity. However, the short barrel also allowed for a high elevation and Howitzers could be used to fire high trajectory shells over the heads of friendly troops. This had a significant advantage over the standard 6 and 9 pounder guns that could only fire on a flat trajectory and therefore, more often than not had to be deployed on the flanks or in front of the main body of troops to be able to engage the enemy.

Ammunition

Three basic types of projectile were used by the artillery: roundshot, canister and shell. Roundshot was a spherical cast iron shot that was deadly at short and long ranges. It could be notoriously inaccurate due to the poor fit of shell and barrel that allowed air to divert the flight of the shot. Canister including grapeshot comprised many small iron or lead balls contained in either a metal jacket or canvas cylinder. When fired the projectile would break up causing the contents to spread out very much like a shotgun. The range of this type of shot was poor, never used against targets at more than 350 yards range, but very effective when directed at large formations of men or horses. Longer range anti-personnel work utilised shells fired from howitzers. These hollow shells would have a wooden fuse that was cut to a

certain length which determined the timing of the shell exploding. It is not surprising that this form of ammunition was extremely inaccurate at anything other than short ranges.

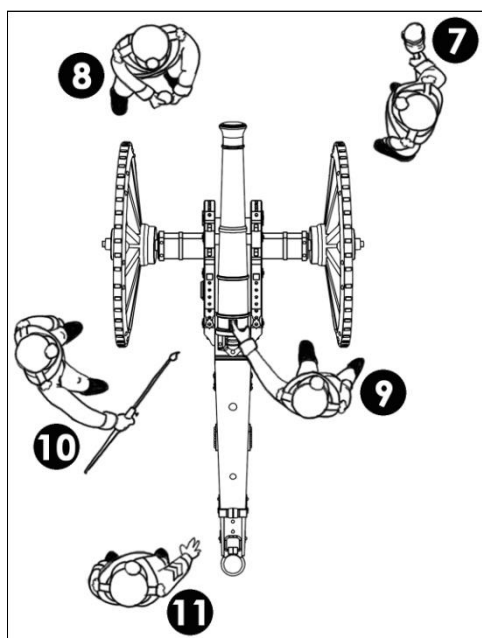
Gun crew

Each gun was crewed by 9 men who were numbered 7 to 15 (please do not e-mail asking why as no amount of research has provided an answer). This number could be increased to 15 men if the gun was to be manhandled. However, the actual operation of the gun was carried out by 5 men. The duties of the gun crew were:

No 7 Sponger. Equipped with a sheepskin fleece on a long pole that when soaked in water was used to swab out the gun to ensure no burning embers from the previous shot would cause a premature discharge. This crew member would also have a wadhook or worm that looked like a giant corkscrew and was used for removing any obstructions in the gun barrel.

No 8 Loader. Equipped with a rammer used to push home the charge and projectile.

No 9 Served the vent. He used a priming iron to pierce the canvas charge bag via the vent. He would then insert an ignition charge into the vent tube. This would normally be a tin tube or goose quill filled with gun powder.



No 10 Fired the gun. He ignited the charge with his portfire. This was a paper tube filled with powder and held on a wooden staff. The portfire would be lit from a linstock, a slow burning cord that was deployed near the gun.

No 11 Gun commander. He decided when the gun was fired, estimated range and fuse burning time.

Other crew comprised:

No 12 Carried the match and bucket.

No 13 Served No 8 with ammunition

No 14 Carried a waterproof cartouche bag containing gun charges and a pair of drag ropes.

No 15 Held the limber horses and also carried a cartouche bag.

All gun crew were expected to deputise for each other in the event of injury or the death to any crew member. A well trained British field artillery crew would be expected to fire up to 5 rounds per minute.

Other equipment used by gun crews included hand spikes to help traverse the gun and rope chains to manhandle guns over short distances. Last but not least was the gun spike, this was a soft metal pin driven into the vent to disable the gun in the event of imminent capture by the enemy.

During the Napoleonic Wars an infantry soldier armed with a musket, if he was a good shot, could hit a target at a range of 100 yards. However, most soldiers would be very lucky to hit a target at any distance greater than 50 yards. The maximum effective range for artillery firing roundshot was about 1400 yards thus making artillery an incredibly powerful weapon. Even marching at the double it would take infantry 10 minutes to close with enemy artillery; thus giving a well drilled brigade of 3 guns time to fire 150 rounds of roundshot. This obviously puts the infantry at a severe disadvantage and was a crucial factor why at The Battle of Waterloo Wellington deployed his main body of troops in a reverse slope position out of site of Napoleons Grand Battery, but more of this in a future newsletter.

Uniform

Foot Artillery officer
pre 1812



Foot Artillery
pre 1812



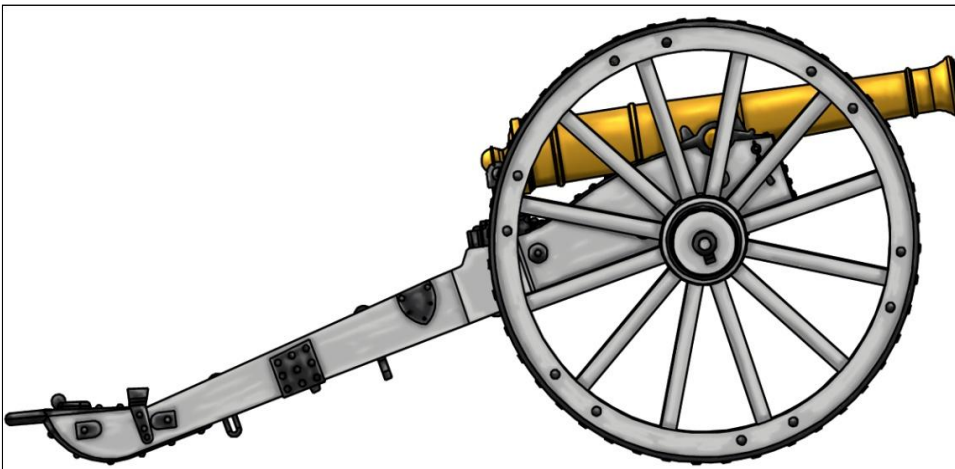
Foot Artillery officer
1812 to 1815



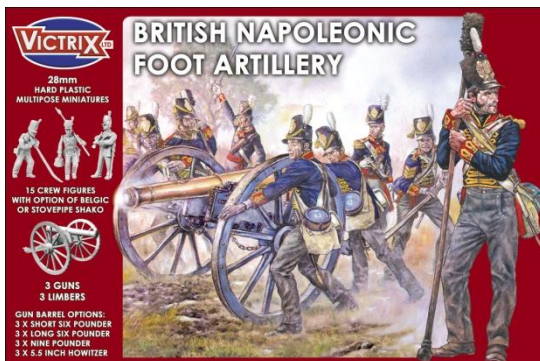
Foot Artillery
1812 to 1815



Thanks to Steve for producing yet another excellent uniform and painting reference guide. Please note the main differences are the yellow shoulder tufts worn by other ranks before 1812 and the adoption of an orange coat liner for officers post 1812. It is also of note that the British artillery uniform is the same uniform used by Hanoverian and Kings German Legion artillery troops. The Hanoverian troops only differed in that they wore grey trousers with a broad yellow stripe down the side.



All nations painted their guns, both wood and iron work, to protect them from the elements. Different colours were adopted by each nation with the British using a light grey for woodwork and black for the iron work. Limbers were painted the same colour as the gun. It should be noted that gun carriages and limbers were treated with pitch tar to protect the wood and this would leech out of the wood and cause discolouring to the paintwork.



FEBRUARY OFFER

For the month of February 2011 anyone ordering VX0010 Victrix British Field Artillery either on its own, with other boxes or as part of a deal will receive an additional artillery sprue (containing gun, limber and crew) for every box of artillery they purchase. Please quote **VBFAN** when ordering to ensure you receive your free additional sprue.

Julian Blakeney-Edwards