

A PRACTICE SHOOT

Reminiscences of C Cutcher

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Wollongong Harbour is nestled under two protective forts, one on Signal Hill and the other on the cliffs overlooking the Harbour basin.

The 6-inch naval gun, very modern at the time, was a breechloader quick-firer, never fired to my knowledge as being too expensive for peaceful practice purposes.

The fortress on the western cliffs overlooking the Harbour entrance was a different story: two great muzzle-loading guns of ancient vintage, supported by a trunnion or pivot each side and sitting on a hardwood frame which in turn sat on a carriage arranged to turn on a circular track. Each year the South Coast Infantry Encampment, situated not far away complete with bell tents, supplied the gunners for the practice shoot. In addition to the two just mentioned, a quick-firing Nordenfeldt was positioned. Shells were in cartridge form 1½ inches in diameter. When the gunner pulled the trigger we boys, crouching down to look along the barrel, could follow the shot to its destination, sometimes the target near the Harbour entrance - a very modern and advanced weapon.

The muzzle-loaders (examples of the muzzle-loaders are still to be seen on Fort Denison, Sydney Harbour) were also to repel the Russians, if necessary.

I may be the last to remember the practice shoot utilising those two guns. I vividly remember looking over the fortress fence (with mates, of course) to watch the gun crews rush to the surrounding grass verge around each emplacement, armed with bucket and swab, cleanse the smooth barrels, load a bag of black powder, insert a felt wad and ram home the charge; in the next act the crew would take a spherical cast-iron ball from the neatly-maintained pyramidal store close by, roll the ball down the barrel, follow with wad, and ram home. The crew, exposed to the enemy, would leave for the shelter provided in the concrete surround.

The next move was for the touch hole to be primed with powder, all ready for the gunner to issue final orders as to pointing the gun if necessary, and stand by with a lighted match. Just before the actual firing act, we boys would increase the distance between ourselves and the resulting explosion.

Looking back on those wonderful days I am of the opinion that should the Russian scare have developed into a serious confrontation, an arrangement would have been necessary between the Ship's Captain and the gunners to heave to whilst all was made ready to fire. I am of the opinion also that those gunners ran less risk than the average citizen of today competing in city traffic and armed with the normal high-powered motor vehicle.