

## Field Gun Battery HMAS Cerberus by Frank Shugg



Photo courtesy of Alan Price

Healthy competitions and pride in the Armed Services and branches thereof have always played a major role throughout the ages. Apart from individual and team sporting activities of athletics all codes of football swimming tennis etc there have been many occasions that will always be remembered at CERBERUS including the Curry Cup a combination of athletics cycling cross country boat pulling etc, but few will remember the strenuous Field Gun Crew competition which ended in 1955 at Como Park in Melbourne a final event and a spectacular display for public entertainment to celebrate Trafalgar Day.



The Naval Brigade at the Battle Before Ladysmith, 30 Oct, 1899.  
The 4.7" gun, mounted on Captain Scott's carriage in action.

The origin of the Naval Field Guns goes back to the days when the Royal Navy was called upon to wage war in foreign lands at short notice. When this requirement arose a Naval Brigade was formed and landed. A brigade really meant a party of armed sailors up to 50 men to which a field gun was added, because it could be smartly moved about the countryside by a crew of 18 sailors (This was the theory). Field Guns varied from time to time but the Navy favoured the 12-pounder after a successful siege against the Boers in 1899.

From 1920 to 1955 the Field Gun Battery in HMAS CERBERUS consisted of six 12-pounder guns and limbers. The limber was

the detachable front of the gun carriage with an ammunition box mounted on an axle and two wheels, a long wooden centre pole and cross bar at the front for steering. The gun had a three-inch barrel with an interrupted screw breach block weighing eight hundredweight (approx 800 lbs or 406 kgs) a quick firer, the charge being contained in a brass cartridge case. Both the gun and limber were fitted with two 42-inch artillery wheels (a spare carried on the top of the ammunition box for races). To move this carriage different lengths of 'drag ropes' were attached with a loop at the end to go over the arm of the sailor.

The guns were used mainly for ceremonial occasions and funerals. Old hands will remember the long drag at the slow march from the chapel in the drill hall to the cemetery at Boot Hill on the eastern boundary of HMAS CERBERUS. In November 1926 at the Police Carnival in Melbourne a gun drill competition was introduced and a trophy presented by the wardroom to the winner the Ordinary Seaman's Gun Crew. The competition continued over the years between branches and the rules changed somewhat until the last performance in 1955.

To provide entertainment and show off the maneuverability of the gun and the strength of manpower, a course was designed to test the skills to be developed by the crews including physical fitness to be competitive against other departments and the clock, and not get injured in the process, an understatement. Training was from 0700 to 0800 weekdays and only two badge men were excused from 'volunteering'. In 1955 a Commissioned Writer Officer Nick Carter was in charge

Once you got the hang of what was needed to move the limber and gun you were introduced to the course out on the playing field at the back of the gunnery school. The gun's crew took up their allotted positions around the gun and limber dress of the day no'8's (working dress) heavy boots negative caps. (At this stage the 'volunteer' training squad was the same size or larger than the operating numbers because of varying injuries sustained along the way). At the command up pole and drag ropes the crew with sailors front and side took up the slack and moved forward to the starting line.

At the command go full speed ahead was achieved for about 25 yards and then a right about turn straighten up for another 25 yards to face a thick wooden wall over four foot high. The gun and limber had to be lifted over this wall. To achieve this at a given spot the gun was detached under way sailors dispersed leaving the two steering crew to jump up onto the wall swing forward whilst the sailors lifted and pushed the limber over before the arrival of the gun because that was to follow. Once over and hooked up another dash to a marked area about 25 yards ahead, stop, take the spare wheel off the limber and change the right wheel secure the spare on the magazine box and off again for another 25 yard dash and stop. Unhook the gun swing it round to the front load fire two blank rounds at a wall purporting to be about ten foot high to 'blow' a hole in the wall in order to proceed through at a distance of about 25 yards.

For appearances and excitement a two-foot gap was prepared and covered and an explosive and smoke device rigged by the gunnery staff to achieve the desired effect

of a direct hit second shot. Don't wait for the smoke to disperse hook up and run to the gap in the wall, because the next achievable part of the exercise was to dismantle the limber and gun get it through the hole in the wall together with all sailors assemble the unit and run for the last 50 yard dash to cheers if victorious and a well earned rest providing everything was in one piece including the sailors. At each stop area there was an umpire to oversee the procedure which overall took about six minutes.

The crowd loved it, the competitors, sick bay staff, chippies and gunnery school staff welcomed the final run. This last run was a special achievement for the S&S Team its first and only victory. I know I was there on the steering cross bar. Coincidentally a member of the first Ords crew in 1926 E.Vollmer, was still serving as a Commissioned Stores Officer.

My opposite number on the limber was Marty Minogue whose utterances I will not forget "we're gunna get killed - we're gunna get killed". As I cannot remember all the names of that magnificent crew I shall not name a few but once again congratulations to all the crew on the final day and the wounded for their participation. I hope this revives a few memories.

The diagram below shows a typical course which is used in the UK for field gun competitions.

