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Thunderstruck: Teaching Boy Scouts About History and Cannons

Gary H. Nobbs Jr.

State University of New York College at Buffalo - Buffalo State College, gnobbsjr@gmail.com

Andrew D. Nicholls

nicholad@buffalostate.edu

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Thunderstruck: Teaching Boy Scouts About History and Cannons

Gary Nobbs Jr. Military Transformations in the War of 1812 - Dr. Andrew Nicholls, PhD,
Department of History and Social Studies Education.

Abstract

This project focused on US Field Artillery in the War of 1812. Specifically, a cannon's performances, construction, strategy and technology. The project was put together to teach older scouts about history, teamwork and engineering. The project was created based out of a larger program called the Scout Brigade of Fort George which examined the previously stated aims with the exception of engineering. The sources used included regimental histories, articles and books as well as interviews with professional reenactors. Primary sources included an artillery manual from 1807. The conclusions that were reached were eye opening and included a first hand look at an artilleryman's life in battle, the confusion created on Napoleonic battlefields, and the difficulty of recreating technology from the past.

Background

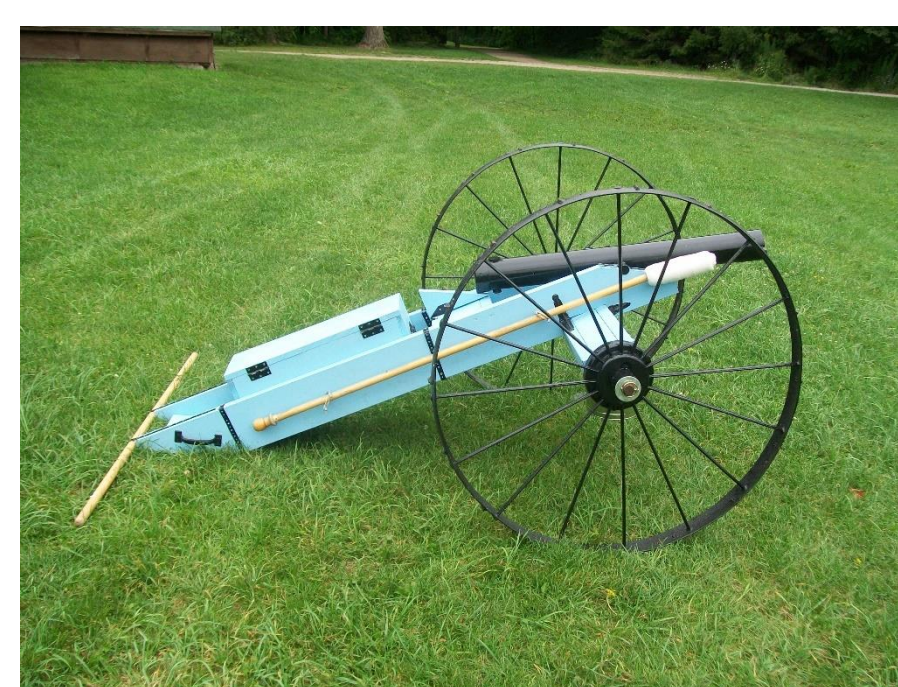
Every September, Boy Scouts from the United States and Canada gather together at Niagara-on-the-lake to recreate the War of 1812. The scouts, dress up in homemade period costumes, arm themselves with cap guns and play a large game of capture the flag. The event, hosted by the Greater Toronto Council, attracts as many as 2,500 scouts every year. The growing event and demand for a more diverse program caused the creation of an artillery regiment. The regiment was designed to have older (14-20 year olds) American and Canadian scouts camp and work together as opposed to the infantry regiments which were segregated by nation. The artillery regiment represents the Royal Artillery and the U.S. Third Artillery Regiment being represented by Canadians and Americans, respectively. New Rules were established to incorporate cannons (called guns) that already existed. Most of the guns on the field were built by Canadian scouts and based off of British Artillery during the Napoleonic Age. Americans made up a small amount of guns on the field, none of which were a historical representation of actual American field pieces as opposed to those being used by the Canadian scouts. The need for such cannons caused American Venture Crew 614 to build a replica cannon based on a United States 6 pounder (pdr).

Approach

The biggest problem that was discovered whilst starting the research was the lack of available existing research on United States field artillery in the War of 1812. Research revealed two things. Firstly US artillery had few standardized pieces as much of existing pieces of ordinance were holdovers from the Revolution. Secondly, the pieces that were standardized were based on the artillery system being used in France known as the Gribeauval System. Using blueprints and technical drawings of this system, construction began. The cannon was built in four phases, adding more detail as construction went. In all the project lasted a total of four years, three years of construction and a year of research. Research in minor forms continued throughout the process and technical drawings were made of the various pieces to make it easier for subsequent cannons to be built. Also, because the cannons at Scout Brigade of Fort George cannot be black powder, this piece was designed with a calcium carbide cannon on the inside of larger barrel which is made of fiberglass. The entire carriage and limber were designed to be taken apart for transportation. During this time research was also conducted on uniforms and training the scouts. Scouts were taught how to handle, fire and assemble the cannon.

Results

Our cannon had to evolve to be more accurate. In our first year, 2010, it was revealed that the hay rake wheels were not ideal on pavement and the gun carriage would shake apart. The carbide cannon on the inside needed an improved firing system. In 2011, the firing system was improved and the fiberglass barrel was built to enclose it. In 2012 the pulling arm used to pull around the field carriage was determined to be inefficient, so a limber carriage was built to allow pulling the cannon easier. Also, carriage wheels replaced the hay rake wheels. The hooks on the gun carriage to hold the gun's accoutrements, were replaced several times until we reached a set of hooks that were more reliable.



Completed first gun design.



Completed final design.

The goal of teaching the scouts about artillery and history was successful in the sense that scouts had a better understanding. The demonstration of large cannons being pulled around on the field by hand and the confusion created even in a make believe battle, gave the scouts greater appreciation of the realities of early 19th century warfare. Some scouts gained an interest in the field of history and others went on to participate as officers in the artillery regiment.



Scouts loading cannon.



Scouts mounting gun on limber

Over the same time frame the uniforms were researched and improved to enhance historical accuracy. Instead of using infantry uniforms modeled after 1814 standards, the uniforms were modeled after the artillery uniform standards issued by the army in 1812. That is a blue uniform with yellow trim and yellow stripes across the front, and scarlet collars and cuffs.



Scouts in uniform. Notice the infantry and artillery uniforms.

Interpretations

Various interpretations were discovered in the research and construction. First and foremost, young scouts that are engaged in a hands on experience in history are more likely to learn. It also allows scouts to take on leadership roles on the field. Other interpretations were that the United States Army had to improvise many things on the field. Cannons were a constant work in progress and parts regularly needed to be repaired. Artillerymen had to become mechanics as well as gunners. In a similarly unforeseen result, our augmented their skills as well. The biggest difference is that our scouts had access to duct tape as opposed to the 19th century counterparts. Another difference between our scouts and the soldiers of that time was how our cannons and theirs differed during battle. The confusion created in battle forced our cannons to be constantly on the move in fluid situations. Historically speaking, cannons usually stayed in one spot and rarely moved unless the situation demanded it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, technical information on War of 1812 artillery is difficult to research and scouts learned better with hands on projects. Ultimately, our cannon has become the first cannon in the artillery regiment to represent American artillery. Others have since expressed interest in the possibility of building their own American style cannon for the Scout Brigade of Fort George. Future projects include the possibility of other artillery vehicles including but not limited to caissons and travelling forges. Another project has taken shape in the form of a United States naval carriage using the field cannon barrel as a starting point. In the end, this project is an ongoing study of American artillery in various forms. One day, maybe one of these scouts will use the knowledge learned from their experiences and go into the historical field and make great discoveries. One scout has even looked into the daunting task of researching American cavalry in the same period. Another subject that currently has very little information.

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