

CAPE FIELD ARTILLERY



(Source: The SA Gunner)

When the East Indian crew steamship “Madras” reached Cape Town on 6 August 1857 with news of the Indian Mutiny, Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape did not hesitate. He sent almost every available man of the Cape Garrison to India. It left the Colony’s forces badly depleted.

The volunteers of the Cape Royal Corps (today the Cape Town Rifles (Dukes)) offered their services. Some of the men soon found themselves drilling on the “Great Guns” of the batteries defending Table Bay, under the watchful eye of the Chevalier Alfred Duprat. Duprat was a member of the Anglo-Portuguese Commission dealing with captured slaves. He was second-in-command of the Rifles but more importantly he had been a Gunner in the Portuguese Army.

Soon, as a result of their work on the batteries, a new volunteer unit was born, the Cape Town Volunteer Artillery being formed on 26 August 1857. The enthusiasm of the new gunners knew no bounds. They paraded several times a week, before and after their days work and were a proud and efficient group of men.

Their first call to arms came in October 1877 and their first action was at Umzintzani on 2 December 1877, followed by Quintana on 7 February 1878. The volunteers spent four months on the Northern Border in 1879 and within a few months were back in the Transkei for five months in 1880/81. From December 1896 to the end of August 1897 the Langeberg Campaign claimed their attention and just over two years later the Corps, which had in January 1899 become a partially paid force of only one battery, was mobilized in October for service in the Boer War.

The Corps spent much of its service on “Lines of Communication” duties, guarding vulnerable points on the railway line to the North. Two guns were for some months each allotted to the defence of Koffiefontein and Jacobsdal. One section operated for some while in a roving capacity with Scott’s Railway Guards and the Right Section, which saw more action than others, was seconded to the Colonial Division, which moved from Naauwpoort, through Aliwal North, Wepener, the eastern Free State to Kroonstad and finally Zeerust. The Right Section had been entirely responsible, by its coolness under heavy Boer fire, for saving Sir Edward Brabant’s advance guard which had been advancing to relieve Wepener.

By now known as Prince Alfred’s Own Cape Artillery, (the Prince named had been bestowed on the corps in 1867), it was demobilized in January 1902.

Only 12 years of peace followed before it was again mobilized for war in August 1914. Following some three months with Gen Botha's forces in suppression of the rebellion, the battery moved to Upington to act as garrison troops while waiting to move into German South West Africa with Col van Deventer's Southern Force. Patrols were carried out and guns fought a small action against the Germans at Schuists Drift. The battery was fortunately in Upington when the republican rebel, Maritz, with a force accompanied by a battery of German guns and two pom-poms, attacked the town.

The guns of Prince Alfred's Own were rapidly brought into action and after a four hour artillery duel the rebels surrendered. A writer to the Sunday Times stated that "The town was saved by the Cape Field Artillery... The C.F.A. covered themselves with glory and deserve praise, as they saved Upington and acted as seasoned soldiers."

There appeared to have been attempts in the inter-war years to retain the Cape Field Artillery in the coast artillery organization. The unit was initially ignored in the mobilization in September/October 1939 for service in World War II. But the call came on 6 December and the first battery arrived at Potchefstroom before Christmas. It was followed by two more. Two other batteries eventually became anti-aircraft units.

1st Field Battery (C.F.A.) served as an independent battery in a divisional artillery role in East Africa but was lost to the unit when it was incorporated into 7 Field Regiment in Egypt.

Cape Field Artillery had in February 1940 become 1st Field Brigade and in January 1941, 1 Field Regiment (V), South African Artillery (P.A.O.C.F.A). As such it fought at Bardia, Sollum, Halfaya Pass and Gazala. 2 Field Battery was lost at Tobruk where it fired the first and last rounds before the Fortress surrendered on 21 June 1942. 1 and 3 Field batteries, joined by 14 Field Battery, fought at Alamein from the German assaults in July to the final battle that began on 23 October 1942. On one crucial day in July the three batteries fired over 9000 rounds to break up heavy attacks on the Alamein Box.

After returning to South Africa in December 1942, a depleted regiment returned to North Africa in 1943 to "marry" with 6 Field Regiment to become 1/6 Field Regiment (V), South African Artillery (P.A.O.C.F.A.). With 6th SA Armoured Division it moved to Italy in April 1944. It fought in the last battle for Monte Cassino and in all the battles and actions in which the 6th Division were involved. The young unit commander, Lt Col L. Kay, believed in close support and close support was always given. On one occasion a forward observer found himself just behind the engineers in advance of the Division sweeping the road for mines. On another occasion a battery was actually ahead of the American infantry, who advanced through the gun positions.

On 1 January 1946 the regiment was resuscitated as a Citizen Force unit and in the years since then has been mobilized for the National Emergency in 1960, Operation Savannah in January / March 1976 and other terms of services on the SWA/Namibia border, as well as for the periods of unrest in the 1980s.

It provided a 140mm battery for 10 Artillery Brigade in August / September 1988 when the SADF established a force to counter Cuban forces which had given an indication of possibly moving over the SWA/Namibian border.

In remembrance of the 40 years spent as both field and garrison artillery, the three batteries of the unit are named after the coast batteries on which personnel of the unit served: P (Amsterdam) Battery, Q (Imhoff) Battery and R (Wynyard) Battery. Cape Field Artillery is affiliated to 29 Commando Regiment, RA. The antecedent of the latter was 25 Field Regiment, under whose command 2 Field Battery PAOCFA was placed in Tobruk in June 1942.

The regiment, the senior unit of the SA Artillery, celebrated its 150th Birthday in August 2007. The Headquarters of the unit moved from Wingfield to Fort iKapa in 2008. The Officers' Mess is still maintained in the Castle.

The CFA is currently classified as a GV5 155mm Towed/Howitzer regiment.