

A Brief History of the Natal Field Artillery (Source: Ken Gillings)

The Natal Field Artillery was established in September 1862 when the Artillery Company of the Durban Rifle Guard was reformed under the command of Captain A W Evans, an early Natal settler. It was equipped with two 7-pr rifled breech-loading Armstrong guns – the first such field pieces in over 600 years of artillery. The Regiment can trace its ancestry, however, to April 1855 when a public subscription was raised to buy a field piece for the Artillery Company of the Durban Volunteer Guard. This company was retained when the Durban Volunteer Guard became the Durban Rifle Guard in 1859, but was disbanded temporarily due to lack of funds.

In 1870, the Artillery Company of the DRG became a separate unit under the command of Capt Harry Escombe and became known as the Durban Volunteer Artillery. The DVA accompanied Sir Theophilus Shepstone to Mlambongwenya ikhanda (barracks) during the official coronation of Prince Cetshwayo kaMpande on the 1st September 1873.

After the battle of Isandlwana on the 22nd January 1879, the DVA joined other Colonial Regiments in a parade on the 24th January that was held to restore confidence and two days later it was deployed on the south bank of the Mngeni (previously the Umgeni) River to counter any possible attack on Durban by the Zulus.

On the 11th June 1879, the Unit took part in the funeral procession of the Prince Imperial of France after his death on the banks of the Ityotyzi River in Zululand on the 1st June 1879.

It was also responsible for firing several salutes on ceremonial occasions. When the Natal Government Railway reached Charlestown on the 4th April 1879, President S J P Kruger of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek visited the Colony. The DVA fired a salute when the Presidential party crossed the border. The Battery was then rushed to Ladysmith where it fired another salute, then on to Pietermaritzburg and finally to Durban. Evidently the President was surprised and impressed by the 'large number of artillery Natal possessed'.

In 1892, the name of the regiment was changed to the Natal Field Artillery.

When the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) broke out, the Natal Field Battery (which was mobilised on the 28th September 1899), was sent to Ladysmith. On the 21st October 1899, it fired the opening shots of the Battle of Elandsplaagte but was hopelessly outranged by the Boer guns, which retaliated, damaging an ammunition

wagon. The unit was withdrawn from Ladysmith after the Battle of the same name on the 30th October 1899, and together with the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the Durban Light Infantry, it was responsible for guarding the bridge across the Thukela (Tugela) River at Colenso. It was, however, withdrawn shortly before the Boers' southwards movement in mid-November 1899. On the 5th December 1899, the NFA was then split into three sections for operational duty in Natal.

On that day, the left section (commanded by Lt J Livingstone) moved to Nottingham Road and then was sent to Mooi River and thereafter New Hanover. The same day the right section (commanded by Lt A M Ritchie) moved to Mooi River and returned to Estcourt on the 15th January 1900. After the Relief of Ladysmith on the 28th February 1900, it was sent to Dundee where a sub-section was deployed at Glencoe and outposts on Mpati. In January 1900 the centre section (commanded by Lt HHC Puntan) operated between Estcourt and Mooi River. On the 5th February 1900, it proceeded by rail to Zululand where they operated with the Melmoth Field Force where it remained until joining up with the Colonial Scouts on the 15th February 1900. It crossed the Mzinyathi River into the old ZAR at de Jager's Drift on the 16th September 1900 and they were therefore the first guns and volunteers to enter the ZAR.

After the Relief of Ladysmith on the 28th February 1900, the left section of the NFA advanced on Pomeroy with Col Bethune's force from Greytown and participated in the Battle of Helpmekaar on the 13th May 1900, reaching Dundee on the 15th May 1900. It then joined Brig Gen John Dartnell's Brigade, operating in Charlestown, Dundee, Newcastle and Ingagane until October 1900, when the Natal Volunteer brigade was disbanded. In 1901, the NFA was issued with new 15-pr guns and was once again mobilised when Gen Louis Botha launched his second invasion of Natal.

Following the Anglo-Boer War, two additional batteries were formed and the Pietermaritzburg Battery was established in 1902 as the Artillery Branch of the Natal Royal Regiment. It became a separate unit, known as C Battery Natal Field Artillery. The Regiment's first Colonel-in-Chief was Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar who served in this capacity until his death in 1914.

In 1906, the Natal Colonial Government introduced a Poll Tax which was the cause of much resentment amongst the Zulu speaking citizens. An uprising ensued resulting in Colonial regiments being mobilised. The NFA saw a great deal of action and were deployed in a counter-insurgency role for the first time. The Regiment's guns operated in some of the most inhospitable regions of the Colony of Natal and played a significant role in the Battle of Mome Gorge on the 10th June 1900. The Regiment had the privilege of

participating in the commemorations of the centenary of this event in 2006, when several Gunners whose ancestors had participated on the side of the so-called Rebels fired a 21 gun salute at Mpanza, site of Chief Bhambatha kaMancinza Zondi's homestead in 1906.

During the First World War, the NFA was mobilised in August 1914 as the 7th Citizen Battery (NFA) and landed in Lüderitzbucht on the 19th September. It served throughout the German South West African Campaign, operating with Brig Gen Sir Duncan McKenzie's Central Force, Col Beves's 1st Infantry Brigade and then, after changing from 15-prs to 13-pr QF guns, they participated in the Northern Force under Gen Louis Botha and then as part of the 6th Mounted Brigade under the command of General Timson Lukin. The Battery was present at Otavifontein when the Germans surrendered to Gen Botha and the GSWA Campaign ended. Several of its members then joined other South African Regiments abroad or obtained commissions in the Royal Artillery.

After WW1, the NFA was commanded by the legendary Col W M P Johnston DSO VD and comprised one Battery in Pietermaritzburg. It was known as the 2nd Citizen Battery (NFA) but in 1939 it was renamed the Natal Field Artillery. In July 1939, it was increased to a Brigade and known as the Natal Field Artillery Brigade.

When WW2 broke out, the Regiment was divided between the Second Field and Second Light Brigades. When, however, the 8 gun Battery organisation was introduced, a partial amalgamation resulted in the establishment of 2nd Field Regiment (NFA) SAA, consisting of RHQ, 4th, 5th and 6th Batteries. The Regiment sailed from Durban on the 22nd July 1941 aboard the MV Dilwara as part of the 2nd South African Division and were issued with new 25-pr QF guns on arrival in Egypt.

After receiving training in desert warfare, the Regiment moved with the rest of 2nd SA Division to El Alamein and to the oasis of Jarabub on the 9th November 1941.

4th Battery accompanied "E" Force and saw action for the first time at the oasis of Gialo, which was captured by Allied troops. It subsequently moved north to the area of Agadabia which was still held by the Germans and was engaged in harassing the German withdrawal from Benghazi along the main coast road. During Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's counter-attack in January 1942, "E" Force came under constant fire and 4th Battery suffered severe casualties. When "E" force was broken up, 4th Battery was stationed at Gazala and then the Acroma 'Box' and eventually withdrew to Tobruk.

5th and 6th Batteries joined the 2nd SA Division in preparation for the attack on Sollum and Bardia. The attack on Bardia was launched on the 1st January 1942 and during the action, the BC 6th Battery (Maj M Sired MC) and his armoured car crew were killed. 6th Battery eventually also moved towards Tobruk.

5th Battery remained in the Tobruk area and was not engaged until the 20th June 1942 when the Germans attacked. The Battery put up a tremendous resistance and the Gunners continued firing until they were overrun by the Germans, earning a mention in the Royal Artillery's Commemoration Book.

The Battles of Rigel Ridge and Tobruk resulted in the entire Regiment being captured. It was disestablished and ceased to exist for the duration of the War.

On the 1st July 1946 the NFA was redesignated the 2nd Field Regiment SAA (NFA). No training took place that year but normal Active Citizen Force training resumed thereafter.

Following the National Party's election victory in 1948, the name of the Unit was changed to the Natal University Regiment on the 1st January 1960. After an approach was made to the Ministry of Defence, they were permitted to retain NFA in brackets after the name, but the crown was removed to the wheel hub and substituted with the lion of Batavia. The regiment's name reverted to the Natal Field Artillery on the 1st September 1966.

During the so-called Border War, the NFA was called up in 1976 and served in Ovamboland. In 1979, it was deployed in the Kavango area in an infantry role and later in several areas of northern South West Africa (now Namibia). It was also deployed in Soweto and Alexandra during the 'township unrest' of the 1980s and was instrumental in stabilising the volatile situation by enjoying an excellent relationship with those townships' inhabitants.

In 2000, it had the privilege of firing a salute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2 at Durban International Airport.

The Regiment's motto is 'Armis Arte Audacia' ('With Arms, Skill and Bravery') and it held an affiliation ceremony with 159 (Colenso) Battery RA on the centenary of the Battle of Colenso on the 15th December 1999.

The Regiment was awarded the Freedom of Durban on the 28th September 1962, the Freedom of Pietermaritzburg on the 29th September 1962 and the Freedom of eMnambithi / Ladysmith on the 2nd July 2011.