



Field Gun Jack Versus The Boers: The Royal Navy in South Africa 1899-1900

Tony Bridgland

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War broke out in 1899 between the British and South African settlers of Dutch descent, the Boers, or Afrikaners as they are usually called today. Despite previous clashes, the British seriously underestimated their opponents. Although dressed in battered civilian clothes and made up entirely of volunteers, Boer troops were all mounted on horses and had very up-to-date German rifles.

An even more unpleasant surprise than the mounted riflemen were the Boer artillery units. They were the only Boer troops to wear uniforms, were organized on a full-time basis, and were equipped with excellent German field pieces. The British artillery soon found itself out-gunned and out-ranged.

Some British officers, however, were capable of adapting to the new conditions in South Africa. Royal Naval vessels anchored off the Cape had powerful, long-range cannons. It was decided to try bringing these guns ashore and mounting them on improvised carriages for field use. Naval infantry brigades had served in some previous campaigns, and proved capable of accompanying the army as gun crews, their straw hats and naval leggings identifiable in many wartime photographs.

Although they were depicted in many wartime drawings and photographs, no serious study of the naval artillery has ever been done. Tony Bridgland has spent many years researching the topic and has produced a study of the technical problems involved in this unique operation, as well as a colourful narrative of naval personnel pressed into hazardous service far from the sea.

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