

A pair of King's Troop gun teams roll past Buckingham Palace during a state occasion in London. (Photo by Editor Stuart A. Hessney)



# RUNNING WITH GUNS

Text: Retired U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Raymond E. Bell Jr.

## Raymond E. Bell Jr. rolls out a look at horse-drawn artillery in miniature

Once upon a time there was a Royal Tournament at the Earls Court Exhibition Centre in London. I know because both as a boy and an adult I visited it. The military tattoo was a spectacular show with all of Great Britain's military and those of other nations represented.

Especially thrilling was the appearance of the six gun teams of the King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery. The ceremonial unit demonstrated "running with guns" at a dazzling pace through intricate and demanding evolutions.

In the musical ride, galloping six-horse teams



Post-1906 version of Britains set No. 39 -- Royal Horse Artillery (Review Order). (Photo Courtesy of Vectis Auctions Ltd.)

pulling limbers and 13-pounder guns never missed the "beat of a hoof" as they wove in and out, wowing the entranced audience. It was an unforgettable sight, one that was famously recreated in the hollow-cast, old Britains set No. 39 -- Royal Horse Artillery (Review Order).

### CEREMONIAL UNIT

Women were first admitted to the King's Troop in 1996 and today make up about one-third of the unit. Maj. Erica Bridge became the first female commanding officer of the King's Troop in 2007.

The display team retains "King's" as part of its title even

though the United Kingdom has been ruled by Queen Elizabeth II since 1952. Her Majesty's father, King George VI, reviewed the Riding Troop in 1947 and expressed the wish that it be called the King's Troop, RHA. In deference to her father, the Queen decided the unit should continue to be called the King's Troop.

The unit fires salutes on Royal birthdays and state occasions. It also conducts riding exhibitions throughout the United Kingdom. In addition, its members pull mounted guard duty at the Palace of Whitehall on the Horse Guards Parade during the summer months.

Japanese gunners seated on a limber. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)





WWI German horse artillery set made by Hiriart. (Photo by Daniel P. Jones)



Writer Ray Bell's version of Britains horse artillery at the walk in khaki uniforms. (Photo by Jennifer Coates)

The King's Troop and the mounted squadrons of the Household Cavalry's Life Guards and Blues and Royals rank as the only units with horses in the British Army. In addition, the King's Troop is the only ceremonial artillery unit of its size in the world. It musters 168 officers and soldiers along with 120 horses at its barracks in St. John's Wood, North London.

### TOY SOLDIER SPINOFFS

As unique as the real King's Troop is, its toy soldier representations and other horse artillery sets are equally so.

For instance, from Uruguay comes an excellent replica of World War I German horse artillery made by Hiriart. I found an example in the collection of fellow American Daniel P. Jones of Connecticut.

Best known, however, are the Britains versions. Britains has produced four 54-mm versions of the King's Troop since 1947. The production of sets Nos. 39 (at the gallop) and 2077 (at the walk), which had gun set No. 1201 as their artillery pieces, ceased in the early 1960s.

In 1993, Britains produced set No. 8825 at the trot. For a gun, the set had an superb model of a 13-pounder, which was the standard British light fieldpiece during World War I. Britains released set No. 40188 with the horses at the walk in 2001.

All of these Britains painted metal sets had the gunners and drivers wearing ceremonial hussar-like, form-fitting dark blue jackets with yellow frogging.

### KHAKI & BLUE UNIFORMS

There have also been Britains sets of horse-drawn artillery with gunners in khaki and blue uniforms.

Prior to 1941, Britains issued

Neil Rhodes' version of U.S. horse artillery with gunners in Montana hats. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



a trotting RHA set with artillerymen in khaki (No. 39A), but then it was not known as the King's Troop.

Other Britains sets of walking and standing horse-drawn artillery, with gunners both in khaki and in blue uniforms, were of the Royal Artillery.

Then, of course, there are the plastic and metal sets of American Civil War horse-drawn artillery produced by Britains and other makers.

I remember one early morning while visiting London

awakening to the clatter of hoofs outside the window of the hotel we were staying at. Flying to the window, I saw the King's Troop on its way from its barracks to Hyde Park to practice firing a Royal salute for a State Visit by French President Charles de Gaulle. The mounted gunners were clad in khaki, not dress uniform.

Many years later I created my own khaki-uniformed team of the RHA (or RA). Taking an assortment of battered Britains walking horses, a limber, and the familiar set No. 1201 cannon, I put together a three-team set with two soldiers riding on the limber. The only Britains touch I failed to add was the white gloves of the gunners and drivers. Otherwise I thought I had assembled a pretty decent set of horse-drawn artillery.



Mounted U.S. artillerymen by Neil Rhodes include an officer, standard-bearer and bugler. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Japanese artillery team and escort by Neil Rhodes. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Close-up of the Japanese artillery team with standing horses. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)

### RHODES' CREATIONS

The uniqueness of the King's Troop has inspired other metal spinoffs using Britains figures as a basis for conversions and reproductions.

Take for instance Neil Rhodes. A visit to his Toy Soldier Shop of Washington, D.C., will reveal several unusual 54-mm sets of horse-drawn artillery that the proprietor has crafted out of original Britains items and reproduced parts, especially the horses.

A look at a few unique sets that Neil has created shows that beautiful workmanship, as well as an eye for historical significance.

Britains made early 20th-century Japanese, German and U.S. infantrymen. But except for an American team (part of set No. 323), the company produced no artillery for these armies. Neil's creations include pre-WWI U.S. Army artillery with the horses as the walk.

Britains' U.S. horse artillery

had drivers in peaked hats similar to the British khaki-clad set No. 1440. Neil's set, on the other hand, has its cannoneers wearing Montana hats, the official headdress of the period.

The horses are hollow-cast Britains horses obtained from a variety of sources. The limber has a drop-down lid at rear for access to ammunition.

Accompanying the U.S. artillery team is an officer on a trotting horse. A standard-bearer, a bugler, and two gunners ride cantering horses.

### JAPANESE ARTILLERY

Neil's work related to the Russo-Japanese War includes two sets of Japanese artillery with the horses at either the halt or at the gallop. The two Japanese sets have the soldiers in the colorful dark-blue uniforms of the period.

The standing horses are reproductions of figures without riders found in Britains

Neil Rhodes' adaptation of a Japanese officer on rearing horse. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Mounted escort to the Japanese horse artillery team. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



WWI German horse artillery and escort by Neil Rhodes. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)

pre-WWII sets Nos. 316, 317 and 318, the originals of which are extremely rare to find. Both the galloping and standing sets have Japanese gunners riding on the limbers.

The galloping set is accompanied by a Japanese officer on a variation of the Britains Horse Guards rearing horse. A bugler and three gunners ride galloping horses.

## GERMAN GUNNERS

Arguably most unique of all is Neil's WWI German artillery team at the gallop with a howitzer. A gunner rides on the limber. An officer, standard-bearer, bugler and two gunners are mounted.

The soldiers' heads are reproductions in steel helmets done in the style of Britains. The limber was made in France with an opening lid at top.

The howitzer is unusual combination of different parts. Neil took the basic Britains 4.5-inch howitzer (set No. 1725) and replaced its rubber wheels with those of the pre-WWII RHA cannon wheels. Because this replacement caused an imbalance, Neil took the spade from a Britains 155-mm gun and attached it to the howitzer's trail to create a properly balanced weapon.

Neil has also used the Britains 4.5-inch howitzer as the basis for creating a large-caliber gun as part of a pre-WWI German artillery set. A six-



Close-up of the Britains-style WWI German howitzer created by Neil Rhodes using an assortment of parts. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)

horse team draws the gun and its limber. All of the gunners, including the outriders, wear Prussian-style pickelhaube helmets topped by the ball spikes of the artillery branch.

## COLLECTIBLE MYSTIQUE

Guns drawn by horses have a certain mystique about them. Models of them are popular with collectors, some of whom specialize in horse-drawn artillery.

Of course, if one wanted to quickly move guns around a battlefield before the advent of motorized transport, the best way was to have them drawn by swift horses.

That is not to say that guns have not been moved by other animals (including human beings) such as elephants, mules, donkeys, oxen and even camels. But throughout history, if an army really wanted to "run with guns," it was the galloping horse-drawn artillery piece which got into firing position the fastest. ■



Escort to the WWI German horse artillery team. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)

WWI German horse artillery standard-bearer. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Close-up of the WWI German artillery limber and one of the teams of horses. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Pre-WWI German horse artillery escort. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Pre-WWI German large-caliber gun based on the Britains 4.5-inch howitzer. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)



Pre-WWI German horse artillery team and escort by Neil Rhodes. (Photo by Neil Rhodes)