

Information sheet no 111

Gun salutes

General:

1. The firing of gun salutes is a very old custom which appears to have originated in the early days of sail. Ships, when on goodwill visits to foreign ports, discharged all their guns to seaward on arrival thus indicating to the authorities ashore that their guns were empty and their visit peaceful.
2. Gun Salutes always consist of an odd number of rounds; the firing of an even number of rounds in olden days was always reserved for occasions of mourning. A salute is referred to as, for example, 'a salute of 21 guns' or a '21 gun salute' though nowadays only 2 or 3 guns actually fire the 21 charges.
3. The interval between successive guns in a salute is 5 seconds. Before a stop watch was used, the interval was timed by the deliberately spoken repetition of the couplet, "If I wasn't a gunner I wouldn't be here, number one (two, three, etc) gun fire!" How this was done before the turn of the century when the standard interval was 10 seconds is left to conjecture.
4. It used to be the custom to fire salutes with the gun "shotted", i.e. using powder and shot. When the news of the restoration of Charles II reached the fleet, which was then anchored in the Downs, Samuel Pepys recounted: "The General began to fire his guns, which he did, all that he had in the ship, and so did the rest of the commanders, which was very gallant, and to hear the bullets go hissing over our heads as we were in the boat." The Admiralty prohibition against firing salutes above Gravesend, Kent, is said to date from an occasion when a shot fired during a salute went uncomfortably close to Greenwich Palace where Queen Elizabeth I was then residing.
5. It was also the custom when at sea for the saluting ship to turn and head towards the ship being saluted. This originated in the days when ships were armed with broadside guns only and by heading towards the other ship the salute could not be mistaken for an act of aggression.
6. Royal and National salutes are of 21 guns. The number of guns for other salutes varies from 19 to 7 and is laid down in Queen's/King's Regulations for the Royal Navy. A salute to a National flag or to the flag of a foreign Flag Officer is returned gun for gun. A salute by one of HM's Ships to the flag of a British Flag Officer is returned by the number of guns to which the officer initiating the salute is entitled. Although officers of the rank of Captain and Commander are not entitled to a gun salute on these occasions they receive a return salute of 7 guns. No other salutes are returned.

Salutes at Funerals:

7. Minute-guns are fired at the funeral of an officer entitled to a gun salute, between the time that his body leaves the ship or place where it has been lying and the time that it is buried; in the case of Royalty the guns are fired at

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three minute intervals. A salute is also fired after the burial and in each case the number of guns is limited to that to which the officer was entitled when alive.

8. At the funeral of a Captain or Commander in command of a ship at the time of his death, seven minute guns and a salute of seven guns are allowed from the ship the officer commanded.

Times of Firing Salutes:

9. The general rule is that salutes shall be fired only between 0800 and sunset, except on Sundays when they shall be fired only between 0800 and 1030, and 1300 and sunset. Noon on weekdays is the time laid down for firing salutes in honour of Royal Anniversaries. If the occasion falls on a Sunday the salute is fired at noon on the following day.

Court-Martial Gun:

10. On the day on which a court martial is to sit a gun is fired when the colours are hoisted or at the time the signal is made if the court is ordered to sit immediately. Should the court sit for more than one day, a gun is fired each day when colours are hoisted.

Morning and Evening Gun:

Although the firing of morning and evening guns and the associated ceremonies are no longer carried out they are mentioned here for interest.

11. In British ports at home and abroad the senior Flag Officer used to order the morning and evening gun to be fired. In home waters the morning gun was fired at daybreak and the evening gun at 2100. Abroad the times of firing were directed by the Commander-in-Chief of the station.

12. It was laid down that whenever the morning and evening guns were fired, the sentries of all ships present were to fire a volley of musketry (this was to ensure that muskets were in working order), and immediately after the firing of the morning gun all ships were to sound the Reveille. Some 15 minutes before the firing of the evening gun the First Post was sounded and a tattoo was beaten ashore and afloat to indicate curfew time; sentries were also posted for the night. When the evening gun was fired the Last Post was sounded.