



## Information sheet no 028

# Royal Naval Field Gun Runs

The Field Gun Run is a tribute to the Royal Navy's involvement in the relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War in 1900. Naval guns from HMS *Powerful* were hauled to Ladysmith by the ship's naval brigade to defend the town against the Boer attack (see Information Sheet 31 for details of this event). There are two forms of competition.

### **The Inter-Port/Command form.**

This was the original version of the field gun run competition and first took place at the Royal Tournament of 1907. It is estimated that 15,000 men of the Royal Navy have taken part in the competition. The Inter-Port (Command) Challenge Cup was first awarded in 1909. The cup was competed for by Portsmouth, Devonport (Plymouth) and at various times, Chatham (until 1960), Royal Marines (c.1919 until 1947) and Naval Air Command (later Fleet Air Arm from 1947). In 1924, two further cups were awarded for the best (lowest) aggregate time and fastest time.

The gun run is divided into three sections. The first represents the guns being unloaded from HMS *Powerful* at Durban; the second the overnight transport of the guns from Durban to Ladysmith as the Boers surrounded the town; the third is the guns being put into position at Ladysmith to face the Boers.

The first section is called the run out. The guns are raced from the start position down the sides of the arena and manhandled over a five foot wall. Wooden spars weighing 170lb are erected and wires rigged across the 28 foot chasm. The first men are hauled across, carrying 120lb wheels for the gun carriage. The gun carriage and gun barrels follow. The gun barrels each weigh 900lb. The remainder of the gun carriages' wheels and limbers are pulled through a hole in the second wall, called the enemy wall. Each gun crew then engages the enemy with three rounds.

The second section is the run back. All the men and the field gun have to be carried over the enemy wall and back across the chasm. The combined weight of the gun barrel and gun carriage is 1250lb and it goes over the wall in one piece! As soon as the last man of each gun crew - nicknamed the flying angel - is across the chasm, the rig is collapsed and three rounds are fired in a rearguard action.

The third section is called the run home. At the sounding of the G on the bugle the final phase is to take all their equipment through the narrow gaps in the home wall. In a matter of seconds the wheels are on, pins are in, and the gun crews race flat-out to the finishing line.

The average time for the run out is one minute twenty-five seconds; for the run back one minute and for the run home twenty-one seconds. All three stages are carefully timed and these are added later to the crew's actual running time to give the official time for each crew. Each crew competes seven times against each of the other crews. Only two crews run during each performance. A four minute run was first recorded in 1948. In 1962, the crew of Fleet Air Arm broke the three minute barrier. The last actual Command competition took place in 1999 when the annual Royal Tournament ended.



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### Brickwoods Trophy

The Portsmouth brewers, Brickwoods, sponsored a trophy just after the institution of the Inter-Port competition in 1907. This version simulates the drill to bring the naval field gun into action at Ladysmith but involves no obstacles and is run on a flat track. The format of the competition is:

#### 1st Advance, 1st Wheel Change

The limber is lifted, its wheels and drag ropes are shipped and it is run forward. The gun wheels are exchanged with the limber wheels. The gun is brought to the back of the limber and connected then both are run forward.

#### 2nd Advance, 1st Action

The gun is unhooked and the limber is run to the 70-yard line, where it is turned or spun to face the start; its wheels are removed and it is dropped to the ground. The gun is run to the end of the track, turned and stopped. The gun is fired three times, each shell being run to the gun from the limber by the fastest man in the crew.

#### 1st Retire, 2nd Wheel Change

The limber wheels are shipped and it is run back and hooked to the gun. Both are then run towards the start, stopped and lifted together to exchange wheels. This is the heaviest lift of all stages and can get difficult if the gear is dropped.

#### 2nd Retire, 2nd Action

Gun and limber are run towards the start line, separated and stopped. The gun is fired three times as quickly as possible.

#### 3rd Retire and Finish

The limber is run back and hooked to the gun, then every member of the crew strains to accelerate the gear over the finish line. It is advisable to avoid falling in front of the gear at this stage because it is very heavy and cannot be stopped.

Originally the competition was limited to naval units in Portsmouth Command but in 1975 it was opened up to units around the UK. The trophy left the Portsmouth Command for the first time in 1978 when it was won by HMS Fisgard and in 1997 the trophy went to Scotland for the first time when it was won by HMS Gannet.

The competition is still run at HMS Collingwood. A Junior Leaders introductory version has also been instituted for younger members of the three services, cadets and other civilian youth groups to instil teamwork, leadership and discipline as well as experiencing a great Royal Naval tradition. The junior competitor's ages are between 16 and 25.

# Field Gun run course (Command format)

