

# Cannon Accidents Reported or Recapped from 1996-2003

Vol. 18, No. 1 Winter 1996 Pg.2

We reported in the last issue about two fatal “cannon” accidents. Readers Chip Rogers and Brig. Gen. Charles Corfman of the National Military Department, Sons of Veterans Reserve, sent reports that two men were sentenced to two years of community supervision, the equivalent of two years’ probation, in the Medina, Ohio, case.

The men were coworkers of Richard M. Houdek who owned the homemade device in which the three were trying to shoot hot dog buns.

It blew apart and Houdek was hit in the head by a metal cap welded to the end of one of the barrels. The men pleaded no contest to possession of a dangerous weapon on school property – they were roofers working on the roof of a career center and fired the device in the parking lot.

The newspaper headline and story referred to “cannon.” Corfman says the police lieutenant said told him that was wrong – the device should have been called a “Fourth of July noisemaker.”

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As longtime readers know, we have several times published National Safety Rules for artillery firing and we offer free additional copies. Some of you have ordered copies to give out or have sent names of people you think should become familiar with safe shooting rules.

Our offer still stands. If you see unsafe practices, try to correct them and we’d be happy to send the rules to the parties involved.

What brings this to mind is a recent Associated Press story headlined “ Teen Injured in Cannon Blast Gets Robotic Arm.”

According to the newspaper account Billy Gibbs, 17, was ramming and sponging a 12 pdr. Napoleon during the March reenactment of Cuba Station in Demopolis, Ala.

Gibbs had rammed a pound of black powder down the barrel. “ I was in charge of getting the sparks out,” he told the reporter. “I rammed the charge down, felt a loud flash and the ramrod took most of my hand off. I laid on the ground and [at first] I couldn’t feel my hand. The I could feel pain like you’re not supposed to feel.”

According to the orthopedic hand surgeon, the hand lost a thumb, the tops of the other fingers were badly damaged and the two major nerves of the hand were “totally blasted apart.” The doctor said, “It was worst than anything I’ve seen, even in the Gulf War.” The hand was amputated and Gibbs has been fitted with a myoelectric artificial hand.

Vol. 19, No. 1 Winter 1997 Pg. 2-4, 7 – recapitulation

1540 Premature Ignition. Francisco Vazquez de Coronado’s expedition pushes from Mexico as far east as Kansas. En route a No. 1 man loses his arm as a result of a premature ignition of a cannon.

1811 Premature Ignition. Portugal. No.1 man blown from the muzzle and into the harbor along with rammer. No. 3 stopping vent gets severely burned hand.

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1840 Premature Ignition. U.S. sailor killed while priming the vent directly from a priming horn.

1841 Premature Ignition. U.S. War Department directs Ordnance Board to find a way to stop premature ignitions which are killing so many men during artillery drills. “The accidental explosions of cannon by which many lives and limbs are lost annually, are generally caused by fragments of the burning cartridge from a previous discharge remaining in the gun and which are not extinguished before the next charge is inserted.”

Capt. Benjamin Huger (later General), Secretary of the Ordnance Board, recommends: “Care should be taken not to use a very wet sponge. If it is slightly dampened it may do no harm, but it is far safer to use the sponge dry that when it contains water, for if the water is squeezed out it remains in the bottom of the bore. The free use of water in sponging is the frequent cause of accidental explosion. Non but careful, sober men and well instructed, should be allowed to sponge a gun or serve a vent.”

1843 Premature Ignition. One man killed and loses eyesight when cannon fires while reloading.

1844 Premature Ignition. New York. Hemstead Light Guards practicing rapid fire, fires 7 rounds in 1 minute killing No. 1 man.

1859 Premature Ignition. Barnstable County, Mass. Premature ignition takes off both arms and one eye of the No. 1 man.

1862 Premature Ignition. Perryville, KY. Samuel Decker 4th U.S. Artillery, loses both arms while serving gun during battle.

1863 Premature Ignition. Man loading gun severely burned when it suddenly discharges in Cape Cod, Mass., while celebrating July 4th.

1865 Premature Ignition. Two veteran soldiers killed, one loses both arms and one badly burned on firing a town-owned cannon to celebrate the end of the Civil War, Harwichport, Mass.

1865 Premature Ignition. Former infantryman loses both arms and one eye while firing town cannon to celebrate end of the Civil War in Sudbury, Mass. Another man is killed (Probably hit by rammer)

1865 Premature Ignition. July 4, Concord, Mass., the No. 1 man loses his arm to premature ignition while firing holiday salutes.

1871 Premature Ignition. The No. 1 man loses his hand during town celebration ceremonial firing in Massachusetts.

1872 Premature Ignition. Davenport, Iowa. Two men injured in different premature ignitions of two different guns at July 4 celebration. One has his arm amputated while ramming powder charge and the other is severely burned and blinded in one eye from a separate premature ignition.

1872 Premature Ignition. July 7, Galena, Ill. No. 1 man suffers broken arm and is burned from “chin to thigh” by cannon going off while loading.

1872 Premature Ignition. Cleveland, Ohio. No. 1 man receives severe burns when guns fires unexpectedly while loading.

1881 Premature Ignition. Acton, Mass. An untrained crew of Civil War veterans firing salutes from a borrowed cannon on July 4th has a premature ignition and one man loses his hand.

1882 Cannon Explodes. Lancaster, Pa. Two men are killed when the town cannon blows up after being double charged for local celebration.

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1913 Cannon Explodes. New Mexico. Several people badly injured when cannon explodes during celebration and shrapnel flies everywhere.

1961-1965 Premature Ignition. Two premature ignitions on National Park Service property, one at Gettysburg, during the Civil War Centennial celebrations results in permanent ban on live firing at NPS sites without strict supervision and regulations imposed by Park Service.

1967 Premature Ignition. Connecticut. Boy Scout loses arm while serving as No. 1 man on gun crew during an event held at a stadium. Crew had previously participated in many competitive shooting events.

1970s Explosion of Powder kills one and injures another in Michigan as vent debris from a mortar firing is suspected as touching off their limber chest while lid was open.

1970s Premature Ignition. Football game at New Orleans, La. No. 1 man loses both hands due to premature ignition.

1974 Premature Ignition. James Dassatti loses arm while serving as No. 1 man for two original bronze 6 pdrs. at Norwich University graduation ceremonies in Vermont.

1977 Premature Ignition. Concord, Mass. Man loses one hand and most of another during Memorial Day ceremonies following official parade.

1977 Premature Ignition. Reenactment in New Jersey. Man loses hand and rammer flies over heads of opposing troops during Revolutionary War reenactment.

1981 Premature Ignition. San Diego, Calif. Reenactment of Battle of San Diego bay, man loses right hand to rapid fire.

1981 Powder Supply Explosion. Pittsburgh, Pa. 19 injured, one broken ankle, 11 transported to hospital when limber chest of Revolutionary War era gun blows up while crew is firing pyrotechnic projectiles directly up in the air as part of waterfront celebration.

1982 Premature Ignition. Cannon used to fire at football games and ceremonies at a military school is overloaded and fired remotely. Explosion wrecks a car and sends fragments through a dormitory window in February.

1983 Premature Ignition. Provo, Utah. July 4th, man loses both hands and one forearm plus the sight of one eye. Two others injured. Rapid fire; mixed charge container types involved.

1983 Premature Ignition. Gun goes off unexpectedly as spectator trips over lanyard during waterfront celebration. Crewmember requires 4 hours of surgery.

1984 Premature Ignition. July 4th cannon owner is in critical condition following explosion of 1820s era cannon during official parade ceremonies, Long Island, N.Y.

1985 Premature Ignition. Lily, S.D. Man killed when reloading after firing original Napoleon from parade float.

1985 Premature Ignition. Man loses one hand and one eye in Toronto, Canada, during display of rapid fire at a national park.

1985 Cannon Explosion. Hampton, Va. Overloaded cannon explodes wrecking a car, taking down a food concession tent and breaking shoulder of a bystander as well as injuring several members of the crew.

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1986 Cannon Explosion. July 4th, Milford, N.H., cannon is loaded with smokeless powder. Explosion sends shrapnel into stomach of woman bystander and cannon owner suffers severe damage to his legs.

1987 Premature Ignition. Reenactment in Tennessee. Man wearing heavy gloves and using tapered rammer is not seriously injured when a 12 pdr. mountain howitzer has a premature ignition.

1987 Powder Supply Explosion. Norfolk, Va., three seriously injured during a mock sea battle as Chinese pirate junk's ammunition supply for black powder cannon blows up when gun fires.

1987 Powder Supply Explosion. Cannon and limber chest explode in Spain killing five people and injuring several more.

1989 Cannon Explosion. Sharon, Vt. Homemade cannon blows up, one man is killed and two others are injured.

1989 Cannon Explosion. San Antonio, Texas, five people injured, two seriously (three broken legs, tow broken arms) and two more fractured bones when cannon explodes.

1989 Cannon Explosion. Havana, Cuba, old Spanish gun explodes during firing celebration. One killed and 24 people injured.

1990 Premature Ignition. Man severely injured and blown off back of flatbed truck when cannon he was firing has a premature ignition in Plymouth, Mass. Three others injured when hit by parts of the rammer that shattered.

1990 Premature Ignition. Meriden, Conn. Larry Cook, maker of cannons and mortars, is injured severely when mortar goes off as he has his head over the barrel. Firing was signal to start an air show.

1990 Premature Ignition. Boy, 13, loses finger and has extensive surgery to hand as a result of premature ignition of cannon in San Diego, Calif.

1990 Cannon Explosion. Man killed in Sparta, N.J., when cannon explodes after being overloaded during firing at a lakeside party.

1992 Cannon Explosion. One man is killed in California as an unlined cannon explodes during firing.

1992 Cannon Explosion. Man has his toes blown off and his boot is found 40 feet away when cannon explodes.

1992 Premature Ignition. Man loses eye and suffers burns in England when cannon goes off as he hits ramming charge.

1993 Premature Ignition. Man loses hand in Temple, Texas, mortar accident.

1993 Cannon Explosion. Two men injured when cannon explodes in England due to overloading.

1993 Cannon Explosion. Man is killed in New Hampshire when a homemade cannon explodes.

1993 Premature Ignition. Man loses hand in Michigan as he was ramming a cannon using a hammer and a stick.

1994 Fire Ignited. Cannon wadding ignites a field during a public demonstration and 20 people are treated at hospitals for burns and smoke inhalation in England.

1995 Cannon Explosion. One man is killed in Michigan when cannon explodes and he is hit by pieces.

# **Cannon Accidents Reported or Recapped from 1996-2003**

1995 Premature Ignition. Man loses an eye to a premature discharge of cannon while he is serving as No. 1 man.

1995 Cannon Accident. Man loses an eye while firing potatoes out of a cannon and he gets his head over the bore in Florida.

1996 Premature Ignition. Two men are injured in a premature discharge of a homemade cannon.

1997 Premature Ignition. Boy loses most of hand and one eye during Cincinnati, Ohio, reenactment. Rapid fire.

1997 Premature Ignition. Two men injured in Gettysburg while giving demonstration of a mountain howitzer. One has severely damaged right arm and the other gets his thumb burned.

Vol.19, No. 4 Fall 1998 Pg. 2

A Hillsboro, Ore., man was killed in May when his homemade grenade blew up. He had filled a pineapple grenade shell with black powder. The 34-year-old victim had demolition training in the National Guard and a commercial explosives license, but had not worked with black powder.

Police said noting happened when the victim first pulled the pin, so he took the grenade apart, fiddled with it and put it back together. It blew up in his hand, sending shrapnel into his head and body.

Vol.20, No. 1 Winter 1998 Pg.10

Booneville, Miss. Two boys were injured when black powder in an ammunition box exploded on Oct. 17. John, 14 received second- and third-degree burns to his hands, arms, and to the lower portion of his face. Jared, 13, also received second- and third-degree to his arms and chest area while standing about three to five feet away from the box.

Vol. 20, No. 2 Spring 1999 Pg. 3

A black powder accident in Nashville, Ga. Jeff Futch received injuries to his face resulting in being swollen and scarred and singed his hair. He may still need a procedure to remove embedded powder grains. Jeff believes the explosion was caused by static electricity.

Vol. 20, No. 4 Fall 1999 Pg. 2

According to another news account a 47-year-old man in Washington was tamping gunpowder into a metal tube when a spark set it off, shooting the rammer at him. He was firing a 3-inch diameter pipe about a foot-and-a-half long welded to a flat plate with a hole in the bottom of the vent. His household also had a homemade shoulder-mounted pipe resembling a bazooka, two pipe bombs, film canisters filled with explosives, and fuses, all for recreation use according to police.

# Cannon Accidents Reported or Recapped from 1996-2003

Vol. 21, No. 2 Spring 2000 Pg. 3

A modern artillery accident made headlines in January. Soldiers were firing 155mm howitzer rounds at night on a range at Ford Hood, Texas. One tube in the battery was pointed exactly 180 degrees opposite the others and no one noticed. Eleven high-explosive shells and an illumination round went off base. Four houses were within a few hundred yards of the shells.

Vol. 22, No. 4 Fall 2001 Pg. 2

A football player's dad in Trenton, Mo., was killed at a game on Sept. 7. The cannon was always reloaded after each firing. On this night the game was called due to bad weather. As the cannon is being loaded up, some men noticed it had not been fired yet. They pulled the lanyard while Bud Meek, 41, was standing at the muzzle.

A 9-year-old from Delaware was killed at a July 3rd party in Altoona, Pa., when a "makeshift cannon" flew 120 feet. Kyle Dolan was killed instantly when the pipe hit him in the face.

Another deadly July 4 accident occurred near Gettysburg, Pa., in Butler Township when a steel pipe with a welded cap exploded on the third shot. The "cannon" had been fired for several years and for two earlier shots, but, in an attempt to get more bang, it was packed with smokeless powder for the third shot.

Shrapnel hit a 22-year-old in the chest and killed him instantly. A 7-year-old was hit in the thighs and hospitalized for two days

An August accident in Plymouth, Mass., when brothers 16 and 24 were sparking black powder with a lighter. The older brother lost his hand and the younger one had facial burns and temporary deafness.

Vol. 23, No. 4 Fall 2002, Pg. 2

Police in New Haven, Ill., were investigating a fatal cannon accident that happened when a recently purchased "Civil War type" cannon, that was fired earlier in the day on July 13, was fired around 12:30 a.m. the next day. The first shot was a "dud," and the gun was reloaded with smokeless powder and wadding. The gun exploded on the second shot, with shrapnel killing one man and wounding eight other people.

A 1998 trial in New South Wales, Australia, on charges filed after a theme park cannon explosion in 1996 was reported. Old Sydney Town had two 4 pdrs. which costumed employees fired with wadding. During loading one of the guns fired prematurely. The man stopping the vent had finger burns and temporary deafness while the two in front suffered temporary deafness, burns and lacerations. The park owner was prosecuted for occupational and health safety act violations. The park pleaded guilty to one charge, was fined \$35,000 and reduced cannon firing to once a day.

Among safety violations: failure to worm properly, failure to adequately wet and dry sponge, failure to ensure that at least 3 minutes elapsed between firing and loading a new charge, failure to ensure that the person ramming held the rammer underhand with one hand and thumb to the side, failure to ensure that person stopping the vent was wearing leather thumbstall or pliable leather glove and failure to ensure that no one was in from of the muzzle line during ramming.

# Cannon Accidents Reported or Recapped from 1996-2003

Vol. 24, No. 2 Spring 2003, Pg. 2

A reader sent a clipping of a July 4, early 1900s, accident in Beaumont, Texas, involving the Revolutionary War Jasper Rifles and their Civil War period cannon. The gun fired prematurely, blowing off the arm of a nearby newspaper reporter. Years later a witness told a newspaper that the commander, former Confederate Capt. E.I. Kelly, wept and repeatedly said, "I didn't even touch a match to it."

The Jasper rifles went home without the cannon which remains on the Orange County courthouse square. It is a M1857 12.-pdr. Napoleon cast by Revere Copper Co. in 1863.

Vol. 24, No. 3 Summer 2003, Pg. 19

Excerpt of March 2, 1841, Ordnance Board instructions for firing cannon is reprinted. It begins: "The accidental explosions of cannon, by which many lives and limbs are lost annually, are generally caused by fragments of the burning cartridge from a previous discharge remaining in the gun, and which are not extinguished before the next charge is inserted."

The Secretary of War directed that the instructions be prepared. They conclude: "None but careful, sober men, and well instructed should be allowed to sponge a gun or serve the vent."

Vol. 24, No. 4 Fall 2003, Pg. 7

A 16-year-old Boy Scout was killed when a cannon he was firing as part of the daily evening flag ceremony blew apart and he was hit with shrapnel. The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration was investigating the incident at Camp Meriwether near Tillamook.

At the time of publication it was not known what kind of cannon was involved. It was described as having a bore of 1.25 to 1.5 inches and had misfired. Wadding, possibly a potato, was reported to have been used.