

# NITIDA

## CANNON STATION

## Does one fire or shoot a muzzle loader cannon

### **Erick Kellerman stated:**

It took me quite some time in using the correct terminology when firing a cannon. “Ek het tot bietjie dag terug nog kanon geskiet“. I must admit, using the correct terminology not only sound better on the ear, but also much more user friendly when it gets to the SAPS and anti-muzzle loader cannon public.

### **Explanation by Willem Steenkamp, curator Chavonnes Battery:**

Gunnery, as we all know, is a science rather than an art. This being the case, it behoves us to use terms relating to gunnery which have a precise meaning as well as the correct tradition.

Thus, one might examine the correct terminology for initiating the explosion which drives the projectile from the barrel. It is common usage to say you are “shooting a cannon” or “shooting with a cannon”. Which, I am afraid, is as wrong as its Afrikaans equivalent “ek skiet ‘n kanon af” or “ek skiet met ‘n kanon”.

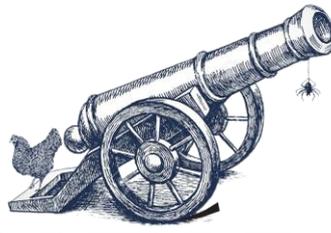
Think about what is implied by the above. Essentially you are saying that you are shooting *at* some other cannon, which implies that you intend to cause harm to it by hurling a round shot or other projectile at it. This would be correct if that was your purpose – for example, to disable an enemy weapon by damaging the muzzle or vent, or demolishing the carriage, just as you might shoot a springbok by launching a rifle-bullet at it.

But the act of discharging your gun is another matter. When you are doing that, you are *firing* the gun (in Afrikaans, “ek het die kanon afgevuur”). In other words, you have touched the lintstock to the priming charge, thereby completing a train of events which was set in motion when the barrel was sponged out and had a bag of powder rammed down it.

In doing all that – sponging, charging, loading, priming etc – you have prepared the gun for its prime purpose, which is launching a projectile (or projectiles, in the case of grape or canister) at an animate or inanimate target.

In other words, *firing* it. “Fire”, in practical terms, means *launching* something – which is why it is common to hear expressions like “he fired a torrent of curses at me.” The fact that nowadays it is most likely to be a blank charge that one fires does not invalidate either the process or the need for the correct terminology.

The correct terminology, embedded in centuries of tradition, therefore, is to say, “I fire the gun” or “die kanon word/is afgevuur”. One might say that this is merely a quibble; but one should try to be as correct and professional in one’s terminology as possible, if only to honour the memory of the gunners of the past. It should never be forgotten that language is a precision instrument which is inherited from one’s forebears and, like any other inherited valuable, should be cherished and not misused.



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One could take that further. How many people today know the correct Afrikaans artillery terms? For example, a gun-carriage is an “affuit”, an ammunition limber is a “kanonwa”, and an explosive shell a “kartets”, “lintstock” is actually a corruption of the Dutch “lontstok”, and “geskut” is the equivalent of the English “ordnance” when used in referring to heavy weaponry.

How many people still know the difference between horse artillery (the gunners ride on the gun-horses) and field artillery (the gunners ride on the carriage or limber, or both)?

Or that the professional name for that famous round iron projectile is a “roundshot” (both singular and plural), rather than “cannonball”, which is the sort of term junior schoolboys use when describing the projectiles fired in “Pirates of the Caribbean”

Similarly, the immemorial custom seems to be that one calls a cannon a “gun”. One does not, after all, refer to “a 74-cannon ship”. And so on. We South Africans tend to get a little confused here, because in Afrikaans a cannon is a “kanon” – “gun” translates as “geweer”, referring to some sort of shoulder firearm, whether smoothbore or rifled.

“Shoot a cannon” is, I expect derived from a nasty Americanism, which has led to abortions like “I’m shooting a gun” when meaning “I’m firing a rifle”. In correct English usage, the only shoulder weapon which should really be called a “gun” is a shotgun, which is, of course, a smoothbore.

So, let’s fire those cannon instead of shooting some cannon.

**Written by Willem Steenkamp Researcher**

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