

Exercise Bustard Challenge

The National Artillery Association Annual Awards and Dinner

Following the success of the National Rifle Association formed in 1860, it was decided in 1863 to form an association on similar lines for the artillery volunteers to encourage enrolment into the Corps of Artillery and promote efficient gunnery and associated skills.

The School of Artillery at Shoeburyness was selected as the competition range and the first meeting of the NAA took place in August 1865. Some 25 gun detachments employing 250 volunteer gunners competed for various prizes, which included those donated by HM The Queen, the National Artillery Association, the Prince of Wales and the Commander in Chief of the Army. The Queen's Prize was awarded originally to the detachment achieving the highest aggregate score over several of the individual competitions. From 1895 separate competitions were held for garrison and heavy artillery, a prize and badge being awarded for each category. Over the years the guns and the nature of the competitions changed. From the individual character of the single gun firing in the early years, the competition evolved to include the collective effort of a battery of guns manoeuvring and firing under the orders of the battery commander.

The requirement for a field force composed entirely of part-time soldiers, organised in peacetime as they would be for war and serving alongside the regular army, led to the formation of the Territorial Force in 1908. The competitions were now divided into three groups, those for horse and field artillery, for medium artillery and for coast defence artillery. Competitions were suspended during World War I. The competitions were revived again in 1921 under the auspices of the Territorial Army and were held annually until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The anti-aircraft competitions resumed in 1954, but were not immediately under the control of the NAA. After World War II field artillery competitions were not swiftly revived. Due to the effort of some determined Territorial Gunners they recommenced in 1962, and have been held annually ever since for the modern volunteer gunner to enjoy and to benefit from, as did his earlier counterparts. The University Officer Training Corps competition was started in 1967.

1967 was a year of fundamental change for the Territorial Army, which was disbanded and replaced by the Territorial and Army Volunteer Reserve. Of the 44 regiments and three independent batteries of the TA Gunners only six regiments (including the HAC) and four independent batteries were to remain.

During 1986/87 the Territorial Army was expanded to meet the perceived increase in tasking in support of 1st (British) Corps in Germany. However, due to the lessening of tension in Europe after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, reductions were introduced in 1992 and 1999 across the whole of the Territorial Army and the TA Gunners were no exception. The NAA competitions, however, continued. The TA seems to be able to expand, reduce and re-organise as part of a continuing process and yet it never falters.

Following the move of the regimental home from Woolwich this summer, the Royal Artillery Territorial Army (RA TA) and the National Artillery Association (NAA) will ring the changes in early 2008 as the annual celebration of the skills and science of artillery moves to Larkhill on Saturday, 9 February. Along with the change of venue, the format for the weekend has also been redrawn. In keeping with the change from the NAA competition that so many former members of the TA will remember, the weekend at Larkhill will be known as Exercise Bustard Challenge and will reflect the special-to-arm assessments that the six RA TA regiments have been put through by the Gunnery Training Team during 2007. Under the guidance of the Director Royal Artillery, these assessments have validated proficiency in the science and art of modern gunnery disciplines achieved by today's RA TA units.

Exercise Bustard Challenge will involve the TA regiments conducting training during the morning and early afternoon of Saturday. Special-to-arm activities are likely to include the close support regiments firing on bombard OP, as well as static displays and demonstrations of air defence and general support equipment. The training activities will culminate with a reduced range practice rocket firing by MLRS. Officers and SNCOs will then be given a series of presentations on matters affecting the TA and the Royal Artillery by invited speakers from Regional Forces, the Artillery Centre and the RA chain of command. Soldiers and UOTC officer cadets will conduct activities around Larkhill during the afternoon under the direction of the Royal Artillery Sergeant Major, before joining the officers and SNCOs for the presentation of the NAA Awards by the Master Gunner St James's Park in the Newcome Hall.

Exercise Bustard Challenge will culminate with the annual NAA dinner in the RA Mess, and dinner for the senior non-commissioned officers in the Central Warrant Officers' and Sergeants' Mess at Larkhill. Transport will be provided for junior ranks to visit Salisbury for the evening. The regimental dinners hosted by the NAA and Royal Artillery Sergeant Major will provide the opportunity to formally 'dine in' newly commissioned TA officers and sergeants into the Royal Artillery. These events are open to all serving members of the RA TA (including the HAC, RA Specialist Pool and UOTC Gun Troops) and NAA members. As 2008 is the centenary of the Territorial Army's formation, this will be a fitting occasion for the NAA to host its annual dinners at the regimental home.

Exercise Bustard Challenge will be an unrivalled opportunity for soldiers and officers from across the TA Gunners to visit Larkhill and to see the skills and training of their colleagues in other regiments. Moreover, these are the skills that the RA TA is now delivering to the Field Army in order to support the Royal Artillery's many roles on current operations. Further details are available from SO2 TA Policy HQ DRA (ArtyCen-DRAHQ-SO2TAPol@mod.uk) or the NAA Secretary, Maj (Retd) AJ Dines, Pegasus, Goodworth Clatford, Nr Andover, Hampshire, SP11 7QY.

