

On English Railway Artillery during the Second World War

Introduction

As a supplement to my article On English Railway Artillery in the First World War, the story can be rounded off with a mention of the English use of railway artillery in the Second World War.

The railway artillery is not one of the weapons systems that one immediately associates with the efforts of the British Army from 1939 to 1945, but it nevertheless had a particularly moral significance in the first years that followed the retreat from Dunkirk in the summer of 1940.

12" rail howitzers, Mk 3 and Mk 5



? 12" rail howitzer Mk 3, circa 1940. From Source 3.

The pamphlets had been stored since demobilization after the First World War and were retrieved from the caches in 1939.

Source 1 mentions that "a number" of 12" rail howitzers were sent with the Expeditionary Force to France in 1939.

Source 6 lists the subdivision as 1st Super Heavy Battery, Royal Artillery.

The pamphlets were left behind in France, perhaps without ever really firing a shot, and then passed to the German army, where they were designated *Haubitze Eisenbahn 633 (e)* and *634 (e)*.

It is currently unclear whether - and if so, for what - the pamphlets were used. Perhaps those particularly interested would like to follow this German trail up...

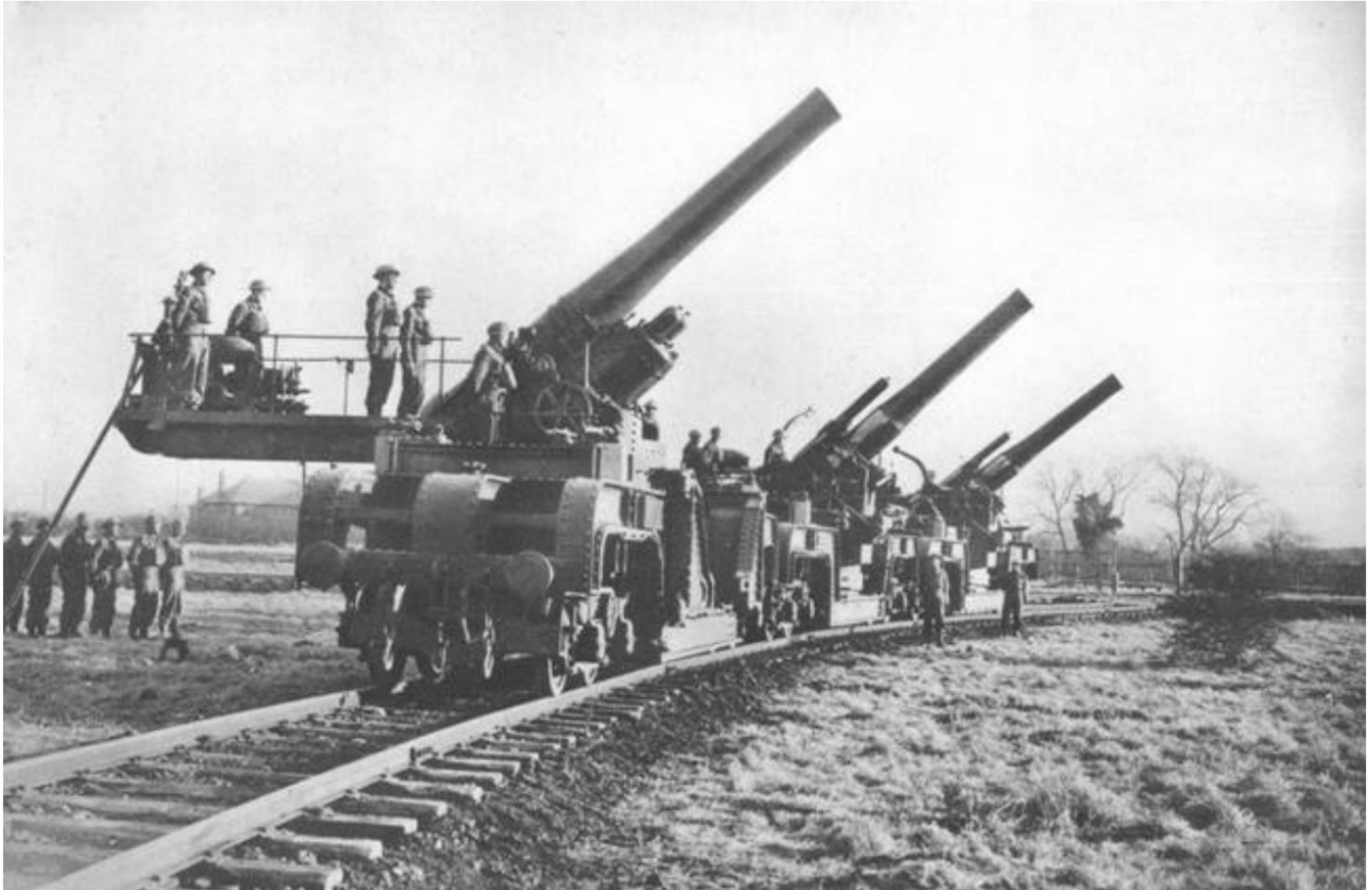
The 12" railway howitzers still remaining in England were deployed as long-range artillery in

invasion defense.

9.2" rail gun

This pamphlet was also a holdover from the First World War. The earliest models were scrapped in the 1920s; the best and latest of the remaining - very similar to the 12" rail howitzer - were laid up in depots. In 1940, when the shortage of long-range artillery was acute, they were found again.

A number of batteries were formed to form part of the invasion defense around Kent, between Dover and Canterbury.



12" rail howitzers Mk 3 and Mk 5 (front), circa 1940.

From Source 4.

13.5" rail gun

The idea for this pamphlet arose in June 1940 and the author was Lieutenant Colonel SM Cleeve, Royal Artillery, who during the First World War had been in command of the 471st Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery during the famous firing of 8 August 1918 - The King's Shot - which is described in my article *The King's Shot* by Jeff Dorman.

The lieutenant colonel was one of the few remaining officers with practical experience in railway artillery, and he was also aware that there were still a number of railway platforms intended for the First World War's 14" railway guns, as well as a corresponding 18" pamphlet, which, however, was only ready after the end of the war completion. He further found a number of 13.5" guns that came from older warships (of the HMS Iron Duke class among others). A total of 3 pamphlets were now built, the first of which was ready on 20 September 1940; the last two were completed by the end of May 1941. Judging by available imagery, the finished result was virtually identical to the 14" railgun of the First World War.

The three rail guns were named His Majesty's Gun "Scene Shifter", "Gladiator" and "Piecemaker" in the style of their predecessors during the First World War. However, the gun crews did not come from the Army, but from the Royal Marines, who had a surplus of personnel and experience from operating similar guns in coastal defence.

The cannons were sent to the area around Dover, from where they solved tasks in both the invasion defense and - probably as important in a moral context - shelling German positions around Calais. However, the Germans also shot the other way and on 10 December 1940 a German shell thus fell quite close to the cannon "Piecemaker". The shot damaged a pair of wheels and fatally wounded a Marine.

18" rail howitzer



18" railway howitzer in position near Dover. From Source 2.

The fourth and final type in use during World War II was the 18" rail howitzer.

The pamphlet was a product of the First World War, but was only ready for use when the war was over. In 1926 the 14" rail guns were scrapped and an 18" gun barrel was fitted to the rail stock from His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster". The pamphlet shot twice during the interwar period.

In 1940 *the Boche Buster*, the pamphleteer of the 11th Super Heavy Battery, was sent to the Dover area where it became the subject of much attention.

The pamphlet was often photographed "in action", but in reality could barely cover the coastline, and did not have the range to reach across the English Channel at all, which is the impression press reports often left.

Plans to create Super Heavy Artillery Group

At the end of 1943, there were plans to create the Super Heavy Artillery Group to support the 21st Army Group in North-West Europe.

The artillery group was to consist of two Super Heavy Artillery Regiments (= artillery divisions). One section was to consist of four batteries of 2 each. 9.2" rail gun; the other was to consist of a battery with 1 18" rail howitzer and three motorized batteries - one with 8" guns and two with 240mm howitzers, both American pamphlets. Under the impression of Allied air superiority, however, time had run out from railway artillery and the plans therefore came to nothing.

See also British Artillery in World War 2 - Artillery Organisations.

War Games Organization

Should you be inspired to set up a railway battery from 1939-40 - e.g. as a wargaming unit - then Mike D. Taylor's *The Gamers Guide to the BEF in 1940, Part I* (Source 6) provides the following example set-up:

The battery

- 1 battery
- commander
- 1 staff car 1 gun crew

The train stock

- 1 steam locomotive
- 1 railway howitzer/rail gun 1 freight
- car (with crane and ground anchor) 1
- freight car (ammunition) 1
- freight car (luggage)
- 1 passenger car (transports the gun crew) 1 brake
- car

The organization is calculated on the Command Decision rules.

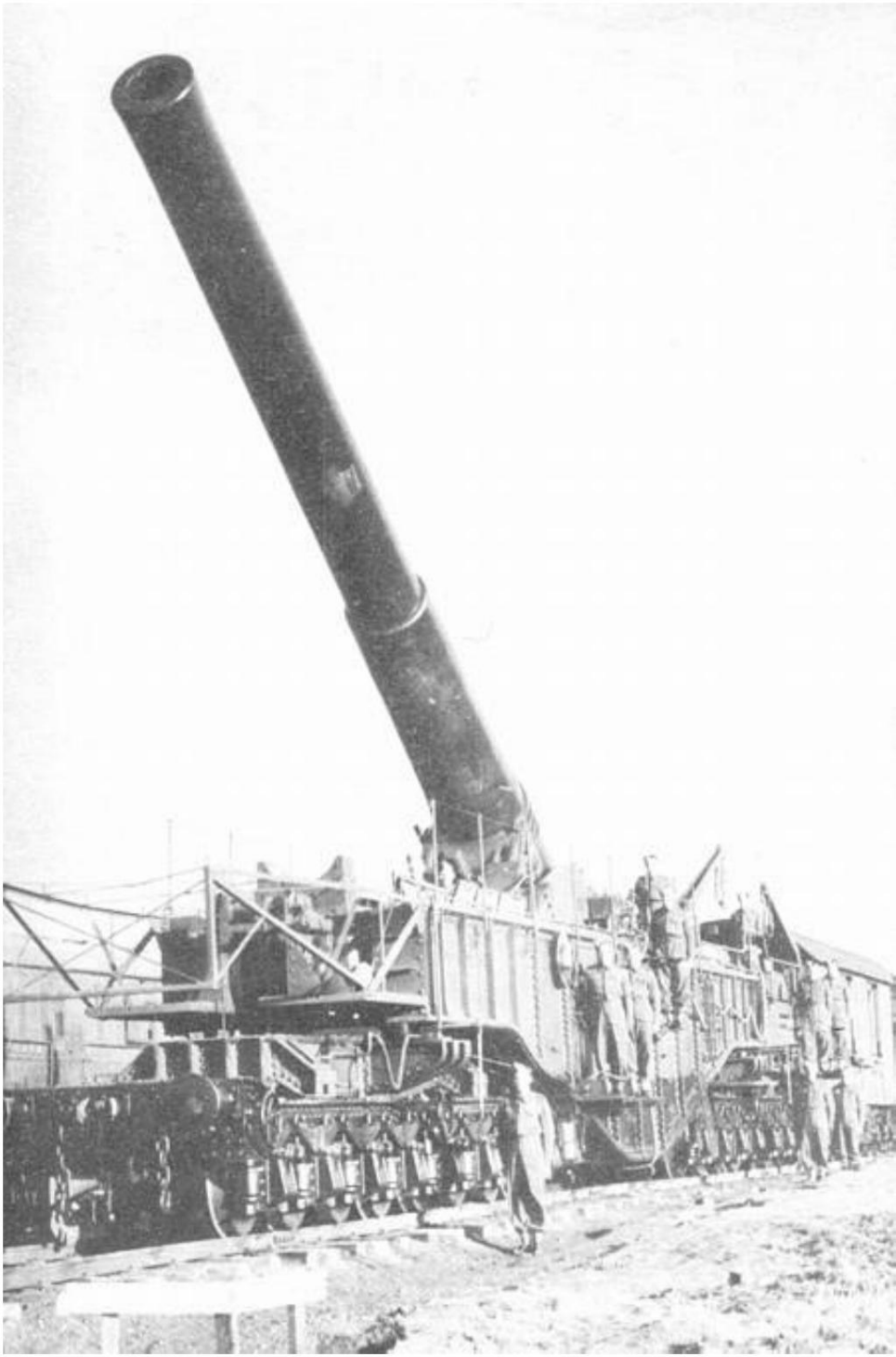
Mike D. Taylor unfortunately does not cite his sources and states that the 1st Super Heavy Battery, Royal Artillery was to be equipped with 2 pcs. 9.2" rail guns.

This information is contradicted by the very artillery-savvy author of Source 1, Ian V. Hogg, who states that only 12" rail howitzers were sent to France. Howitzers or cannon left unsaid, there is no doubt that it will be a exciting setup with such a railway battery.

Sources

1. *British & American Artillery of World War 2* by Ian V. Hogg, Arms and Armor Press, London 1978, ISBN 0-85368-242-9.
2. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - The Years of Defeat 1939-41* by Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1996, ISBN 1-85753-080-2.
3. *Gunners at War* by Peter Mead, Ian Allen Ltd., Shepperton, Surrey 1982, ISBN 0-7110-1157-5.
4. *The British Army at War* by Brigadier-General EDH Tollemache, John Murrey and the Pilot Press, London 1941.
5. *Engines of War - The Mechanized Army in Action*, Adam & Charles Black, London 1941.
6. *The Gamers Guide to the BEF in 1940, Part I* by Mike D. Taylor, Command Post Quarterly, No. 15.
7. *The Guns: 1939-45* by Ian V. Hogg, Ballentine Books, New York 1970, ISBN 0-345-24991-7-250.

Per Finsted



18" railway howitzer photographed at Dover, December 1940.
From Source 7.