

# The King's Shot by Jeff Dorman

## Introduction

The following article by Jeff Dorman was published in the defunct English journal *Battle*, December 1975. The article can be usefully read in conjunction with my article *On English Railway Artillery in the First World War*.



## Introduction

In the early afternoon of the 8 August 1918 the sunny calm around the village of Maroeil was shattered by a thunderous roar as His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster" belched out from its 54ft long barrel three-quarters of a ton of steel and high explosive towards the German lines. At Douai some 19 miles away the shell descended with a slow whine and fell on the railway station, smashing a German troop train to matchwood and inflicting over 400 casualties. This was a remarkable piece of shooting for two reasons; it was the first shot to be fired at Douai by this gun from a newly laid line and this round was fired under the personal direction of His Majesty King George V. In his honour the round became known as the "King's Shot".

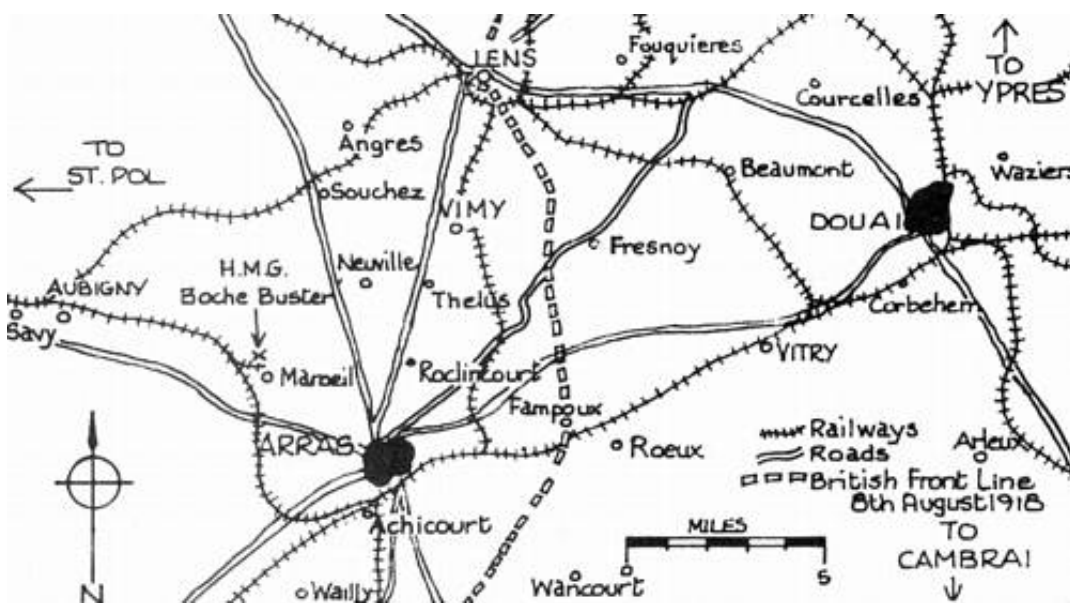


## 14-inch Railway Gun Described

The 14-inch Rail Gun, like its predecessors namely the 9.2-inch and 12-inch types, owed its parentage to the Navy, who supplied the barrels for these equipments from their reserve supplies when the Army were casting about for suitable guns for railway mountings. The two 14-inch guns were made by the Elswick Ordnance Company for the Japanese Navy but could not be delivered so they were offered to the War Office with the suggestion that they could be used on railway mountings. The War Office were impressed by the performance of the guns and requested that the Elswick Company design a suitable mounting and work started in late 1916.

The mounting was a simple box structure supported by two pairs of bogies carrying 30 wheels in all; the mounting weighed 164 tons and with gun total led 248 tons. The gun was mounted in a cradle and was fixed by trunnions to the side members; recoil was controlled by means of a hydropneumatic system and the total recoil length was 34 inches.

The maximum range with a 1,586lb shell was 34,600 yards with a muzzle velocity of 2450ft per sec. Maximum elevation was 40° and maximum traverse was 2° either side of the centre line. Ammunition was supplied from a special wagon and was supplied to the breech on a sliding tray; a voice tube ran the length of the equipment up to the sighting platform.



The gun crew consisted of 30 men, these travelled in their own train and locomotive whilst the gun was pulled by its own locomotive together with its ammunition wagon.

The two guns were finished and shipped to France in early 1918; they were issued to 471<sup>st</sup> Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery, and one was sent to the Bethune area and christened "HMG Scene Shifter", and the other gun was called "HMG Boche Buster" and sent to the Arras area.



## The King's Shot

By August 1918 "Boche Buster" had been operating along the single line that ran from St. Pol to Arras for four months and had only fired 16 rounds. On the morning of the 8th "Boche Buster" was lying in a siding at Savy when the battery commander, Major S. M. Cleeve, received orders to bring his gun into action on a newly laid spur line outside the village of Maroeil a few miles north-west of Arras, and that the battery would be inspected by His Majesty King George V. Major Cleeve blew his whistle and the whole battery sprang to life, men clambered into the gun and the officers took station in the Command Post Wagon. Major Cleeve took up position in the cab of the lead engine and the battery steamed off to cover the five miles to Maroeil.

Some 25min later "Boche Buster" was ready for action. The battery had not long to wait as a cloud of white dust heralded the arrival of a number of cars and out of the first stepped His Majesty King George V. After the preliminary greetings were over the King eagerly began a full inspection of the equipment and remarked on its great size. During the inspection the King revealed a competent knowledge of gunnery and asked Major Cleeve many questions, among them what allowance was being made for wear in the barrel and how long its life would be. In reply Major Cleeve said that the life of the barrel is 250 rounds; the King laughed and said that in his estimation it would fire 350 rounds and the accuracy on the 300<sup>th</sup> round would be as good as it is now.

H.M. King George V and Major Cleeve (left) await a 'Boche Buster' salvo. The officer with his back to the camera is General Horne, Commander of the First Army.  
Photo: I.W.M. QB 9770.



His Majesty then requested to see the gun fire and the target was to be Douai railway junction nearly 19 miles away and never before under artillery fire. During the loading operation the King remained on the narrow loading platform and only when he was accidentally bumped by the Section Commander, Lieutenant Tickner, did he climb down to the ground and stood a few feet away. The gun was layed, but before the King could give the order to fire he had to be made to restrain his own enthusiasm and move back to a safe distance. The King gave the order to fire and with a tremendous roar a tongue of flame shot from the barrel and the whole equipment slid some 30ft back along the track. When a large gun like "Boche Buster" fires it can be frightening and those around the King covered their ears and turned their backs. But not the King; he stood upright and still during the firing not even flinching and afterwards wryly remarked that he considered it made no noise at all. . . . The King and his party retired and he asked for a map; one was produced showing all the enemy rail systems, he then pointed out that he had just come from the Fourth Army attack at Amiens and if the Germans wished to bring reinforcements from Ypres they would have to pass through Douai railway station, and suggested that it be kept under harassing fire. Major Cleeve was in full agreement with him. The King then bid farewell and left without knowing the full effect of the round he had just fired.

During the next two months more than 120 tons (169 rounds) of high explosive was fired at Douai railway junction and it was not until the allies took the town that the full effect of the bombardment was realized. Major Cleeve in conversation with local residents was told that, apart from the activity at the railway station, all had been quiet until the first shell fell and blew a troop train apart and the subsequent shelling deterred the Germans from using the station other than for the evacuation of forward areas; indeed it had been a shot worthy of a King.

"Boche Buster" remained in France until the armistice by which time it had fired 243 rounds and when the bore was measured for wear it was declared fit to fire another 100 rounds so the King's prediction of a 350 round barrel life had been correct!

## Sources

1. *The Story of the King's Shot* by Lieutenant-Colonel Cleeve, printed privately 1941.
2. *Official Hand Book 14" B.L. Gun Mark 3 on Railway Truck mounting.*

3. *British Artillery Weapons* by Ian Hogg and L. E. Thurston.
4. *Railways and Wars before 1918* by D. Bishop and K. Davis.
5. *Artillery* by John Batchelor and Ian Hogg.
6. *Rail Gun* by John Batchelor and Ian Hogg, distributed by Argus Books, Kings Langley, Herts. This latter book contains many scale drawings, including the 14" Rail Gun described here.



*One shot from Gun No. 1 of the U.S. Naval Railway batteries, firing at Laon, France, struck in the centre of the switch yard at that city.*



*Freight car thrown on top of adjacent car by one shot from U.S. Naval Railway Battery firing at Laon.*

## **Postscript**

Although these are not pictures of the railway terrain in Douai, they may still give an impression of the situation. They are from the United States Navy Railway Batteries from The World War I Document Archive.

The marshalling ground at the town of Laon in France after shelling from a 14" railway battery belonging to US Navy.

The effect of the impact is described as follows:

The force of the explosion was sufficient to utterly demolish a flat car which it struck, dig a large crater in the roadbed, tear up the tracks for a distance of more than 80 feet, raise up the wreck of the demolished car over 5 feet and throw it a distance of more than 15 feet, leaving it on top of an adjacent car that was standing on another rail. This picture shows a portion of the crater left in the roadbed by the explosion of the shell.

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