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Article on
Congress
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CONGREVE

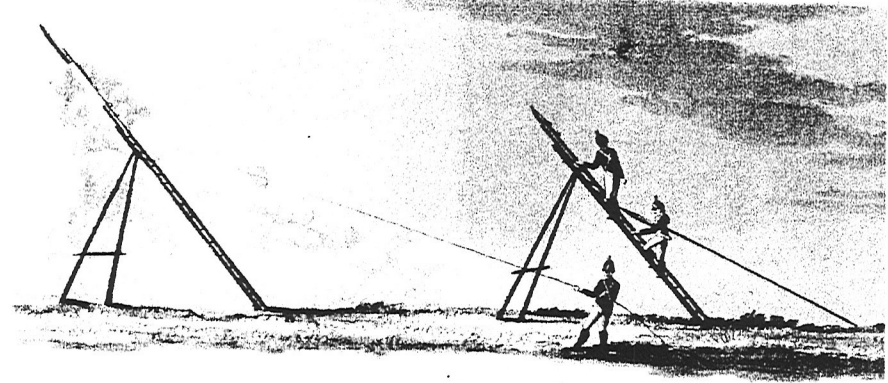
From an article by Dinah Dean of the Waltham Abbey Historical Society

During the war in India between the British and Tipoo Sahib in the 1790's, Tipoo's army made some impression on the British by the use of batteries of primitive rockets against their infantry in square formation. This was noted by artillery officers and reported to the War Office. This report was apparently read by Major William Congreve of the Royal Artillery, later Comptroller of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich Arsenal and also responsible for the production of gunpowder at the Government's recently acquired mills at Waltham Abbey. He started to experiment with improved rockets, starting production of them for military use in 1806 and setting up a Rocket Brigade within the Royal Artillery.



Royal Artillery Rocket Brigade ca.1807

These rockets were similar to ordinary firework rockets, but much larger, each having a pole six feet long on to one end of which was slotted a metal cylinder stuffed with a gunpowder propellant charge, then a more powerful gunpowder charge (and wadding) which exploded when the fuse had burned as far as the upper part of the cylinder. This caused the warhead to disintegrate, flinging red-hot metal and burning wadding for several yards around. Aiming the rockets was a very chancy affair, depending on the skill of the battery commander in judging altitude and distance by eye. The rockets were fired from an A-shaped frame on which they were leant, altitude being adjusted by the angle of the frame.



Test firings before military officers on the range at Purfleet were not markedly successful but the Prince Regent, who (wrongly) believed himself a military genius, was very impressed and supported Congreve with enthusiasm.

ROCKETS

The first active service use occurred in 1807, when it became necessary to repeat Nelson's destruction of the Danish fleet in Copenhagen harbour, to prevent seizure by the French. A combined naval and army force was sent to carry out this task, taking a battery of the Rocket Brigade with it, and the rockets, according to Sir Arthur Bryant "made a fearful noise and had a propensity for setting things on fire" actually managed to hit and set fire to several ships.

Army commanders however, were reluctant to use the rockets, mainly because they were extremely noisy and frightened the horses on which the army were very dependent (the worst cardinal sin). The Prince Regent insisted on sending a battery to assist Sir Arthur Wellesley in the Peninsula War which caused a Wellingtonian comment that "they would be very useful if he wanted to set a town on fire, which he did not since all the towns were inhabited by the friendly Spanish and Portuguese". Elsewhere the Rocket Brigade scored its first real success. In October 1813 the combined Russian, Austrian and Swedish armies, plus a lone battery of the Brigade fought and defeated Napoleon at Leipsig in the Battle of the Nations. On the second day of the battle the Battery commander was killed and command fell on a young lieutenant who set and fired one salvo which virtually wiped out a French regiment advancing near the village of Paunsdorf. Czar Alexander of Russia, who was standing nearby, was so impressed that he took his own badge of the Order of St Catherine and pinned it on the lieutenant's uniform.

In 1814 the British attempted to capture the American naval dockyard at Baltimore which was protected from the sea by Fort McHenry. The fort was bombarded by the Royal Navy for the whole of one night, the Rocket battery also taking part but the fort failed to surrender. The scene was witnessed by an American lawyer, Francis Scott Key who wrote a poem, "The Star Spangled Banner" mentioning the "Rockets Red Glare" which forms the link between Waltham Abbey where the rockets were made and the American National Anthem.

Later that same year the French surrendered and the Prince Regent organised a huge jubilee festival to celebrate the centenary of the Hanoverial dynasty, including of course, fireworks and he insisted that the Rocket Brigade should also take part. It is not recorded that they did any damage to anyone or anything on this occasion!

The Brigade's last success came the following year, 1815, when Napoleon escaped from Elba, reformed his armies and was advancing on Belgium. The advance guard of the allied army, led by the former Sir Arthur Wellesley, now Duke of Wellington, was faced by Marshal Ney at Quatre Bras. After a sharp battle Wellington ordered his forces to fall back to Waterloo. During the retreat the Rocket battery, its iron frame disassembled and its rockets loaded horizontally on a flat bed cart found itself being overtaken by French cavalry. The officer in charge, with great presence of mind, lit the fuses and fired them back along the road, effectively blocking the cavalry advance and allowing his men to escape. After that the Brigade was disbanded and the Congreve rocket does not appear to have been used as a weapon again. They were however adapted them for use, particularly at sea, as a distress signal and as a means of passing a towline or breeches-buoy line from ship to ship.