

Historian's Corner



- Part 4 -

DOTMLPF ARTILLERY INSIGHTS FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: TRAINING

An eight-part series by Dr. John Grenier, the FA Branch Historian

Training (the “T” in DOTMLPF) of Redlegs in the pre-American Civil War (ACW) Army was atrocious. The Federal Army maintained the Field Artillery (FA) branch in peacetime solely to train recruits, but shortages in ammunition—”practice in gunnery is a heavy expense to the government”—meant that dispersed batteries rarely engaged in live-firing training. Note that there was a significant difference between the FA and the Coast Artillery (CA), which manned the guns at the nation’s small complex of seaport fortifications. The siege of Fort Sumter, South Carolina in April 1861 demonstrated just how feeble stationary harbor defenses based on cannons were against land-based attacks, but that is a different story for a different place. Returning to the pre-war training of FA officers—they devoted some of their time to “book learning” and called it “going to school.” According to a Confederate, “to be an expert artilleryman was much of an education”—an idea reinforced by a Union officer who said, “I tell you Artillery practice is a big thing to learn.” Officers faced only oral, not practical, exams that certified them as an FA professional, and most of their duties centered on administration and working with their non-commissioned officers to ensure good order and discipline within their batteries. There existed no program of continuing education and follow-on training for federal artillery officers, who were responsible for ensuring the combat readiness of their batteries. It’s difficult to see the pre-war training regimen as anything but a case of the blind leading the blind.

Outside of federal service on the frontier, most FA pieces, in both the north and the south, resided in state militias. The standardization of training across them was unheard of. Because few experts from the pre-war Army stood ready to direct the training of the mass influx of recruits in 1861, self-learning and ad hoc training continued as the primary approach to prepare Redlegs for battle after the war started. Artillerymen on both sides knew their abysmal training destined them to relative impotence. Despite recognizing the need for better training and education, the U.S. Army did not create a school specifically for artillery instruction—the School of Fire, the progenitor of today’s Field Artillery School—until 1911. Across the Atlantic Ocean, King Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715), who most famously ordered the Latin inscription “ultima ratio regum” (“the last argument of kings”) be engraved on his army’s cannons, formed five artillery academies in the late seventeenth century. The British Army opened its Royal Military Academy at Woolwich “to produce good officers of artillery” in 1741, and the Prussian Army under Frederick the Great saw a massive expansion of artillery regiments in the Seven Years’ War (1754–1763 ... yes, we know that is nine years, but it’s still called the Seven Years’ War) along with exercises and “war games” to integrate them into brigades that could support Infantry and Cavalry corps. The U.S. Army in 1861 was plainly generations behind European armies in its FA training. Once it ramped up a simulacrum of a training program, it found that many of its instructor cadre lacked the expertise and experience to perform their duties. Most Redlegs therefore learned their craft in the “School of Hard Knocks.” Remember that, especially when today’s FA takes “superstar” non-commissioned officers, warrant officers and company grade officers from field units and sends them to the Field Artillery School to serve as instructors. The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command’s (TRADOC) motto “Victory Starts Here”—at the FA School—is something we should all pay attention to. *To be continued...*