

Cannon Shooting in The Netherlands

by Frank Thibault

Over the past year, a number of shooters have been actively pursuing an interest in target shooting with miniature cannons. These vary in size from those that are about the size of a hand, to those that have an overall length of around two feet. The calibres are between .45 and .69 and most are without sights. I believe the interest increased after David Spittles displayed his cannon at the British Shooting Show, where it has attracted a great deal of interest every year. There is now about a dozen cannon shooters who meet several times a year at Wedgnoek, where we shoot at 25m at the standard PL7 target.

I had heard that there was a greater interest in shooting miniature cannons in Belgium and The Netherlands and so I contacted the MLAIC Delegates for those countries for more information. As a result, I learned that there are two clubs for cannon shooters in The Netherlands, KSV and NVK. Both clubs invited me to come and join them and I chose NKV on the 8th May, as I was able to purchase a Eurotunnel ticket at a very reasonable price for that weekend.

The range is at Reijmerswaal, which is just over the border with Belgium, about two and a half hours from Calais. I arrived just after 9 and found ten shooters in the process of setting up to shoot at 50m. I was warmly welcomed and given a quick tour of the range and told to sign in. The program was two details at 50m followed by two details at 25m, both at the PL7 target. That was my first surprise. On my home range I have no difficulty hitting the PL7 target at 25m, but when I wanted to see what I could do at 50m, I changed to the rather larger French military rifle target used in the 50m musket events. Even then, I had some difficulty keeping all the shots on the card. Here in Reijmerswaal, all the shooting would be on the smaller target.

Fortunately, I was put on the second detail at 50m so I had time to learn their procedures. The course of fire is 4 shots at 50m and 4 shots at 25m without sighters. There is no time limit as such, but each detail is expected to take about 45 minutes. By contrast, in Britain we tend to treat the miniature cannons rather like black powder small arms and expect to shoot 13 shots in 30 minutes with the best ten to count.

The differences arise from the cannons used. Now I know that they say that size doesn't matter, but at Wedgnoek, I have one of the big ones. It is made by Ardesa, a Napoleon III field piece, .69 bore and nearly two and half feet long overall, weighs 8 kilos and uses 50 grains of powder. In Reijmerswaal, everyone could see that I had the smallest and it really did cause some amusement. Generally, people were kind and said that, yes, there were some shooters in The Netherlands that had similar cannons, so I need not feel that I was alone.



So what cannons were the Dutch using? Their rules limit barrels to a length to 750mm and a maximum bore of 40mm with a maximum charge of 500 grains. It is worth noting that these shooters were using powder from Eastern Europe that is much cheaper than Swiss. Only round ball is permitted. Now not everyone was at the limits, but most were fairly close and many cannons weighed between 60 and 80 kilos. Moreover, they all had sights, which although simple and without adjustment, certainly

gave a significant advantage over my short sightless barrel. For cannons of this size, the rules state that they must be shot from the ground without digging holes or preventing recoil.

At Wedgnoek I have been shooting my cannon from a lightweight picnic table and the recoil moves the table backwards after every shot. I had anticipated shooting from the ground and I had taken the example I had seen on a South African cannon shooting website and built a wooden platform with adjustable feet. This has the effect of raising the cannon about 10cm from the ground, which enables me to have my head in the right place for sighting. I was allowed to use this base and I was told that cannons of this size were shot from sturdy tables, making sure that they did not fall off during recoil.

In The Netherlands, the range officer gives the order to load for the first shot. These larger cannons have the powder in a spoon that is pushed to the breech and then tipped out. The ball, with or without a

patch follows and then sighting takes place. When everyone appears satisfied, the order is given to insert fuses. Once this is done, the range officer brings out the match and hands it to the first shooter, who lights his fuse and returns the match to the range officer. Only after the cannon fires does the range officer pass the match to the next shooter. This continues until all cannons are shot.

The range officer then orders the barrels to be swabbed with a damp brush while he inspects the targets. Shooters may go with him if they wish. Only when everyone has returned and is behind the line, is the order given to load and the procedure is repeated.

I was using fuse that was similar to that being used by the Dutch shooters. However, my coil seemed to attract particular interest. I discovered that Netherlands law permitted as much fuse as you want (and I know that size doesn't matter), but the maximum length allowed is 10cm! Now I estimate that I had over 10 metres in a single length of fuse and they hadn't seen one that long before.

So how did they perform? The standard of shooting was very high with around half the shooters keeping their shots inside the black. One or two missed the target with one shot, but I was the only one to miss with every shot. I did manage to hit the post on the centre line, but just over the target. No one, including me was surprised that I failed to score. We then dragged, although in my case carried the cannons forward to 25m where the same procedure was followed for a further four shots. This time, all shots were on the target, with most inside the black.

It was a long way to go in order to fire 8 shots, but the overall experience was certainly worth it, especially as it was unseasonably warm with the temperature of 27C and the company so delightful. The Dutch cannon championships are at the end of August at Helmond and I expect to be there.

