

# Artillery: Where Now?

by Lewis Page

Lewis Page is a retired Royal Navy officer and the author of the book *Lions, Donkeys and Dinosaurs*. In this article he looks at the unique selling points of artillery and, as an outsider, suggests a novel approach for the future.

**Artillery – in military science, crew-served big guns, howitzers, or mortars having a calibre greater than that of small arms or infantry weapons. Rocket launchers are also commonly categorized as artillery...**  
Encyclopaedia Britannica

Most treatises take the view given above – that artillery is primarily a class of weapons. In the British Army the artillery is also a regiment, which is to say a club, union and professional clique.

As one might expect of such a large and long-established brotherhood, the Royal Regiment of Artillery has spread its tendrils everywhere. Out beyond the Forward Edge of the Battle Area (such a lovely old-world term) the Phoenix drones prowl. Far to the rear there may soon be pocket ballistic missiles. Somewhere in the middle are the gun batteries, the Royal Regiment's spiritual home.

Artillery officers relate to the chain of command the way the clergy did to the feudal nobility. Behind every throne at every level stands an artillery priest, from company FOO to divisional CRA, who

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can call down the wrath of holy church on the enemy. Examining the logistic tail and the stuff it expects to handle, we might describe it as primarily a support mechanism for the artillery rather than

for the formation as a whole. To an outsider, the army can resemble a glove puppet, sometimes large and fluffy, sometimes small and neat – but always fitted around the bony, directing hands of Gunners.

That doesn't matter, of course, if the Royal Regiment is a group of soldiers. Soldiers prioritise the needs of the army and the state over their own best interests. If the Gunners see themselves as a guild or professional association, however, we might have a problem. The Amalgamated Tube and Rocketry Union might be a bit too powerful; they might tend to demand tube and rocketry jobs even if these weren't actually required. We might deploy a thousand people, 32 very hefty tubes and lord knows how much associated support and lift in order to fire a measly 9000 shells, as we have lately done.

But of course, there is another side to the story. Gunners truly are soldiers, not just brothers of the Amalgamated Tube-throwers and Rocketeers. Gunners get killed doing patrol and security work just as infantrymen and cavalrymen do; just as sailors and airmen don't. And Gunners operate a lot of things apart from tubes and rockets.

***'Under My Command'***

There is another soldierly strength to the Artillery. General Rupert Smith didn't give many frank personal opinions in *The Utility of Force*, but he did drop a few hints: 'I particularly wanted the guns,' he writes, describing the forces he requested to lift the siege of Sarajevo. 'In comparison with aircraft, guns . . . apply fire as accurately, can maintain the fire for longer, are not weather dependent and would be under my command.' (My emphasis.)

Technology has moved on since 1995.

Most of General Smith's purely technical objections to aircraft will yield to progress soon if they haven't already. More intractable are the human problems which come with aircraft – the long bendy screwdrivers and inter-arm power struggles. Tubes and rockets may not be a particularly efficient way of delivering explosives into theatre; blowing things up may not always be a particularly helpful thing to do. But sometimes it really is necessary. And when we do blow something up, we must deliver the

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***'That's why General Smith wanted Gunners rather than airmen – because they would do what he said'***

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right amount of explosive, in the right place, at the right time. Even troops on the ground may not have the information to accomplish this; but they are the only people who might. An air marshal in a Joint HQ several countries away cannot usefully get involved. Politicians and four-stars in Whitehall or Brussels will be even worse.

That's why General Smith wanted Gunners rather than airmen – because they would do what he said. He was the man on the ground, and thus the only one who could usefully throw explosives about. The only way he could get control of the process was to use surface launchers – even though the launchers and their ammunition, often enough, moved about by air! The aircraft may be obtainable which can sit overhead perpetually in any weather, throwing down the good news accurately and

responsively. Mirabile visu, it may even be able to dispense the stuff in small packages with reasonable danger radii rather than units of half a ton. But it won't be all that much use to soldiers on the ground if it comes attached to a

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### **'Gunships are artillery with wings; aviators prefer aircraft with guns'**

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separate chain of command; not even a comparatively short one to theatre HQ. That's the really clever thing about artillery, the unique selling point. Not the commendable urge to get near the sharp end; certainly not the cumbersome weaponry. The valuable stuff is the set of command skills and relationships with the rest of the army, honed over a century. FOOs and battery commanders and CRAs and the rest devolve distant striking power to the lowest levels, and yet permit the spread fingertips to close instantly into a shattering fist when required. That's what outsiders admire about artillery.

The tubes and rockets themselves might persist. The close-combat of the future, staggering about under his load of electronics and kevlar, won't really care what falls from the sky when he points his magic crosshairs and presses the red button. He doesn't mind whether the warhead drops off an aircraft or flies in ballistically, provided it happens quickly.

#### **Transporting the Ammunition**

But the force commander and his logistics chief care – a lot. They would rather not transport the warhead any further than they have to. The hidden enemy cares, too. They like bases and trucks which they can attack. Even General Smith, such a fan of artillery, goes on to say that 'supporting arms and services must be kept to a minimum . . . each one of these facilities and its attendant guards and supply convoys is a set of targets . . . maritime and air

advantages may allow many of these activities to be conducted out of harm's way'.

It may not even be a matter of air and sea; Guided MLRS already resembles a pocket ballistic missile. It can't be long until the various new rocket-pipe rigs reach so far that the batteries can be out of harm's way. But no decent Gunner wants to be out of harm's way. And that would worsen the response time, too. A guided rocket might one day take longer to arrive than a close-support aircraft. What's the answer?

#### **Close Support Air Gunners?**

Well, perhaps we can combine the virtues of gun batteries and close-support aircraft. A modified cargo plane can loiter for hours above the threat ceiling, throwing explosives about accurately in a variety of different sized packets – even homely artillery shells. Shells often arrive in theatre aboard cargo planes anyway, then frequently get fired out of tubes which have been carried into position by helicopter. It might make sense to cut out the middlemen to some degree.

The resources required to keep AC-130 gunships overhead are enormous, of course. But so are the resources required to keep surface fire units close at hand for everyone who might need them. And the support tail for the gunship needs deploy only to a nice safe airbase, not right into the field. The flying Gunners would run some risks, but nobody else would have to.

But that means the death of the Royal

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Regiment, surely? Gunships are air-force kit. Where's our beautiful integration with the manoeuvre units now? Actually, there are only 21 gunships in the

whole world, so it's a little premature to say who they naturally belong to. The present aircraft wear USAF markings, true, but the USAF doesn't like them and has mostly loaned them out to the special-ops crowd. The RAF has none at all, nor ever will, left to itself. Gunships are artillery with wings; aviators prefer aircraft with guns. If the British Army wants to try this idea, it will have to supply the initial push just as it did with helicopters. One does note that the Army already operates close-support aircraft; one also notes that the Royal Artillery has run its own aviation squadrons in the past.

If I were a Gunner, I might see that as an opportunity. I might very well aspire to see my successors on the battlefield providing integrated, flexible fire control as they have always done. I might also hope to see the actual batteries in the sky above, responsive, part of the fight – not out at sea, or far away across the border, or sitting inside heavily guarded perimeters at the end of exposed supply lines. And I might demand genuine fit-for-purpose airborne batteries, not short-endurance supersonic whizz-fighters with strike packages bolted on as an afterthought. It would involve a big tussle with the air arms, and perhaps some genuine co-operation with them in the end. But that's better than trying to do the job the wrong way. ■

[contention@rusi.org](mailto:contention@rusi.org)

[www.rusi.org/defencesystems](http://www.rusi.org/defencesystems)

Has artillery lost its way? Or merely been slow to find the correct path?

Either way, artillery has lost much ground in the battle for investment.

What do you think? Give us your views for publication in the next issue.

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