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The Volley Gun



The prize for probably the most intimidating handheld firearm has to go to the Royal Navy, who purchased the monstrous, seven-barrelled volley gun

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Everyone knows that firearms can hurt people, in most cases really badly, if not fatally. But how do you convince a trained member of the armed forces, or even a desperate assailant that it is simply not worth the effort, to take on the person holding the firearm in question. Well, in history, the answer was simple; you either made the muzzle bigger or added extra barrels!

Blunderbuss myth

In the case of the larger muzzle, the blunderbuss was king. Even the military (especially the Navy) experimented with them, making large examples known as musketoons; but the wide muzzles that these weapons were equipped with was as much to facilitate easy loading on board a rolling ship



Some blunderbusses had inscriptions written around the muzzle, such as "Happy Is Thee That Escapeth Me"

than to increase the effect of intimidation. A certain school of thought also surmised that with a trumpet-shaped muzzle, the shot – as these guns were invariably loaded with multiple projectiles as opposed to a single ball – would be spread across a wide area within a short distance. Actually, this is not the case, but the myth was deliberately kept alive by those that made blunderbusses because they were most often sold to people who had very little other experience of firearms, with many being used for house protection or from the horse drawn coaches of the day.

Protection

The Royal Mail, often the target for robbers and highwaymen, would always equip their coach guards with a brace of heavy calibre pistols and a blunderbuss, some of which are known to have witty inscriptions written around the muzzle; one I saw recently had "Happy Is Thee That Escapeth Me" engraved where only the assailant could truly appreciate it!

Brass was the favoured material of choice for construction of the barrel, mostly because of its corrosion resisting qualities. The guns could be left loaded for long times and it would not rot if the owner neglected to clean it after firing. Some, mostly those for house defence, were additionally equipped with spring-loaded bayonets, instantly deployable via a catch on the top-tang, or more rarely the trigger guard bow.

Monstrous gun

However, the prize for probably the most intimidating handheld firearm has to go to the Royal Navy, who was the only agency to take up the purchase of the "Volley Gun"



The seven-barrelled volley gun was immortalised by Sergeant Harper in the Sharpe series of films

manufactured by Henry Nock. The gun, which fires seven barrels of over 1/2in calibre simultaneously was actually designed a few years earlier in 1779 by an engineer named James Wilson, but it was Nock who convinced the Navy that they needed this monstrous gun and subsequently obtained an order for 500 pieces. Designed to sweep decks of enemy ships clear of sailors during boarding actions, it soon became clear that the recoil was simply too much for the majority of users to bear, with broken collar-bones and shoulders commonplace after firing – anyone who thinks that black powder does not kick should try one!

A smaller bore version was introduced but even this was horrific to use, and coupled with the excessive flash and sparks that the gun produced made officers reluctant to issue them for fear of setting their own rigging and sails alight. Despite being immortalised by Sergeant Harper in the excellent "Sharpe" series of books and films by Bernard Cornwell, the guns were in truth all withdrawn from service by 1804, and are a rare item indeed today. **SG**