Whoops! Accident on a Gun Detachment, 1811

In the coming years of the bicentenary of the War of 1812, there will be artillery demonstrations at many re-enactment events. Let us hope that all proper safety precautions are taken lest there be a repetition of the remarkable event that Lance-Bombardier Alexander Alexander (yes, that was his name) witnessed in 1811 while serving at Colombo. As he recalled:

One occurrence I witnessed here almost incredible: a Portuguese governor touched at Colombo, early in the year 1811; on the firing salute, Gunner Richard Clark was blown from the mouth of his gun right into the air, and alighted upon a rock at a considerable distance in the harbour. .. he was but an awkward soldiers at the best; the gun of which he was No. 1, went off by accident, but not just at the time of loading, otherwise the left arm, or perhaps both arms, of No. 2 had been blown off, as No. 2 loads and rams home, along with No. 1.

The gun was just loaded when she went off, through the negligence of Clark, in not spunging properly .. He was not at his proper distance, like the other man, nor yet near enough to receive the whole flash. To the astonishment of every one, he was seen in the air, the spunge-staff grasped in his right hand, the rammerhead downwards, which first struck the rock as he alighted on his breech. The rock was very thickly covered with sea weed.

A party was sent down to bring up the body, as all concluded him killed upon the spot; he was brought up only stunned and slightly singed, and was at his duty again in a few days; while No. 5, who served the vent, had his thumb, with which the motion-hole is stopped during the loading, so severely burned, it was feared he must have lost it, and it was only saved by the skill of the surgeon.

From The Life of Alexander Alexander, Written by Himself, and Edited by John Howell, 2 volumes, William Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1830, volume I, 201-203.

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