

Collection : **ROYAL ENGINEERS MUSEUM, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVE**
Series : **Photographs of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1878-1880**

6/8 Battery RA and the ‘Screw-Gun’

In September 1879, No. 6 Battery, 8th Brigade Royal Artillery was ordered to move from Lucknow, where it was stationed, to Peshawar. There it was equipped with the new seven-pounder muzzle-loading jointed gun (the ‘Screw-Gun’¹²) and converted into a Mountain Battery, whose guns were carried on mules.

Under the command of Major (later Brevet Lieutenant Colonel) T. Graham, RA, an experienced officer who had served with the Bengal Artillery, and assisted by Captain (later Brevet Major) J.C. Robinson, RA, the battery left Peshawar on 16th March 1880 and arrived in Kabul on 2nd April, where they were based in the Sherpur cantonment. Shortly after arrival, four guns from the battery were engaged for the first time in an action at Saidabad.

After their return to Kabul in early May, they had a series of photographs taken by the photographers of the Bengal Sappers and Miners, who were stationed beside them in Sherpur. Six photographs show how the various gun components were loaded onto the mules and a seventh shows a complete gun crew.

The names of that gun crew have been obtained from a letter preserved in the Royal Artillery Museum.³ On the photograph below, are marked the numbers referred to in that letter.



No. 1. Sergeant W. Lynch.	Trail. He is in charge of the gun crew.
No. 2. Gunner P. Thompson.	R. of Muzzle
No. 3. Gunner P. Hendley.	L. of Muzzle
No. 4. Gunner I. Murphy.	R. of Breech
No. 5. Gunner W. Collins.	L. of Breech
No. 6. Bombardier ⁴ W. Watkins.	Point of Handspike.

¹ <http://oldbritishguns.com/the-screw-gun>

² http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg_screwguns1.htm

³ RA Museum Acc. No. 1604 Letter to Col H.A. Inglis.

⁴ Bombardier is the rank in the Artillery, equivalent to Corporal.

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The man holding the mule in the photograph showing the load with the breech (RE 121) is identified in the letter as Havildar Major Roor Singh. Although the gunners were British, the mule teams were Indian and the Havildar Major would have been the senior Indian officer with the Battery.

The screw-gun had to be broken down into 5 mule loads (of approximately 200 pounds each) which were, in the order in which they marched:

- Axle - the cross member that fitted under the carriage to take the wheels;
- Wheels - two iron-rimmed wooden wheels, 3 feet in diameter;
- Carriage – 2 steel plates with three cross members and a 'shoe' which rested on the ground;
- Breech (back part of the barrel);
- Chase (front part of the barrel);
- Ammunition and gun-powder on additional mules.

The photographs RE 118 to RE 123 were arranged accordingly.

On going into action, the gun was assembled in the order in which the mules arrived:

- first the axle had the wheels fitted,
- the carriage was then placed on and secured to the axle,
- then the breech was rested, butt end down, on the rear end of the carriage and
- the chase (or barrel) was then screwed into the breech and hammered tight.
- The combined gun was then lifted onto the carriage and secured by caps over the trunnions.

It seems astonishing, but contemporary authorities agree that this could be done in twenty seconds in the field and one quotes 12 seconds for a detachment doing it against the clock. 'Limbering up', that is, breaking down the gun and getting the bits back on the mules, was equally labour intensive.⁵

6/8 Battery later took part in General Robert's famous march to Kandahar, where it remained until the spring of 1881.

Brigadier Bill Woodburn, late RE, Chatham, England

Paul Bucherer, Director of Afghanistan Institute, Bubendorf, Switzerland

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⁵ The above remarks on the marching order and assembling of the 'Screw Gun' is based on the information provided by: http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg_screwguns1.htm and <http://oldbritishguns.com/the-screw-gun>