

WHAT IS THE THREE-MINUTE RULE FOR MUZZLE-LOADING ARTILLERY REENACTORS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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Loyal Train of Artillery Chapter of the United States Field Artillery Association

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SAFETY is the single most important thing to remember when dealing with black powder, muzzle-loading artillery. The drills taught by the Loyal Train of the Artillery Chapter of the United States Field Artillery Association (LTAC-USFAA), in addition to focusing on historical accuracy, are about safety and how all safety procedures work together to protect the reenactors and spectators. Safety is not a “Pick and Choose” activity – it is an “All or Nothing” activity. This must never be forgotten.

The foundation of the Muzzle Loading Artillery Drill taught by the LTAC-USFAA Schools is called the “Three-Minute Rule,” which denotes the time that must elapse between when the gun is fired and when the next powder charge is introduced into the muzzle.

There has been controversy regarding the Three-Minute Rule – especially from people who have attended other artillery schools in the past. However, there has never been a mishap on a gun whose crew was following the Three-Minute Rule – ever. The same cannot be said for any other artillery drill.

The following is the Three-Minute Rule as followed by artillerists who use the drills taught by the LTAC-USFAA:

- When the **LOAD** Command is given, the artillerists perform what is called “Service the Piece,” which involves clearing the vent, and worming and sponging the tube. The powder charge is then placed in the muzzle and rammed down to the breech. If the gunner so chooses, the cannon can be aimed at this point, but that only really applies when live firing or putting on a show for the spectators.

- When the **READY** Command is given, the powder bag is pricked open and the friction primer, attached to the lanyard, is inserted into the vent. The artillerists take their firing position, making sure to keep an eye on the safety zone to ensure that it is safe to fire.
- When the **FIRE** Command is given, the lanyard is pulled and the cannon is fired. The artillerists immediately “Service the Piece,” clearing the vent, and worming and sponging the tube. The artillerists then return to their Post position, which is the position they take when waiting for orders.

Following this drill, the piece is serviced *twice* between each shot – once after the cannon has been fired and once before the next round is loaded. This ensures that there is no debris that could accidentally rip open the next powder charge or hot embers that could cause a misfire, resulting in serious injury to the artillerists.

Some gun crews feel the Three-Minute Rule is too limiting and doesn’t allow the gun to fire that many shots during an event. My response to that is: “It’s better for the entire crew to come home safe than it is to see how much powder you can burn through during an event.”

Some gun crews feel the Three-Minute Rule is not historically accurate. My response to that is: “Nonsense! Check the facts and you’ll see that this is not only historically accurate, it was considered a mandate.”

General Henry J. Hunt, the Chief of Artillery for the Army of the Potomac, wrote the following on December 4, 1862:

The attention of the chief of artillery has been called to the very lavish expenditure of artillery ammunition. In small skirmishes between 300 and 400 rounds of ammunition per battery are often expended, the fire frequently averaging, and sometimes exceeding, one round per minute per gun, while in general engagements batteries have been known to expend all their ammunition in little over an hour and a half. The rules which guide officers of artillery are very distinctly laid down in the Orders of the 12th of September 1862... An officer who expends ammunition improperly proves his ignorance of the proper use of his arm, and a want of capacity for the command of a battery. In no case, except when firing canister at short ranges, should fire exceed one round from each gun in two minutes; and that rate should only be reached at critical moments, when the

distance, numbers, and formations of the enemy are such that the fire is sure to be effective. At all other times one round in four to six minutes is as rapid firing as should be permitted. The value of the rifled cannon consists principally in its accuracy; accuracy requiring careful pointing, with close observation of the effect, and these require time. Twelve shots in a hour at an object over 1,000 yards distant, the time being spent in careful loading and pointing, will produce better results than fifty shorts in an hour will ordinarily produce from the same gun in the same time...

Granted, reenactors and Ceremonial Units do not concern themselves with aiming their piece when firing, except when participating in a live fire event. However, the historical accuracy of a more delayed firing cannot be questioned in light of General Hunt's orders to his Battery Commanders.

When firing blank charges, which is most typical at reenactments and artillery salutes, the LTAC-USFAA has found that a three-minute delay between when the gun is fired and when the next powder charge is introduced into the muzzle is sufficient to ensure the safety of the powder charge and the gun crew. Given the number of accidents that have occurred from premature firings, even with blank charges, and their resulting injuries, it is better to slow the rate of fire and make sure all embers inside the muzzle are extinguished before ramming the next charge than it is to risk the safety of a member of the gun crew or other reenactors just because a gun crew is impatient to fire the next round or wants to burn more gun powder.

Ready to learn more about the muzzle-loading artillery drills taught by the LTAC-USFAA? The drills are taught to all students who attend the Artillery Schools, and the manuals can be purchased online at <http://artillerypublications.com/>.