

# *Gun accidents in early KwaZulu-Natal*

*by Roger Ingle*

**D**URING THE first three decades of the 19th century, a small group of white adventurers resided at the then remote Port Natal to trade and to maintain somewhat precarious communication with the Zulu nation. The hopeful prospect for this risky enterprise was the lucrative harvesting of ivory and buffalo hides. Guns were essential to this task. However, it seems the hunters were often in more danger from their own firearms than from the elephant and buffalo.

Their guns would have been typical of the muzzle-loading hunting pieces that played such an important role in our national heritage. In particular, one thinks of the huge gun widely used by the early hunters and frontiersmen at

the Cape and later by the Voortrekkers in their move northward into the interior.<sup>1</sup> This was the *bobbejaanboud*, a spectacular class of gun uniquely South African. In vernacular Cape Dutch, it describes the unusual shape of the wooden stock, viz. a baboon thigh. Many were monsters, some with a muzzle reaching as high as a man's chin and with a bore often one inch in diameter and firing a lead ball wrapped in linen weighing over a hundred grams. It required a sturdy soul to shoot them. Most were smooth-bore and some with straight grooves cut in the inner surface of the barrel, this sometimes being mistaken by collectors for rifling. The long barrel had little to do with ballistics. It was to enable the muzzle-loading



*Bobbejaanboud*

flintlock gun to be loaded by a man on horseback, with the butt resting on the ground. When the trigger was pulled, a flint, held in a spring-loaded cock, would fall and strike a serrated iron frizzen, thus creating a spark. This would ignite some exposed priming powder in a small pan on the side of the barrel. The resulting flash would go through a small touch hole to fire the charge in the barrel.

When at the bay in 1839, the well-travelled hunter and explorer Adulphe Delegorgue<sup>2</sup> describes such a uniquely African gun and the preparation of the ball it fired.

But whether you accompany me on a crocodile hunt, or whether you follow me in pursuit of buffalo, hippopotamus, rhinoceros or elephant, remember that the gun must be single-

barrelled, of enormous calibre and that two tenths of the bullet must be tin. This is a *sine qua non* observed by all South African hunters.

He attempted to hunt hippo in the Umgeni River but was “defeated by the mighty mosquito”. There was a good market for hippo ivory as it was harder than elephant ivory and thus used in the manufacture of dentures. An illustration in his book *Voyage dans L’Afrique* shows a classic *bobbejaanboud* with a barrel about one metre long extending back to what appears to be a cap-lock ignition system. It is more likely that his gun at that time was a flint-lock, the percussion cap-lock system not being in general use till much later. Perhaps the illustration was produced some time after his African experiences.

The travelling hunter at the time would have had several guns, some being of smaller calibre with perhaps a fowling piece for game for the pot. When in pursuit of dangerous game, a trusty gun-bearer would be close at hand with a second elephant gun in the event of a shot being botched. Added to this danger, the use of exposed black powder and the muzzle-loading system was intrinsically dangerous. There were numerous accidents at the time and later, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The accounts that follow have been taken from a number of published sources. Modern place names have been used to identify localities while the language and spelling of those who witnessed the events have been left unchanged. The big guns used considerable quantities of gunpowder and large stores of it were required to sustain operations during the long periods between visits by schooners to the bay or overland trips from the Cape Colony. The unregulated



*The flash from a muzzled-loaded flintlock gun*

mass-storage of gunpowder led to an inevitable consequence.

In 1835, Mr Collis was the principal trader in Durban, representing the Grahamstown firm of Maynard & Norden. Beads, guns, gunpowder, lead and other basic essentials were exchanged for ivory. The inhabitants of the port mostly lived in grass huts in the Zulu style or in more primitive bush shelters. Mr Collis, on the other hand, had a more substantial dwelling. His store was made of reeds plastered with daub and stood amidst a lush vegetable garden surrounded by virgin bush. The site later became part of the central business district of Durban. One day in 1835, this peaceful bay-side setting was suddenly devastated by a huge explosion. The event was recorded by Allen Gardiner<sup>3</sup> in his *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country*.

26<sup>th</sup> – Mr Collis's magazine, containing fifteen pounds of powder, had yesterday exploded; and himself, his infant child, the native nurse, and a Hottentot named Class, had been

killed while several natives were seriously burnt. The circumstances which led to this awful scene were related by a native who was present, and so severely burnt that it is scarcely thought he can recover. Mr Collis had gone into the store for the purpose of taking out a gun for Class then in his service but who had accompanied me from the colony as Mr Berkin's servant. In order to try the flint, he had imprudently snapped the lock, with the muzzle pointed towards a powder barrel, when the gun which had been carelessly put by loaded but without priming, went off; and the explosion, which was heard at the Umgeni, took place. The mangled bodies of Mr Collis and the Hottentot were blown to a considerable distance; the skull of the infant, which was in the arms of the servant girl, seated on the outside of an adjoining building, was fractured; and she shortly after died of the injury she had sustained.

Mr Collis's wife was one of only two white women in Durban at the time. She must have had a sad and lonely return to England.



*Powder horn*

Nathaniel Isaacs preceded Allen Gardiner. He was an early pioneer who was shipwrecked while trying to enter the bay in 1825. He hunted and traded in the area and kept a detailed diary. In August 1826 he wrote of an accident which occurred on a small hill on the side of the Bluff overlooking the present-day oil-storage sites at Fynnlands – a small park marks the spot today.

11<sup>th</sup> August, 1830 – Early this morning I was awakened by the report of a musket, which was followed by a hideous howl. I leaped from my bed and ran towards the mob who had collected at the bottom of the kraal, and there beheld a most painful sight. A poor boy was lying prostrate on the ground, his arm nearly shattered off, with a deep wound in his belly that exhibited his entrails and the upper part of his thigh lacerated. He was bleeding a good deal and faint from the loss of blood, with which he was covered. In fact, the poor creature was so mangled that I had no hopes of reviving him. The natives began already to howl, conceiving him to be dying or dead.

William and Francis Fynn, like myself, were inexperienced, and knew not what to do. We sent for Shingarn, the old native doctor, and then looked into medical books for information. My own judgement was that the arm was much too shattered to be in anyway set again, and that nothing would do but amputation. The native doctor came, and displayed his knowledge by saying that he could do nothing for the dying youth. William Fynn resolved on cutting off the arm at the elbow; accordingly, we gave the sufferer 40 drops of laudanum and drove all the natives away.



*Modified Brown Bess*

Laudanum is a solution of opium dissolved in alcohol. Forty drops is enough to transport the stoutest soul to Shangri-La. He continues:

I went to keep his friends from approaching, who were coming to mourn, while William, with his razor, operated; and as soon as the arm was off, I sewed the parts together, dressed the wounds, then lodged the lad in a hut, regulated his diet, put three boys to superintend him, and left him as well as could be anticipated from his mangled condition. The boy had been sitting at the entrance of a hut of another who had been trained to the use of the musket, and was cleaning it. The musket being loaded, accidentally went off, and the poor boy, while looking at his companion cleaning the piece, received its contents in his arm and body.

The boy recovered from this ordeal, albeit with one arm. Isaacs wrote of another accident which had occurred some months before, this time involving a powder horn. Present-day shooters of muzzle-loading black powder guns are prohibited from dispensing powder from a powder flask or powder horn at the firing range. For safety reasons, powder charges have to be separately weighed and held in individual containers. Although this is a departure from the usual way powder horns and flasks were used, it is a prudent rule. Isaac's diary underscores this.

15<sup>th</sup> October, 1830 – It appeared from the evidence elicited, that two of our musket party having been sent to the Cayles, they went to Umtondese's kraal to beg some corn from their sister, who was the chief's wife. Entering the hut of the chief's brother, where some females were sitting, who asked them what they had got in their horns, Nonqua took a little powder



*Redman 4 bore, being held by the author*

out and set fire to it. The women's curiosity not being satisfied, the man put some more on the ground, forgetting, at the same time, to put the stopper into the horn. As soon as it had ignited it communicated with that in their horns, when a violent explosion took place, which blew up the hut. Both the boys were burnt, and the people became greatly alarmed. The chief, perceiving the hut on fire, and not seeing his brother, thought from the cries from Nonqua, and observing the other running away, that he had killed his brother; he therefore, without considering, ran after the boy, who was dreadfully burnt, and himself and his people beat him.

Later, another burning powder horn nearly changed the course of history in KwaZulu-Natal. The defeat of King Dingane was expedited in 1839 when Prince Mpande, Dingane's brother

broke away from the Zulu king with 15 000 followers. The Voortrekker Volksraad soon took steps to form an alliance with Mpande. A delegation led by a landdrost went to conclude the agreement. The party must have been filled with apprehension. The horror of the fate of Piet Retief's recent visit to Dingane must have been much in mind that day. Adulphé Delegorgue was there to witness the event. During the negotiations, for some unexplained reason, Mr Morewood's powder horn ignited.<sup>4</sup> There was a violent explosion. Fortunately the only casualty was Mr Morewood, who caught fire and, to put it in the polite language of the day, was "severely burnt about the loins". The deal was concluded successfully. As Delegorgue observed, had one fragment touched the King, the matter would have taken a different course.

As Durban grew, sporting guns became very popular. Charles Barter was a lawyer who had a successful career in those early days. He arrived in Durban in 1851 and had the following to say of his fellow passengers:

But whatever their age, or calling, or previous habits, or to whatever employment they might look forward on their arrival in the land of promise, not one of them was without a gun. Such a collection of fire-arms I had never seen before – singles and doubles, smooth-bores, two-grooved, and poly-grooved, of all sizes and qualities, from pea-rifle to the monster elephant-gun using four-ounce balls, from the costly and highly-finished Lancaster to the cheap Birmingham pistols; revolving and not revolving; all these, and many more were there to be found. The very ladies carried light fowling pieces and the caboose was continuously beset by bullet-casters, to the great discomfort of the good-natured black who presided

there. As many of them had never handled a piece before, some of their manipulations were amusingly eccentric; but when they began actually to load and fire "for practice", I trembled with apprehension, and the captain, sympathising with me on account of his spars and rigging, put a hasty stop to the exhibition. I need scarcely say that not more than two or three of these men, since they landed in the colony, have ever had occasion to take gun or pistol in hand, unless to offer them for sale.

By 1854 there was sufficient interest to form a Volunteer movement. Musketry could have helped to promote gun safety but it had a slow start and the dreaded powder horn again left its mark; perhaps on the loins of a Volunteer or two. George Russell lived and worked in Durban at the time, and in his book *History of Old Durban* he described an accident.

Not content with learning how to carry, shoulder, and present arms, we must hurry on to the real thing, so soon began with what the Instructor called "blank cartridge", but as guns were of all sizes and no cartridges were to be had, while very few knew how to make them, we overcame the difficulty by bringing our own powder horns and flasks, with paper or rag for wadding in our pockets. A slovenly carpenter man, standing in the rank between John J. Chapman (spared to be Mayor of Pietermaritzburg) and myself, after firing his fowling piece once or twice, was preparing to "load and prime", when his powder flask was blown out of his hand and exploded. The shock and scare caused Chapman and myself to feel for our wounds but, as nothing gory resulted, we descended upon the carpenter in wrath by way of gratitude. This incident led to a general order prohibiting flasks and imposing cartridges.

The cartridge referred to was a measured charge of powder and a ball wrapped in a paper sleeve. This would be torn open, the powder poured down the barrel followed by the compressed paper from the cartridge to form a wad and then the ball. Subsequently, old Tower muskets were issued with factory-made cartridges, and later the Durban Rangers were issued with out-of-date Brunswick muzzle-loading rifles, one of the worst rifles ever to see service in the British Army. They fired a ball cast with a raised ring encircling it which engaged two rifling grooves in the bore. George described how he had to dismount, pick up a stone and hammer the ramrod to get the ball down the barrel and seated on the wad. It is surprising there are no records of broken hands and airborne ramrods.

The introduction of metallic cartridges, more stable powders and breech-loading guns over the years that followed must have saved many a life along the way.

#### NOTES

- 1 Muzzle-loading guns were made in quantity at the Cape from the early 19th century onwards until the later advent of breech-loaders. However, some gunsmiths may have used intricate components such as lock springs supplied by specialist British and Continental makers who served the trade.
- 2 See *Natalia* 4, p 43 and *Natalia* 5, p 30.
- 3 Allen Gardiner was an ex-Royal Navy officer who, after the untimely death of his young wife and retrenchment on half pay, decided to devote the rest of his life to opening up new areas for missionary work. The Zulus in South East Africa became his first priority. He was a brave, headstrong man with deep convictions and thus controversial. In 1835 he named the bay d'Urban after the then Governor of the Cape. On his return to England he wrote *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country* based on his diary during his stay in KwaZulu-Natal.
- 4 Edmund Morewood was the harbour master of the Voortrekkers at the time of the Battle of Congella.

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