"Mounted But Not Mounted" The Confusing Terminology of Artillery

By James Morgan

The terminology of 19th-century artillery can be very confusing. As in most bureaucracies, there were both official and unofficial terms for everything. many of which were contradictory or had multiple meanings and frequently were misused even by artillerymen. This unintentional misuse continues today in reenacting and, indeed, may have become so pervasive as to render pointless any attempt at correcting it.

Nevertheless, the author offers the following glossary in the hope that it will help to clarify proper Civil War terminology for reenactors. even including those unfortunate souls who are not artillerymen. The glossary is not meant to be an exhaustive dictionary of artillery terms, but merely to offer working definitions of those organizational and functional terms which are most commonly (mis)used.

Unless otherwise specified, the information is based on Federal practice as this most closely approximates the pre-war usages from which the confusion comes. Generally, however, it applies to the Confederate service as well.

The United States army artillery in April, 1861, consisted of four regiments of twelve companies each. A fifth regiment was hastily organized in May, making a total of 60 regular batteries around which the Union artillery was built. Those southern artillery who left the "Old Army" naturally took their expertise with them so, in that sense, the Confederate artillery also was built around the regular U.S. artillery establishment.

Unlike an infantry regiment which was the basic fighting unit of that branch of the service, an artillery regiment almost never -it probably is safe to say never - operated as a whole, the batteries being scattered about with little apparent concern for proper command structure, logistics, firepower or other matters. Both the Union and Confederate services improved considerably in this regard as the war progressed, through in different ways.

In any case, the primary organizational unit, blue or gray, was the battery, with the Federals maintaining a 6-gun standard (until General Grant ordered a reduction to four guns per unit in May, 1864) and the Confederate using a 4-gun standard throughout the war.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

COMPANY: Official term for the component units of an artillery regiment; changed to "Battery" by special War Department order in July, 1866.

BATTERY: Unofficial but commonly accepted term for an artillery company. The word comes from the French verb "a battre" meaning "to beat or batter" and orginated in artillery's earliest days when huge stone or iron balls were used literally to batter down castle walls. Curiously, "battery" was the official term for the units of the 5th U.S. Artillery from that regiment's creation in 1861. The 1866 order mentioned above merely brought the older regiments into line with this common usage. "Battery" also can be used to identify any group of artillery pieces, of whatever type, number, or size, operating together.

BATTALION: Confederate artillery organization usually consisting of three to five batteries, which may or may not have been from the same state, grouped together into a kind of super-battery for greater firepower. Though the Federals also grouped batteries, they did not use them as the Confederates used their "battalions." Thus, there was no true battalion structure in the Union artillery. The artillery as a whole was divided into two groups by function: FOOT artillery and FIELD artillery. Any battery might be assigned to either group.

FOOT ARTILLERY: Official but seldom used term for what commonly was called "Heavy" artillery. Foot batteries generally manned coastal or river fortifications mounting large, immobile guns like Rodmans or the larger Parrotts. During the war, many Union "heavies" served in the defenses of Washington.
Some foot batteries were equipped with medium-sized pieces known as "siege" guns; 30-pdr Parrotts, for example. These were mounted on heavy, but relatively mobile, siege carriages which allowed them to follow in the wake of the army and be emplaced in temporary positions whenever the troops were likely to remain in one place for a while. The expression, "foot artillery", also has been used colloquially to mean artillerymen armed and serving as infantry.

FIELD ARTILLERY: Official term for those batteries assigned to operate in the field with either infantry or cavalry; commonly, but incorrectly, called "Light" artillery. Standard field pieces included the Model 1841 6 and 12-pdrs, 10-pdr Parrot Rifles, 3-in Ordnance (not Ordinance) Rifles, and the "Model 1857 light 12-pdr gun-howitzer" or "Napoleon".

Early on, the Union artillery eased its logistics burden by eliminating the older pieces almost entirely and relying on the rifled guns and Napoleons. By war's end, the Parrotts were themselves being phased out in favor of the lighter, safer, and more accurate Ordnance Rifles. The Confederates, of course, were forced to use whatever they could get, so that even the obsolete little 6-pdrs remained in the Southern inventory.
The Field Artillery was itself subdivided into two functional groups called MOUNTED and HORSE artillery. Again, a given unit could be assigned to either.

MOUNTED ARTILLERY: Official and extremely confusing term for those field batteries assigned to operate with infantry. It was and is confusing because "Mounted" artillery was NOT mounted. The drivers, of course, rode and the rest of the men occasionally would "mount" the limbers whenever speed was required. But generally, like the infantrymen with whom they worked, the "mounted" artillerymen walked. This sometimes results in the added confusion of having them referred to as "foot" artillery.

This somewhat strange usage originated with the structure of the artillery as of 1838. Before that date, the men of an artillery company were divided into distinct groups of drivers and cannoneers. These men wore different uniforms, received different rates of pay, and were not cross-trained in each other's duties. Drivers, moreover, doubled as cavalry and were considered "mounted" troops, while cannoneers doubled as infantry and were considered "foot" soldiers. In 1838, however, these distinctions were eliminated. No longer was there a separate class of drivers who rode while the cannoneers walked. Henceforth, the men were cross trained and each would ride whenever assigned to be a driver. Thus, all of the men occasionally were "mounted." This branch of the artillery kept the "Mounted" designation simply to distinguish itself from the "Foot" artillery. Less frequently, but more accurately, the term 'Harnessed" artillery also was used to identify the "Mounted" artillerymen.

HORSE ARTILLERY: Official term for those field batteries assigned to work with cavalry. In order to keep up with the troopers,each horse artilleryman rode his own horse, a practice devised by Frederick the Great in the mid-18th century and formally adopted by the U.S. Army shortly before the Mexican War. Thus, the "horse" artillery was mounted and the "mounted" artillery was not, leading to frequent but understandable confusion of the terms. Today, when someone refers to "mounted" artillery, it is a safe bet that he means "horse" artillery. In the Army of the Potomac, for example, the number of horse artillery batteries (often called simply "horse batteries") varied during the war but never exceeded twelve. These were organized into formal "Horse Artillery Brigades", similar in some ways to the Confederate "battalions," and assigned to the cavalry as needed. Except for short periods of service by the 6th New York Independent Battery and the 9th Michigan Battery, the Horse Artillery Brigades consisted exclusively of regulars. All other field batteries were "mounted" artillery.

A further distinction between horse batteries and their mounted counterparts was in the use of sidearms. As a general rule, mounted artillerymen carried neither pistol nor saber, while horse artillerymen almost always carried revolvers and frequently, sabers as well (though, of course, they did not wear the sabers while working their guns). Moreover, horse

artillerymen often were cross-trained as cavalry (many of them, in fact, being transfers from the cavalry) and those men not actually serving the guns might be out on the flanks as battery supports to free up the troopers for other duties.
At reenactments, the author often has heard people, including artillerymen, on seeing a horse-drawn gun go by, comment about the "horse-artillery." The reader should take care not to confuse "horse" artillery with "horse-drawn" artillery. The terms are unrelated. Naturally, ALL artillery was horse-drawn (or, in a few cases, mule or ox-drawn) there being no other way to move the pieces around when necessary. Only those batteries so designated, however were "Horse Artillery."

LIGHT ARTILLERY: In artillery, "light" is NOT the opposite of "heavy". "Foot" equals "Heavy" but "Field" does not equal "Light", even though "light artillery" is almost universally used as a synonym for "field artillery." Historically and technically, the term is more limited and means only "horse artillery." Numerous Union and Confederate batteries had the word "Light" in their names. But unless they were formally assigned to and regularly operated with cavalry, each cannoneer being individually mounted, they were not light batteries regardless of that they called themselves. "Light", in this context, has nothing to do with the size or weight of the guns used, but refers only to speed. With the cannoneers individually mounted, a battery could travel much faster - was, so to speak, lighter on its feet - than when the men had to walk or hang precariously from a limber. In short, "light" artillery is "horse" artillery. In the Federal service, light batteries, it is true, were usually equipped with the relatively lightweight (800 lbs) Ordnance Rifles to make it easier for them to keep up with the cavalry (for the same reason their limber chests did not carry as many rounds as the chests of a mounted Ordnance Rifle battery). Several light batteries, however, were armed with the much heavier (1200 lbs) Napoleons. For these units, speed and mobility were achieved through the use of 8-horse, rather than the normal 6-horse, teams. Mounted Napoleon batteries naturally used the standard-sized team.

FLYING ARTILLERY: Occasionally used during the Civil War, this unofficial and rather romantic term was popularized during the Mexican War and also means "light" or "horse" artillery. It is a reference to the comparatively high maneuvering speeds of these batteries and was used admiringly, much as we might comment on the speed of a runner by saying, "He can really fly!". Like the term "light," however, it sometimes is misapplied to field artillery in general.

CONSOLIDATED BATTERIES: From time to time, because of the loss of men or guns, two batteries would be merged. This happened with some frequency but usually was a temporary arrangement as, for example, with batteries H & I of the 1st U.S. and C & E of the 4th which were consolidated for periods of several months. An unusual triple consolidation occurred when C F & K of the 3rd U.S. were merged for the war's final year. Sometimes, as with consolidated B & L of the 2nd U.S. the merger occurred early and lasted the entire war. Historians sometimes will mistake a consolidated battery for two separate units, thereby overestimating the number of guns and the firepower of a given force.

Artillery terminology, understood in its historical context, is not as senseless as it first appears. Nor should it be a mystery to the reenactor who ought to be familiar with the proper military terminology of the time. It must be admitted that the obscure origins and contemporary misuse of terms such as "light" and "mounted" will likely continue to cause confusion in our own day, especially since the incorrect usages tend to be more logical than the correct ones. Still, it is to be hoped that the information presented herein will lessen this confusion and, perhaps, contribute to more accurate impressions.

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