

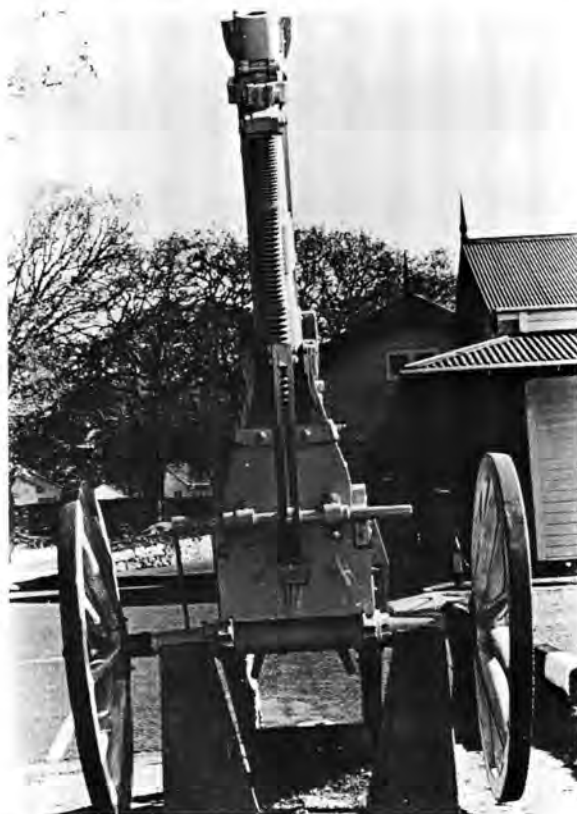
SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS

LT W. M. BISSET, SAN*

Although some useful research has been done on this topic, it would seem that this has not been published. Quite by chance I have discovered some fresh information, which is included in this offering, which it is hoped will prove a useful interim report.

Although the threat from aircraft had been perceived prior to the First World War and anti-aircraft guns had been manufactured by 1909, Britain had relatively few of these weapons when war was declared. Why two 15-pounder Armstrong BLC's (breech-loading cannon) should have been converted for use in an anti-aircraft role by British Army Ordnance Department personnel in the Cape Peninsula is not known. If the conversion experiment had proved a success it would doubtless have been adopted elsewhere.

Details of the new capability of these guns were published in the *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine* in 1914.¹



South Africa's first anti-aircraft guns

The main problem which had to be surmounted was that of designing a new carriage capable of elevation far beyond its maximum of sixteen degrees and of withstanding the recoil because 'the gun alone weighed 9 cwt (457 kilogram) and its normal recoil through the cradle in the field carriage was 3 feet 6 inches (1,06 metre)². Initially only one gun was converted by Captain C.L. Gransden, Inspector of Ordnance Machinery, South Africa and his team of armament artificers at the Army Ordnance Workshops, Fort Knokke,

* Lt W.M. Bisset, SAN is Staff Officer Naval Museums.
1. *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine*, October 1914 (Danger from the Air — An Anti-Aircraft Gun in South Africa), pp 850 and 852.
2. *Ibid.*, p 852.



Woodstock. Its maximum elevation was sixty degrees.

It would seem that Captain Gransden was not entirely satisfied with the success achieved in converting his gun which does not appear to have been given a name. Another improved carriage with a maximum elevation of 71 degrees, extra springs to lessen recoil and raise the gun after firing was built in the Salt River Railway Workshops and the Army Ordnance Workshops, Fort Knokke. The new carriage was constructed from 25 millimetre boiler plate steel and I.V. Hogg and L.F. Thurston state that ten were needed to lift the trail.⁴ This gun, later to be named 'Skinny Liz', was tested in September 1914 before a distinguished company which included Mrs Louis Botha (wife of the Prime Minister), General Sir James Wolfe Murray (General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, South Africa) and Major-General C.W. Thompson, C.B. D.S.O., (Officer Commanding, Cape District). An entry in the Fort Record Book of Queen's Battery in Simonstown mentions that the gun 'was placed in position in rear of the 6-pdrs' and that it was sent to German South West Africa in December 1914. Commander Hay records that 'an anti-aircraft gun dubbed "Skinny Liz" (was) mounted on the fore-castle of the Gaika ready for use should an enemy aeroplane appear', during the voyage to Walfish Bay. How the gun received its name is not known but there may be a connection with Colonel Skinner (later Major-General Sir Percy Skinner, KBE, CB, CMG, DSO) who commanded 1 Infantry Brigade during the voyage.

The gun is mentioned briefly in the Official History, *Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914–1918* on page 44. The only record of shots fired in anger at an enemy aircraft is contained in an official report on 2 Battery, South African Mounted Rifles describes an unsuccessful engagement with a troublesome German *Taube* monoplane. The report adds that one of the recoil springs broke each time a round was fired.⁵

Although the report in the *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine* states that 'Skinny Liz' was 'capable of easy transport'⁷ and although Hogg and Thurston say that the gun was employed in its dual role during the German South West Campaign with 'considerable success'⁸, it would seem

that its weight and the lack of success in its anti-aircraft role may have led to the decision not to use it in another theatre of war. By 1939 Captain C.L. Gransden had been promoted to the rank of Colonel. He had served during the German South West Campaign and it would be interesting to know whether he followed the progress of 'skinny Liz' in the field or whether he wrote any articles on the two guns which he converted.⁹

For many years 'Skinny Liz' and the other Gransden gun stood outside the Wynberg Officers' Club. In 1976 'Skinny Liz' was moved to a place of honour at Youngsfield to serve as an inspiration to our present day 'ack-ack' gunners.



The 'Skinny Liz' manufactured at Fort Knokke.

3. *Ibid.*
4. I.V. Hogg and L.V. Thurston: *British Artillery Weapons and Ammunition 1914–1915* (London, 1972), p 74.
5. Cdr the Hon Sereld Hay: *The history of the RNVR* (South African Division) (Cape Town, 1920), p 130.
6. Research carried out on Union Defence Forces Archives by Documentation Services, South African Defence Force.
7. *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine*, October 1914 (*op. cit.*), p 852.
8. I.V. Hogg and L.F. Thurston: *op. cit.*, p 74.
9. The Half-Yearly Army List, January 1939, p 154.