



A gun salute is fired by the Presidential Salute Battery of the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment, better known by its nickname, "The Old Guard." This 54-mm group was recently unveiled by maker Martin Ritchie of U.S. Military Miniatures and sells for \$142.

# Origins of the 21-Gun Salute

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad uncovers the story behind a ceremonial tradition with a bang

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

**T**he use of gun salutes for military occasions can be traced to early warriors. To demonstrate peaceful intentions, they would place their weapons in a position that rendered them ineffective.

A North African tribe, for example, trailed the points of their spears on the ground to indicate that they did not intend hostilities.

The tradition of rendering a salute

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Warships fired seven-gun salutes. The number seven was probably chosen because of its astrological and biblical significance. Seven planets had been identified and the phase of the moon changed every seven days. The Bible says that God rested on the seventh day of Creation and that every seventh year was sabbatical.

Land batteries, having a greater supply of gunpowder than ships at



sea, were able to fire three guns for every shot fired afloat. Hence, the salute by shore batteries was 21 guns.

Early gunpowder was composed mainly of sodium nitrate and spoiled easily at sea. The advent of potassium nitrate improved the quality and reliability of gunpowder, and with it, ships at sea could boost the salute to 21 guns.

The gun salute system of the United State has changed considerably through the years. In 1810, the “recognized salute was defined by the War Department as equal to the number of states in the Union” — at that time 17. In 1842, the “national salute” was formally established at 21 guns, according to the Headquarters, Military District of Washington. ■



**ABOUT THE WRITER**

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.

**Marlborough Military Models depiction of the British King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery, firing a ceremonial salute.**

**THE FIRST SALUTE BY BARBARA W. TUCHMAN**



Illustration of the Continental Navy brig-of-war Andrew Doria attributed to artist Richard Hess from the book jacket of “The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution,” authored by historian Barbara W. Tuchman. It was the first American vessel to receive a salute from a foreign power.

On Nov. 16, 1776, a ship flying the red-and-white striped flag of the Continental Congress entered the port of St. Eustatius in the West Indies. Adhering to custom on entering a foreign port, the ship fired a salute, and the guns of the island’s fort returned a ritual response. This act of recognition acknowledged that the vessel and its flag represented a legitimate nation. It was the first official salute to the United States of America, and although it took only minutes to carry out, it would have the most profound repercussions through the events of the next five years.