



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
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CELEBRATING AMERICA'S FREEDOMS

Gun Salutes



Today, the firing of guns is seen as a great honor bestowed upon both military and political officials. Firing guns at the approach of a party demonstrates not only welcome but also respect and trust. In former times, however, firing all guns could leave a ship, fort or battery virtually defenseless, for the reloading took a great deal of time. For this reason, gun salutes were seen as a great honor.

The practice of firing gun salutes was well established by the sixteenth century, although gun salutes had existed for centuries. Later, the number of guns to fire was designated for various ceremonies, honors and officials — in relation to their importance and position.

The firing of three rifle volleys (rounds) over the graves of fallen armed forces members and political leaders can be traced to the European dynastic wars, when fighting was halted to remove the dead and wounded. Once an area was cleared of casualties, three volleys were sent into the air as a signal to resume fighting.

By about 1730, the British navy was prescribing 21 guns for certain anniversary dates as a personal salute to members of the royal family. This was not mandatory, however. The 21-gun salute was adopted as the standard salute for royalty in 1808.

The United States fired a “national salute,” on special occasions and during times of mourning, of one gun for each state in the union until 1841, when the salute was standardized at 21 guns. It was customary at that time, when naval vessels were visiting foreign ports, to salute the flag of that nation with the number of guns present in the foreign country’s national salute. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for vessels visiting the United States to fire a salute that, in 1841, doubled the number of

guns prescribed by most other nations (42 as compared to 21). Also, it would have been internationally discourteous to offer a salute to a foreign port with fewer guns than prescribed by our own national salute.

The British proposed that the two nations exchange salutes gun for gun when their vessels visited American ports in the nineteenth century. In 1875, the British minister at Washington, D.C., and the U.S. secretary of state decided to work towards an agreement on salutes. On August 18, 1875, the United States formally adopted the 21-gun salute, the number prescribed by Britain, France and other nations.

No one can explain why the number 21 was chosen for national salutes. In ancient cultures, numerology, the study of numbers, developed symbolism behind most numbers. These cultures believed the number seven to be sacred and, therefore, it is believed, multiples of seven would be looked upon favorably (hence 21). Other gun salutes vary from five guns (the lowest) to 21 guns (the highest) by increments of two, and are prescribed in accordance with occasion and level of importance of those honored. It is generally believed that gun salutes are set off in odd numbers because of an old naval superstition that even numbers are unlucky.