

A twist in time

Three strands of rope are all that stands between a punt-gunner and death, says **Nick Horten**, so rope is not a mundane material to these sportsmen

UNLESS YOU happen to be a waterman, one type of three-strand rope is very much like another, and the subtle differences in the qualities and uses of either man-made or natural fibre rope are frequently lost on the land-bound sportsman. Until, that is, the landsman finds himself laying prone for the very first time on the floorboards of a gunning punt with his face a few bare inches from the intimidatingly solid breech end of a punt-gun.

The sudden realisation that only the few strands of a material, whose properties he does not fully comprehend, separates a safely taken shot from a particularly violent form of amateur dentistry, often provokes a crisis of confidence. It is an extremely brave or trusting novice who resists interrogating his mentor about the punt-gun's rope breaching. What sort of rope is it? Is it strong enough to contain the recoil? How old is it? What will happen if the gun hits me? These are all fairly usual questions.

In point of fact, punt-gun breaching ropes rarely break – the punter has too much interest vested in his face and head to permit the use of worn or inferior rope. Living in an area where punting was once very popular, I do not know of a single incident of a rope giving way.

As for getting too close to the gun, well, that happens all the time. I hardly know a punter who has not experienced a tap on the head from a gun at the end of its recoil travel – right through to those knocked clean unconscious with much accompanying blood and broken teeth.

Stories about “kissing the punt-gun”, as one old chap once described it, are legion. Accidents are usually brought about by lack of concentration or overexcitement on the part of the gunner, but once in a while you hear a tale sufficiently out of the ordinary to justify repeating it in detail.

Dazzle camouflage

JACK GREENTREE senior was one of those blokes who just would not listen to advice. He had served in the Royal Navy before and during the First World War, and he reckoned he knew everything about gunning punts. Instead of painting his punt the traditional pale grey, he got the idea in his head that it would be better if it was painted in the dazzle camouflage used occasionally by the Navy at that time. Other gunners tried to point out that the purpose of painting a ship with large areas of black, grey and white in three-dimensional shapes was not to render it less visible, but to confuse the observer as to its type, course and speed.

Unfortunately for Jack, the wigeon were not deceived by his drunken zebra colour scheme and



Most sportsmen are not concerned with rope quality, but for a punt-gunner it is a vital piece of equipment

by now other gunners were getting a bit irritated, since he resorted to taking extremely long shots that made the birds wild and difficult to approach by more conventionally coloured punts.

Fortunately for the other gunners, another of Jack's brain waves was about to solve their problem. Jack reckoned that he could improve on the good old-fashioned rope breaching by substituting it with a 1in-thick wire hawser. Unable to run the cable through the deck-mounted kicking strap, because it would have kinked the wire, he ran it through a hole in the bow of the punt.

Punters who shared the upper reaches of Langstone Harbour with Jack in the early 1920s threw up their hands in horror, but they knew he would not listen so they let him get on with it. Rope is used to control the recoil of a punt-gun because it has a limited degree of elasticity – something notably absent from a wire cable.

His only concession to safety when test-firing his new apparatus was to kneel in the stern of the punt and fire the gun with a long-trigger lanyard, rather than to lay up close behind it, which was probably just as well. The gun did not hit him, nor did the wire break, although the gun recoiled much further than he had anticipated. The reason for this became apparent later. Meanwhile, the punt rapidly filled, settled lower in the water and, weighed down with the big gun, sank to the bottom of Ports Creek like a stone.

Jack floundered ashore very wet and somewhat mystified as to why his punt had sunk beneath him, shaking his head in disbelief but otherwise unharmed. When the tide dropped he fished out the big gun, but found to his horror that the punt was a write off – the wire rope had sliced the bow block clean in half well below the waterline and pared off a foot of the side planking and foredeck

like a hot knife through butter. Thereafter he used a plain-rope breaching and, everyone would like to think, became a little more receptive to advice.

Left-handed strands

STILL ON the topic of breaching ropes, I recently had the most extraordinary conversation with an ancient Portsmouth Harbour gunner, revealing a facet of the subject never before mentioned in any wildfowling book. “Of course,” said the sprightly 93-year-old, “in my father's day they used to prefer left-handed rope for their breaching.”

At first I thought he was pulling my leg, since left-handed rope seemed about as likely as a sky hook or a gravity bolt. However, not only does it exist, but you can still buy it.

Almost all three-stranded rope is right-handed. While the fibres in the strands are twisted in a clockwise direction, the subsequent strands are themselves laid up with a right-hand twist. Following much experimentation, in 1861 the Royal Navy concluded that rope in which the fibres were twisted conventionally to the right, but the strands to the left, was more pliable and less likely to soak up water, then rot and subsequently break. The Navy went on to use it exclusively for all naval gun tackle for the next 50 years.

The perfect punt-gun breaching rope, developed and tested by the authority on large-bore seaborne artillery, did not escape the Portsmouth punt-gunners' attention for long – they “acquired” it from Her Majesty's dockyard for as long as it remained in service. Left-handed rope, however, was never a secret and it is surprising that other punters failed to discover it.

Punt-gunning is probably the best documented of all forms of wildfowling. However, the odd chapter or two evidently remains to be written. ■