



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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## Dispatch: Big Guns

Michael Yon



The intention was to write a detailed dispatch on the 3-17<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery. Unfortunately, I won't be embedded with 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team until they leave Afghanistan, so the research on this dispatch was not completed. However, there are some nice nighttime photos and so this dispatch is more about Canons than cannons.



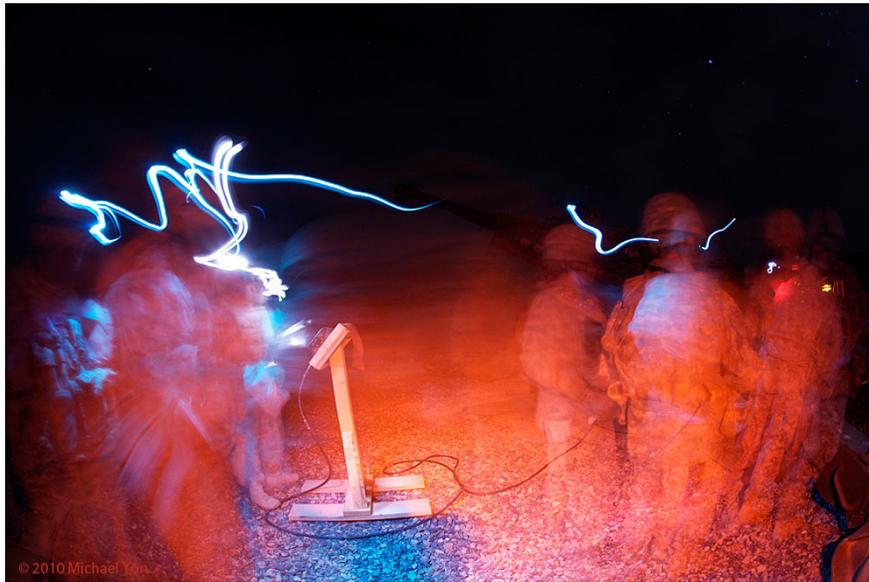
The cannons are ultra-accurate. The commanders are careful with their fire because the guns are also very powerful. When a “fire mission” comes in, the soldiers use the computer to calculate the shot. When you watch the soldiers in action, you can see that they must have practiced this a thousand times. Or more. They just can’t afford to be wrong, and the people who depend on the cannons sometimes cannot wait – so the soldiers must fast and accurate.



Our people use various sorts of ammunition. The most accurate is called “Excaliber,” and it’s a GPS guided smart bomb that is fired from these cannons. The Excaliber is fantastically precise –

more accurate than any sniper – and can make first round hits on the targets 5, 10, 20 miles away. Recently, we (the U.S.) had a software glitch with the Excaliber rounds which would have made them inaccurate within certain calendar dates. There are still some glitches but there is no doubt that we could use a lot more of Excaliber. The incredible first-shot accuracy allows our people to more specifically target and reduce civilian casualties.

(I sat on the software information for a couple months until the problem was fixed.)



Daytime photography is somewhat predictable, but nighttime photography is like a box of chocolates.



With the shutter open for up to 30 seconds per photo, moving soldiers appear as apparitions.



Tonight they were firing illumination. On very dark nights, they sometimes fire IR (infrared) illumination that helps our nightvision gear.



These images came from two cameras. Both are Canon Mark II 5d, and with the best lenses that Canon sells, the Mark II 5d model using Canon professional lenses is the best “normal” (meaning not nightvision or thermal) gear for night shooting that I’ve ever held.



**Photo from Modified Camera**

The sensors on digital cameras are sensitive beyond the visible range, and so the manufacturers install a filter over the sensor that passes only visible light. I paid a company to remove that filter so the camera will pass IR and some UV. Some of the photos in this series are with the normal camera, and the other are made with the modified sensor.



**Normal Canon catches cannon firing with a small charge. When the cannons are firing at close targets, they use small charges that are not bright, such as this one. But when they are firing maybe 20 miles away, the fireball is massive compared to this.**



The illumination drifts down under parachute and the gun can be seen moving as the soldier take a different aim. Soldiers don't call their rifles "guns," but they call the cannons guns. Rifles are called either "rifle," "weapon," "M4" (or whatever model it is), but not "gun."



**Normal Camera**



**Normal camera. To the right, the modified camera is on a tripod and it also has an IR modified flash. I never use a normal flash in Iraq or Afghanistan, though the IR modified flash is fine for on base.**



**Normal**



**From the Normal Box of Chocolates**



**From the IR Box of Chocolates**

You just never know what you will get with night photography.



The gun was moved while the shutter was open. Notice with the modified camera that the stars are a little fuzzy.



### Small Charge



The IR flash strobed once during this photo – which lit up the men, but the sun in the background is actually an illumination round. The IR camera does strange things.



Again the IR flash strobed once.



Again with IR strobe.



**IR strobe.**



**IR strobe.**



**IR strobe.**

And that's about it. This was meant to be a full dispatch but my embed ended before I could finish the research.

*Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael's dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation.*

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