



21-Gun Salute or Three Volley Salute



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Since the enactment of the federal law providing for the rendering of military funeral honors,¹ more and more veterans are receiving a three volley salute at their gravesite. This three volley salute is not a twenty-one gun salute!

Some may remember watching President Reagan's funeral on television. He received both a 21-gun salute and a three volley salute, but for different reasons and by different people using different weapons and at different times during the ceremony.

There is probably no better 'authority' for drills and ceremonies than the Army. The U.S. Army's first drill manual, called the Blue Book, was written at Valley Forge in 1778. Chapter 1 of the current "Drill and Ceremonies" manual (FM 3-21.5)² contains a short history about what happened at Valley Forge and why the Blue Book came into being. It makes for some very interesting reading.

Chapter 14 in the drill manual deals with funerals and the various funeral ceremonies. Skip over to Paragraph 14-10, "Cannon Salute." There you will find, "Immediately preceding the benediction, a *Cannon Salute* corresponding to the grade of the deceased ... is fired at five-second intervals. Following the benediction, three volleys of musketry are fired." (The italics are in the manual for emphasis.) The use of the word 'musketry' in the current edition of the drill manual is possibly a holdover from the Blue Book.

These two salutes are separate events which take place at different times during the funeral ceremony. Now to determine what weapons are used at which time and for which salute.

In Army terminology, a 'gun' is what civilians call a 'cannon'. No soldier will ever refer to his personal, shoulder fired weapon as a 'gun' (or his Sergeant will 'drill' into him the difference).

Paragraph 14-17 in that same chapter has intricate and detailed instructions covering what the 'firing party' does while rendering a three volley salute. There are a variety of weapons which can be used but most are fired from the shoulder. Hand held weapons such as pistols and revolvers have also been used in three volley salutes.

As an aside, there is an organization, *Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War*, whose members are actively searching for the burial sites of Civil War veterans.³ When they hold a ceremony for a Civil War veteran, they fire three volleys using muskets. Some may be using rifles but all of their weapons are muzzle loading, single shot, black powder, shoulder fired, Civil War era weapons. It takes them a while to fire all three volleys because of the loading and re-loading of the weapons.

This brings up another difference between the two salutes. A 'volley' is when all the weapons are fired simultaneously. In a Cannon Salute, the guns are fired one at a time.

How many weapons are fired depends on a couple of factors. How many weapons are available and how many people are available to fire them.

It really doesn't matter if there is only one gun or twenty-one guns as long as they are fired one at a time until the total number of firings is reached.

Paragraph 14-17 in the FM 3-21.5 says, "For ceremonial firing, the firing party consists of not more than eight riflemen and not less than five with one noncommissioned

officer in charge.” The main thing is that they all fire simultaneously each of the three volleys.

Why did President Reagan receive a 21-gun Salute? For that we need to look at the Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) and the U.S. Army’s most elite drill and ceremony unit, those who perform the ceremonies at Arlington. On the ANC’s “Military Honors” web page (click on the “Full” tab)⁴ dealing with funerals at ANC we find, “The president of the United States is entitled to a 21-gun salute....”

(For a complete listing of who gets how many ‘Guns’ for their salute, see the U.S. Army Regulations, specifically Table 2-1 in AR 600-25.⁵)

By the way, the Reagan funeral’s military ceremonies were conducted by members of the ‘Old Guard’, the 3rd United States Infantry, who, among other duties, perform most if not all of the military funeral ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. Company E of the Old Guard provides the Sentinels for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Now you know the difference between the two salutes, when they are given, who does the firing and with which weapons. Gun salutes, including a 21-gun salute, are fired from cannons. Three volley salutes are usually fired using shoulder fired weapons.

Next time you see a ‘firing party’ at a funeral ceremony you will notice that they each fire three times. This is the traditional three volley salute to which every honorably discharged veteran is entitled.

¹ USC Title 10 § 1491 <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/10/usc_sec_10_00001491----000-.html>

² U.S. Army FM 3-21.5 <http://www.combatindex.com/store/field_man/Sample/FM_3-21_5.pdf>

³ Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War <<http://suvvw.org/graves/graves.htm>>

⁴ ANC <<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/FuneralInformation/MilitaryHonors.aspx>>

⁵ U.S. Army AR600-25 Table 2-1 <http://www.apd.army.mil/jw2/xmldemo/r600_25/head.asp>

The reference ² link above goes to a sample of the manual which includes Chapter 1. For a download of the entire manual, including Chapter 14, go to: <www.usarmyband.com/audio/media/FM_3_21_5.pdf>.

