

'Gun battle' splits Lakes village

By CHARLES HENN

A MAJOR ROW has been sparked in a Lakeland community following the rescue of an old German howitzer on Sunday from the bottom of Coniston Water.

The combatants are the Army, represented by the 4th Bn, King's Own Royal Border Regiment, who now have the gun, the Lunesdale Sub-aqua Club, who rescued it, and the British Legion's Coniston branch and the Rawdon-Smith Trust, which governs the lake bed, who want it put back.

Almost as soon as the gun had been brought ashore by the sub-aqua club as part of an "exercise," soldiers arrived and took it away.

Lt-Col Peter Dew, who commands the 4th battalion, said: "The truth is that we have the gun and are interested in preserving it as a museum piece. We believed it to have been abandoned; if it had been valuable to the people of Coniston they had 50 years in which to retrieve it themselves."

'Could not refuse'

The colonel added that although he was not in a position to have instructed the club to raise the gun, "it came up and was an offer we could not refuse."

Villagers seem divided as to whether the gun, presented to them as a First World War memento, should be retained. But Mr Edward Troughton, president of the local British Legion, said: "We will want it dumped straight back into the lake. It is all a matter of 'lest we forget'."

"Our First World War hero, Jim Hewitson, V.C., was one of those who objected to it when the gun was presented to the village. He was one of the party of lads who, after meeting one night in a local public house, decided to run it off the jetty."

"It is still our job to respect his wishes. When they knew our feelings, the action of the sub-aqua club is just beneath contempt. They should be ordered to put it back."

Letter plea

The sub-aqua club, whose plans to lift the gun last November were spiked by British Legion anger, yesterday received a letter from the Rawdon-Smith Trust asking the divers "speedily to return the gun to Coniston parish."

The letter continues: "Your action has caused the greatest parish and the trustees have already instructed me to seek legal advice. If a case of common theft is pursued it must be the Lunesday aqua club who will have to answer the charge."

Mr Robert Skelly, spokesman for the sub-aqua club, said he had also had a telephone call from the trust secretary and understood the Army would be getting a similar demand to return the gun.

"If the colonel were to give it up we might have to return it to Coniston, but our lads would not be pleased about putting it back into the water."

An Army spokesman said last night: "Common sense will decide where this old gun finally ends up. In the meantime it is probably in the best hands for safe keeping."