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978-1-107-67015-0 - Sword, Lance and Bayonet: A Record of the Arms of the British Army and Navy  
Charles Ffoulkes and Captain E. C. Hopkinson

Excerpt

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## Early Regulations, Warrants, and Records

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## EARLY REGULATIONS, WARRANTS, AND RECORDS<sup>1</sup>

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It would be perhaps an irreverent exaggeration to say that the Army of the eighteenth century was in a state of anarchy as regards equipment, but it is an incontrovertible fact that till the beginning of the nineteenth century there were few regulations which applied to the whole Army, and these seem to have been honoured as much in the breach as in the observance. To the student of military subjects it is heart-breaking to wade through the vast mass of documents in the Public Record Office classed under the heading "W.O." which teem with warrants, out-letters, commissions, reports, pensions, ordnance records and other naval and military matters. It is true that some attempt was recently made to compile a printed index, but this serves only to raise false hopes, and the searcher finds, especially as regards arms and equipment, that the reference is to a bare fact with no details.

Take for example the Board of a round dozen of General Officers who issued an order dated 31 May 1788<sup>2</sup> dealing with swords for the Heavy Dragoons and Light Dragoons. This gives useful information as to the blades, which measured for the Heavy Dragoons  $39 \times 1\frac{5}{12}$  in. and for the Light Dragoons  $36 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$  in., the blade being curved " $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches from the straight". In the case of the former the hilts were to be "half-basket as carried by the Inniskilling Dragoons" and in the case of the latter "as now used". It has, however, been impossible to trace a previous order for these patterns and we can only assume that the Colonels of these regiments had adopted them in earlier years and that the War Department accepted them eventually as the designs for general use.

<sup>1</sup> Where not otherwise stated all references are to the Public Record Office.

<sup>2</sup> W.O. 3/27, p. 36.

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The Colonel was for long supreme in the question of equipping his men, and we find that tastes differed as to whether steel or brass hilts were preferable. Indeed, some commanding officers seem to have been careless as to the actual supply of weapons to their men, and this perhaps can hardly be wondered at when it is remembered that as a rule the Colonel had to foot the bill. It was not only the Colonel who was in fault, for in some cases, after a deficiency had been reported, the Inspecting Officer passed the swords as correct. The following returns go far to show the parlous state of the Army as regards equipment in the middle of the eighteenth century, at a time when this country was conducting military operations in Europe, India and America. On 27 April 1753 the 13th Foot are reported as having "arms very bad and absolutely unfit", and on 10 September of the same year, for 700 rank and file they had only 103 swords, mostly unfit for service. On 3 November of the same year the swords of the Royal Regiment of Dragoons were scheduled "very clean but old and worn, almost all unfit for service". These had had hard service as they had been issued in 1744. The Inspecting Officer, John Campbell (Duke of Argyll), writes: "a very fine regiment and when supplied with arms will be fit for service." The King's Own Dragoons were worse off on 13 May 1754, for they reported their arms as "so worn as to be really unfit for any service". The same conditions are noted for the 3rd Foot in October of 1755 and yet John Campbell reports: "a very good regiment, well appointed."<sup>1</sup> Another entry under the date 1768 gives the number of sergeants of the 49th Foot as fifteen and reports all their seventeen halberds and swords as bad, the Inspecting Officer compromising by merely stating: "Arms clean." And so this goes on all through the Returns of this period with an occasional ray of hope for the Army as instanced by the report of the 12th Foot: "swords remarkably good."<sup>2</sup>

Evidently this question of deficiencies came to a head in

<sup>1</sup> W.O. 27/3.

<sup>2</sup> W.O. 27/14.

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1768, for a Royal Warrant was issued on 19 December laying down that all sergeants and the whole of the Grenadier companies were to have swords. The Highland Regiments, however, had their own ideas on the subject, and in 1775 the Grenadiers of the 42nd Foot paraded without swords, which they considered to be “encumbrances”,<sup>1</sup> and by 1783 they had returned all their swords to the Ordnance at Halifax, the Inspecting Officer merely noting the fact without criticism of this direct defiance of orders.

Whether other regiments followed suit or not it is impossible to say, but evidently the 42nd won the day, and an order was issued on 21 July 1784 discontinuing the use of swords for Grenadier Companies.<sup>2</sup> But in spite of regulations and warrants the Colonels had still some voice in the matter, for the Board of 31 May 1788 before referred to would not commit themselves as to whether British or German swords were the better, but played for safety and allowed the Colonels to have which they liked.<sup>3</sup> It should be remembered that means of communication were difficult and that it took a long time for an order to reach troops in Scotland, Ireland or America; and conversely, if an order were ignored it took some time for a record of the delinquency to reach the Horse Guards, and by that time the Government might have changed and with it the ruling military powers at headquarters. With the advent of the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns, as has been the case in all wars, the important need of the moment was to carry on with the equipment available, for there was no Ministry of Munitions to organize civilian factories, and indeed, to an appreciable extent, there were few factories in this country for the production of war material, much of which came direct from Germany. If this had been otherwise Wellington might have given favourable consideration to the epoch-making invention of the Rev. Alexander Forsyth, who produced his percussion lock in 1805 and had to

<sup>1</sup> W.O. 27/1–60 sub anno.<sup>2</sup> W.O. 3/26, p. 155.<sup>3</sup> W.O. 3/27, p. 37.

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wait till 1839 to see its adoption by the Rifle Brigade. With the British Infantry armed with a percussion musket Wellington might not have said of Waterloo that it was “a damned serious thing . . . the nearest run thing in my life”.<sup>1</sup>

When the war was over and the military authorities had time to take stock of the general confusion of orders, warrants and regulations, the Horse Guards issued the first complete *Dress Regulations* in 1822 and these have been revised from time to time up to the year 1934. In 1856 there is a tantalizing record of an order that the *Dress Regulations* were to be accompanied by coloured illustrations by a competent artist at an estimated cost of £200.<sup>2</sup> Either the artist could not be found, or, as is more probable, the Treasury, smarting under the cost of the Crimean War, considered, very properly, that the expenditure of so much public money was entirely unjustifiable. However, the matter was not dropped and was revived in 1866 when four volumes of *Army Equipment* were issued with the intention of illustrating the text with coloured and monochrome plates. For some unknown reason illustrations of General Officers, Cavalry and Artillery equipment were omitted. The volumes dealing with Royal Engineers, Infantry, and the Army Hospital Corps were treated in minute detail: uniform, small arms, and even axes, saws and other minutiae, being carefully illustrated. But this was too good to last and plain and unadorned *Dress Regulations* were issued periodically as occasion demanded till the advent of process reproduction led the authorities to bring out in 1900 a quarto volume of the *Regulations* fully illustrated, which is revised from time to time to conform to new orders and changes.

The arms and equipment of the rank and file have been dealt with in the *List of Changes* first published in 1860, each change being illustrated at first by crude wood engravings but in later years by process blocks.

It is difficult to explain the fact that while many works have

<sup>1</sup> *Creevey Papers*, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> W.O. 3/328, p. 244.

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been produced up to the present dealing with swords of earlier periods or with civilian fencing and duelling, only one author in the last hundred years has dealt specifically and scientifically with the sword as a fighting weapon of modern armies.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that in the middle of the nineteenth century the subject was frequently discussed in Service periodicals, notably by the late General Sir C. Beauchamp Walker, Colonel F. J. Graves, Mr Henry Wilkinson and Mr John Latham; the former being distinguished Cavalry officers, and the last two being authorities of the first order on the manufacture of swords, and on the conditions which rule, or should rule, their design. But from observations of officers evidently interested in the subject, we find that while opinions differed materially on the importance of the sword as a weapon, the majority of writers were agreed that the ideal sword, especially for Cavalry, could never be evolved and that the lance (which was the weapon under special consideration in these Journals) was, when combined with pistol or carbine, the favoured weapon for modern Cavalry operations. Indeed, the late General Brabazon and certain officers of the present day, who had had practical experience in war, have gone so far as to suggest that a combination of the lance and mace, or battle-axe, is the better equipment for Cavalry.<sup>2</sup>

In the latter part of the eighteenth century uniform and equipment was not subject to the definite regulations which rule today, and commanding officers had to bear the cost of many items which are now provided out of public funds.

In 1725 it was reported to the War Department that in Colonel Handasyde's Regiment of Foot there were 360 firelocks and bayonets deficient. The Colonel was therefore ordered to replace these from the Ordnance Store at the cost of 24s. per firelock and 2s. per bayonet. In the following year when Colonel Otway transferred two companies from his regiment to

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Marey, *Mémoire sur les Armes Blanches*, 1841.

<sup>2</sup> Maj.-General von Czerlieu (*Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, XLVII) quotes Seidlitz as in favour of a sword or mace for Cavalry.

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that of Colonel Handasyde the latter did not approve of their arms and Colonel Otway had to return them to Store and purchase other arms at a cost of £153.<sup>1</sup>

The arms of the several regiments were therefore the personal property of the Commanding Officer and this arrangement lasted up to the end of the century. A Memorandum from the Horse Guards, dated 27 March 1799, reads as follows: "His Royal Highness is of opinion that as the accoutrements are the personal property of the colonel it would be advisable that you should take those belonging to the 5th Dragoons into your care in preference to lodging them with the Ordnance." This Order is addressed to Major-General Henry Fox, youngest son of the first Lord Holland.<sup>2</sup>

While there was some attempt to standardize weapons the very fact that no State factories existed till well into the nineteenth century made it impossible to lay down hard and fast rules. With the succession of George IV to the throne and the establishment of peace in Europe, the military authorities had an opportunity to set their house in order, a result being the issue of *Dress Regulations*.

Unfortunately there are but few informative records preserved in the War Office papers previous to 1822 which might indicate the reasons for discarding one pattern in favour of another.

In 1884 a *Treatise on Military Small Arms* was produced by Lieut.-Col. H. Bond, R.A., under the aegis of the War Office, which besides technical details gives a short history of the arms of the British Army with some useful illustrations. The next illustrated works are the *Tables of Small Arms* of 1893–1910, and the *Dress Regulations* from 1900 onwards. In the *Tables* all the swords are drawn with the hilt in profile, thus, with the exception of the Scottish broadsword, band-swords and sword-bayonets, making it impossible to recognize the design of most of the Cavalry and staff-sergeants' swords. The design for the Infantry sword of 1895, however, is clearly shown in three

<sup>1</sup> W.O. 26/17, pp. 45, 147.<sup>2</sup> W.O. 3/19, p. 282.



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positions in the "Specifications", and the Cavalry 1908 pattern, even when drawn in profile, explains itself sufficiently. The *Dress Regulations* of 1900 and 1911 are more precise as regards the illustrations of officers' swords, for these are mostly shown in profile and in plan, and the swords of Rifle Regiments and the Royal Army Medical Corps are sufficiently well reproduced in three-quarter profile.

In the *Dress Regulations* between the years 1822 and 1904 no dates of approval of the several patterns are given, and in the last-mentioned year, though the date for the General Officer's sword is recorded as 1896 and that of Rifle Regiments as 1902, there is no indication of the fact that these were, in their main designs, the same as the patterns of 1831 and 1822 respectively. For some unexplained reason drawings of officers' swords of the Household Cavalry are omitted from the *Dress Regulations*.

The information given in these volumes from 1822 up to 1894 is disheartening in the extreme, for terms are employed which, although they were understood at the time, convey little or nothing to us at the present day without the supporting evidence of actual examples or illustrations. Such terms as "shell", "boat-shell", or "half-basket" might be employed to describe sword-hilts of many entirely different types, and in the case of earlier patterns it is only by finding weapons dated or ensigned with the Royal monogram, by reference to portraits or to military prints, that we are able to explain the official nomenclature. Here again we are faced with difficulties, for in portraits it may be that the sitter is painted in General's uniform but wearing the sword of his regiment or of an obsolete type.

Modern military artists are serious offenders, for they more often depict the soldier facing to the right with his sword hidden from view, or facing to the left with the sword-hilt obscured by the wearer's hand, or sometimes they shamelessly skimp the drawing of the hilt, proof positive that in the nineteenth century at any rate the artist suffered from that ignorance of the varieties

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of the regulation sword, which is put forward as one of the reasons for these all too incomplete notes.

Many swords of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still with us in the Tower and in other collections, but when we find them in Mid-Victorian Inventories entered as “80 swords of various nationalities” we cannot hope to obtain useful evidence from records of this nature. It is to contemporary prints and drawings that we have to turn, and at any rate between the years 1742 and 1830 we have records by draughtsmen more or less skilled and, what is more important, the drawings are dated. These taken in conjunction with the vast mass of Army Orders, Inspections and Returns preserved in the Public Record Office, help us with some degree of certainty to date the weapons we possess or reconstruct those missing from the pictorial records.

The earliest of these is the *Representation of Cloathing of His Majesty's Forces*, a volume of coloured engravings made in 1742 to the order of the Duke of Cumberland, of which copies are to be found in Windsor, the War Office and Prince Consort (Aldershot) Libraries, wherein with some degree of clarity the swords and other weapons of Cavalry and Infantry are depicted. The next of importance is the collection of paintings preserved at Windsor Castle by David Morier, a Swiss who was engaged at a salary of £200 per annum by the Duke of Cumberland to make records of the uniforms and equipment of the period, most of his works being dated 1751. Morier's detail in such items as sword-hilt and horse furniture form incontestable evidence of the armament and uniform of the years from 1742 to 1751. For those who cannot journey so far afield there are excellent tracings of Morier's paintings in the War Office Library made by the Rev. P. Sumner, who has made exhaustive studies of military uniforms for over twenty years. The set of coloured engravings by Edward Dayes in the British Museum gives valuable detail respecting the arms of the Infantry in 1792, and it is to be regretted that this artist did not record with the same exactitude of detail the equipment of Cavalry Regiments.