

The Scots in Wartime

(A wee look at Scottish Regiments)

*** * * * Pt. Two Conclusion * * * ***

With the outbreak of the American War of Independence (1775-83) yet another great flurry of recruiting began in the Highlands. Although slow to begin with, there finally emerged nine new Highland corps, the names of which are as follows:

- 71st – Fraser's Highlanders**
- 73rd – Lord MacLeod's Highlanders**
- 74th – Barbreck's (Argyll) Highlanders**
- 76th – Lord MacDonald's Highlanders**
- 77th – Duke of Atholl's Highlanders**
- 78th – Lord Seaforth's Highlanders**
- 81st – Aberdeenshire Highlanders**
- 84th – Royal Highland Emigrants**
- (?) --Perthshire Highlanders**

Throughout most of the 18th century it was the government's policy to create regiments only for the duration of major conflicts. Thus, in 1783 all the Highland regiments were disbanded, leaving only the Black Watch and some Fencible corps which had been raised for national defence.

A third battalion of the Black Watch had also been raised and sent to India in 1780, where it remained for six years, after which time the officers and non-commissioned ranks were ordered back to Britain. The 'buck' privates meanwhile were to be dispersed among other regiments in India; being a ruling totally against the terms of enlistment. However, after some considerable representation by the commanding officer, the order was reversed. In fact, the battalion was then brought up to regiment strength and numbered 73rd (The 73rd Lord MacLeod's Hldrs. were re-numbered 71st at the same time).

It is sometimes difficult to highlight the many changes, due to disbandment, merger and re-grading that had taken place between 1739 and 1800. Apart from the units already mentioned here, this same period also produced some twenty-four Fencible regiments and four Militia corps, all raised for fear of invasion by France and to control internal civil disturbances. However, the unpopular legislation brought in to facilitate the recruitment of Militia (essentially a civic force) itself may have sparked off some of the most violent civil riots of the era.

Mutiny in the ranks

During the same period, there occurred fourteen serious mutinies among Highland regiments, mostly due to mismanagement and individual acts of cruelty by officers and military authority in general. Moreover, there were no proper avenues along which

grievances might be given a hearing. Authoritarian regard for the welfare of the Highlanders may well be reflected in the remarks of an English officer, Major James Wolfe, who said of the Gaels: "*They are hardy intrepid, accustomed to rough country, and no great mischief if they fall. How can you better employ a secret enemy than by making his end conducive to the common good?*"

It seems that Wolfe nursed a kind of love/hate regard for Highlanders, so it is perhaps ironic that as he lay mortally wounded on the Plains of Abraham, he was wrapped for comfort in a plaid offered by one of the Highlanders who helped to give him his great victory in Canada.

In 1793, France again declared war on Britain (or was it the other way around?) which subsequently led to the protracted Peninsular War until the final showdown with Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo. This was the period when we begin to see the true forerunners of modern Highland regiments that most of us today recognise. By 1861, the official Order of Precedence shows the following muster of Highland corps.

- 1739 – Royal Highland Regiment (Black Watch**
- 1777 – 71st Highland Light Infantry**
- (Originally 73rd Lord MacLeod's)**
- 1778 – 72nd (Duke of Albany's Own Hldrs.) Regt.**
- 1780 – 73rd (Perthshire) Regiment**
- 1787 – 74th (Highlanders) Regiment**
- 1787 – 75th (Stirlingshire) Regiment**
- 1793 – 78th (Highland) Regt. of Ross-shire Buffs**
- 1793 – 79th Regiment of Cameron Highlanders**
- 1794 – 90th (Perthshire) Regiment**
- 1794 – 91st (Argyllshire) Regiment**
- 1794 – 92nd (Gordon Highlanders) Regiment**
- 1800 – 93rd (Sutherland Highlanders) Regiment**

All of the above-named units wore Highland dress, through its various changes from the traditional belted plaid (*feileadh-mor*) with military jackets and regimental facings, to the small kilt (*feileadh-beag*). The tartan worn by most was of government design and which ultimately became known as the Black Watch sett. Later, some of the regiments had additional lines woven in; the Seaforths added a white and a red line, which came to be regarded as a MacKenzie sett; the Gordons chose a yellow line. An exception was the Cameron Highlanders, who wore a sett said to have been designed by the mother of the regiment's first commanding officer, Alan Cameron of Erracht. This was a red design believed to be a mixture of MacDonald and Cameron setts, but might equally have been an old Lochaber pattern.

There were occasions when some regiments. Like the 91st 'Argyllshires' and the 71st Highland Light Infantry were dressed as ordinary Line soldiers, or

wore tartan trews. Likewise, there was a lightweight uniform designed for those soldiers serving with the East India Company, where the heat made the plaid impractical.

There were, of course, times when some so-called Highland uniforms bordered on the ridiculous, and bore little resemblance to the ancient garb of the Gael. Outlandish ornamentations – all probably introduced at the whim of non-Highland colonels or eccentric clan chiefs – produced such horrors as those great feather bonnets, and the equally grotesque ‘hairy’ sporrans, the effects of which are still evident in many pipe band uniform seen today!

I often wondered just how those poor soldiers survived under the sheer weight and discomfort of the uniforms thrust at them. During my own brief and undistinguished service of more recent times, I recall the rank-and-file Jocks had many complaints over ill-fitted clothing – a particular example being the infamous khaki tam-o-shanter bonnet (TOS for short). This monstrosity had all the sartorial elegance of a dried out cow pat! And when soaked by rain it looked and felt like a joiner’s nail bag!

On those, thankfully few, occasions when I was obliged to don the modern version of Highland uniform (No.1 Dress) I was forever thankful that my only physical exertion went no further than a short ceremonial march, or better still, just to stand on sentry duty and try to look intelligently picturesque. Indeed, any idea of being ordered to charge up (or down) a hill wearing such finery would have been too cruel to even contemplate!

Military Music

Pipe bands were not officially recognised in the British Army until 1854. Regulations generally allowed for a pipe-major and five pipers per battalion. Prior to this, it seems that pipers were often disguised on the payroll as drummers; later on, pipes and drums (bands) were largely financed by individual officers in each regiment.

The Army School of Piping was set up in 1910 for the training of pipe-majors. Even so, it seems that it was not until 1918 that Lowland Scottish regiments were allowed to have official pipers and a greater use of tartan.

Some English officers tried unsuccessfully to have pipe music banned. For while, in 1850, the 91st Argyllshire Highlanders lost their pipers, due to the whim of an inspecting officer, namely Major-General G. Brown, the Adjutant General of the day. No reason was given! In contrast, when the four Highland regiments marched out after the Relief of Lucknow, their pipers numbered 140 in total. Likewise, many are the stories of lone pipers who led their companies into battle, seemingly oblivious to personal danger.

Cardwell Reforms

Possibly the biggest shake-up of the British Army came with the Cardwell Reforms of 1881, which actually set the mould for modern army organisation until the end of World War II, at least.

Several regiments were paired-up to become 1st and 2nd battalions of a single unit. Similarly, the Militia and district Volunteer corps were brought under Army control and became 3rd and 4th – and even 5th – battalions of Territorial Volunteers (later to become a reserve Territorial Army) and were affiliated to Regular Army units. The Cardwell Reforms reduced the number of Highland regiments from around eighteen to ten. During the process of pairing off, five new regiments were created. Thus, the Order of Precedence changed as follows.

The Royal Scots (Lothian Regiment)

The Royal Scots Fusiliers

The King’s Own Borderers (the word ‘Scottish’ was added in 1887)

The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)

The Black Watch (Royal Highlanders)

The Highland Light Infantry

The Seaforth Highlanders (Ross-shire Buffs, Duke of Albany’s).

The Gordon Highlanders

The Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders

Princess Louise’s Argyll & Sutherland Hldrs.

Not mentioned in the above order are the **Scots Guards**, which belonged as part of a different (Royal) brigade structure, and the **Scots Greys** which was a cavalry unit. Nor have I given mention of other mounted Yeomanry corps, and the famous **Lovat Scouts** who, along with numerous Territorial and Service battalions, gave valiant service in the last two major wars: having been mobilised in times of need to form the bulk of the British Army in wartime.

Space does not permit reference to artillery, armoured and service units – not forgetting the **Royal Army Medical Corps** – all necessary and no less important than the fighting elements of an army. Neither can we exclude the many Scots in exile who served in affiliated Scottish regiments in Canada, Australia and other ex-British colonies.

The new 1881 arrangement *did* assist with recruitment, in that while one Regular battalion was overseas the other would serve as a feeder unit. Also, during major campaigns, the Volunteer units could be mobilised for overseas duties, as witnessed during the South African wars of the nineteenth century. Some campaigns involved no more than one or two regiments, whilst others, like the Boer War (1899-1902), with the exception of four cavalry units, saw every Regular regiment engaged. These were ably supported by detachments from 43

Yeomanry regiments and 50 Militia battalions – this was possibly the only time in 250 years when the British Army actually outnumbered its enemy!

World War 1

There were, however, some adverse side effects which arose from the creation of 'county' regiments, among which the awful death toll in World War I (1914-18) had to be reckoned with. An example is seen where, during May 1915, as a result of heavy bombardment and gas attacks on the Western Front, the 1st/9th Battalion Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders was reduced from a strength of 900 men to only two officers and 85 men. The resulting loss of young men, not to mention human distress, in Dunbartonshire (particularly the four-mile long Vale of Leven) can only be visualised. Such was the case throughout the United Kingdom, simply because the lads wanted to serve in their county regiment and in company with their own street mates.

By 1948 all regiments were systematically reduced to one Regular battalion, supported by the Territorial Army units. These were the 'Weekend Jocks'! And in later years there occurred further reshuffling due to government cuts in defence spending. Apart from the Lowland regiment mergers, referred to earlier, we saw in 1961 the 'marriage' of the Seaforth's and Camerons, to create **The Queen's Own Highlanders** which, in turn, merged with the Gordon's in 1996 to become, simply **The Highlanders**.

In the foregoing notes, I have made no mention of other British army elements in which many Scots have served, including the **Royal Marines**, which is really the Royal Navy's 'personal infantry'! Then we have the **Special Air Service** (SAS) founded during WWII and now very much UK's leading covert unit. But this report would never be complete without mention of the **Ghurkha Rifles**, being those brave little warriors from the highlands of Nepal – who always had a close affinity with Scottish units (in spite of being paid less than British soldiers until 2009) and whose pipers wear Douglas tartan.

Currently, as a result of the more recent (highly controversial) warfare in oil-rich Iraq and an other, equally debateable, conflict in Afghanistan, we have seen more British defence reorganisation. Today, there is only **one** Scottish infantry unit in UK, being **The Royal Regiment of Scotland**. Formed in 2006, but this is a subject for future consideration – if I ever find the heart and inspiration to write about it!

Malcolm Lobban.

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German Kilties!

There is a little-known story of an incident which took place during the Second Battle of Ypres, in May 1915, when German soldiers wearing kilts attacked the Scottish trenches.

The story emerges in a report on how Major James Christie, of the 9th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders won his DSO at Ypres during World War 1.

During the night of 9th May the Argylls were ordered to reinforce the 2nd Camerons with two companies. Thus, under heavy enemy fire, Major Christie led his men to a position astride the Menin Road, 200 yards west of Hooze, where the Cameron Highlanders were. Here they dug themselves in, while the major went for further orders.

At 9.30pm he was ordered to lead one company forward to reinforce a trench south of the Menin Road and between Sanctuary Wood, which was reported to be breaking. "A" Company was chosen, which immediately advanced in short rushes – amid cheers of "**Good old 9th Argylls!**" They reached their objective in spite of murderous shelling and a gas attack.

The trench which they had come to save had already broken, and men were falling back. At the sight of the Argylls, however, they raised a cheer, and passing through them they rushed into the trench and bayoneted or chased out the astonished Germans, who fell back in some disorder. The Argylls and Camerons repaired the damaged trench and awaited further developments.

"Presently they saw, to their astonishment, a strong force of men in Cameron kilts, advancing through the Belleward Wood, north of Menin Road, towards the trenches of the 91st. Uncertain as to whether they were British or Germans, they refrained from firing, until volley upon volley from the trenches of the 91st told them they were enemy in disguise."

The foregoing reference to the "91st" probably relates to the 1st Battalion Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (Regular soldiers) whereas the 9th was a Territorial unit.

The idea of soldiers disguising themselves by wearing the uniform of their enemy is not unique in warfare. In this case it is likely that the Germans obtained the uniforms from captured British soldiers.

Nevertheless, although the Germans of the period are known to have held Scottish soldiers in high esteem, the idea of them donning Highland dress does tend to stretch the imagination just a wee bit!

One has to wonder if they remembered to remove their unique spiked helmets! Moreover, what were **they** wearing under their kilts? Ed.