

Sabretaches

by Lt. Colonel

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Lt. Col. Nicholson, born in London in 1915, is a retired officer of the British Army in India. He is widely known in Anglo-American circles for his studies of uniforms, accoutrements and insignia of the past, in particular of Britain's but also of other nation's forces. He is editor of Tradition Magazine, dedicated to uniform studies, and author of many articles as well as the books Military Uniforms and The British Army in Crimea (both London, 1973). He is also his own illustrator, rendering in watercolors and pen sketches his reconstructions of uniforms and pertinent objects, and often also of scenes showing their employment. He is married and has a son who is studying at Oxford.



The sabretache is one of those strange pieces of military equipment the use or purpose of which often appears incomprehensible to the layman. It was in fact an eminently practical, even essential item in its earliest form, having been neither more nor less than a plain pouch or haversack worn on the left side by Hungarian horsemen, alongside the sabre. The German word for pouch is *Tasche*.

With the widespread demand for light cavalry in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hungarian Hussar became the accepted model upon which most European powers based at least a part of their cavalry establishment; and since according to contemporary thinking no cavalryman could possibly function as a hussar if wearing anything other than the full Hungarian costume, this was duly adopted, with such minor local variations as were considered appropriate. The full regalia was not always designed, adopted, manufactured and issued in one single governmental spending spree, although this was *sometimes* the case. The British Light Dragoon dress, for example, became gradually closer to the Hungarian fashion until, in a final spurt, four regiments were converted to Hussars in 1807, fur cap and all.

Officers of Light Dragoons had begun to adopt the sabretache in the 1790's, and it had already become a flat map and writing case, far less bulky than its ancestors. At this stage it was still most useful, but was already becoming decorative as well,

and very shortly the structural quality, elegance and beauty, and consequently the expense, of officers' sabretaches — laced, embroidered with monograms, battle-honours, mottoes and insignia of one sort or another — rose so vertiginously that plain leather models, with perhaps a simple metal badge, were taken into use for daily and campaign wear. The decorative dress models were reserved for occasions of pomp and circumstance, and were seldom and perhaps never opened. The collector, however, who has the good fortune to find one should always look inside as sometimes the name of the former owner or his visiting card may be found, or at least the name of the manufacturer. (I do not wish to try the reader's credulity, but I once found a two-shilling piece in a Highland sporran . . .) Sometimes a sabretache was provided with an oiled silk cover as a protection against wear and tear, but these rarely survive and should not be confused with the well-made leather cases lined with velvet which were often supplied by manufacturers for storing the sabretache when not in use.

Amongst the earliest British examples is that worn by officers of the 26th Light Dragoons. It is covered entirely with leopard skin except for a circle of red cloth in the centre upon which are the numerals "26" in silver; it was worn upon three straps. An even more elaborate model, shaped like a shield, was worn by officers of the Governor General of India's Bodyguard in 1791. It was also covered with leopard skin, but was edged with wide silver lace and had a large blue-edged silver star in the centre, and was worn on two short straps not more than four inches long. By the 1800s most officers of Light Dragoons appear to have adopted sabretaches, usually faced with red or blue cloth with gold or silver embroidery and laced edge according to regiment. The usual device at this period was the letters G R for *Georgius Rex* (George the Third having been King of England at the time), this being surmounted by a crown which was usually of gold embroidery, the "jewels" in the crown often rendered in coloured silks and the top of the crown showing a crimson velvet lining. Later on, when battle-honours such as "Waterloo" were added by way of commemorating a regiment's presence at the battle, these were usually embroidered upon a scroll of contrasting colour.

With the introduction of the full Hussar costume, all ranks in the regiment adopted plain black leather sabretaches, officers having in addition a dress model; in 1812, when new uniforms were introduced throughout the British cavalry, all regiments followed suit. General Officers of Hussars or Light Dragoons wore scarlet-faced, gold-laced sabretaches with the royal cipher, a crown and the crossed-sword-and-baton insignia of their rank. The exam-



ple illustrated (Fig. 1) is exceptionally fine, but it was more usual to have simple gold lace round the edge. General Officers of Heavy Cavalry may have adopted some similar pattern, but the writer does not recollect ever seeing one in any portrait. The Household Cavalry, that is to say the Life Guards and the Royal Horse Guards, had plain black sabretaches with extremely decorative patterns for officers before Waterloo in 1815. They were worn close to the waist-belt on short straps, and not at calf length as in the light cavalry. They were worn for only a few years and had disappeared by the Coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837.

In the Royal Horse Artillery and Rifles, whose officers and artillerymen wore a uniform similar to Hussars, the sabretache was also used. The artillery eventually prescribed them for all officers, and there survives an interesting letter from one Captain Dyneley of the Horse Artillery written after escaping from the French in the Peninsula, he having been taken prisoner and plundered of all his belongings: "I shall want directly a sword and sabretache complete; tell Hawkes to let the sabretache to be of his last pattern, lock and key, inkstand, etc." It is interesting to note that the tailors referred to, Hawkes, are still in business in Savile Row, London, and could doubtless supply a similar sabretache today.

After Waterloo, regiments which had been present there lost no time in having the word embroidered on standards, saddlecloths or sabretaches — a useful pointer in identification. At the same time four



Fig. 1 — Dress sabretache of a General Officer of Hussars, c. 1815, scarlet cloth face embroidered with gold and sequins. Note the crossed-sword-and-baton insignia of rank. The special uniform authorised for Hussar Generals was last worn in the 1860's. Size 10 by 15 inches.



Fig. 2 — Officers' dress sabretache, 5th (Princess Charlotte of Wales' Own) Dragoon Guards, c. 1815. This sabretache has a dark green velvet face with gold lace and embroidery; parts of the crown are silver, as is the bottom scroll with the gold-embroidered battle honour "Peninsula." All the scrolls are outlined with gold wire.



Fig. 3 — Officers' undress sabretache of the 1st (Royal) Regiment of Dragoons, c. 1820. This sabretache is of plain black leather with gilt metal badges. Note that the bottom edges are straight as in Fig. 2, a style which later disappeared in favour of the shape seen in Fig. 1.



Fig. 4 — Officers' dress sabretache of the 6th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Dragoons, c. 1830, of black leather without any facing cloth, gold lace border and gilt metal insignia and wreath. Note the battle honour "Waterloo" under the castle, and the rounded bottom.

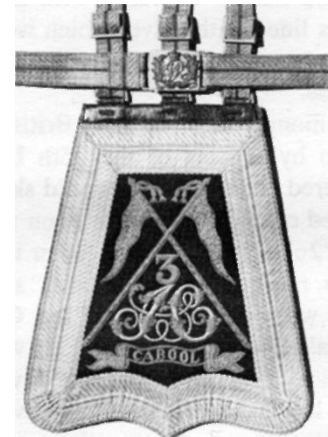


Fig. 5 — 3rd Bengal Irregulars, C. 1845. This splendid officer's sabretache has a black velvet front with gold lace and embroidery. Notice the technical excellence of the monogram I.C. intertwined and wrought in bright and dull contrasting threads. The native ranks did not wear the sabretache in Irregular cavalry. The matching belts have gold lace with a black stripe.

regiments were converted to Lancers on the Polish model, and as usual the rank and file had plain black leather sabretaches, officers having a decorative dress pattern.

Immediately after the Crimean War, 1854-5, when so much finery was swept away, the sabretache suffered a temporary eclipse, surviving only in the Hussars and Artillery, although officers of Engineers had what was called a "sketching case", never worn in dress uniform. It is described in the 1857 Dress Regulations as "black patent leather fitted up to contain drawing materials . . . regimental badge, gilt." In fact it looked exactly like a plain sabretache. Later in the century the sabretache returned to favour, although not issued to the ranks (in the Hussars they were retained by non-commissioned officers). Amongst commissioned officers they proliferated, and in the 1894 Regulations, the last to be issued before their final abolition, the following instructions appear:

"Sabretaches. Staff officers will wear when

mounted, Russia leather taches with three slings of staff pattern." (This was of crimson leather with gilt VR and crown badge. — *Author*)

"Officers of Household Cavalry, Dragoon Guards, Dragoons, Lancers, Mounted Officers of Royal Engineers, Foot Guards, Rifles and Departments, wear, when on mounted duties, black leather sabretaches of similar pattern, with three slings, 1 inch wide, of patterns to match their sword-belts. Metal ornaments of regimental patterns, or of departmental patterns, will be worn on the flaps. Mounted Officers of Infantry will also wear sabretaches of the pattern described above, but without metal ornaments."

The Royal Artillery are not mentioned; neither are the Hussar regiments, as details appear in their own sections of the regulations. These were the only Regular Army units to retain the embroidered sabretache at the end of the century, when it was abolished, never to return. The Artillery pattern for dress wear had the Royal Arms of England elaborately embroidered in gold over a gilt metal gun and



Fig. 6 — Officer's sabretache of the 12th (The Prince of Wales') Royal Regiment of Lancers, c. 1845. This very fine sabretache has a scarlet cloth face with gold lace and embroidery. The crown is lined crimson velvet, the base being represented by silver embroidery with black "ermine" tails. The upper part of the lance penants are embroidered in silver, as are the backgrounds of the two battle honour scrolls. The beautifully carved, if somewhat overpowering, frame of mahogany is the only one of its kind known to the author.

Fig. 7 — Officer's dress sabretache of the Northumberland Hussars, c. 1890. This was one of the County regiments of Yeomanry, Cavalry, who were part-time volunteers and not regular soldiers. The face is scarlet cloth with all gold lace and embroidery, except for the castle, which is silver. The scroll is of dark blue velvet.



Fig. 8—Officer's dress sabretache of the 11th (Prince Albert's own) Hussars, c. 1869. This sabretache is of great magnificence. The face is crimson cloth and the lace and embroidery of gold, the scrolls being blue ribbed silk. Note how beautifully the cypher VR is worked in sequins and dull and bright threads. The sphinx badge is of metal.

Fig. 9 — This is an undress sabretache of an officer of the Royal Artillery, c. 1890. It is plain black leather with gilt-die stamped badge, and is typical of the pattern used also in the Royal Engineers and Infantry until the sabretache's abolition in 1900. This pattern in crimson leather with a gilt VR and crown was worn by staff officers.



scroll with the motto *Ubique*. Where this is all in silver, not gold, it belonged to a Volunteer Artillery unit.

Unfortunately the perishable nature of patent leather together with the vandalism of some collectors who do not hesitate to rip badges and buttons off uniforms and accoutrements, afterwards consigning the denuded carcasses to the trash can, have combined to make the plain sabretache rare and the embroidered models rarer.

One of the problems in identifying the elaborate patterns is the lack of detailed descriptions. Regulations usually refer to "regimental devices", and it is therefore often necessary to identify specimens by a process of elimination: the colour of the face and lace, numerals, mottoes and battle-honours are the best indicators, but dating may well require considerable knowledge of regimental history. Sometimes the knowledge of County insignia may be called for; thus on the officers' sabretaches of the Yorkshire

Hussars Yeomanry the White Rose of York is embroidered in silver thread, a symbol dating back to the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century. On the plain black 'tache of the East Kent Mounted Rifles Yeomanry appeared the White Horse of Kent, a badge of far greater antiquity. (It should perhaps be explained that Yeomanry cavalry were volunteer cavalymen raised in the various counties, and formed no part of the Regular Army.)

Currently sabretaches are one of the most sought-after pieces of militaria. This is scarcely surprising since they appeal not only to the military collector but to many who have no interest in things military as such but are attracted by the beautiful embroidery, the elegant design and potential for interior decoration. They were so used even in Victorian times. I have seen them mounted as firescreens; the lancer 'tache illustrated in a mahogany frame (Fig. 6) is an early example of conversion to a wall decoration.

APPENDIX V.

DESCRIPTION OF SABRETACHES :—

1. FOR OFFICERS WEARING THE UNIFORM OF "COLONEL ON THE STAFF."
2. ALL MOUNTED OFFICERS EXCEPT AS ABOVE* (ROYAL ARTILLERY AND HUSSARS FOR UNDRESS ONLY.)

Dimensions are subject to reasonable manufacturing toleration.

(!) OFFICERS WEARING UNIFORM OF COLONEL ON THE STAFF.

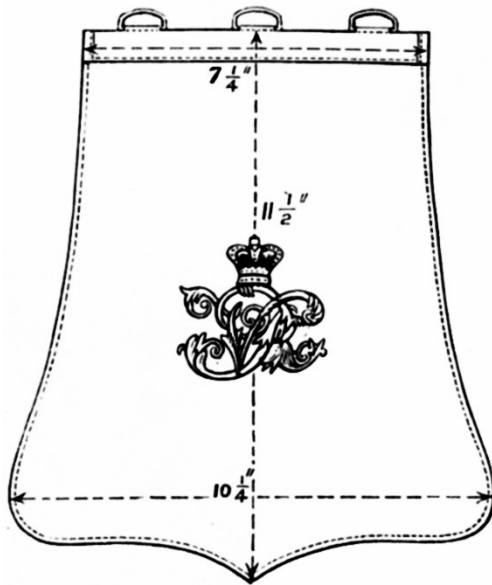


Fig. 1.

PATTERN NO. 301.
Sealed 11/5/95.

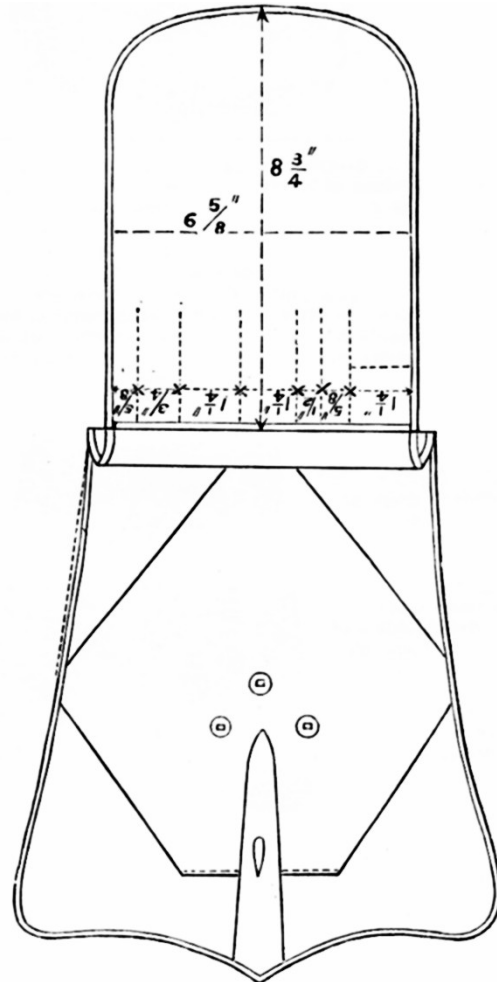


Fig. 2.

Flap. — Front, as in Fig. 1, made of millboard, covered back and front with red Russia leather. The front fait is turned over the edge so as to form a binding, and is sewn all round with silk to match. Three gilt metal dees $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide are attached to the flap at top by means of leather chapes* sewn on to the back. The centre part of the pocket comes over the top, forming a binding through which the chapes for the dees pass.

Ornament. — Gilding metal, "V.R." and Crown above. It is fastened through the flap by means of fixed screws and small nuts.

The back of the flap is covered with red Russia leather, having extra pieces on the corners, as in Fig. 2, which shows the sabretache opened. A tab is fitted at the bottom to fasten the pocket down.

Pocket. — The pocket is double, one compartment being on either side of the centre piece. This, as above stated, passes over the top of the flap and forms a binding.

The gussets are made in one piece for each of the two compartments, and are sewn on to the centre piece; each gusset is $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide when made up.

The inner compartment is shown in Fig. 2. It is a plain pocket without flap, bound all round. Inside the top on the front part is attached a piece of elastic webbing $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, sewn down at intervals to form loops for pens &c. In the centre is a small leather inner pocket for safety ink bottle, $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide, and 2 inches deep.

* Regiments of Cavalry having special regimental patterns are allowed to retain them.

Fig. 10 — Excerpt from British Army dress regulations, 1900.

Both compartments, except the gussets, are lined with red skiver.

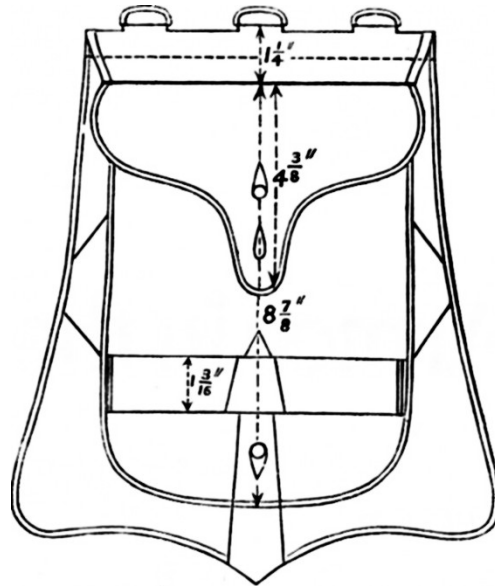


Fig. 3.

Fig. 3 shows the back of the pocket when closed. There is a sword loop across the bottom of the pocket $1\frac{1}{16}$ inches wide, with a loop in the centre for the tab to pass through. The pocket and flap thereof are bound all round. The flap is sewn on from the inside and is turned over. Two studs are sewn in as shown. The centre piece is bound on each side above the pockets.

(2) PATTERN FOR MOUNTED OFFICERS EXCEPT THOSE WEARING (1).

This is the same as Fig. 1, in shape, make, and size, with the following exceptions : —

The front is of solid black patent leather. It is unlined, but has corner-pieces at the back (as shown in Fig. 2), and is not bound, but is stitched round the edge.

The pocket is made as in pattern (1), except that it is of black enamelled horse hide, lined with black roan and the gussets are of black roan.

No ornament is worn on it by Mounted Officers of Infantry except in Rifle Regiments.

Departmental Officers wear the same device as shown in Fig. 1.

In other branches regimental devices are worn as authorized.