

Officers and Gentlemen :

Commanding the British Army in the Napoleonic Wars

by Stuart Reid

During the Napoleonic Wars the land forces of the Crown comprised a number of sometimes quite disparate elements, and although this article is concerned with the greatest of them, the British Army itself, it is as well to begin by outlining all of them and briefly describing their status and relationship.

The British Army proper comprised General and Staff officers, the Household regiments of cavalry and infantry, and the cavalry and infantry of the line. Closely bound up with them, but constitutionally separate were those troops administered by the Board of Ordnance - the most important of whom were of course the officers and men of the Royal Artillery. Although their rank structure, responsibilities and promotion system differed in some measure there was complete equality between the two services. This was not always the case with the third of the services; the armies of the East India Company. While they had come into being as the mercenary servants of a trading company, the fact of the matter was that by the 1790s the Company was being run by the British Government through the Board of Control, rather than by the ordinary shareholders. In 1795-96 its officers successfully resisted assimilation into the British Army while at the same time winning local brevets which placed them on something approaching an equal footing with regular officers. Consequently their *de facto* position, particularly after recruitment for the European regiments was placed on a regular footing in 1799, became similar to that of Ordnance officers; in that they were administratively separate but operationally fully integrated.

Of much lesser importance were the Militia and Volunteers, both of whom were administered by the Home Office. Operationally they came under Army command but unlike Ordnance and EIC officers they certainly did not enjoy equal status.

REGIMENTAL OFFICER STRUCTURE

British infantry battalions during the Napoleonic Wars normally comprised ten companies, each commanded by a Captain. Up until the 25th of May 1803, three of those Captains also ranked as Field Officers; that is Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel and Major.

Whilst the most senior of these, the Colonel, was of course the commanding officer of the Regiment he normally exercised that function in a purely administrative sense and rarely clapped eyes on it. Indeed in the majority of cases he was a superannuated General officer 'given' his regiment as a reward for past services. Generals as we shall see were only paid as such whilst actively employed and so were dependent to a very great degree upon the pay and perquisites attaching to their regimental rank.

Less commonly encountered was the Lieutenant Colonel Commandant. As his title implies, this officer was indeed expected to command his regiment. This particular rank was initially granted to officers of newly raised regiments and in the recruiting boom of the 1790s it was in fact common for the prospective raisers of new corps to be successively granted the rank of Major Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Commandant or Colonel Commandant according to their success in recruiting their regiments. In more stable times, however, the rank could also be given to the officers in actual command of the several battalions making up the 60th (Royal American Regiment), and occasionally other multi-battalion corps as well.

While both the Lieutenant Colonel and Major generally spent far more time with their battalions than the Colonel himself, holding down two jobs at once was clearly undesirable. Regulations forbade both officers to be absent on leave at the same time, but all too often this was interpreted as *carte blanche* for one or other to be absent at any one time, leaving the other in sole charge. Moreover in wartime it was equally likely that one of the two field officers might be serving in a staff appointment or commanding a detachment or post. As early as 1725 Colonel Henry Hawley had suggested that the service would benefit from the field officers being deprived of their companies and a first step towards this came on the 1st September 1795², when the establishment was also increased to two Lieutenant Colonels and Majors to each battalion. This at first produced something of an anomaly in that the number of companies in the regiment was not correspondingly increased. Consequently the senior Lieutenant Colonel and senior Major in each battalion at first retained command of their respective companies and the "emoluments" which came with them, while the new appointees had only

their Field Officers' pay. The final step was only taken in a War Office circular dated 27th May 1803³ which stated that; "*in future each Troop and Company throughout the Army shall have an effective Captain, and therefore that the Colonels, First Lieutenant Colonels, and First Majors, in the respective Regiments, shall no longer have Troops or Companies;*" By way of compensation those officers deprived of their companies were to continue to receive their pay as Captains and an additional £20.00 per annum to cover the customary "emoluments".

Rather more excitingly three additional Captains were added to the establishment in order to take over the vacated companies - incidentally abolishing the now redundant rank of Captain-Lieutenant in the process.



Officer of the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, 1811



The Captain was of course the backbone of the service as far as the commissioned ranks were concerned and his sphere of command and responsibility could often spread far beyond his company. He might be required to take command of a detachment comprising several companies, a wing of his battalion or even the whole battalion in the temporary absence of all the Field Officers. He could also be promoted to Field Rank by brevet, though this usually came about through his appointment to extra-regimental duties.

Until 1803 the Colonel's company was actually commanded on a day-to-day basis by his Captain-Lieutenant. This individual occupied an ambiguous position in that he was theoretically no more than the senior Lieutenant in the regiment and paid accordingly, but in practice he normally enjoyed both the status of junior Captain and the courtesy of being addressed as such, just as a Lieutenant Colonel is invariably addressed as Colonel. He was, moreover, rewarded for his not inconsiderable pains when he received any subsequent promotion, in that his seniority as a fully fledged Captain was accounted from the date of his earlier appointment as Captain-Lieutenant rather than the actual date of his promotion to the higher rank.

The Lieutenant, as his title suggests, was second in command of the company. Flank Companies - Grenadiers and Light Infantry - boasted Second Lieutenants as well, but otherwise there was originally only one to each company (including the Captain-Lieutenant). However for most of the period there were two Lieutenants in the ordinary battalion companies as well. It was a rank easily attained since the "difference" between a Lieutenancy and the lowest commissioned rank of Ensign was comparatively negligible, but it was much less easy to climb out of it and not surprisingly Lieutenants appear to have formed the most numerous class of officers on the Half Pay lists.

The most junior commissioned officer in a company was the Ensign. Fusilier regiments had a Second Lieutenant instead, although beyond the fact that their commissions were slightly more expensive to purchase, this appears to have been little more than a terminological distinction. Given the absence of formal training or qualifications for the post, the average Ensign was probably more ornamental than useful but the rank was an essential first step in a military career - officers trans-

ferring from Fencible or Militia units could not normally carry over their existing rank, but had to enter the regular army as Ensigns.

Cavalry regiments were similarly organised with six, or occasionally up to eight Troops (in place of companies), each again commanded by a Captain, Lieutenant and, in place of the Ensign, a Cornet.

The Guards, quite naturally had their own rank structure. All Field Officers in the Footguards ranked or rather were breveted as General officers and similarly

all Captains were styled "Captain and Lieutenant Colonel", the former being their regimental rank and the latter their Army rank - a point further confused by several being full Colonels by brevet. Lieutenants similarly ranked as Captains in the Army and only Ensigns were considered on a par, militarily if not socially with their counterparts in the line.

With the exception of the Blues, who were organised like any other regiment of Horse, the mounted Household units at first boasted an even more arcane rank structure, comprising three troops of Lifeguards and three troops of Horse Grenadiers, and perusing the Army List one could easily be forgiven for wondering whether they employed more officers than troopers. The rest of the army certainly thought so and on the whole tended to be quite rude when referring to them. However a massive shake-up in 1788 placed them on a more conventional footing, re-organised into the 1st and 2nd Lifeguards. Both the new regiments had a conventional rank structure saving only the addition of a supernumerary Lieutenant Colonel and Major in each, and the curious insistence that the Adjutant should always be a Lieutenant.

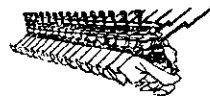
In addition to these company grade or line officers in each infantry battalion or cavalry regiment, whether belonging to the Household troops or the Line, there were a certain number of what are generally referred to as regimental (as distinct from general) staff officers; Surgeon, Chaplain, Quartermaster, Paymaster and

Adjutant.

The Surgeon held his commission by virtue of his professional standing and although it was officially admitted in 1804 that the surgeon's lot needed to be made more attractive, he was accounted to be on a par with a Captain when it came to the allocation of billets and allowances. Normally the process of becoming a regimental surgeon was fairly lengthy. The first step



Officer of the 5th Dragoon Guards, in undress, 1812



being to obtain the post of Hospital Mate, for which he had to satisfy the Court of Examiners at Surgeon's Hall that he was indeed competent to practice. Once in place he was then eligible to be taken on as a Surgeon's Mate and thus ultimately to become the Surgeon of a Regiment, although examples do exist of Hospital Mates being directly promoted to the rank of Surgeon. In 1798 it was pointedly laid down that Surgeons were to be "preferred according to length, or merit of service; and not on the recommendation of their Commanding Officer, to succeed regimentally, unless they otherwise have reasonable pretensions to the promotion."⁴ The same circular indeed went on to state quite categorically that in the first instance medical officers were to be taken from the Half Pay in preference to a less qualified successor found within the regiment. Popular stereotypes notwithstanding the surgeon or "doctor" could often be a good one. When Surgeon John Wright of 1/Royal was appointed by General Williamson to be Purveyor of the Hospitals on San Domingo in 1794, he was warmly recommended as having "an excellent character & has great professional merit." Then again, if others took the view that any man reporting sick was a malingerer until he proved otherwise by expiring, then that breed of army doctor still has not entirely died out.

Allied in a manner of speaking to the Surgeon, was the Veterinary Surgeon, carried on the establishment of Cavalry regiments from 24th May 1796. Previously care of the horses had been the province of the Farriers, but a Board of General Officers convened to look into the matter was won over by the arguments of the newly created Veterinary College who were, to put it charitably, at daggers

drawn with the ancient craft of Farriers. Initially they were to be appointed by warrant on the recommendation of the Colonel and to receive the same pay as a Quartermaster of Cavalry, but four months later it was decided to grant them commissions instead and place them on a par with Cornets.

Chaplains were rarely to be encountered in the army, especially on foreign postings and the appointment appears to have been generally regarded as nothing more than a sinecure in the gift of the Colonel. Indeed although the commission could be purchased just like any other, it was the Colonel, not the incumbent who had the selling of it. Neither Miles Beevor, nor his brother George, who were appointed Chaplains to the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royals in 1786 and 1790 respectively spent a single day with their units, invariably being described in monthly returns as absent with the commanding officer's leave. Clearly this was unsatisfactory and on the 23rd September 1796 a Royal Warrant abolished Regimental Chaplains. Those already serving were pensioned off and no more were appointed.

In future religious care was to be exercised by Brigade or Garrison Chaplains, acting under the authority of the Chaplain General, otherwise commanding officers were enjoined to seek the services of any local clergymen.

Each infantry battalion included a commissioned Regimental Quartermaster and initially cavalry units had one for each troop, but while both appear to have enjoyed comparable rates of pay, their status was actually quite different.

In the infantry it was essentially an appointment, which could in theory be held by any officer. Although Quartermaster's commissions were originally purchasable like any other, this practice was forbidden by George III in 1779: "the proper persons to be recommended for quartermasters are active Sergeants, His Majesty not thinking the office very fit for men of better extraction and consequently very improper



British staff officers
(1814 Hamilton Smith series)
©National Army Museum



for a Captain...." Nevertheless, there was nothing to prevent a Quartermaster thus risen from the ranks from subsequently holding an Ensign's commission by purchase. A good example was Alexander Davidson who was commissioned Quartermaster of 1/Royals on 28th May 1782. Ten years later, while the battalion was on Jamaica, he obtained an Ensign's commission and would have been promoted to Lieutenant in October 1794 had he not had the misfortune to die before the happy news reached San Domingo.

Cavalry Quartermasters on the other hand were originally junior officers, ranking below the Cornets, but by the mid 18th century they had become the equivalent of the modern Troop Sergeant or Troop Sergeant Major and the rank was abolished entirely in 1809 and replaced by a single (commissioned) regimental Quartermaster.

The Paymaster, oddly enough was a comparatively recent appointment. Prior to 1797 the job was held on a part-time basis by one of the company officers - almost invariably one of the Captains. He did not hold rank as such, for the appointment did not appear in the Army List, but rather assumed the job in addition to his ordinary military duties

after providing suitable financial securities. Although the Colonel was clearly in a position to make strong recommendations, in this matter at least he was sometimes rather in a position of first amongst equals, for the appointment was traditionally decided by means of a vote amongst all the Captains - of whom the Colonel was but one. On the 18th November 1797, however, a circular letter from the War Office advised that all existing appointments would cease as of the 24th December. Those nominated to fill the position after that date were to be properly commissioned as such, but while they were to rank with the Captains, it was strictly laid down that they were not to undertake ordinary regimental duties, assume military command - or expect promotion.

The Adjutant's was a particularly responsible post since he was expected to act as assistant to the Major, look after the drill of recruits (including newly commissioned Ensigns) and in general terms take day to day responsibility for administration. Like the Chaplaincy it was originally open to purchase from the Colonel himself, but this practice was actively discouraged and eventually suppressed. While there are instances of men - often former NCOs - holding Adjutant's rank alone in the 18th century, prior to 1802 it was an appointment usually given to keen young Lieutenants, or much less commonly to Ensigns. Like the Field officers they were expected to combine their regimental and company duties but on the 10th of June 1802 a

War Office circular laid down that they were no longer to receive their subaltern's pay and were to be borne on the regiment's books as supernumeraries in whatever rank they presently held. They were of course compensated by an increase in the pay due to them as Adjutants and unlike Paymasters were to retain their present regimental seniorities for the purposes of any future promotions. Those Adjutants not already holding Subalterns' commissions were to rank as Ensigns or Cornets as of the 25th May 1802 and while they would not of course draw pay for that rank, they would rise in seniority accordingly.

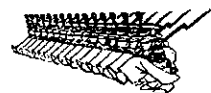
Finally, there was the Regimental Agent or Army Agent. This gentleman was not an officer at all but a civilian, although a number had served in the army at one time or another. Nevertheless he was a most important figure. As late as the middle of the 18th century he was little more than the Colonel's confidential clerk, but as the century progressed his status and responsibilities grew and sole practitioners gave way to large Agencies handling the affairs of several regiments. In 1798 the Deputy Secretary at War succinctly described the Agent's functions as being to:

"...apply for, receive, disburse and account for public money advanced to him under general regulations or by particular orders. He is the ordinary channel of communication between the Regiment and the P u b l i c Departments and is resorted to not only for providing and forwarding of arms, clothing and other regimental supplies, but also in the business, public or private, of the individual officers."

As far as this present study is concerned, the last function was the most important, for the Agent served as a banker and business manager for the individual officers serving in 'their' regiments, arranging exchanges and promotions - and often advancing the money to purchase those promotions.

STAFF OFFICERS

General officers might be Field Marshals, Generals, Lieutenant Generals, or Major Generals in descending order



of precedence. The junior rank of Brigadier General was also conferred from time to time, but like its naval equivalent of Commodore, this was invariably a local promotion and usually quite transient. No particular duties attached to any of them; a Lieutenant General might command a division or its equivalent, while a Major General might have a brigade, but this was a very shaky rule of thumb and there was in fact no requirement for a general officer to be employed at all.

Staff officers proper fell into three sometimes overlapping categories. These comprised the Quartermaster General's Department, the Adjutant General's Department, and Personal Staff Officers. Some posts had originally been purchasable, but this was entirely squeezed out during the 1790s and instead almost all posts were filled by selection - or rather by patronage since in practice there was no objective assessment system. There were in fact very few qualifications demanded of staff officers. The few graduates of the Royal Military College were routinely commissioned into the Royal Staff Corps, a quasi-Engineer unit coming under the authority of the Quartermaster General, but otherwise almost anyone could be appointed to the staff providing he had served at least one year as a regimental officer.

Broadly speaking the Quartermaster General's Department quite literally dealt with the quartering and transporting of the army and everything associated with it. This included the reconnoitring and sometimes the improvement - through the medium of the Royal Staff Corps - of the routes along which the army was to march. Inevitably these duties involved an element of intelligence gathering, which properly speaking fell to the Adjutant General's Department along with the interrogation of prisoners. However the department was not responsible for supplies, which were actually procured and transported by the civilian Commissariat. The Adjutant General and his assistants were responsible for more routine administrative matters, such as discipline and military administration.

Both departments were similarly organised on a surprisingly ad hoc basis. Each 'command', be it a field army or a military district had its own staff comprising an Adjutant General (AG) and Quartermaster General (QMG) and one or two Assistants (AAGs and AQMGs) normally ranking as Lieutenant Colonels or Majors.

Below them came an indeterminate number of Deputy Assistant Adjutant Generals and Deputy Assistant Quartermaster Generals (DAAGs and DAQMGs) who were usually Captains or sometimes Subalterns.

So-called 'personal' staff officers comprised Brigade Majors and Aid de Camps (ADCs). Although recommended by their Generals, the first were in effect Brigade Adjutants and their appointments often outlived their patrons. On the other hand ADCs appointments were very much in the gift of their masters. A General was entitled to have three at public expense, a Lieutenant General two, and a Major General one. If this allocation was found to be insufficient to fulfill the duties demanded of them, others, distinguished as 'Extra' ADCs could be added to a General's personal staff at his own expense. Regulations required all officers appointed to staff positions to relinquish their regimental rank and retire on to the Half Pay⁵ which is why so many nominally belonged to exotic or long disbanded corps such as the Ceylon Regiment or the Royal Glasgow Regiment to name but two examples. The reason was of course that if an officer was to be absent from his corps for any length of time it was desirable for the resulting vacancy to be filled. In practice observance of this rule often depended on circumstances. The appointment might only be of short duration and if both staff officer and regiment were serving in the same theatre it was understood that he might retain his Full Pay commission on the understanding that he could be recalled to regimental duty if the circumstances demanded.



Young officer of 10th Regiment, 1815

FOOTNOTES

1 Callahan, R. The East India Company and Army Reform 1783-1798 Harvard 1972

2 Dates of this and other establishment alterations are taken from Collection of Regulations (1807)

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Hence the importance of the various allowances paid to Staff officers for horses and accommodation. Personal staff officers would also eat at their General's table.



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Part II

by Stuart Reid

BACKGROUND

As to the officers themselves, a very great deal of nonsense has been written and indeed still continues to be written both about their social background and about the supposed iniquities of a promotion system based on the premise that military rank could be bought for hard cash. There is still a very widespread belief that

Wellington's army was substantially commanded by wealthy aristocrats who had purchased their commissions. Wellington himself, who socially at least always remained a provincial Irish snob, certainly contributed to this impression by surrounding himself with Guards officers, and by his vigorous defence of purchase.

Nevertheless his doing so obscures the extent to which promotion did not depend upon purchase during the Napoleonic Wars - and for that matter the fact that the social composition of the wartime army was in many respects very different from the peacetime one.

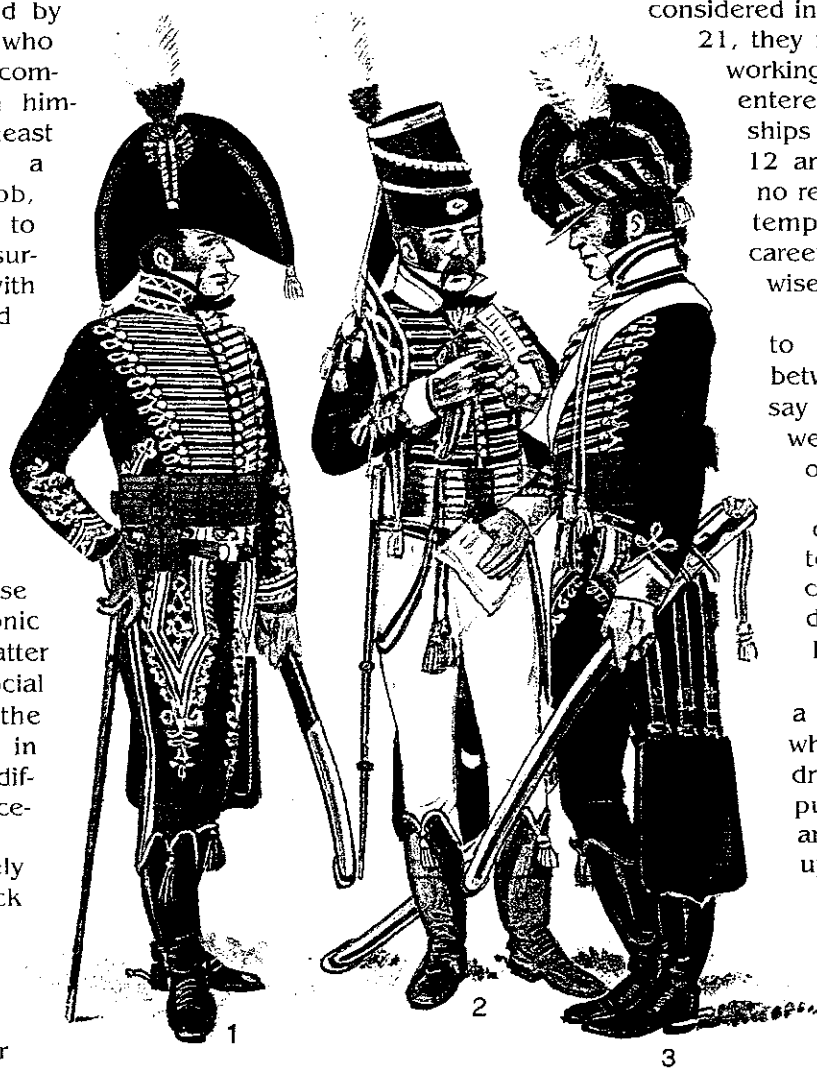
The most widely advertised drawback of the system was the apparent ability of wealthy officers to purchase rank beyond their abilities or experience, and contemporary critics were prone to parading poor but honest old Lieutenants grown grey in the service and passed over by aristocratic young striplings with more gold in their pockets than brains in their heads.⁶ However in 1795 the Duke of York's reforms included proper enforcement of the existing rules governing the age limits for first commissions, and the period of time which had to be served in each grade before qualifying for further promotion.

A prospective Ensign or Cornet normally had to be aged between 16 and 21. The upper limit was routinely waived in the case of commissioned rankers and officers volunteering from the Militia. As to under-aged officers the position was by no means as straightforward as it might appear. It is above all vitally important to approach the question from an 18th century rather than a 20th century perspective.

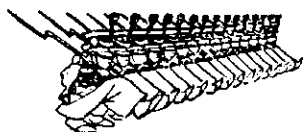
Although children were legally considered infants until the age of 21, they normally began their working lives - or at least entered upon apprenticeships - between the ages of 12 and 15, so there was no reason why those contemplating a military career should not do likewise.

It is probably helpful to draw a distinction between children below say the age of 13, who were clearly incapable of serving with their regiments in any capacity, and teenaged boys who could be taught their duty. Prior to the Duke's crackdown there were certainly a number of cases where very young children had commissions purchased for them and with no real check upon subsequent promotions it was indeed possible for them to rise as high as money would permit without ever leaving the nursery or schoolroom, far less clapping eyes on their regiment. On the other hand the abuse was afforded a dubious endorsement

by the granting of non-purchase commissions to the deserving orphans of dead officers. Nevertheless they accounted for only a very small proportion of those carried on the Army List. Even as early as 1791 the youngest officers turned up in a random sample of ten regimental inspection reports were aged 16 and the average age was 21.



1. Officer, 22nd Light Dragoons, 1807
2. Officer, 10th Prince of Wales Own Royal Light Dragoons (Hussars), 1805
3. Officer, 12th Prince of Wales Light Dragoons Regiment, 1805



The situation was in any case exactly paralleled in the Royal Navy where there was a long-standing practise of entering very young children on ships' books in order to quite fraudulently increase their sea-time and thus assist their eventual careers by boosting their notional seniority.⁷

Whilst the eventual abolition of Purchase tends to be hailed as a thoroughly good thing it actually had no discernible effect whatsoever on the social composition of the British Army. The fact of the matter is that by the second half of the 19th century the Army was firmly in the hands of a pretty homogeneous officer caste, substantially drawn from the aristocracy and landed gentry - that very level of society in fact which was best placed to purchase commissions in the first place. It was even argued at the time of its eventual abolition that the removal of purchase would ensure the predominance of the landed gentry by excluding the *nouveau riche* with only their money to commend them. Indeed it can also be argued that the 18th century army drew its officers from a rather wider base and was more open to promotion from the ranks.

In peacetime, with the army maintained on a reduced establishment and casualties of all kinds at a minimal level, purchase naturally predominated. In wartime it was a very different matter. Not only was the establishment of officers within existing regiments increased, but a whole host of new ones were raised, in turn requiring a steady supply of officers. All too many of those officers then proceeded to become casualties and had to be replaced by yet more aspiring heroes. Consequently the expansion of the army resulted in an exponentially larger demand for officers, and since this demand was not matched by a corresponding increase of the birth-rate of the gentry and the aristocracy, the additional officers had to be drawn from a much wider social base.

Ensign John le Couteur was rather sniffy about this declaring that, *"In those days of raging wars, all sorts of men obtained Commissions, some without education, some without means, some without either, and many of low birth."*⁸

In his study of the social origins and backgrounds of 18th century army officers P.J. Razzell⁹ estimated that in 1780 some 24% were members of the aristocracy while a further 16% were drawn from the landed gentry. However, over the next thirty years both figures declined quite sharply. In 1780 no fewer than 30% of Major Generals bore inherited titles, but by 1810 the proportion had dropped to only 20%¹⁰ which in turn implies that the overall percentage of aristocrats may have dropped as low as 16%. Moreover both aristocrats were disproportion-

ately concentrated in the Household units and, particularly in the even more fashionable Hussar regiments. While only 19.5% of first commissions were being purchased in 1810, these accounted for 44% of Ensigns in the Guards and 47% of cavalry Cornets.

An interesting contemporary comment on this comes in a letter written by Ensign Keep of 2/28th in 1812:

*"Many of our Gents are restless to remove from the infantry to cavalry, particularly if at all aristocratically inclined, for the latter though expensive is considered the most dashing service, and is generally selected by young men of good fortune and family. The consequence is that officers of the infantry hold themselves in very low estimation comparatively."*¹¹

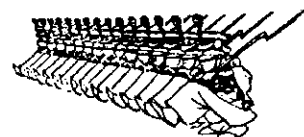
Even in the infantry, the social distribution could be very uneven. Some regiments certainly prided themselves on maintaining a 'select' officer corps,¹² while others must consequently have been much more workaday in style. Whilst all officers were officially designated gentlemen, if only by virtue of their commissions, the reality was that the majority were the sons of soldiers, clergymen, the professions, and even tradesmen. Some of them could afford to purchase their commissions but for the most part they applied for non-purchase vacancies.

A significant number of officers actually began their military careers in the ranks. During the 1800s the Gazette not only recorded whether a commission was purchased, but also very helpfully noted whether the recipient was a Volunteer, a former NCO, or simply a private gentleman.

Analysing the Gazette entries, Michael Glover reckoned that during the war some 4.5% of newly commissioned subalterns were Volunteers - young men who went out on service at their own expense in the hope of being on the spot when any non-purchase vacancies arose. From the same source he also concluded that a further 5.42% were ex-NCOs - exclusive of Ensigns appointed to Veteran Battalions who were almost invariably drawn from the ranks. Taken together the two categories account for just under 10% of newly commissioned officers.¹³ However there is good reason to believe that the true figure is actually higher for this analysis takes no account of those men who served in the ranks as private soldiers rather than as Volunteers, and who were discharged before taking up their commissions. A notable example occurred in 1799 when five privates of the then 100th(Gordon)Highlanders were discharged in consequence of being commissioned. All five had enlisted when the regiment was first raised back in 1794 and at the time one was described as a tailor, while



Infantry Officer



the other four were labourers!¹⁴

PURCHASE AND PROMOTION

There were a number of avenues by which an aspiring officer could obtain his first commission. The first, obviously enough, was by purchase. While all three Georges were opposed to the purchase of commissions, no realistic alternative had presented itself during the 18th century. Promotion was governed strictly by seniority in the East India Company service, as well as in those corps administered by the Board of Ordnance, but the obvious disadvantages deterred any thought of extending it more widely in peacetime. Nor was any serious consideration given to introducing a system based on merit. While this might appear surprising, there were in fact widespread political as well as professional objections to any proposals of this nature since it was considered that promotion would then come to depend upon patronage. In fact although the Navy pointedly looked down on the supposed lack of professionalism in the Army, the professional examinations or rather vivas which supposedly governed promotion in that service were wholly concerned with the unique skills associated with ship-handling and maritime navigation. Once a candidate had successfully 'passed' as a Lieutenant his subsequent career depended entirely on seniority and patronage.¹⁵

In order to purchase a commission a young gentleman had first to deposit the required sum of money with the relevant Regimental Agent. He in turn then submitted the applicant's name and any letters of recommendation to the Adjutant General's office at the Horse Guards for approval by the Commander-in-Chief. Once the initial commission had been obtained, subsequent steps could be purchased in exactly the same manner and if there was no vacancy in his own regiment, the Agent could be relied upon to find one in another of the regiments in his management portfolio.

Throughout most of the 18th century there was an officially 'regulated' price for commissions. In peacetime and to a rather more limited extent in peacetime it was also customary to smooth progress by paying something more on top, but for the meantime it is important to appreciate that the regulated price represented what might be termed the 'absolute value' of a particular commission, not the sum which actually changed hands.

This requires some explanation. In the 1790s the regulation price of an Ensign's commission in an infantry regiment was £400.00, and leaving aside the usual fees and anything else which be clandestinely agreed, this is exactly what it cost him. A Lieutenant's commission was valued at £500.00, but all that actually changed hands in purchasing it was the 'difference' of £100.00, and similarly with a Captain's commission valued at £1,500.00, a Lieutenant who wished to buy his way up only had to find the difference of £1000.00. Should he then decide to realise his investment by selling out, the £1,500.00 was made up by reversing the process; that is he was paid by all three officers benefiting from his departure. His immediate successor paid

him £1000.00 for his Captaincy, another £100.00 came from the Ensign moving up into the Lieutenant's place, and the balance came from the young gentleman paying the full price for the Ensigncy. Although at first sight the process might appear cumbersome it was actually quite straightforward since all the paperwork and cash transactions were normally handled by the regimental agent.

Free vacancies were normally obtained in a variety of ways. The first was by way of a direct application to the Commander-in-Chief (most frequently composed by the would-be hero's father or widowed mother), accompanied by testimonials as to his fitness to serve the King.¹⁶ In many cases these testimonials were endorsed or even written by commanding officers, but where there was no such recommendation such applicants tended to be offered commissions in colonial formations such as the 4/60th or one of the West India regiments. In the majority of cases however the Colonel's backing was crucial and he also provided the other avenues of entry, by recommending the promotion of outstanding NCOs, and allowing 'volunteers' to go on active service with the regiment in the hope of filling any casual vacancies which might arise in the course of a campaign.

Although Purchase might justifiably be regarded as the mainspring of the promotion system, seniority also played a very considerable part in determining how an officer's career progressed. It was of course the sole regulating factor in both the Ordnance and East India Company service, but its importance in the King's service should not be overlooked. In the first place if an officer died, the senior man in the grade below obtained the vacancy without payment and everyone else shuffled up behind him until eventually a free vacancy was created for a new Ensign. Free vacancies also arose when an officer was dismissed from the service by the sentence of a court-martial. In this case however it was an invariable rule that the cashiered officer would be replaced by a man brought in from outside the regiment in order to avoid any suggestion that his colleagues might gain from convicting him. Secondly, when a commission did become vacant by purchase it was the senior man who had the right of first refusal.

This, however, was not always as straightforward as it might at first appear. An officer's seniority in the army was primarily determined by the date of his commission as it appeared in the official London Gazette. Ordinarily this also determined his standing within his regiment, but it was quite possible for Army and Regimental seniority to be at variance. This normally arose when an officer exchanged from one regiment into another or joined from the Half Pay - the latter was particularly common in newly raised battalions. His regimental seniority would then be accounted from the date on which he transferred, but his Army rank (other than by brevet) was still calculated according to the date of his original commission.

It was therefore possible for an officer to jump the queue as it were, since although he might then



be at the bottom of the list regimentally, he could well be the most senior man by commission date and was therefore entitled to claim the next available purchase vacancy - although death vacancies were almost always filled strictly according to regimental seniority. While this might at first appear unfair, the opportunity to do so normally arose when none of the original officers qualified for promotion.

In 1795 the Duke of York insisted that no officer could become a Captain without at least two years service, or a field officer without six. There had been attempts to impose qualifying periods before, but this time they were pretty strictly enforced. Consequently the old complaint that it was possible for a schoolboy to purchase his way up to Lieutenant Colonel in a mere three weeks was firmly addressed. On the other hand it was quite possible to have a situation where those officers who had the necessary qualifying experience lacked the cash to purchase and those further down the list had the cash but not the experience. Therefore if there were no takers within the regiment there was nothing to prevent a suitably qualified outsider buying his way in to the regiment, either directly or by first exchanging with one of the disappointed. This seems to have more frequently occurred in promotions to field rank where both the 'difference' and the service qualification were substantially greater than at company level.

Before leaving the subject of seniority one further aspect needs to be noted. On the outbreak of war with France in 1793 most infantry regiments had just one battalion, but by 1814 all but a handful had two or sometimes more. The Army List made no distinction between them and listed all the officers belonging to a particular corps in a single sequence. In theory the more senior half of the officers in each grade served with the 1st Battalion while the juniors served with the 2nd.

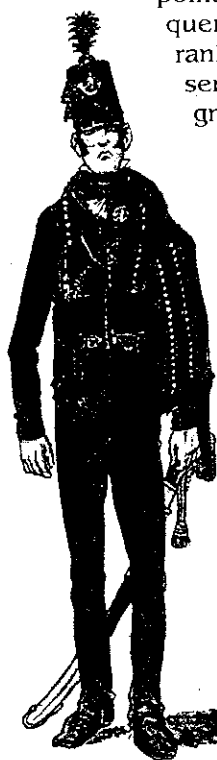
Consequently any promotion invariably led to an

exchange of officers between the two. On being promoted a Lieutenant serving with the 1st Battalion became his Regiment's Junior Captain and as such was automatically posted home to the 2nd Battalion. In practice however he normally waited until the most senior Captain who had been serving in the 2nd Battalion came out to replace him. Depending upon a variety of circumstances he could wait for some time, or, if it was quiet enough at the front simply take himself off home without waiting.

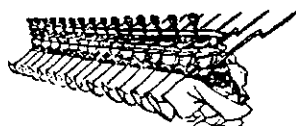
On the whole this was an excellent system which helped to ensure that the 2nd Battalions were properly provided with some experienced officers - particularly as the original intention to reserve them for home defence was soon abandoned. There was however an unfortunate end to it in 1814 when the additional battalions were disbanded and their officers placed on Half Pay according to Regimental rather than Army seniority.

Despite an almost universal objection to a promotion system based on selection, or rather patronage, it did in fact take place not just in the recommending of deserving candidates for commissions, but also to a limited extent in the form of brevets.

Ensigns, Cornets and Lieutenants were not eligible to receive brevets, but otherwise almost any officer could receive a promotion by brevet under a variety of circumstances. These could sometimes be quite indiscriminate as in the case of the 'victory' brevet of 1814 which advanced all those officers whose commissions dated to before the outbreak of war in 1803, and 'Local' brevets were granted to East India Company officers in order to place them on the same footing as Royal ones serving east of the Cape of Good Hope. Otherwise brevets were normally given to individual officers either by way of a reward for some



Top: Obligator Shean Bean shot
Left: Officer 95th Rifles
Right: Sergeant 95th Rifles



exceptional service, to confer local seniority within a specified geographical area, or to lend added authority to a staff appointment. Promotion by this means could be incremental and it was quite possible for an officer to be a Lieutenant Colonel by brevet while still holding the regimental rank of Captain.

Brevets were invariably gazetted as conferring rank 'in the Army' and were considered as temporary. This meant that an officer so promoted had no right to sell and only drew the additional pay of his brevet rank while he was actually serving. In the meantime he retained his Regimental rank (and seniority) and eventually sold it or retired on to the Half Pay accordingly.

RETIRING

Provision for an officer's retirement was in fact inextricably linked with Purchase. Ordinarily an officer was expected to provide for himself by selling his commissions and purchasing an annuity with the proceeds. If the whole sum was invested it was calculated that an interest rate of 4% would produce an annual income equivalent to his pay.

Throughout the 18th century it had firmly been laid down that only those commissions which had been purchased could be sold, but in practice the matter was less straightforward.

If we suppose that after having purchased his Ensigncy at the regulation price of £400.00, an officer succeeded to a death vacancy by reason of a Lieutenant's sudden demise, his subsequent promotion to Captain would still only cost him the difference of £1000.00, and apparently he still expected to gain the full £1,500.00 when he sold out. This however was by no means a right. In 1812 for example Major Cocks of the 79th Highlanders entered into a complicated arrangement to buy out Lieutenant Colonel Fulton of the same regiment. In order to expedite matters Cocks agreed to take on the selling of most of the gallant Colonel's commissions, but not his Majority since that had been a free promotion and there was consequently no certainty that he would be allowed to sell it.

On the other hand an Ensign who had begun his career with a free commission was in a less happy situation. Once again should he wish to rise in his chosen profession he only needed to pay the 'difference' of an easily borrowed £100.00 to become a Lieutenant, and a further £1000.00 for the privilege of styling himself Captain. However when the time came to retire he had no automatic right to sell the Ensigncy and so normally could only expect to receive the 'differences' which he had paid.

In the circumstances he had two options available to him. The first was to apply through his Colonel for permission to sell the free commission(s). Officially this was discouraged since it reduced the number of free vacancies for new entrants, but the privilege was granted in exceptional circumstances. A much commoner alternative was to obtain an appointment to a Veteran Battalion, or to retire on to the Half Pay.

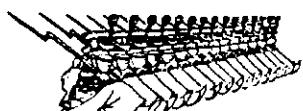
The Half Pay establishment was made up of phantom regiments and companies disbanded in

the course of the 18th century. Originally Half Pay was provided for the officers of those regiments since they would clearly be unable to find anyone to buy their commissions. In return they were expected to return to the Full Pay if so required. This actually occurred with some surprising frequency. The Government was always anxious to keep the bill as low as possible and whenever a new levy was ordered it was piously expected that as many officers as possible should be drawn from the Half Pay. This resulted in a two way traffic. In the first place those officers who intended to retire as a consequence of wounds, ill-health or old age, but who were unable to sell their commissions could be appointed to one of the many vacancies in the Half Pay regiments. This was a relatively straightforward matter and considered to be well worth the additional burden which it placed on the exchequer since his departure created a free vacancy in his original corps. Alternatively he could exchange with a Half Pay officer who wished to return to active duty.

Such exchanges were, as usual, effected through the ever obliging medium of the regimental agent and were by no means confined to those officers who wished to retire from the service permanently. As we have already seen those officers who joined the staff were normally required to 'retire' on to the Half Pay for the duration of their appointment, while others might choose to do so in consequence of prolonged ill-health or for other personal reasons. Retiring can in fact be something of a misnomer, for while many officers did indeed put their feet up and see out their declining years on the pension, others continued to lead active careers either on the staff or elsewhere.

In theory a Half Pay officer could be recalled to service at any time, and indeed many were called up during the Irish emergency in 1798, so a number of conditions were laid down. Half Pay officers could not for example be in Holy Orders and while there was no bar on an officer living abroad, but he could not take service with a foreign army. Oddly enough however this did not apply to the East India Company's armies. Captain John Urquhart, who for much of this period served as an Assistant Military Secretary at India House was also at the same time drawing Half Pay as an officer of the Royal Glasgow Regiment, while John Blakiston of the EIC Engineers was also on the Half Pay of the 71st.

When an officer exchanged on to the Half Pay for whatever reason it was usual for him to receive the 'difference', which in this case related to the respective capital values of the Half Pay and Full Pay commissions. Naturally when the time came for him to return to active duty he himself was required to pay the 'difference' or alternatively he could apply for a free vacancy created by augmentation after making a formal declaration that he had not received the 'difference' at the time of his earlier retirement. Oddly enough it was also possible to purchase Half Pay commissions. There was no question of course of a civilian doing so, but there was nothing to prevent a Half Pay Captain buying out a Half Pay Major. The benefits of doing so were dubious but one



example was Captain Babington Nolan, father of the noted cavalry theorist killed at Balaclava.

RICHARD SHARPE

To end on a light note it is interesting to see how the celebrated career of that fictional Rifleman, Richard Sharpe squares with actual custom and practice. His first commission - in the 74th Highlanders - was a death vacancy gained without purchase (Sharpe's Triumph) and as we have seen there was nothing at all unusual in his coming up from the ranks. What is more since he was neither a Sergeant Major nor a Volunteer, the Gazette entry will have referred to him as 'Richard Sharpe, Gentleman'!

As yet we know nothing about how he came to be a Lieutenant in the 95th Rifles, (Sharpe's Rifles) though he would not have appointed a Quartermaster. At any rate his promotion to Captain came during the Talavera campaign of 1809. The death of Captain Lennox produced a death vacancy in the South Essex and as it is clear that none of the subalterns had the necessary qualifying time, there is nothing exceptional in Wellington's decision to transfer Sharpe in from the 95th (Sharpe's Eagle).

So far so good but early in 1812 our hero has a problem when he discovers that not only has the promotion not been ratified, but worse still a young gent named Ryder has purchased the long dead Lennox's commission. The plot of Sharpe's Company revolves around this setback, but even allowing for the supposed malign influence of Sir Henry Simmerson, it simply does not stand up. In the first place the time period between the promotion and disappointment is far too great¹⁷ to be credible, but rather more important is the simple fact that dead officers commissions could not be sold.¹⁸ Leaving this trivial point aside however there is another important aspect to consider.

In 1809 he became a Captain in the South Essex. If the appointment to command the Light Company had been only a temporary one of no more than six months he could have remained in the 95th, but as he was still serving with the South Essex some thirty months later and once again succeeded to a death vacancy in the regiment we must conclude that he was indeed a South Essex officer and that his continued wearing of a shabby green jacket was a mere affectation.

Sharpe's next promotion to Major is unambiguously by brevet (Sharpe's Enemy), however it is clear at the outset of the next book (Sharpe's Honour) that presumably as a result of Thomas Leroy's promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, he has in the meantime succeeded by seniority to a regimental vacancy. As the junior Major in the regiment he would then automatically be posted to the 2nd Battalion which provides very convenient justification for his doing just that in Sharpe's Regiment. The fact of his now being a 2nd Battalion officer also explains why he was placed on Half Pay in 1814, but his complaint in Sharpe's Waterloo that he was only receiving a Lieutenant's Half Pay is pure humbug. He would actually have 'retired' with the regimental rank of Major in the South Essex and was entitled to Half Pay as such.¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

- 6 Given the opportunities which existed for promotion without purchase it has to be feared that in all too many cases it was actually lack of ability rather than a shortage of cash which blighted their careers.
- 7 See N.A.M. Rodger *The Wooden World* for a superb (and very readable) study of the Georgian Navy
- 8 Graves, Donald (ed) *Merry Hearts make Light Days*. p52-53. These ascerbic remarks were prompted by his arrival in a mixed mess at the Newport Depot on the Isle of Wight. As the officers included those of various foreign and penal corps, (and EIC officers as well) it is hardly surprising that some of them failed to live up to his elevated social expectations.
- 9 Razzell: *Social origins of officers in the Indian and British home army: 1758-1962*. *British Journal of Sociology* 14(1963). QUOTED IN Bruce, Anthony *The Purchase System in the British Army 1660-1871* (Roy.Hist.Soc.1980) p67
- 10 Ibid. p68-9
- 11 Fletcher, Ian (ed.) *In the Service of the King: The letters of William Thornton Keep at home, Walcheren, and in the Peninsula, 1808-1814*. (Spellmount 1997) p80-1.
- 12 The 34th Foot for example were famously known as 'The Cumberland Gentlemen' while John le Couteur of the 104th smugly recorded in his diary for the 31st October 1814 that 'Sir James (Kempt) was pleased to say that He had never seen a mess so like the establishment of a private family of distinction.'
- 13 Glover, Michael *Wellington's Army in the Peninsula 1808-1814* (David & Charles 1977) p76-77
- 14 Bulloch, J.M. *A General Survey of Territorial Soldiering in North East Scotland* (Muster Roll 25th June to 24th December 1794)p236-252
- 15 Rodger op.cit.
- 16 A typical example (WO31/40) came from Lieutenant James O'Neil of the 94th, writing on the 16th December 1795: "*Memorialist has had the honour to serve 19 years a Subaltern and purchased his first Commission and is now the oldest Lieutenant in the Service. That your Memorialist is not able to purchase a promotion having a Family of 5 Children, two of them Sons able to Serve. One of whom, James O'Neil, he has fitted out at an inconvenient Expence. And he is gone a Volunteer with the present Expedition to the West Indies. Your Memorialist could not afford to fit out his second son Arthur as a Volunteer on an uncertainty, And has some hopes that Sir Ralph Abercrombie may Notice his son James on service. Your Memorialist as an old officer with a heavy family and no mode of providing for them humbly prays your Royal Highness will please to recommend his two sons to His Majesty for Ensigns Commissions, or please to recommend himself for a Company on any service.*" The appeal was partly successful in that both sons were appointed Ensigns in 4/60th as of 16th December, but although O'Neil himself went to the 22nd Foot in consequence of the reduction of the 94th, he does not appear in the 1797 Army List.
- 17 Rather disappointingly the scene in which a dusty clerk at Horse Guards pulls out Sharpe's personal file is also wrong. Unfortunately no such files exist for Napoleonic era officers.
- 18 Permission was very occasionally granted for the sale of dead officers' commissions, but only in order to provide for a widow or orphan children. Lennox left neither.
- 19 Not only that, but he would also have been entitled to a temporary pension of one year's pay as a Captain for his wound at Salamanca.

Officer pictures taken from 'Les Uniformes des Guerres Napoléoniennes', Éditions Quatuor 1998

