

THE DRESS DISTINCTIONS OF THE MERCIAN REGIMENT

by Brigadier Jim Tanner OBE

Now that the dust has settled over the changes brought about by the so-called Future Infantry Structure it will be of interest to record the dress distinctions of one of the new infantry regiments and how the decisions over dress were made. The example used here is of The Mercian Regiment, for the simple reason that the author of this article chaired the regimental dress committee. But perhaps others might be persuaded to do the same for the other new infantry regiments formed in 2006 and 2007.

The Mercian Regiment was the last of the new infantry regiments to be formed and was created on 1st September 2007 as a merger of The 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment, The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment, The Staffordshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales's) and Territorials from across the north and west Midlands. The end result is a regiment of four battalions: 1st Battalion (Cheshire), 2nd Battalion (Worcesters and Foresters), 3rd Battalion (Staffords) and 4th Battalion (Volunteers). The latter's Territorials come from what was The West Midlands Regiment and The Kings and Cheshire Regiment but also incorporate a company of Royal Fusiliers and a company of Rifles.

The dress of the Mercian Regiment follows the general regulations for the Infantry of the Line and, within that, The Prince of Wales's Division¹. In deciding the dress distinctions of the new regiment it was important to represent each antecedent regiment as equally as possible as this was considered a key factor in maintaining the 'golden thread' – the critically important link between the new and the old. But at the same time, creating a uniform akin to a Christmas tree was to be avoided. As a result it was clearly impossible to carry forward every antecedent distinction, especially from two of the three Regular regiments which had undergone previous amalgamations². Historical precedence was important (anyone who has faced the Army Dress Committee will know they have to face the Committee's Historical Advisor and so need to have their facts straight!) and was used to govern any possible dispute. An important example was in the decision over facing colour, which resulted in the choice of buff as this was the facing colour of the 22nd. When no agreement could be reached over colour of Stable Belt (black, as then worn by the Staffords, was a strong favourite but ardently opposed by the Cheshires) the regimental committee fell back on buff. None of the dress distinctions have been affected by the recently introduced All Ranks Number 2 Dress Uniform.

REGIMENTAL BADGE AND CAP-BADGE

See Photo 1. Choice of Regimental badge was relatively straightforward, made even more so by the decision from the outset to call the new regiment the Mercian Regiment. All the antecedent regiments had been part of the Mercian Brigade between 1947 and 1968³ and all had worn the Mercian Eagle as a cap-badge. Many of the new regiment's Territorial predecessors had also worn this badge as Mercian Volunteers⁴. The new badge was based therefore very closely on the old badge and comprises a silver double-headed Mercian Eagle with gold claws and bills surmounted by a gold Saxon Crown. Three versions of the badge exist and these are illustrated⁵. The soldiers' cap-badge, in silver and gold coloured metal and worn in all forms of dress, is larger than the officers' cap-badge by some 2mm all round. Officers' (and WO1s') cap-badges come in two versions: silver and gold coloured metal for wear in the Forage Cap and bronze metal for wear in the Service Dress Cap and the Beret. The Beret is the infantry khaki pattern and carries a square Lincoln Green patch as backing to the cap-badge. Two of these dress distinctions are worth further explanation. A bronze cap-badge to be worn by officers⁶ in all forms of dress except when wearing the Forage Cap recognised the black facings of the North Staffordshire Regiment, and is repeated in buttons and shoulder titles as described below. The Lincoln Green patch on the Beret recognised the Lincoln Green facing colour of the Sherwood Foresters Regiment.

COLLAR BADGE

See Photos 2 and 3. There are two versions of the Collar Badge: one in gold coloured metal and one in bronze; the latter, again, for wear by officers and WO1s. Design is based on the 'Dettingen Oak-leaves', a dress distinction worn previously by the 22nd and which is also shown by the wearing of oak-leaves in headdress when in the presence of Royalty⁷. Beneath the new design of acorn and oak-leaves has been placed the motto 'FIRM', a motto carried by the 36th Foot, later the 2nd Worcesters, since 1743. This motto has been carried forward into the motto of the Mercian Regiment as 'STAND FIRM, STRIKE HARD'.

SHOULDER TITLES AND RANK BADGES

See Photos 4 and 5. Metal Shoulder Titles also come in two coloured versions – gold coloured and bronze – and consist of a simple curved and blocked out 'MERCIAN'. The cloth version, for wear in Combat Dress, is worn by all ranks. Private soldiers carry 'MERCIAN' alone, while all ranks above private and officers carry their respective badges of rank, all in a dark bronze colour on a green cloth slide. WO2s, senior and junior NCOs wear standard worsted rank badges but all on black felt backing as previously worn in the Staffordshire Regiment.

BUTTONS

See Photo 6. Buttons are also in two coloured versions and all bear the Mercian Eagle in relief.

SPECIAL ARM BADGE

See Photo 7. A significant feature of Mercian Regiment dress is the Special Arm Badge, worn by all ranks on the upper right arm of all uniforms except Combat Dress. The Badge is a gold wire Stafford Knot surmounted by a gold wire Glider, backed by a Holland Patch and all on a black cloth background. These features are all drawn from the Staffordshire Regiment. The Stafford Knot⁸ was worn in one form or another by the Staffordshire Regiment and its forbears since at least 1782, the date when the 38th and 64th Regiments of Foot received the titles '1st Staffordshire' and '2nd Staffordshire' respectively. The Glider was formerly 'Titles Glider', a Special Arm Badge awarded to the South Staffordshire Regiment and the Border Regiment in 1951 in recognition of the part played by both in the airborne landings in Sicily in 1943. By placing the Glider on the Knot it is distinguished from the Glider worn today by the new Duke of Lancaster's Regiment⁹. The Holland Patch was a dress distinction of the South Staffordshire Regiment, awarded in 1936 in recognition of the 57 years continuous service of the 38th Foot in the West Indies in the Eighteenth Century. Finally, the black backing is further recognition of the black facings of the North Staffords.

TACTICAL RECOGNITION FLASHES AND LANYARDS

See Photos 8 and 9. Officially only one Tactical Recognition Flash (TRF) exists, as authorised by the Army Dress Committee and following a policy laid down by the Army Board that permits only one regimental TRF to be worn by all battalions in an infantry regiment. The Mercian Regiment TRF is a tri-coloured diamond on a black backing, the three colours representing the Mercian 'colours' of red, buff and green¹⁰. The central buff strip is the facing colour of the Mercian Regiment, representing the Cheshire's facing colour (as noted above) and also the buff colour of the Staffords' Holland Patch. The red/cerise represents a colour long associated with the Cheshires and worn also on the regimental ties of the North Staffords and the Worcesters. The green represents the WFR's Lincoln Green and the green background to the 1st Battalion flag of the Staffords. Green had been chosen for a battalion flag in 1959 as a neutral alternative to the South Staffords' yellow and the North Staffords' black. This Mercian tri-colour is also represented in the regimental Lanyard, to be worn by all those serving away from the four Battalions, and in the two types (one town and one country) of regimental tie. It is interesting to note that this tri-colour had been agreed some 12 years or so earlier when discussions were taking place between the Cheshires and Staffords ahead of their, subsequently aborted, amalgamation under Options for Change.

Four other TRFs were designed, each to mark a distinguishing feature of each Battalion but which were not approved for wear by the ADC. They are all shown for completion and are described as:

1st Battalion (Cheshire): Buff and cerise diamond, the choice of colours as already described. The design is also based on a battle patch worn previously by the 22nd in the Great War.

2nd Battalion (Worcesters and Foresters): Lincoln Green and maroon diamond, colours taken from the Sherwood Foresters and the Worcesters respectively.

3rd Battalion (Staffords): Yellow Stafford Knot on a black diamond. The yellow of the Knot comes from the yellow facing colour of the South Staffords and the black patch from the North. The design was drawn from various historical examples from battle patches worn in the Great War. The Knot was a feature of the battle patches worn by the Territorials of the 137th Staffordshire Brigade while the black patch was worn by the 7th North Staffords in Mesopotamia in 1917/18 and could thus be seen as recognising the part played by the modern Staffordshire Regiment in Iraq.

4th Battalion (Volunteers): A Mercian Eagle on a blue diamond. The blue was the colour adopted by the Mercian Volunteers during their existence from 1968. The Mercian Volunteers had taken this from the Mercian Brigade formation sign, which had consisted of a blue shield bearing a silver gothic 'M' beneath a gold Saxon crown. At one stage blue was being proposed as the facing colour for the Mercian Regiment but was deemed inappropriate as it is not a Royal regiment. A proposal had been made by the West Midland Regiment¹¹ for the 4th Battalion to continue using their TRF, a Saint Chad's Cross, but this was rejected by the regimental committee for the sake of standardisation and so as not to seem to exclude other antecedent Territorials now included in the new regiment.

All TRFs are just under two inches square except that of the 1st Battalion, which is a diamond measuring 2" by 1½". All are worn on Combat Dress only, on the upper right arm and beneath any formation sign then being worn.

Each Battalion is distinguished by its own lanyard. The regimental lanyard has already been described but when soldiers are serving with any of the Battalions they wear that Battalion's lanyard. The three Regular Battalions wear their old Regimental lanyards and the colours for these are: 1st Battalion – red cerise; 2nd Battalion – Lincoln Green; 3rd Battalion – black. The 4th Battalion wears blue. Lanyards are worn in Service Dress and Barrack Dress and are worn on the left shoulder except for the 2nd Battalion, where they are worn on the right.

BELTS AND BELT CLASPS

See Photo 10. As mentioned earlier, the colour chosen for the Stable Belt was buff – the Regimental facing colour. It was decided too that the buckle would be a union-type locket so that the Regimental badge could be displayed, and that this would be in bronze coloured metal for all ranks.

OTHER DISTINCTIONS

There are two more dress distinctions of note. Officers wear their sword frogs with their Sam Browne belts even when not carrying swords as this was a dress distinction of the Worcesters and Foresters. It is derived from an incident in North America in 1746 when officers of the 29th Foot were attacked at mess by Indians. The Regiment has been known since as 'The Ever Sworded'. Finally, the regimental pullover, worn by officers and warrant office

Footnotes

¹ The Prince of Wales's Division, set up on 1 September 1968 when the Brigade Groups were broken up, originally comprised nine Regular battalions plus associated Territorial battalions from nine County Regiments: The Devon and Dorset Regiment, The 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment, The Royal Welch Fusiliers, The Royal Regiment of Wales, The Gloucestershire Regiment, The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment, The Royal Hampshire Regiment, The Staffordshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales's) and the Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment (Berkshire and Wiltshire). The Division today has just two regiments: The Mercians and The Royal Welsh Regiment.

² While the 22nd had not experienced a single amalgamation in its history, the Worcesters and Foresters were formed in 1971 from an amalgamation of the Worcesterhire Regiment and the Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derby) Regiment. Prior to 1881 these had been the 29th and 36th Regiments and the 45th and 95th Regiments respectively. The Staffordshire Regiment was a 1959 amalgamation of the South Staffordshire and the North Staffordshire Regiments. Prior to 1881 these had been the 38th and 80th and the 64th and 98th respectively.

³ In 1947: The 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment, The Worcestershire Regiment, The South Staffordshire Regiment and The North Staffordshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales's). The Sherwood Foresters Regiment (Notts and Derby) joined in 1962 on the disbandment of the Forester Brigade.

⁴ The Mercian Volunteers were created in 1967 when the Territorial Army was demolished and originally contained the Territorials from the old Mercian Brigade. Starting with two battalions it rose to three until the Mercian Volunteers were reorganised during the brief comeback of county TA battalions in 1988. The new Mercian Regiment embodies the history and traditions of the Mercian Volunteers.

⁵ See Badge Notes in Bulletin Number 237 and the comments regarding Photograph 3.

⁶ Officers only. Line Infantry soldiers have never been permitted to wear bronzed badges or buttons.

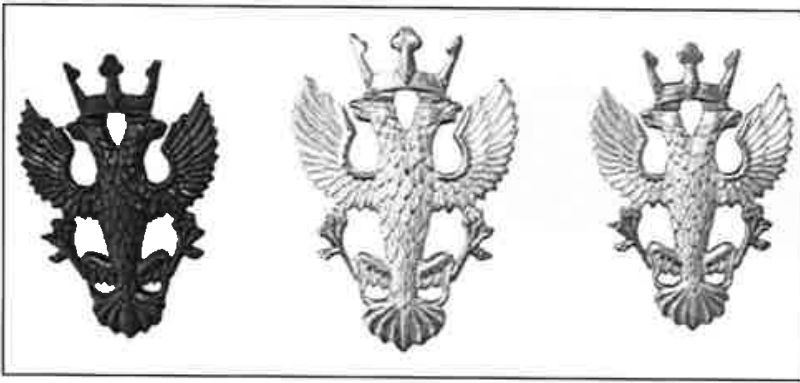
⁷ The foundation of this dress distinction is lost in the mists of time. The right of the 22nd to wear oak-leaves in their head-dress on Royal and special occasions is said to derive from the Battle of Dettingen in 1743, when a 'detachment' of the 22nd saved King George II. But the 22nd was stationed in Minorca at that time. There is no record of this distinction until 1833 when a remark was made by the Governor of Jamaica when presenting new Colours to the 22nd, and it may be that the Regiment had simply carried on a tradition once common of wearing oak-leaves as a field sign. The allowance to wear oak-leaves in their hats on special occasions was not actually given until 1933, by King George V, and when Sir John Fortescue asked the Regiment to explain, no explanation was recorded. Whatever the facts, or lack of them, this distinction has been carried forward to the Mercian Regiment.

⁸ The Stafford Knot is the ancient symbol of the Earls of Stafford. It is never the 'Staffordshire Knot'.

⁹ The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment is an amalgamation of the King's Own Royal Border Regiment, The King's Regiment and the Queen's Lancashire Regiment.

¹⁰ Note that Gary Gibbs' Badge Notes from issue 233 of The Bulletin are incorrect in stating (in Photograph 5) that the Mercian TRF is the Eagle on a blue patch. This is actually the 4th Battalion TRF. Note also that Badge Notes in issue 237 state that Photograph 8 is the TRF of the Mercian Yeomanry when it is actually the TRF of the Mercian Regiment, as shown here.

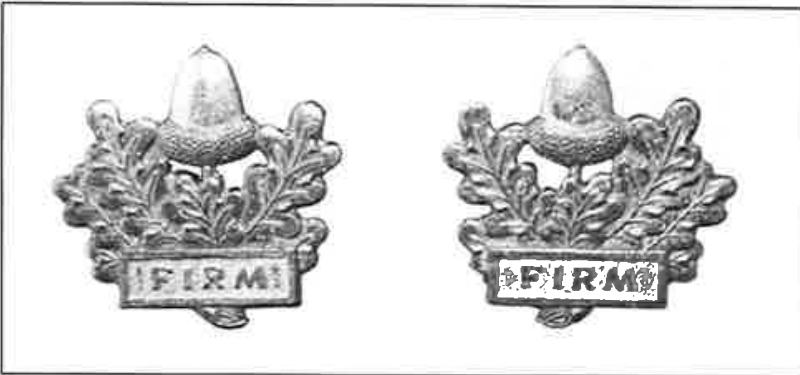
¹¹ When the county TA battalions were demolished by the Strategic Defence Review in 1999 the West Midlands Regiment absorbed Territorials from the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment and the Staffordshire Regiment.



Regimental Cap Badge. L to R: Officers' bronze, soldiers' silver and gold, officers' silver and gold



Cloth slide



Silver and gold collar badge



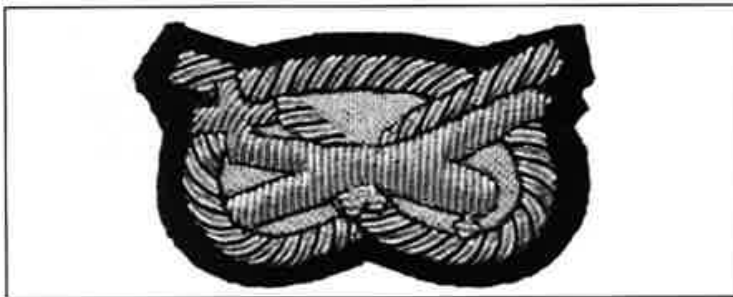
Officers' bronze colour badge



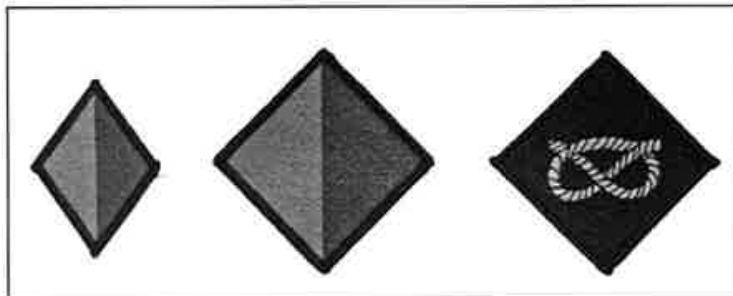
Shoulder titles – brass and bronze



Buttons



Special arm badge



*Tactical recognition flashes. L to R:
1st Battalion, 2nd Battalion, 3rd
Battalion*



*Tactical recognition flashes. L to
R: 48th Battalion, regimental*



*Stable belt with bronze union
locket*