

HISTORY OF THE REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJOR

by Gary Gibbs

As a follow up on the Guards 'Big Badge' in issue number 213 of the Bulletin, I offer here a brief history of the rank of Regimental Sergeant Major. The rank of Sergeant Major has changed considerably over the years from that of a very senior officer to a senior non-commissioned officer, at times there is no mention of this rank on the establishment at all.

It would appear that during the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the Sergeant Major was an important staff officer. Around 1630 a regimental officer, similar to the modern Major, was called Sergeant Major and that a staff officer was called Sergeant Major General. At the close of the 17th century, both these ranks seem to have disappeared. Early in the 18th century certain special duties seem to have been assigned to the senior Sergeant, often called the Sergeant Major. These duties gradually increased in importance, until at the beginning of the 19th century, Sergeant Majors were regularly placed on the establishment, and granted a higher rate of pay. In 1881 they became Warrant Officers.

Within the Guards Museum there is a book titled *The Sergeant Major, the Origin and History of his Rank*, published 1886. It is from this that most of the following has been taken.

In olden times the infantry was commanded by a Captain General of the Footmen, who had under his command a Lieutenant, a Sergeant Major, six Officers, a Chaplain and a Surgeon. The Sergeant Major mentioned here was a general officer and afterwards called Sergeant Major General (taken from *Grose, Military Antiquities*).

In Harleian Manuscripts No 4685 dated 1518 there is a passage entitled "The Order of the Campe or Army Royal, with the Dutie of every Officer belonging to the same." This gives the duties of the Sergeant Major.

The pay lists of 1518 also show beyond doubt that the Sergeant Major in those days was an officer of high rank and great importance, on a par with today's Adjutant General.

The 1577 list for the Army does not list a Sergeant Major General.

The Rates for the Entertainment of the Officers of the Companies appointed for Service in 1588 list the following officers: The Colonel General of the Footmen, Lieutenant, Sergeant Major, Corporal of the Field and Halberdiers.

In 1598 a document signed by Queen Elizabeth I lists the following in the Pay of the Army in Ireland under the Earl of Essex: The Lord Lieutenant General. The Lieutenant of the Army, The General of the Horse, The Marshall of the Camp, The

Sergeant Major, The Lieutenant General of the Horse. Twenty Colonels, Captains of Horse, Lieutenants of Horse, Cornets of Horse, Horsemen, Captains of Foot, Lieutenants of Foot, Ensigns of Foot, Sergeants of Foot, Drummers, Surgeons. At this time each company consisted of a Captain, a Lieutenant, an Ensign, two Sergeants, one Drummer, one Surgeon, and 94 men.

The Sergeant Major ranked after the Lieutenant Colonel, and he performed the duties of the modern Adjutant.

In 1639 the rank seems to have been split as "A List of the Several Entertainments of the Officers General of the Field, Lord General's Train, Officers of Foot, etc.": Officers General of the Field: The Lord General, The Lieutenant General, The Sergeant Major General, Quartermaster General.

Lord General's Train: Colonels of the four Regiments of Foot, four Lieutenant Colonels, four Sergeants Major.

Warde's *Animadversions on Warre*, 1639, shows the duties of the regimental officer who held the rank of Sergeant Major: A Sergeant Major is the third and principal officer of the field, he ought to participate in all the perfections that officers of higher authority should have. His place and office doth somewhat correspond with that of the Major General's.

Commissioned Officers holding the rank of Sergeant Major existed in the Parliamentary Army. *The Army List of the Roundheads and Cavaliers*, 1642 by William Peacock shows that every regiment had a Sergeant Major ranking between the Lieutenant Colonel and the senior Captain.

The House of Commons Journal dated 13th April 1649 shows the pay of the Parliamentary troops then serving, there is no mention of Sergeant Majors.

The following is taken from Grose in 1685: In the time of James II, the Sergeant Major General, sometimes called the Sergeant Major of the Camp, was what is now called Major General, as a Sergeant Major of a regiment formerly signified the officer now call Major. In *The Exercise of the Foot, with the Evolutions according to Words of Command*, by Their Majesties Command, 1690, no mention is made of the Sergeant Major. The Major of a regiment is mentioned, so he was apparently no longer called Sergeant Major.

A Royal Warrant of 1697 was issued by William III respecting allowances to commissioned officers in lieu of servants. A Major is mentioned, but no Sergeant Major, showing that at that time there was no commissioned officer bearing that rank.

The earliest mention we can find of any non-commissioned officer holding the rank of Sergeant Major is in an Order issued to the Brigade of Guards in 1724: "The three regiments of Foot Guards are to furnish a detachment of 100 men as often as due notice is given, under command of a Lieutenant Colonel, a Captain, an Ensign, an Adjutant, and a Sergeant Major, as Guards for the balls and operas at the King's Theatre in

the Haymarket, and to be aiding and assisting in the preservation of the peace, and preventing all manner of profaneness, rudeness, drunkenness, or indecencies, and not to permit any person whatever to enter the said theatre in habits worn by the clergy." Dated 18th January 1724-5.

In 1725 another "A detachment of 100 men from the three regiments of Guards to attend at the King's Theatre, Haymarket, as often as a ballet is held there, and upon all such occasions to direct that the Sergeant Major to oblige the musicians and butlers to retire in good time." 15th February 1725-26.

The 1739 official Drill Book gives no mention of the Sergeant Major. *Blands Military Discipline*, 1743, gives a minute account of the duties of all ranks from The Colonel to the private soldier, but once again no mention is made of the Sergeant Major. From these two accounts it would seem that the rank of Sergeant Major lapsed.

In *The History of the Coldstream Guards*, by Colonel Mackinnon, can be found the following: "Mr Alexander Hogg, Sergeant Major and Deputy Marshall in the second regiment of Foot Guards to be appointed Fort Major and Adjutant of the Garrison of Jersey," April 1756.

Military Medley, by Thomas Simes, 1768. The following item occurs in a list of prices: Silver lace for the Sergeant Major, £4 Os Od.

Military Course, by Thomas Simes, 1768 has the following passage. "Of the choice and duty of the Sergeant Major. He should be a man of real merit, a complete Sergeant and a good scholar, sensible and agreeable in conversation, in order to attract the eye of the non-commissioned officers, who are immediately under his command and are constantly employed together; he should be a person who has discovered an early genius of discipline, and that had been taken notice of, for neglecting every other study but that; he must be ready at his pen, an expert in making out details and rosters, etc. He is always to have by him printed furloughs and discharges, as also Company's books, with many spare leaves to add any additional standing orders that may be issued and for every officer that choose one is to pay two shillings and sixpence, as also the non-commissioned officers and private men that go on furlough for their business, are to pay fourpence for the furloughs and the regiment a like sum for every discharge." Also in the same book: "The Adjutant and Sergeant Major are then to spring from the right and left of the battalion, dressed most exactly every rank, and seeing that the officers and non-commissioned officers are always in line."

In *The Military Guide to Young Officers* by Thomas Simes, 1781, the Sergeant Major is mentioned, but he does not appear to have been of very great importance. In a description of the method of parading the duties, no Sergeant Major is mentioned, though the Adjutant is mentioned. In another place the duties of all ranks on every occasion are carefully detailed, but no mention is made of the Sergeant Major.

The following passage gives apparently a form for notifying the hour at which orders will be given out: "Orderly hour at the 'Orderly room, where the Sergeant Major and

Quartermaster Sergeant, with a Sergeant and a Corporal from each company, Drum Major, Fife Major and the Master of the Band of Musicke attend for orders."

Again: "The Sergeant Major must keep a roster and role of duties of the noncommissioned officers and men."

Again: "When a regiment is ordered into cantonements, the Colours, Chaplain, Paymaster, Surgeon, Adjutant, Quartermaster, Sergeant Major, Quartermaster Sergeant, Drill Sergeant etc. are to remain at Headquarters. This shows that the Sergeant Major was then what is now called a Staff Sergeant." The same book gives a copy of a Royal Warrant on Clothing 1781. The uniform of all ranks is minutely described, but no mention is made of any distinctive badge for the Sergeant Major.

The official drill book of 1792 makes no mention of the Sergeant Major.

The pay book of the non-commissioned officers of the Foot Guards for 1793 lists the following: Deputy Marshall, Drum Major, Sergeant, Corporal, Drummer, Private, but no Sergeant Major.

Grose in a pay list for 1800 lists no Sergeant Majors for the Foot Guards, but does for the Line Infantry, Sergeant Major and Quartermaster Sergeants, Paymaster Sergeants, Sergeants .

Grose also states "As the Adjutant is an assistant to the Major, so in like manner he is assisted by the chief Sergeant, stiled Sergeant Major."

By a *General Order* issued July 1802, chevrons were introduced in order to distinguish the different ranks of non-commissioned officers. Sergeant Majors to wear four chevrons.

Sir FW Hamilton in his *History of the Grenadier Guards* says that, 25th June , 1802, Sergeant Majors, Quartermaster Sergeants, and Armourer Sergeants were added to the establishment of the regiment.

Mackinnon, in his *History of the Coldstream Guards* says that in 1802, two Sergeant Majors and two Quartermaster Sergeants were placed on the establishment

of that regiment. He adds, "They previously received 6d per day each out of the non effective money in addition to their pay as Sergeants." He gives the pay of a Sergeant Major in 1806 as 1s 10d , and 1s 4d additional pay. Sergeants 1s 10d, additional pay 8d.

In the 1809 *Field Exercise* the Sergeant Major is given no place on parade.

By a Royal Warrant issued in 1813, the pay of Sergeant Majors was increased to 3s. By the same Warrant it was laid down that the senior Sergeant of each Company was to be called the "Colour Sergeant" with the pay of 2s 4d.

Sir H Torrens *Field Exercise and*



The Royal Logistic Corps Conductors arm badge

Evolution of the Army published in 1829 mentioned for the first time the Sergeant Major, in connection with the movements of the battalion. He is here mentioned as covering the centre Sergeant when advancing in line, but is not mentioned in any other place.

Field Exercise for infantry, 1833. The Sergeant Major is mentioned as superintending the covering of the advance of the battalion in line, and as covering the flank of the rear rank, on the word, "Rear rank, take open order."

The 1859 *Field Exercise* the Sergeant Major is, for the first time given a place on parade, and in all battalion movements.

In 1881 Sergeant Majors were made Warrant Officers. The four bar chevrons, the distinctive badge of Sergeant Majors since 1802 was abolished and a single crown, worn below the elbow, was introduced in their place. This was also authorised for the Foot Guards (see issue number 213).

Army Order 309/1915 states that Warrant Officers Class 1 were granted the wearing of the Royal Coat of Arms below the elbow, (this does not include the Foot Guards as the Sergeant Major had reverted to the large Royal Coat of Arms worn on the upper arm around 1894).



The new Corps WO1s arm badge introduced during 2008



The Royal Artillery Sergeant Major's arm badge

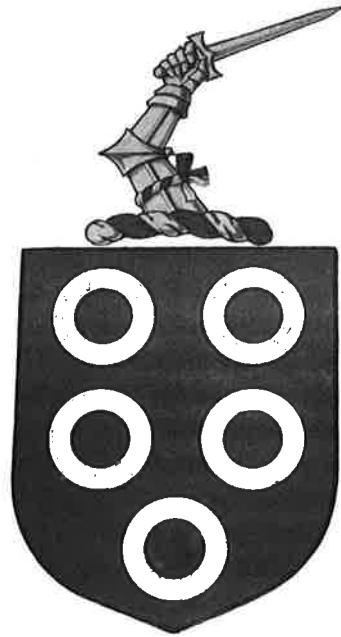
The first Royal Coats of Arms issued to the Army, were approximately the same size as the present day mess dress version, with khaki backing, they soon changed to the size worn today. For Number One Dress they were made in gold and silver wire and came with all sorts of coloured backings, ranging from white, to blue, to red and green, depending on the arm of service. In Number Two Dress they are made of silks on a khaki backing, some also have a colour border around the Royal Coat of Arms indicating the arm of service the wearer belongs to. Mess Dress Royal Coats of Arms are a third smaller in size.

The most recent change to the wearing of Warrant Officer badges is that to the Royal Artillery, The Royal Artillery Sergeant Major wears a special badge on his lower right arm. This being to the same design as the badge worn on the old blue cloth helmet but made in bullion. First off, it was noticed, that the gun on the badge was pointing in the wrong direction, so in 1997 a newer pattern was made, with the gun pointing the correct way. The Royal Artillery Sergeant Major firstly wore the badge above his elbow, but this did not last long and he was ordered to place it below the elbow. The Guards Sergeant Majors are the only persons allowed to wear the Royal Coat of Arms above the elbow.

Another innovation is that the senior Regimental Sergeant Majors of Corps now wear a special badge, to distinguish them from the rest of the Corps RSMs. It is the regular size Royal Coat of Arms in a wreath.



A Sergeant Major of the Coldstream Guards, c1815 shown wearing the four bar chevron on his upper arms, an original watercolour by Ray Kirkpatrick



The coat of arms of Sergeant Major General Phillip Skippon Captain 1639-1657 (HAC). Captain General 1657-1660 (HAC).