

THE ROYAL MARINE ARTILLERY 1804-1923

BY

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"They were probably the most magnificent body of men the services ever produced."
(From an article in the "Globe and Laurel" June 1968.)

Who were these men to be held in such high esteem? Royal Marines. Naturally. One could very easily assume that it referred to the Corps of Royal Marines from 1664 up until the present day. But this particular compliment was paid to a branch of the Corps no longer in existence. The Royal Marine Artillery. Very little seems to have been written about the Royal Marine Artillery. Certainly not in general accounts of the history of the Royal Marines. Though no doubt their history will be thoroughly dealt with in the volumes of "Britain's Sea Soldiers". These volumes are, I believe, the finest recorded account of the early history and traditions of the Royal Marines. Fortunate indeed is the person who has been able to obtain and read the three volumes of "Britain's Sea Soldiers". For they now appear to be very rare.

The Royal Marine Artillery were born exactly one hundred and forty years after the formation of the Corps. In the late Colonel G W M Grover's "Short History of the Royal Marines" one reads: "In 1804 an Artillery company was added to each division and in 1805 the Royal Marine Artillery constituted a separate part of the RM Forces. This strengthened the striking power of Marines in combined operations." Thus was born this unique body of men who, one hundred and nineteen years later, were to suffer the same fate many army regiments today are bitterly complaining against, disbandment and amalgamation. It is recorded that they served with great distinction with three Royal Marines Battalions in the American War of 1812-1815. Of their bearing, Sir Charles Napier wrote: "Never in my life have I seen soldiers like that Marine Artillery. We suffered much fatigue and hardship, but never was seen anything not admirable in these glorious Soldiers. Should my life extend to antediluvian years their conduct at Little Hampton will not be forgotten by me. All honour to the memory of these brave men." Just a mere eleven years after their formation and their reputation was starting to grow. The praise and appreciation expressed by Sir Charles Napier concerning the conduct of the Royal Marine Artillery is, I think, even more significant when one remembers that about the same period of time the Duke of Wellington was referring to his troops as "The scum of the earth", or words to that effect. I have never been able to decide if the Duke of Wellington was, when he passed that remark, referring to the social and class background from which the hardcore of his army came, or was also referring to his men's bearing and discipline. But it is also interesting to find recorded that in 1810 when a Battalion of Royal Marines was sent to Wellington's Army, Sir William Napier described it as "A superb body of Marines sent from England".

In 1832 HMS EXCELLENT was established as the Royal Navy's Gunnery School and it was laid down that - "As in the Establishment of the Officers and crew of The Excellent, a Lieutenant, three non-commissioned officers and two privates of the Royal Marine Artillery are included in her complement of Marines, it is intended that the theoretical instruction required for the Officers and seamen Gunners should be furnished by them ..." In 1963 HMS EXCELLENT said goodbye to the last Royal Marine GI. An association which started that day in 1832 when the Royal Marine Artillery Officers and men first instructed there.

One can find brief mention of the Royal Marine Artillery at Hernani 1837, the Cimea, Graspan, Enslin, but very little detail other than the name of the action or campaign.



From a painting by R Simkin

Moving from warlike to more peaceful pursuits, it seems that the Royal Marine Artillery were just as outstanding. The Physical Drill competition at the Royal Tournament was ended in 1900 after a long series of victories by the Royal Marine Artillery.

On the 29 April 1966 the Royal Marine Artillery held a reunion at Eastney Barracks. When addressing the gathering of old Blue Marines, General Bourne said: "... It shows", he continued, "that we still have the spirit which made us without compare in ceremonial." General Bourne continued "I shall never forget the Guard of Honour of King Edward VII's funeral. It had to march from Picadilly Circus along the funeral route to get to its position at Paddington Station and this Guard of six footers, marching in a rigid block on the crown of the road, looked so magnificent that they were clapped by the dense crowd all the way." General Bourne also remarked upon the fact that they swept the board in their last two years at the Royal Tournament. Competing in an winning the Bayonet Combat Team event, Heavy-weight Tug-of-War and the Light-weight Tug-of-War.

In 1914 the Royal Marine Artillery had to turn their skill and prowess to more urgent and serious matters.

In the 1914-18 war they were the first anti-aircraft Batteries to land in France. They also fought with 15 inch Howitzers.

In Major F W Lumsden VC DSO and three bars, they had the most decorated officer in the First World War. Apart from action in France, Gallipoli, Zeebrugge and with the Grand Fleet they also fought in the Cameroons against the Germans. So from the very little one can read of them it is clear to see that the reputation and high esteem enjoyed by the Royal Marine Artillery was earned by their deeds and actions in both peace and war.

I have a painting by R Simkin depicting officers and men of the Royal Marine Artillery in various uniforms of that period.

Printed on the top right side of my copy of the painting is the wording "Supplement to the ARMY & NAVY GAZETTE Saturday, April 3rd, 1897". Looking at the painting one sees how closely the No 1 ceremonial dress of the Royal Marines, as now practically only worn by the Royal Marines Bands, resembles that worn by the Royal Marine Artillery. The "Blue Uniform". As has been worn by the Corps since the amalgamation in 1923. Some people think that as the Corps is the Navy's soldiers, hence the blue uniform.

I think I am correct in stating that the Blue uniform worn by the Royal Marine Artillery had no connection Naval wise. Blue was always the colour for British Artillery. After all, the rest of the Corps had worn red since the 1700s. Also on the No 1 Ceremonial dress you have the "red collar with the yellow piping". The ball on the white pith helmets. Did the Royal Marine Artillery ever wear the white helmet?

The frogging on the Drum Major's coat is also from the Royal Marine Artillery Drum Majors. And of course the broad red stripe as worn by the band service.

In writing these few lines I most probably will not have told anything that the majority of our members do not already know. Nor have I attempted to do so, for my knowledge is insufficient. But my whole object of writing about the Royal Marine Artillery is because I have always been struck by the fact that in reading about the Corps, there is very little detail to be found concerning them.

Yet the little pieces one does read give one the impression that these were truly an elite body of men. There must be one member among us who can enlarge upon what I have written. For instance, is there any among us who can tell why the "Soldiers Chorus" (from Gounods "Faust") was adopted as the Regimental March of the Royal Marine Artillery? Why had they not an official band of their own until 1874? Just how excellent was their ceremonial? We all know the very high standard of drill and precision in the Corps ever since that day on the 26 June 1919 when the Kings Squad, Royal Marines Light Infantry, marched into the arena at the Royal Tournament and gave what was recorded as "an incomparable drill exhibition". Did the standard of drill and precision in the Royal Marine Artillery compare with what has always been expected from the Corps?

Or were the Royal Marine Artillery and Royal Marines Light Infantry building up the fine reputation the Corps have enjoyed in regards to ceremonial, many, many years before that day in 1919 only never received the acclaim due to them.

To come back to the present day. I wonder what were the thoughts of ex-Royal Marine Artillery men when 46 years after their disbandment and amalgamation the powers that be thought fit to have a commando trained Battery of Royal Artillery Gunners to support the Royal Marines Commandos. If there are any old Blue Marines among our members perhaps this will encourage them to put pen to paper. I am sure many will be more than just interested in what they would have to say.