

## Some talk of Alexander

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On my only visit so far to the United States, to attend an academic conference, I found myself seated at dinner next to a US Army Major who lectured in sociology at West Point. Learning that I had served in the Territorial Army, he seized the opportunity to quiz me about the British regimental system. How, he wanted to know, does it work? That was a question relatively easy to answer, that a man joining the British Army does not simply join the cavalry or infantry,<sup>2</sup> he joins a regiment which is his military “home” throughout his service. Although there may well be periods when he is posted away, to the staff or as an instructor, his loyalties and sense of belonging are with his regiment, and with units within that regiment rather than to a more abstract “army”. Underneath that lies a much more difficult question. Does the regimental system “work”, in the sense of giving the British Army a cohesion and its personnel a sense of identity which is lacking in other armies and indeed in the other British services? And if it does, why does it work?

Common sense as well as a great deal of psychological and sociological research indicates that one of the great human needs is to belong, to be part of a group with its own particular identity and unique features which mark it out from other groups, and whose members provide mutual respect and support to one another. This need is particularly acute in areas of endeavour involving physical danger, where individuals must, quite literally, trust their lives to those they live and work with, most obviously in the Armed Forces, but also in the police and fire service. Traditionally, this type of group identity is developed by rigorous training, designed to encourage mutual trust and the inter-dependence of members of the group. But the British regimental system encourages soldiers to identify not only with those alongside them now, but with those who went before them. This is a very old tradition, seen, for example, in Roman times when a legion’s identity and honour were symbolised by its eagle, and the loss of the eagle meant ignominy not only for the legion as a unit, but for each of its men as an individual.

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<sup>2</sup> The Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and the various corps with specialist functions are organised quite differently and the regimental system operates in a different way entirely.

Elite military units with highly specialised roles find their collective identity in the particular role, and in the demanding selection and training procedures which only a small proportion of candidates satisfy. The most obvious British example of such a unit is the SAS, whose distinctive identity and mystique are only enhanced by the secrecy which surrounds its operations and some of its training methods. The Foot Guards consider themselves not only smarter, better-disciplined and better at ceremonial than everybody else, but better fighters as well. Other military units find a common identity through technical expertise, and a less consciously élite but still specialist role. A good example is the Royal Engineers; my father tells me that my paternal grandfather was to the end of his life proud of being a Sapper, “first into action and last out”. But what of the rest of the British Army?

It might be said that the British regimental tradition works because it gives members of a particular regiment a shared identity going beyond that which arises naturally from operating together, a sense that they are “different” from, more efficient and more valuable than the common herd, i.e. other regiments, that they are, in their particular way, an élite. This “difference” is what underlies the often rather esoteric traditions of various regiments, summed up by one American friend of mine as “the funny hats”. There are cavalry regiments which have “Regimental Hymns” because their Peninsular War forebears sacked a convent and raped the nuns, for which the Spanish religious authorities, with the approval of the Duke of Wellington, imposed a penance requiring their regimental bands to play sacred music on three afternoons a week for 100 years. The practice continued after the penance ran out. The six “Minden regiments” and their successor regiments wear roses in their head dress every 1st August to commemorate their charge through a field of roses at the Battle of Minden in 1759 (except the Royal Welch Fusiliers, who claim to have been too busy fighting the French to be bothered picking roses). Regimental tradition involves a certain oneupmanship, the taking of every opportunity to demonstrate the innate and effortless superiority of one’s own regiment. A particularly nice example can be found in *Rough Road To Rome*, by David Cole, a junior officer in the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. Early in 1944 the local American commander decided to deal with a troublesome German observation post near Monte Cassino by an attack at battalion strength. The night before the assault, the Inniskillings quietly sent out a four-man patrol armed with one of the stencils used for marking the battalion’s vehicles and a tin of white paint, so that the Americans who captured the

position found the rocks which surrounded it to be liberally daubed with a representation of the Castle of Enniskillen.

The best book on this subject is probably *Morale: a study of men and courage*, by Lieutenant Colonel John Baynes of The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), a sociological study of the Second Battalion of his regiment at the time of its near-destruction at Neuve Chapelle in May 1915. Baynes used that battalion as an exemplar of a British regular battalion at the beginning of the First World War, and considered the factors influencing its efficiency, ranging from tangible matters such as the amount of time spent in weapon training, to matters much more difficult to assess, including the role of the regimental system. Baynes had the distinct advantage over me of being a regular soldier, so I therefore dip my toe into this water with some trepidation.

The British Army as we know it today has its origins in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Mutiny Act, giving the monarch authority to maintain a standing army, dates from 1689, but a number of regiments, raised earlier for specific purposes and not disbanded when that purpose was exhausted, were already in existence. These included, for example, the Tangier Horse and Tangier Foot, raised in 1661 to garrison Tangier, which came into British hands as part of the dowry of Charles II's Portuguese queen, Catherine of Braganza (after whom the borough of Queens is named), and evolved into the 1st Royal Dragoons (now part of the Blues and Royals) and Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment (now part of the Queen's Regiment). The Coldstream Guards are the unique survivors of Cromwell's New Model Army, having been part of the Scottish army which marched to London under General Monck and brought about the Restoration of Charles II (Coldstream is the small town where they crossed the Tweed into England). By the end of the century there were some two dozen regiments "of foot" and others of "horse" (cavalry) and dragoons (then mounted infantry, using horses for transport only), which formed a core around which additional regiments were raised when necessary.

A pattern of raising additional regiments when needed and disbanding them when the crisis was over continued down to 1881, by which time there were 109 numbered infantry regiments of widely differing origins, some, though by no means all, with long-standing links to particular localities, some with two or more battalions, the majority with only one, and 21 cavalry regiments. In that year, Edward Cardwell,

Gladstone's Secretary of State for War, embarked on an extensive rationalisation of what had become a decidedly haphazard system. In future, all infantry regiments would have two regular battalions, and be explicitly associated with a particular district, from which they would draw recruits, and where the regimental depot would be located. At any one time one battalion would serve at home and the other overseas. The first 25 regiments already had two battalions, and so were simply required to drop their historic numbers and adopt territorial titles, but the remainder were required to amalgamate, a process which was unpopular and produced some strange combinations.<sup>3</sup> The 26th Cameronians, lineal descendants of the Covenanters of seventeenth century Ayrshire, entered an uneasy marriage with the 90th Perthshire Light Infantry to form The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), whose regular battalions became, perversely, 1st Cameronians and 2nd Scottish Rifles. So unhappy did they remain over this episode that when amalgamation threatened again in 1968 this was one of a handful of regiments which preferred disbandment. Most regiments also had associations with a number of part-time militia and volunteer battalions, which following the creation of the Territorial Army in 1908 became formally part of the regiment. In time of war additional battalions could also be raised.

In the 1960s, the reduction in the size of the British army and withdrawal from East of Suez brought a second round of amalgamations, and what seems to have been a deliberate attempt to destroy much of what was best in the regimental system in order to create economies of scale, and presaged by attempts to water down traditional loyalties by grouping regiments into brigades and requiring officers and men to wear brigade rather than regimental badges. In particular, the "county" regiments largely disappeared, and recruiting areas became much larger and more amorphous. The new regiments adopted a slightly "pick and mix" approach to tradition, selecting uniform distinctions and regimental days from among those of the constituent units. Several amalgamations took place on non-geographical grounds, producing regiments whose present-day recruiting areas are widely dispersed. One such is The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, formed in 1968 from the four English Fusilier regiments,<sup>4</sup> and recruiting from Northumberland, the West Midlands, London and Lancashire.

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<sup>3</sup> The cavalry regiments all retained their separate identities in 1881, but were "paired" so as to function in a similar way to infantry battalions. A number were, however, amalgamated in the 1920s.

<sup>4</sup> Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, Royal Warwickshire Fusiliers, Royal Fusiliers and Lancashire Fusiliers.

At this point it is proper to turn from the general to the particular, and look in more detail at a specific regiment. I make no apology in following Colonel Baynes and choosing a regiment to which I can claim personal ties, the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, having served with its successor Territorial battalion, the 6th Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, in 1983-84. The regiment's origins go back to 1674, when an English brigade was raised for service under William of Orange, then in alliance with Charles II against Louis XIV.<sup>5</sup> This included the regiment raised in Ireland by Daniel O'Brien, 3rd Viscount Clare, and known as The Irish Regiment. The link with Northumberland began in the following year, when Sir John Fenwick, a member of a distinguished Northumberland family, succeeded Lord Clare as Colonel. The regiment then became The English Regiment, and adopted St George and the Dragon as a badge, along with the motto *Quo Fata Vocant* – "Where the Fates Call". The brigade remained on the continent until 1685, when it was recalled by James II at the time of the Duke of Monmouth's rising. Taken into the English line in 1689 as the 5th Regiment of Foot,<sup>6</sup> although the name changed with each change of Colonel down to 1751, the regiment consolidated its association with Northumberland during the eighteenth century, and in August 1782 the then Colonel, Earl Percy (later 2nd Duke of Northumberland) gave permission for "Northumberland" to be part of the regiment's title (his letter is now on display in the regimental museum in Alnwick Castle).

One unusual recruit in this period was Phoebe Hessle, one of several intrepid women who served in the army and Royal Marines in the guise of men.<sup>7</sup> Some time around 1740 Phoebe formed an attachment to a soldier of the 2nd Queen's, the former Tangier Foot, and when his regiment sailed for the West Indies, she enlisted in the Fifth in order to follow him. It seems that she never found her inamorata, but she saw active service in the War of the Austrian Succession and allegedly lived to be 106.

The Fifth had to wait until the Seven Years' War of 1756-63 for their first battle honour, though in doing so they made up for any lost

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<sup>5</sup> Charles II's foreign policy was convoluted. Britain fought two wars against the Dutch during his reign, and he was at the time receiving a pension from Louis XIV under the Secret Treaty of Dover of 1670.

<sup>6</sup> England and Scotland maintained distinct armies until after the Act of Union 1707.

<sup>7</sup> When I joined 6RRF on my somewhat unofficial attachment there was a certain interest in me as "the first woman in the regiment since Phoebe Hessle".

time. After taking the colours of a French grenadier regiment at Wilhelmstahl on 24th June 1762 they thereafter adopted the mitre caps worn by grenadiers, and paraded the captured colour annually on St George's Day until 1833, when the colour was destroyed in a fire at Gibraltar. King William IV (1830-37) was asked to approve a replacement, but refused, though in 1836 he agreed that the regiment should be re-equipped as Fusiliers, entitling them not only to the fur caps (similar to bearskins and still worn today with full dress) which had replaced the old mitre caps, but broad red stripes down the trouser seams and *The British Grenadiers* as a regimental march and bear "Wilhelmstahl" as a battle honour. At some stage a new Wilhelmstahl Banner appeared unofficially, and finally in 1933 permission was given by King George V (1910-36) for it to be paraded as the Drummers' Colour on St George's Day only

From the 1760s onwards the Fifth were heavily engaged in almost every campaign, the only significant exception being the Crimean War of 1854-56. In 1774 they sailed for North America and were part of the Boston garrison under General Gage which fought at Lexington and Concord. During the siege of Boston they took part in the assault on the Patriot position on Breed's Hill, and suffered 158 casualties among the 400 engaged. Evacuated from Boston along with the rest of the garrison on 17th March 1776 the regiment participated in attempts to capture New York and later moved on to Philadelphia, before returning to New York, by then in British hands, until November 1778, when they moved to the West Indies.<sup>8</sup> The Fifth landed on St Lucia on 13th December as part of a force of some 1400 men, and five days later the French landed 9,000 men in an attempt to re-take the island. The battle which followed brought the Fifth the most conspicuous of their "funny hats". After repulsing the French, they removed the white head dress plumes from the French dead and thereafter wore them themselves in a similar fashion to parading the captured French colour after Wilhelmstahl. In 1829 George IV, a monarch with a great interest in the minutiae of military uniform, declared that henceforth all British infantry regiments would wear white shako plumes. The Fifth protested that this would devalue their hard-earned battle honour, and so were given the unique distinction of a red-over-white plume, "as a peculiar mark of honour whereby its former

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<sup>8</sup> The regiment made enough impression on American history for one of the organisations re-enacting the events of the War of Independence to have taken upon itself the identity of the Fifth's light company.

service will be commemorated”. This is worn in modern times as the “hackle” above the beret badge.

The Fifth fought throughout the Peninsular War, earning the admiration of the Duke of Wellington as “the ever-fighting, often sorely tried but never failing” Fifth. A reputation for hard fighting was consolidated in later years. The regiment raised fewer than 54 battalions for service during the First World War, and the cemeteries of the Western Front contain all too many Northumberland Fusiliers. Three Northumberland Fusiliers won the Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, five during the First World War and two more in the Second World War. The regiment’s last period of active service was in Aden in 1966-67, a few months before amalgamation.

Other “funny hats” besides the hackle and the Drummers’ Colour were facings of a unique shade known as “gosling” green, and St George’s Day as a regimental day, celebrated with a church service and a parade in which members wore red and white roses in their head dress.

For Bertie Sexton, who enlisted in 1962 and completed his service in 1999 as a Major, and who was RSM of 6RRF during my time with them, there were two crucial elements in the distinctive identity of the Northumberland Fusiliers. One was the tie to Northumberland, the northernmost county in England, long fought over between the English and Scots, and once home to a notorious species of bandit known as the border reiver. From the eighteenth century an economy based on heavy industry, mainly mining and shipbuilding,<sup>9</sup> developed in the south-east around Newcastle upon Tyne and along both banks of the River Tyne, but the rest of the county was and remains mainly agricultural. Those from the industrial belt are known as ‘Geordies’ and have a distinctive identity of their own, not least because the local dialect can be almost impenetrable to outsiders.<sup>10</sup> The majority of recruits to the Northumberland Fusiliers were miners or shipyard workers in civilian life, and it was far from unusual for friends and workmates to join up together –

<sup>9</sup> The railway pioneer George Stephenson was born at Wylam, near Newcastle, and his early work on steam engines took the form of improving the machinery used to pump water out of the local mines.

<sup>10</sup> The Geordie dialect has affinities with lowland Scots and is far removed from Standard English. To reproduce it on paper is almost impossible, and versions heard on TV and radio are usually well watered down to make them comprehensible. To give a flavour, a simple example of Geordie speech might be ‘Wor lass has gan yem.’ *Wor* means variously ‘our’ or ‘us’, but is typically used instead of ‘my’ (to confuse matters ‘us’ is used only in the singular, to mean ‘me’). A ‘lass’ is a girl, but ‘wor lass’ is specifically a wife or steady girlfriend. To ‘gan’ is to go, and ‘yem’ is home. So ‘Wor lass has gan yem’ is simply, ‘My wife [girlfriend] has gone home’.

Bertie himself was one of a group of eight miners who enlisted as a result of an encounter with a regimental recruiter in a pub in Morpeth. This gave the regiment a natural homogeneity which has now been lost. Nor was it uncommon for several generations of the same family to serve in the Northumberland Fusiliers, though Bertie's own father was initially furious that he had not joined the rival regiment, the Durham Light Infantry. The other was a tradition of strict discipline and high standards, exemplified in the regiment's long-standing nickname of 'The Shiners' – training for St George's Day (23rd April) began in January. A part of this was pride in doing the traditional job of an infantry regiment well; before its departure from Germany in 1966 after a four-year tour Y Company of the First Battalion set out to march in full kit over an 85-mile route from the Weser to the Rhine in 48 hours, to prove that it could be done. They did it, in fact, in 46 hours 45 minutes.

Going back to the question underlying that posed by the major from West Point – does the regimental system give the British Army something that other military organisations lack? Yes, it does, and it contributes in a fashion which is by its nature unquantifiable to the operational efficiency of the British Army. It also gives the individual soldier a place in a wider group identity, something he does not lose after returning to civilian life. He remains part of a regimental family. Some years ago Police Constable George Hammond was stabbed and critically injured while attempting to make an arrest in South London. A battalion of the Coldstream Guards was at the time in London on ceremonial duties. Hearing a news bulletin, someone recognised the name. "Didn't we have a George Hammond who went into the police?" Inquiries confirmed that PC Hammond had indeed been with the battalion some years earlier, and within hours his fellow Coldstreamers were queuing to give blood for him. That sums things up.