



The 95th (Rifle) Regiment of Foot

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HERE WE EXAMINE the origins of the British rifleman, his uniform, accoutrements, weapons, training and the factors which made him exceptional on the battlefield.

Good example of the frontal view of the rifleman, showing the uniform and accoutrements to perfection.



THE 95th REGIMENT as such had a fairly short lifespan, before a title change re-named them the Rifle Brigade in 1815. However, during its brief lifetime, it quickly became an élite corps of the British army; with a bold and daring reputation, which was the envy of many a line regiment. It was their proud boast that they were always the first onto the field of battle and always the last to leave.

The Experimental Corps of Riflemen had been formed on the express orders of HRH Frederick the Duke of York, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army during this period. A number of line regiments were ordered to furnish both officers and men, to be sent to Horsham for training with the new rifles. At Horsham they came under the command of two very capable officers, both experienced in the command and training of light troops, both also having had considerable combat experience. These men were Colonel Coote

A rifleman demonstrates the kneeling position, with the elbow resting on the left knee supporting the stock of his Baker rifle. Note the way the rifle sling is used to support the arm whilst firing.

Manningham of the 41st Regiment and Colonel William Stuart of the 67th. Colonel Manningham had commanded light troops in the West Indian campaign of Sir Charles Grey. Colonel Stuart had been fighting with the Austrian forces in the 1799 campaign and had noted the importance of the light infantry arm. In the British Army it was almost completely lacking and his letters to the Secretary of War first suggested the setting up of a rifle-armed force in the British Army.

In the year 1802 the 95th, as it had been designated, along with the 43rd and 52nd regiments, both of which were also receiving training as light infantry, were sent to Shorncliffe camp in Kent, where they were to receive yet



Close-up view of the rifleman's powder horn, held in place with green cords. This would deliver a measured amount of powder for the firer each time.



A view of the flat-bladed sword bayonet. It measured a total of 24 inches, as compared to the Brown Bess's triangular socket bayonet's 17.



A view of the brass trigger guard and grip of the rifle, with the sling swivel for the black leather sling.



A close-up view of the black leather belt and ball pouch, a feature unique to the Rifles, and rifle-armed troops.

more training under the command of Sir John Moore.

The new rifle battalion was clad in green, reflecting their greater emphasis upon camouflage and concealment rather than the bright red and gleaming uniforms of the line regiments. Rifleman were taught to be self-reliant and independent, they were expected to think and act for themselves rather than depend upon the decisions and order of their officers. Rifleman had to be able to read the ground, move from cover to cover, think for themselves, not expose themselves unnecessarily to the fire of the French voltigeurs and tirailleurs. All this was very important at a time when the rifle took almost twice as long to load as the smooth-bore musket. However, the accuracy and range of the rifle more than made up for this inconvenience.

Uniforms

The newly raised rifles were issued with the black felted stovepipe shako, festooned with green cords and worsted green plume, with a white metal bugle badge. Instead of the cumbersome and extremely uncomfortable and tight thick black leather dog stock, designed to keep the soldier's head and eyes erect and straight to the front (which was worn by all other British troops at the time), the rifles were issued a more comfortable and practical black silk or linen cravat in its place. Their tunics were made in a very dark shade of green wool which is now known as rifle green, with the black facings at the collar and cuffs piped in white cotton cord, with three metal buttons arranged in three rows on the tunic's breast.

Breeches were in either green or, in the case of overalls, some-

times in brown for the other ranks. The accoutrements of the rifleman consisted of the standard trotter knapsack, the standard linen haversack, Italian canteen, cartridge pouch suspended on a black leather belt, a powder horn for carrying the special fine grained powder used for priming the rifle, suspended on a green cord, and finally a waistbelt common to all rifle-armed troops in the British Army, with its small pouch for balls and frog for the flat-bladed sword bayonet.

The uniform and dress of the officers was entirely based on that of the light cavalry of the period. Initially they wore the very elegant light cavalry headdress, the Tarleton helmet. It consisted of a black leather skull with peak, a large fur crest in black, usually stuffed with straw to form the crest, a green turban and green cut feather plume, with regimental bugle horn badge in silver. Later this form of headdress was to be replaced by the black felted shako, with square folding peak, usually worn up, green cords and a small green cut feather plume.

The rifles officer wore the cavalry-style dolman and pelisse tunics, the later trimmed in brown fur, with elaborate black mohair square section braid frogged on the breasts of both tunics. Buttons would have been half ball type on the outer rows and full ball buttons on the central row.

At first the officer would have worn the hussar-influenced barrel sash, but later the light infantry sash in crimson was to replace it.

The equipment of the rifleman obviously differed from that of the line infantryman in many ways. The rifle eventually chosen for service with the new

corps was that made by Ezekiel Baker of Whitechapel in London and was selected after exhaustive tests at the Woolwich Arsenal in 1800.

It had a far smaller barrel length than the Tower musket or Brown Bess, measuring 30 inches in length as compared to the average 40 inches of the various pattern of Brown Bess. The rifle had a calibre of .615, whereas the musket had a calibre of .75. Instead of the normal 17-inch triangular socket bayonet of the musket-armed infantry, the rifleman was issued with the 24-inch-long flat-bladed sword bayonet, with stirrup guarded brass hilt and spring loaded clip for attachment to the muzzle of the rifle. Apparently the sword bayonet was universally disliked by the rifleman. It was not possible to fire the rifle with the sword bayonet attached, which was possibly one of the reasons for its dislike, and by all accounts it was only good for cutting wood for the watch fires.

The Rifles engendered an esprit de corps that was not known at the time in other corps. Instead of being flogged, and made to do their duty by the fear of the lash, they were taught. They were encouraged to regard themselves as craftsmen skilled in the art of war. Regularly the Rifles held sporting and shooting competitions, for which the men were rewarded for their achievements; this had the effect of improving their marksmanship and competence.

Recruits who were selected for the Rifles were the pick of the bunch, the cream of the land; only the best men of the militia regiments, from which the regular army were allowed to recruit, were selected for ser-

vice with the Rifles. Many of the men were able to read and write, which was not altogether common at the time.

A typical recruiting poster of the 95th at this period boasts: "The first of all services in the British Army, in this distinguished service you will carry a rifle no heavier than a fowling piece. You will knock down your enemy at five hundred yards, instead of missing him at fifty. Your clothing is green and needs no cleaning but a brush. Those men who have been in a rifle company can tell you of the comfort of a green jacket. NO WHITE BELTS! NO PIPE CLAY! On service your post is always the post of honour, and your quarters the best in the Army, for you have the first of everything; at home you are sure of respect because a British rifleman always makes himself respectable. The rifle sergeants are to be found anywhere, and have orders to treat their friends gallantly everywhere. If you enlist and afterwards wish you had been a rifleman, do not say you were not asked, for you can blame nobody but yourself. GOD SAVE THE KING AND HIS RIFLE REGIMENT."

The painstaking application of pipe clay, as alluded to in the text of the poster, involved the crushing and grinding of white clay into a fine powder; with the addition of water this was then formed into a paste, which was then carefully applied to the buff leather accoutrements of the line infantry regiments. (There were some exceptions; those regiments which had buff coloured accoutrements.) The paste was applied in thin layers and built up to form a very smooth surface on the straps, etc. The pipe clay had a tendency to chip and flake off and the

process would have to be carried out again. The accoutrements of the rifles were made in black leather, and as a result needed no pipeclaying. However, they would still have needed to be polished and cleaned, probably with 'black ball', a form of boot polish. Pipe clay and black ball were not items that the soldier could purchase, but had to be made up by the man himself. A typical recipe for black ball for boots consisted of the following: six ounces of beeswax, two ounces of virgins wax, one ounce of hard tallow, one barrel of lamp black, mixed and boiled in an earthen pot. Once taken of the fire an ounce of plumb gum was added, and the mixture stirred until cold and solid.

The loading and firing of a rifle differed little from that of a muzzle loaded musket, for which the firer would remove a prepared cartridge from his pouch; this consisted of a beeswaxed paper tube with a measured amount of gunpowder and lead ball bound together. The firer would bite off the end of the cartridge containing the ball, pour a little powder into the flash pan of the musket and the remaining charge into the barrel of the musket. The lead ball was then inserted, followed by the cartridge paper; removing his ramrod from the retaining pipes along the stock of the musket, the soldier would tamp the charge, ball and wad to create some compression.

The rifle could be loaded in the same manner, but accurate aimed shots required a little more finesse in the loading procedure. Special greased patches were used, and fine grained and specially dried powder, held in the rifleman's loading horn, exclusively for the priming of the piece.

A prerequisite of good marksmanship was to prevent at all costs the saltpetre content of the gunpowder from becoming damp. For example, if a measured quantity of gunpowder were left in the open air for only a short time, having previously been weighed, after only a few hours the weight would have increased considerably due to the amount of moisture in the atmosphere having been absorbed by the powder. Whilst in the field it was essential to 'keep your powder dry' as the old saying goes, for damp gunpowder will either not ignite, or not throw the projectile as far as required. The reverse seems also to be true, since after a few shots the barrel of the rifle would heat up considerably and consequently the

charges of gunpowder could be made smaller to avoid unnecessary recoil and waste of powder.

Gunpowder was supplied in either glazed or unglazed form, the difference being in the fineness of the grains and the fact that the glazed powder grains were encased in a form of shell. The glazed grains were polished, which had the effect of protecting them more from the damp, but glazed powder was more difficult to ignite.

The lead for the manufacture of balls was of the purest and softest form available. It was sold in 'pigs' and sent to the market in this form, and was to be preferred at all times to the lead from old pipes, gutters and roof coverings so often used. It was important that the lead balls be free from any impurities that might affect the smooth surface of the finished ball, which in turn might have affected the flight of the projectile once it left the mouth of the rifle.

It was also of prime importance that prior to being poured into the moulds that the lead was just the right temperature. If it was too hot when it came into contact with the mould it would cool too rapidly and produce an unequal ball with hollows and irregularities.

During the loading process of the rifle a small greased patch would be wrapped around the ball. This was usually a small piece of leather which the rifleman carried in the brass-plated container on the butt of the Baker rifle. The patch was meant to fill up the spaces around the grooves, which otherwise had the effect of creating too much windage. The requirements of a good patch were equal strength and thickness throughout, so that the indents on the ball may be of unvaried depth and breadth on every side of the ball's surface or zone.

Patches were not only made of leather such as kid skin, but were also made of calico, dimity, russia duck, fustain (a form of loose woven canvas) and thickset. The grease was placed on the underside of the patch only, in order to make contact with the grooves of the barrel and thus reduce friction.

On campaign a sentry at night might have used a stopple, to prevent the charge in his rifle from becoming damp due to the effects of long exposure to the atmosphere. A stopple was a small piece of thick card or felt accurately cut to the bore of the rifle and placed between the powder charge and the

greased patch and ball to try and counterbalance the effects of the atmosphere.

With every discharge of the rifle some of the grains of powder were blown out of the barrel unignited. Additional powder was soon found only to produce additional unignited grains. As a rule the rifle was charged with powder amounting to 1/5 or 1/4 of the weight of the lead ball, tests having shown that a man's shoulder soon became sore from the recoil of larger charges, resulting in the rifleman involuntarily shrinking from the expected blow of the recoil and affecting his aim. Taking aim with the rifle and the firing positions adopted were all laid down in the training manual of the Rifles devised by Colonel William Stuart and known as the 'Green Book'. Most of the principles involved have survived in the British Army to this day as any former or serving infantryman will be able to tell you.

The first position was the prone position, either supported or unsupported, using the cover of a bank or tree, and always trying to fire from the right so that the body would be covered and present less of a target itself to the enemy skirmishers. The next was the kneeling position using the elbow as a form of rest on the left knee. Another form of kneeling supported position was also used, which utilised the regulation ramrod. By placing the flat nose of the ram into the hollow of the hip and placing the other end into one of the retaining pipes on the stock of the rifle, an excellent rest could be formed.

Whilst taking the photographs for this article we discovered what an effective position this really was as the rifleman could maintain the position with comfort for a considerable period. Other positions such as the sitting position and the standing firing position are all still used and taught to this day, and are all based on the principles of William Stuart.

Great care was taken over the cleanliness and maintenance of the rifle. Each man was issued a cleaning kit consisting of the following: a picker and brush for clearing the flash pan and touch hole of the black and grey carbon deposits that accumulated after a few shots; rag and tallow; a spiral brush of hog's hair which could be attached to the regulation ramrod for cleaning of the rifled grooves; a cleanser of crimped brass wire and a

Key to photos overleaf:

Top left:

Another form of the kneeling firing position, as taught to the riflemen: note the way he supports the stock of the rifle with the ram rod. The ram rod was tucked into the hip and used as a makeshift rest. We discovered what an excellent position this really was when posing for this particular photograph as the rifleman could hold this position almost indefinitely without any great feeling of fatigue.

Top right:

The sitting position. The knees are drawn up to form rests for the elbows; again, this position as with most of the others is still taught to all new infantry recruits, along with the necessary control of the lungs and breathing required to fire well aimed shots.

Bottom left:

Clear right-hand view of the rifleman's kit and equipment. Note the butt end of the Baker rifle with its brass plate, which was a cover for the small box which would have carried the greased patches necessary for accurate shots.

Bottom right:

The standing position, still practised by the British Army to this day, as any serving or former infantryman will be able to tell you; the feet should be well apart, with the left leg well braced and slightly bent if possible. The firer leans slightly forward, with the butt of the rifle tucked firmly into the shoulder.

small container of oil.

The 95th fought in all the major campaigns of the British Army throughout the Napoleonic wars, from the battle of Copenhagen to most of the major actions in the Peninsular from the celebrated rearguard action during the retreat to Corunna, to the campaigns in North and South America, and finally at the greatest battle of them all at Waterloo where they fought against tremendous odds and won.

Men like the Dorsetshire shepherd boy turned rifleman such as John Harris, who left behind a marvellous account of his exploits in the 95th, and was first attracted to the Rifles by their green uniforms and the 'smart, dashing, devil may care appearance' of the regiment, are long since crumbled into dust and their memory almost forgotten in the mellowing of time, but many of their traditions still live to this day in the form of the Royal Green Jackets, who still remain 'first in, last out'. M

