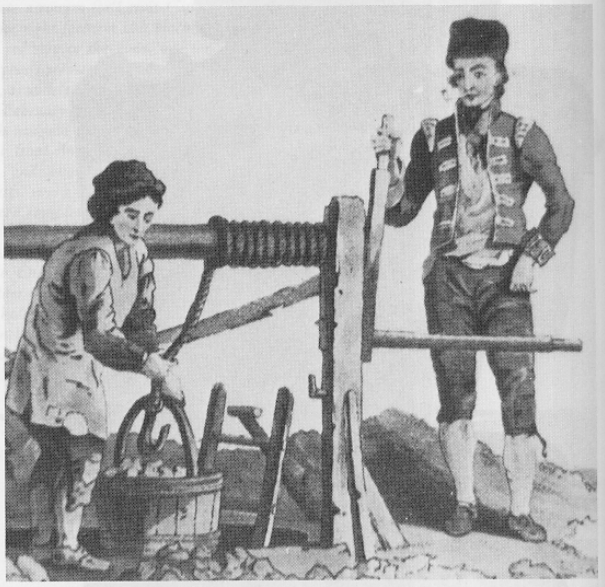
Redcoat:

The Regimental Coat of the British Infantryman, c 1808-15 (1)

G. A. STEPPLER



Marshal Bugeaud recalled the appearance of the British infantry he had faced during the Peninsular War: ' . . . the English, silent and impassive, with ordered arms, loomed like a red wall; their aspect was imposing . . . '. His image and others like it have been enduring; and the uniforms of the stolid infantrymen whom the Marshal held in such regard have long been a popular subject of study, illustration and reconstruction. Yet for all the effort expended, there remains much to be discovered and explained. It is extraordinary, for instance, that until the appearance of this article an authentic surviving example of a Line ranker's coat of the period has never, to our knowledge, been the subject of a published colour photograph in an English-language publication.

While today the surviving regimental coats and jackets of officers are frequently encountered, those of the other ranks are rare indeed – and yet the scale of production of military clothing in Britain during the Napoleonic Wars was unequalled before the First World War. A private soldier who was discharged either kept his regimental coat or, if not entitled to it at the time of his discharge, left it with his regiment to be handed on to new recruits. Regimental coats were good, substantial items of clothing; and, as few who had served in the ranks could afford not to make use of them in their new civilian lives, they were worn until literally worn out. If they were not kept by the ex-soldier himself, there seems also to have been a ready market for used military dress. Indeed, it would seem that of the handful of other ranks' coats which still survive, none of them were actually given out to and worn by soldiers.[1]

'The Ruddle Pit' (George Walker's Costume of Yorkshire, *1814). A former soldier at work in his regimental coat – a rare depiction of the fate of so much of the common soldier's clothing. Although offering little useful detail, it is worth noting the overall impression of a tight, amost too close-fitting jacket. (Courtesty P. J. Haythornthwaite)*

[1]Superior numerals refer to notes at the end of this article.

This extremely poor rate of survival has left us with little tangible evidence of the actual appearance of the private soldier's regimentals. The work of early 19th century artists offers some of the missing detail, but, as is well known, it can be as misleading as it is helpful. The same might well be said of the surviving coats. A closer look can tell us a great deal, but only if set against a wider knowledge of the army's method of procurement and of the difficulties of large-scale production before the advent of the sewing machine and the universal acceptance of the tailor's tape measure.

COLONELS AND CLOTHIERS

Each year on 25 December the private soldier was entitled to a new regimental coat, which, with certain other items of clothing due annually, was furnished by the clothing contractor engaged by his colonel. The military clothiers who supplied such regimental clothing were concentrated in London and Dublin, those in the former providing clothing for regiments on the British Establishment, those in the latter for regiments carried on the Irish Establishment. Taking full account of the time needed to make and ship each year's clothing meant that preparations had to begin well in advance. The process of preparing the clothing which was to be worn, say, in 1812, began in the early months of the preceding year, 1811. In London, on an appointed day, the colonel's clothier would have his proposed patterns for the ensuing year brought to a small house in Westminster, where they would be inspected by the general officers of the army's Clothing Board.

It was the duty of the Board to ensure that any clothing made for soldiers conformed to existing regulations. To fulfill this charge the members scrutinised the patterns shown to them, being particularly careful over the quality of the materials, but also noting the details of cut and ornamentation, workmanship and size. Approved patterns were sealed, and it then fell to the clothier to have made enough coats, and other items, conformable to 'the sealed pattern'. When the clothing was complete, a final check was made at the clothier's warehouse by two military officers appointed as Inspectors of Clothing. If approved the batch was given a 'View Certificate', and was then sent on to be packed and shipped to the colonel's regiment, hopefully to arrive in time for the commencement of the new clothing year.

The clothier himself was a man of business and his position in the trade afforded him the opportunity of considerable profits. The actual task of making up the clothing was sub-contracted to tailors, who in turn might themselves let contracts. With the enormous increase in demand for military clothing during the Napoleonic Wars, much work eventually found its way into very unskilled hands.

Poorly paid and needy female labour, in particular, was exploited in what was then called 'the contract-system' and later became loosely known as 'sweating'. By splitting up the work into small tasks, each of which was easily learned, it was

possible to use people with no previous training and who were generally willing to work for lower wages than a properly apprenticed tailor might expect. In 1813 one group of wretched women at Covent Garden were reported to earn but 5d. a day for making soldiers' coats – when a journeyman soldier-tailor, working for his regiment, could expect 2d. for making a pair of shoulder straps, and a shilling for a coat. Quality in the clothier's product was bound to suffer.

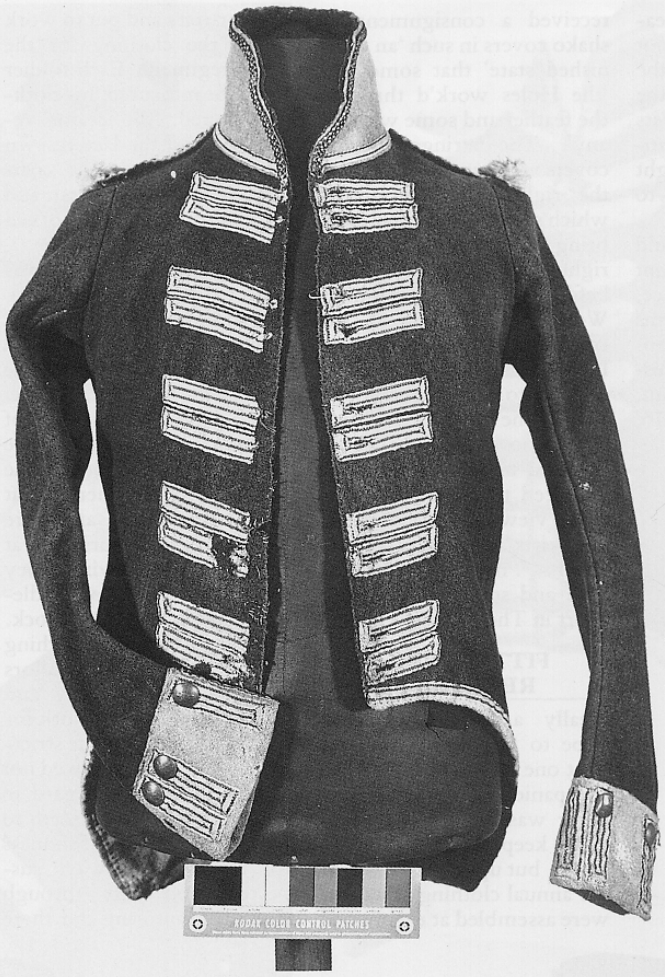
THE QUARTER-MASTER'S TROUBLES

Packed in bales and casks, the regiment's clothing began an often arduous journey to its eventual owners. Even short journeys could be hazardous, and if destined for remote colonial stations the clothing could be many weeks at sea, at the mercy not only of nature but also of the enemy. Nonetheless, Britain's soldiers could count themselves fortunate, for their nation's immense wealth and her strength at sea put them among the best supplied and equipped soldiers of their age. This could not, of course, protect them from the privations inherent in active campaigning and distant service, and the many references to the ragged and patched appearance of Wellington's regiments are well known – nor were those who fought at Waterloo entirely immune. But where such problems arose from the belated arrival, or non-arrival, of the annual clothing, the soldier could at least expect an eventual compensation.

Upon the arrival of the clothing at the regiment, the quartermaster and his sergeant assessed any damage. They would be glad enough to find the clothing 'quite dry' and in reasonably good order. Water damage could occur easily, even on the shortest journey, and poor packing and careless handling could make everything much worse. In 1816, as a result of a short passage to Cambrai, one battalion of the Coldstream Guards lost 17 coats, 13 waistcoats, 6 pairs of trousers and 36 shakos, 'so much damaged by water as to render them Totally unfit to deliver to the Men as new'. In another bale three coats were so 'very much chafed and large holes cut thro . . . as to render them totally useless'[2]. It fell to the quartermaster to minimize the loss to the regiment, and to improvise where he could not replace.

Whatever else had to be done to the clothing, its arrival signalled the start of the onerous task of actually fitting the men with their new garments. The annual expenses of every soldier always included a charge for 'altering his clothing to make it fit'. For a short period just before the outbreak of war with revolutionary France, colonels had been free to have their regimental clothing sent 'in Piece' (i.e. in materials), together with a pattern coat approved by the Clothing Board. From the standpoint of fitting the clothing to the soldier, this was considered much more satisfactory than having to alter clothing which was already made up, for it was 'necessarily taken to pieces and made up afresh, that it may fit the men'[3]. War, however, necessitated the shipment of ready-made clothing. In 1794 the liberty to send the annual clothing 'in piece' was withdrawn, although wherever possible regiments continued to request items 'in piece', especially breeches. As explained by Sir John Moore, those 'made by the Clothiers never can be alter'd so as to fit the Men comfortably'[4].

Regimental coats were supplied in sizes graded according to height and 'stoutness', but too often it seemed as though there was in fact only one size – too small! The Foot Guards in particular had difficulties with coats that were none too generous in cut. The Coldstream, being 'composed of much Stouter Men, and of a higher Standard than those of the Line' on several occasions received clothing which was quite inadequate. Almost 200 of the coats received by the 1st Battalion in southern France in 1814 were found to be 'too small to be fitted to any of the men'. Even after much cutting up and resewing there remained '160 Coats, all 5ft 6In small, not a man in the Battn as they will fit'. Attempts to avoid the usual trouble over fitting, by



Battalion Company, 9th (East Norfolk) Regiment; coat **(1)** *in our listing; Musée Royal de l'Armée, Bruxelles. The 1/9th took part in the Corunna and Walcheren campaigns in 1808 and 1809. In 1810 it returned to the Iberian Peninsula, where it remained on service until withdrawn in 1814 and sent briefly to Canada. In June 1815 the battalion returned to Europe, missing Waterloo but remaining in France for several years as part of the army of occupation. A second battalion (raised in 1799 and re-formed in 1804) arrived in Portugal in 1808, and continued in the Peninsula (principally at Gibraltar) until being sent home in 1813, where it was disbanded at the end of 1815.*

The buttons bear a '9' beneath a crown, the whole surrounded by a closed circle. A similar, undated button is in the Parkyn Collection at the National Army Museum. The irregular lace on the upper edge of the collar may be a substitution by the clothier's subcontractor when his supply of proper lace ran out. The proper lace had two black stripes, now faded to brown. Facings, yellow. (Photograph Musée Royal de l'Armée, Bruxelles)

sending in beforehand 'Measures' of the men, did not necessarily produce the desired result. The use of the tape measure was in its infancy, and suppliers commonly insisted on a height only, matched simply to 'small, middling or large'.

The quartermaster could also expect a certain amount of missing or damaged lace, missing buttons, weak seams and poor sewing. His troubles are again graphically illustrated by the Coldstream, whose 2nd Battalion, in 1816, received a consignment of shako covers in such 'an unfinished state' that some had 'the Holes work'd thro for the feather and some without any'. The strings of the covers were supposed to tie at the right side, 'instead of which some are made so as to bring the strings some to the right, some to the left, some before & some behind'. Worse still, many of the covers were 'too short by an Inch & some more'. Six tailors had to be set to work to correct the faults. Coats suffered too. Many of those received in 1818, while they appeared to look very good when viewed from the front, had skirts 'rather Shorter than usual . . . many of them is an Inch and some 2 Inches too short in The Rear . . . '

FITTING THE REGIMENT

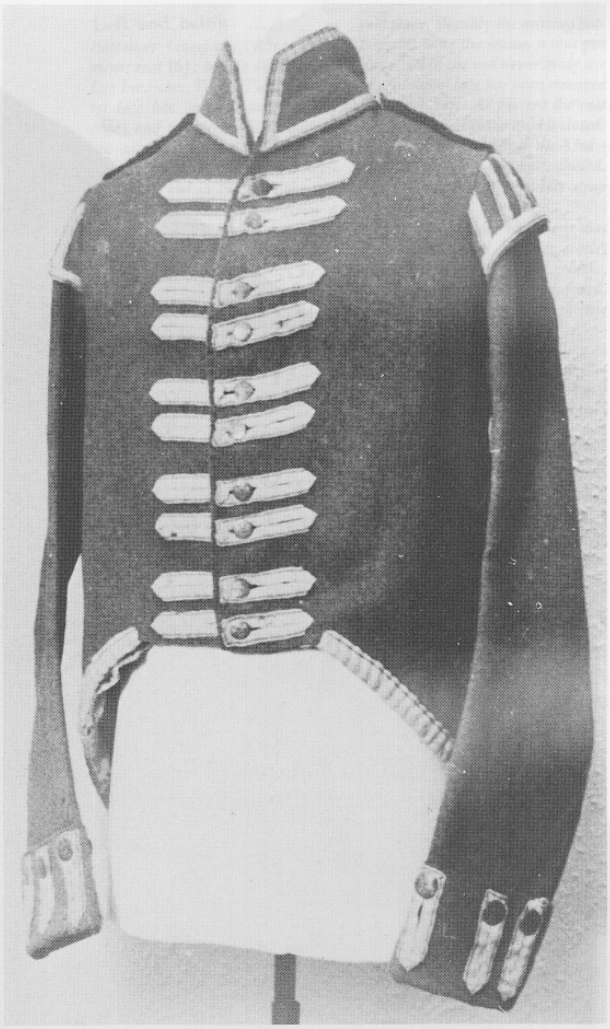
Ideally a battalion would hope to find in its ranks at least one tailor for each of its companies. The company tailor was to help his comrades keep their clothing in repair, but upon the arrival of the annual clothing all tailors were assembled at regimental headquarters and put to work fitting the clothing for the entire regiment. Each soldier had to be measured, his clothing altered, the seams reinforced and the lace resewn where necessary. The coats were generally done first, and each company was worked on in succession.

To ensure that this task was done as quickly as possible, the tailors were subjected to a strict regime which entailed long hours, with very little time away from their work. Quite typically, the tailors of the 76th Regiment were to be at work at six o'clock in the morning in summer, or at daylight in winter, and were to cease their labours only at sunset, though in winter they might well work by candlelight until eight o'clock. While the annual clothing was 'in hands', the tailors were excused all duty and forbidden to do any work for officers or NCOs. The strictness of their regime owed not a little to the low regard in which many officers seem to have held them. A fondness for liquor was always suspected, and only through careful monitoring did there seem any chance of putting 'a cheque upon the taylors, not to run through the work in a careless, idle manner'[5].

Regimental orders seemed always to assume a certain reluctance in the tailors, despite the remuneration paid for their work. As an occupational group, early 19th century tailors had an unenviable reputation for ill-health, the result of cramped workshops and long hours of sedentary work, bent over their task while sitting cross-legged. It may easily be imagined that those who had enlisted to escape such conditions were not necessarily pleased to find themselves compelled to work again as tailors for their regiment. No doubt too, many had come from the worst end of the tailoring trade – unapprenticed men, or 'Dungs', who had found their work as uncongenial as it was unrewarding. A regiment's tailors might well be very poor representatives of their craft, and 'if a Tailor is not equal to be Master Tailor', the chore of immediate supervision could simply fall on a sergeant appointed to it[6].

Battalion Company, 26th (Cameronians) Regiment; coat **(2)**; *Musée Royal de l'Armée, Bruxelles. The 1/26th saw service in 1808 and 1809 in Spain and on the Walcheren expedition. In 1811 it was sent to Portugal and in 1812 arrived at Gibraltar, where it remained until withdrawn in 1822. A second battalion, raised in 1803, passed the war in Ireland and Scotland, being disbanded in Scotland in 1814.*

Two similar, but not identical coats survive from this regiment. Their provenance is not clear. This one has lost all of its buttons, except those for the shoulder straps. The rear view shows that the pocket flaps have a functional button which is omitted on the other extant coat of the 26th, coat **(4)**. *(Photograph Musée Royal de l'Armée, Bruxelles)*



Left:
Battalion Company, 83rd Regiment; coat **(5)**; *Musée de l'Empéri. The 1/83rd embarked in 1805 for Cape Town and remained there until 1817, when it departed for Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The 2nd Battalion, raised in 1804, provided reinforcements for and itself saw service in the Peninsula from 1809 to 1814, after which it returned to Ireland. Before its disbandment, in 1817, a large detachment was sent to the 1st Battalion at the Cape.*

The coat was once in the collection of the painter Edouard Detaille, and is one of two survivors from the 83rd. Both coats would seem to be associated with the 2nd Battalion, being lined for wear in northern climes. The flank company 'wings' on this example are a much later addition, whose cut and ornamentation are quite out of keeping with the rest of the coat. Nevertheless, with a shako and accoutrements, it provides a striking impression of the men who formed the 'red wall' so vividly recalled by Marshal Bugeaud. (Photograph Musée de l'Empéri, courtesy Martin Windrow)

Above:
Grenadier Company, 87th (The Prince of Wales's Own Irish) Regiment; coat **(7)**; *RIF Museum, Armagh. The 1/87th embarked for South America in 1806, and the following year proceeded from there to Cape Town. In 1810 it sailed for Mauritius, and was later sent to India. The 2nd Battalion, raised in 1804, left for the Peninsula in 1808 and remained with the Peninsular army until returning home from southern France in 1814. The 2/87th was disbanded in 1817.*

An exact date for the coat cannot be ascribed, but its being fully lined, except for the sleeves, suggests that it was intended for the 2nd Battalion. Lace, one red stripe. Facings, green.

Prior to its purchase in Paris by the RIF Museum in 1962, it was in the collection of Raymond Desvarreux. (Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum)

THE SURVIVORS

A great many hands shared in determining the final appearance of the soldier's coat. The demands of regimental 'oeconomy', and the rigours of hard service both during and after its useful military life, have destroyed all but a handful. Those that survive seem to have done so by escaping actual wear – though the provenance of almost all of the current survivors has yet to be thoroughly investigated. The best known are those in France and Belgium, with other examples in Northern Ireland, and as far afield as the United States and Russia.

For clarity of cross-reference, we have numbered the known surviving examples of Line (as opposed to Militia) other ranks' coats in **bold** type – this sequence is purely arbitrary, and intrinsic to this

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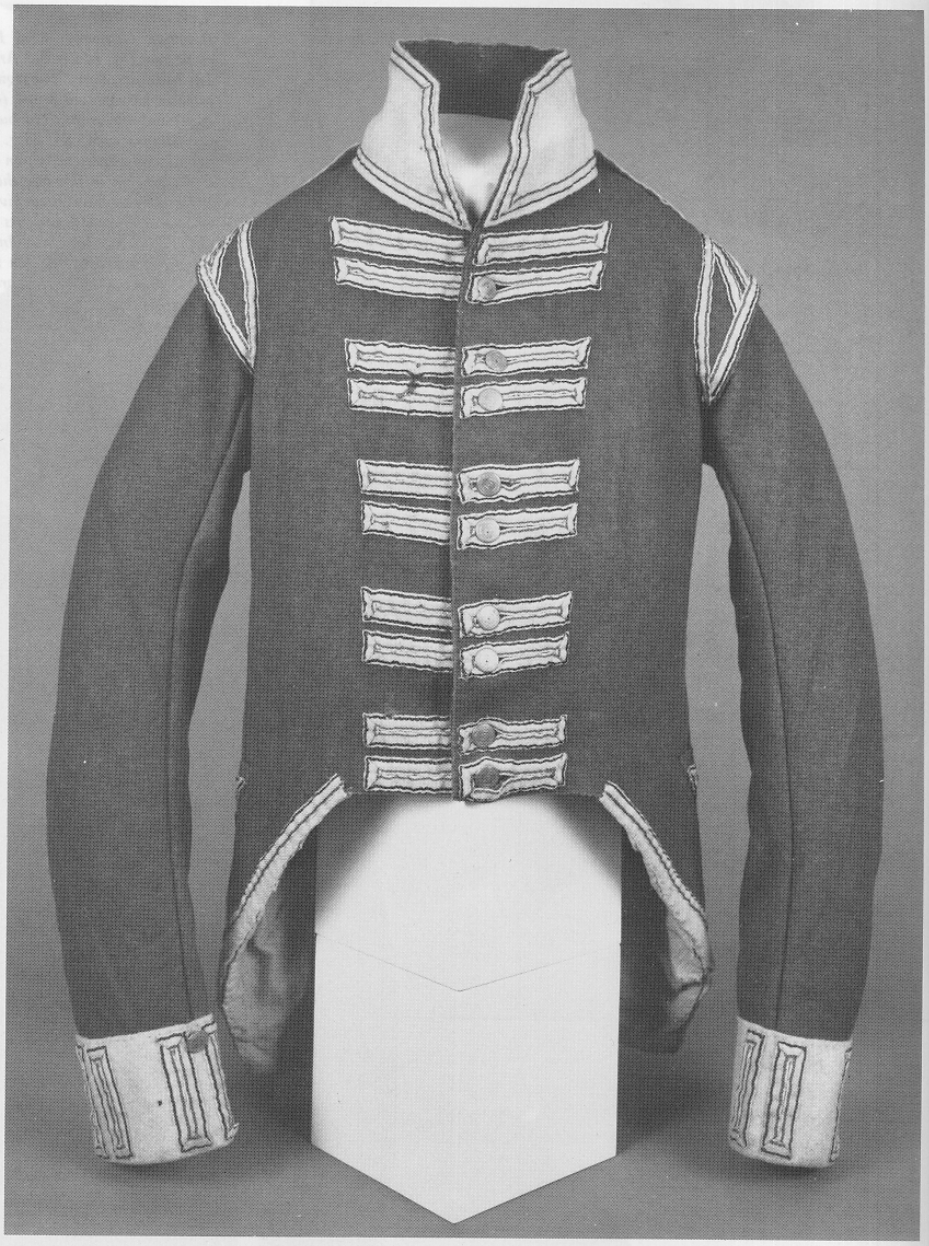

Light Company, 104th Regiment; coat **(8)***; Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts. The 104th was originally raised as the New Brunswick Regiment of Fencible Infantry for service in British North America, but in 1810 became a regiment of the Line. Its service was passed in what is now Canada, where it assisted in the defence of the then British colonies during the War of 1812. The regiment was disbanded in 1817.*

The provenance of the surviving coat can be established with some certainty. It is one of 1,100 (destined for the 104th at Quebec) captured by an American privateer, from Salem, during the Anglo-American war. The capture is recorded in contemporary correspondence, from which it is known that the coats were subsequently sold to the United States Army and used for musicians. This one, however, remained with the Webber family of Gloucester, Massachusetts and was given by a descendant to the Cape Ann Historical Association in 1946.

It provides an interesting example of an unused coat, as supplied by a London clothier. From the position of the one extant button on its right cuff (and another on the rear of the left cuff) it seems probable that it was never fully provided with cuff buttons when it left the clothier. Lace, one black stripe (outer edge) and one red stripe. Facings, pale buff (off-white). (Cape Ann Historical Association, special thanks to Marion A. Harding)

series of articles. They are grouped under current location:

Belgium: Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Bruxelles

(1) Battalion company, 9th Regiment of Foot (East Norfolk)

(2) Battalion Company, 26th Regiment of Foot (Cameronian)

(3) Light Company, unidentified, possibly Militia

France: Musée de l'Empéri, Salon de Provence

(4) Battalion Company, 26th Regiment of Foot (Cameronian)

(5) Battalion Company, 83rd Regiment of Foot

France: Musée de l'Armée, Les Invalides, Paris

(6) Battalion Company, 83rd Regiment of Foot

Northern Ireland: Royal Irish Fusiliers Regimental Museum, Armagh

(7) Grenadier Company, 87th Regiment of Foot (Prince of Wales's Own Irish)

United States: Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Mass.

(8) Light Company, 104th Regiment of Foot

In Russia there are two jackets, from the 42nd and 43rd Regiments, possibly acquired by Alexander I at about the time of Waterloo or the subsequent occupation of Paris[7]. In addition, the Bomann Museum at Celle in West Germany has a fine collection of coats from the King's German Legion which, importantly, includes three sergeants' coats – further examples of 'British' military clothing supplied by London clothiers. MI

To be continued: *The second part of this series will consider the evolution of the soldier's coat, the materials used, its construction and fit.*

Notes and sources:

(1) For the cavalry there is a jacket in the National Army Museum ascribed to Lance Corporal Gill, 1st Life Guards.

(2) All references to documents of the Coldstream regiment are by kind permission of the Lt. Col. Commanding Coldstream Guards. Further details in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* (Summer, 1889).

(3) Public Record Office, WO 30/13B: Royal Warrant, 8 July 1791, clothing.

(4) British Library, Add Mss 57547, 27 November 1802.

(5) Bennett Cuthbertson, *A System for the Compleat Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry*, Dublin 1768, p.87.

(6) Standing Orders, 106th Regiment, 1795, p.23.

(7) Notes from John Mollo. Further information on these and any other coats would be welcomed.

Acknowledgements for assistance during the preparation of these articles will be listed in the final part.

Left and below:
Battalion Company, 83rd Regiment; coat **(6)**; *Musée de l'Armée, Les Invalides, Paris. The regimental lace has one red stripe (outer edge) and one green. The buttons are adorned with '83' only. The chest loops were to be 'set on horizontally', but in this case the uppermost ones have been given a distinct slope, which becomes more gradual towards the waist. In contrast to the coats of the 26th Regiment, those of the 83rd are cut square at the waist, the skirts starting about 3in. back from the centre front.*

Buttonholes were never cut on this coat, no doubt an oversight by the clothier's subcontractors, and evidence that this particular coat was never altered and fitted for actual wear. Possibly the missing buttonholes were the reason it was put aside and in the end never made use of. A loop of lace has been removed from each cuff. At present the coat has hooks and eyes to hold it closed. The other survivor from the 83rd – coat **(5)** *– is properly buttonholed. Note the absence of shoulder strap tufting.*

The dull madder red colour was in contrast to the brighter scarlet used in sergeants' coats. New, 'fresh coloured' coats soon faded, especially if exposed to intense tropical sunlight.

This coat seems at one time to have been in the collection of General Vanson. (Photograph Musée de l'Armée, courtesy Martin Windrow)

Left:
Battalion Company, 26th (Cameronians) Regiment; coat **(4)**; *Musée de l'Empéri. Being on the Irish Establishment, the regiment had its clothing provided by Irish clothiers. The flat pewter buttons, bearing '26' encircled by a wreath, are marked on the back with the name of Renshaw and Woodhouse, Dublin.*

Subcontracting the work on coats produced many discrepancies. The pocket flaps on this coat lack the additional buttons, seen on coat **(2)**, *with which to close the pocket. Possibly the two 26th coats are slightly different in date, or perhaps more probably the omission of the additional pocket flap buttons on this example was an oversight. The 'loops' of regimental lace (made of white worsted wool, and for this regiment interwoven with one blue stripe between two yellow) were to be 4in. in length at the top of the chest, and gradually reduced in length to only 3in. at the waist. On this coat the tapering of the loops is very noticeable, but it is less pronounced on the other existing coat,* **(2)**. *By regulation, confirmed in 1802, collars were to be '3 Inches in Breadth', but this example stands 3¾in. high. Note that the drawn thread tufting at the ends of the shoulder straps is red and white, as is also the case on coat* **(2)**.

The coat was formerly in the collection of Edouard Detaille. (Photograph Musée de l'Empéri; courtesy Martin Windrow)