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The British Infantry Officer of the Peninsular War (1)

PHILIP J. HAYTHORNTHWAITE

'Provided we brought our men into the field well appointed, and with sixty rounds of good ammunition each, he [Wellington] never looked to see whether their trousers were black, blue or grey . . . we might be rigged out in all the colours of the rainbow if we fancied . . . scarcely any two officers were dressed alike. Some with grey braided coats, others with brown, some again liked blue; while many from choice, or perhaps necessity, stuck to the "old red rag"'.[1]

These comments, by an officer of the 88th Regiment, are among the best-known quotations arising from the Peninsular War, 1807–14. Yet while they are true to a large extent, they tend to conceal the fact that the British infantry officer of the period did maintain a reasonably 'uniform' appearance, at least until the exigencies of campaign compelled the adoption of whatever garments were available. This two-part study, covering the costume of the regimental officer, will endeavour to describe both the 'regulation' uniform and its 'campaign' adaptations, as described by many of the participants. (Not included in this present article are the Rifle corps, the Light Infantry regiments or the Highlanders, whose uniforms were sufficiently different that they cannot really be classed with the conventional 'English' Line regiments.)

Unlike the uniforms of later decades, those of the early 1800s were not regulated in their smaller details by published, official 'dress regulations'; thus, while certain features were standard, there was much scope for regimental variations. Certain of these — e.g. the design of badges and insignia — were an accepted channel for the creation of a regimental identity. Others, more radical, embodied regimental traditions, or the whims of commanding officers. Providing that a regiment's officers appeared dressed in a uniform manner, there seems to have been little practical check upon the scope of these.

THE COAT

The infantry officer's coat was a standard garment, introduced in 1796 when the open lapels of the previous style were closed to the waist, and the upright collar was made compulsory. Though its colouring was similar, the officer's coat was a totally different garment from that worn by the rank and file, being double-breasted and having long tails. Unlike the other ranks, whose button arrangement in pairs or evenly spaced depended upon regimental regulations, all officers almost invariably wore buttons in pairs. The body of the coat was of scarlet cloth, usually described as of 'superfine' quality, reasonably hard-wearing but much finer than the coarse, almost brick-red material worn by the rank and file.

Its lining was usually of white fabric, often silk or linen, and often partly quilted, though the tails of the skirts were usually lined in a harder-wearing white cloth. The edges of these skirt tails were ornamented with 'turnbacks', by this date purely decorative white cloth ornaments stitched permanently to the skirts. These were further ornamented with embroidered devices which ranged from simple metallic wire knots on cloth patches to regimental badges of great intricacy incorporating sequins and spangles. Regiments with buff facings usually wore buff, rather than white skirt lining and turnbacks, though in some cases the buff was almost white.

The upright collar and the cuffs — the latter stitched down to the sleeve, and purely decorative — were in the regimental facing colour; each cuff was ornamented with four buttons, and the collar with one or two on each side. The buttons — gilt or silver, according to the regimental colour — were set either upon a doubled bar or 'loop' of similarly-coloured metallic lace, or upon a dummy buttonhole embroidered in thread of the same colour as the cloth upon which it was set.

Whether or not a regiment bore lace depended upon regimental practice. The 1802 clothing regulations[2] stated that '. . . if the Colonel thinks proper either Gold or Silver Embroidered or Laced Button Holes are permitted'. Even so, the practice was by no means rigidly defined: 'unlaced' regiments might wear lace for dress occasions, and 'laced' regiments might use plain coats for service.

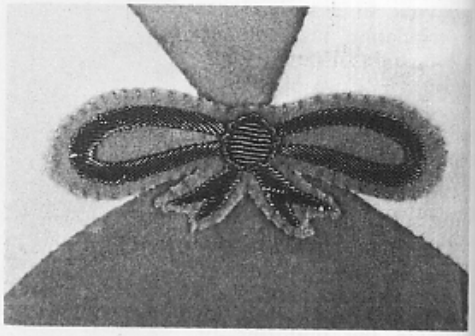
The double-breasted front of the coat was lined in the facing colour. The garment could be worn in three ways: with both lapels folded back, closed down the front with

An interesting variation on the normal method of wearing the lapels of the coatee. George Webb Derezny lost his right arm in the Peninsula as a lieutenant in the 82nd (Prince of Wales' Volunteers) Regiment. His coatee is fastened to the left in 'female' style, presumably so that he could button it more easily with his left hand. Note the belt plate of the 82nd Foot, with the regimental number below the Prince of Wales' feathers. (Print by C. Turner after I. G. Strutt)

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

A battalion company officer of the 3rd Foot (Buffs), showing a uniform typical of that worn by most officers at least until the closing year of the Peninsular War. (Print from the British Military Library *series, 1799.)*

Right:
Rear view of the officer's coatee illustrated in colour on our cover and p. 12. Note details of red 'twist' thread on the pocket flaps and across the waist, typical of unlaced regiments; and placing of rear buttons.



Below right:
Detail of the turnback device on the coatee, in the typical style of an embroidered bow — here in silver wire on a scarlet patch.

Below:
More elaborate turnback device, as worn by regiments whose insignia included the Garter star: gold wire embroidery with tinsel and sequin details.

HEADDRESS and SMALLCLOTHES

Headdress consisted of the ubiquitous flat-sided bicorn, worn almost invariably 'fore and aft'. Made of black felt and bound with black tape, the hat was asymmetrical: its 'front' or right hand side was slightly smaller than the 'back' or left. Its crown was constructed to allow the hat to be folded flat. On the right side was a loop of regimental lace and a regimental button, running from the edge to secure a black cockade made either of ribbon or starched black fabric in a ribbed fan shape. From behind the cockade, secured in a leather tube, rose a feather plume which for 'battalion' companies was in the national colouring of white over red. Though regimental practice varied, the plume was usually quite large for dress occasions, while smaller ones were used for active service. At either end of the hat was a tasselled ornament of gold wire and crimson silk.

Beneath the coat was worn a white shirt, the frilled cuffs sometimes visible at the wrist, and the frilled breast allowed to show between the coat lapels when they were not fastened completely hooks and eyes (or left open for evening wear), to produce a facing-coloured plastron covering the entire breast; with the lapels fastened over completely, to conceal the facing colour (as prescribed in some regimental orders: 'The jacket to be worn constantly buttoned across from top to bottom'[3]); or — the most popular style — with only the upper edges of the lapels turned back, revealing two facing-coloured triangles on the upper breast. For some 'laced' regiments the lapels might have loops of lace upon the facing-coloured side, and occasionally upon the scarlet side also. The pockets of the coat were placed in the rear skirts, accessible by concealed vertical slits in the skirts; dummy horizontal pocket flaps, usually with four buttons, were situated just below waist level.

across. A small line of the collar would also be visible above the stock: this was a black neck cloth, varying between an uncomfortable strip of leather or stiff canvas, buckled at the rear, and a black neckerchief, easier to wear and capable of being tied at the throat in elaborate bows by officers of dandified tastes. The white kerseymere waistcoat was completely concealed by the coat.

Legwear consisted of white breeches, usually of fabric but sometimes of buckskin for dress occasions, worn with white stockings and knee boots. The latter were of 'Hessian' design, with lace or tape trimming to the upper edge, often with a tassel; or of the riding-boot variety, with or without buff leather tops. More varied legwear was worn on campaign.

RANK DISTINCTIONS

Officer's rank was indicated by three features, two of which were common to all: the gorget, and the sash. The gorget, a gilded crescent suspended at the throat by rosettes and ribbons of the facing colour (or red, for regiments with black facings) from the collar, epaulette, or upper breast buttons, was apparently worn during our period only as a 'duty' item — i.e. when the wearer was actually on duty or parade; it was probably always omitted when on campaign. Its usual engraved decoration consisted of a crowned royal cypher surrounded by laurel, but some bore additional regimental badges. The practice of silver-laced regiments wearing silver gorgets (though confirmed by the 1802 regulations, in contradiction of the 1796 orders specifying gilt for all) was probably defunct by this date. The sash, of crimson silk net, was worn around the waist, over the coat, and knotted at the left hip, its hanging ends finished with long tassels.

The third rank distinction was in the form of epaulettes, fixed to the shoulders of the coat by laces which passed through holes in the cloth and tied on the underside. The most usual pattern consisted of a stiffened strap covered with metallic lace — either a single wide strip, or several narrow ones — with a padded crescent at the point of the shoulder from which hung metallic bullions or fringes. A button was situated at the end of the strap, and usually some type of embroidered wire or applied metal badge was set on the shoulder end. Until 1810, however, rank markings on epaulettes were not regulated but were left within the province of individual regimental practice. Some regiments apparently introduced rank insignia before its official authorisation. The only definitive regulation in force before 1810 was that all officers were to wear an epaulette on the right shoulder, except for officers of flank companies, and field officers, who were to wear two. Excluding regimental practice there were no differences of design between the epaulettes of various ranks; but from March 1809 adjutants were ordered to wear a laced strap — i.e. a fringeless *contre-epaulette* — on the left shoulder as well.

In February 1810 epaulettes were ordered to be distinguished by the addition of rank badges in the sequence listed in the table below.

No design was specified for the star, though the Garter Star seems to have been most popular, with some Scottish regiments later adopting the Thistle Star; all were in metals of the contrasting colour to that of the strap.

From December 1811 (in an order later clarified in April 1812) it was instructed that in future all ranks' epaulettes were to be indistinguishable save for the badges, the epaulettes of subalterns acquiring bullion fringes like those of higher ranks. Given the usual delays in the adoption of new regulations, it is doubtful whether the thin-fringed epaulettes ever saw extensive — if, indeed, any — use.

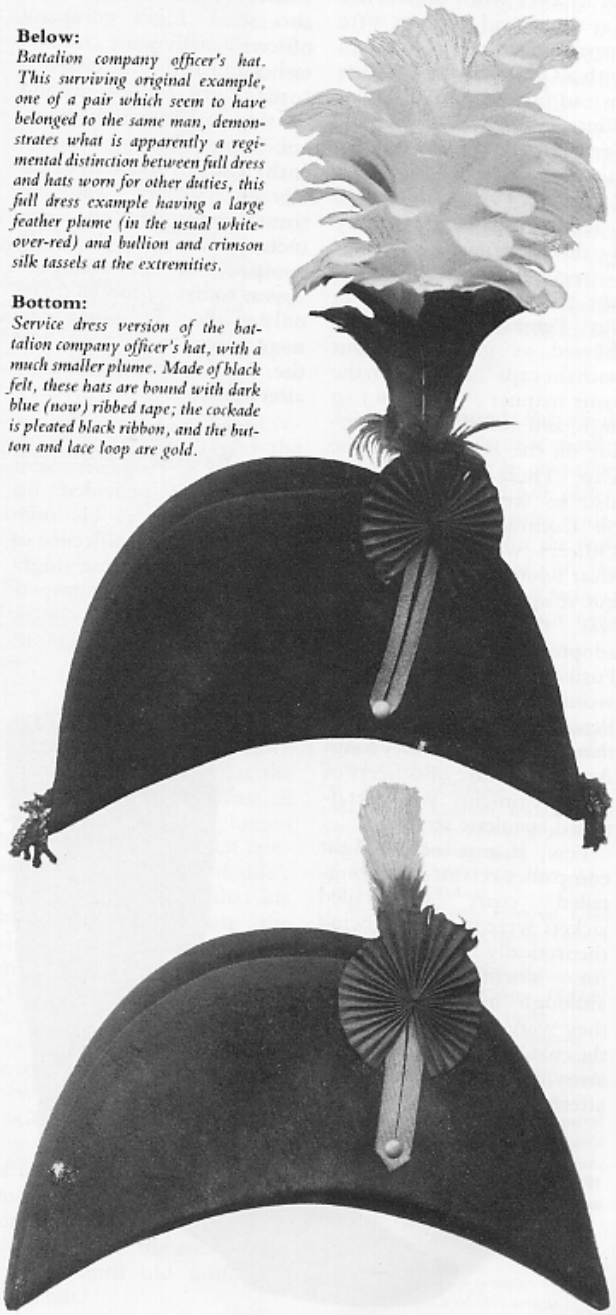
From 1809 officers of brevet field rank, even if only captains, were to wear two epaulettes.

Col.	—	Crown and star	—	Bullion fringe
Lt.Col.	—	Crown	—	Bullion fringe
Major	—	Star	—	Bullion fringe
Capt.	—	No badge	—	Bullion fringe
Lt.	—	No badge	—	Thin fringe
Ensign	—	No badge	—	Thin fringe

Flank companies

The one grenadier and one light company within each battalion confirmed their status as the regimental élite by differences in uniform. Most notable were the 'wings' on the coat: projections at the shoulders covered with either metallic lace, interlocking chain or metallic scales, usually on a scarlet cloth backing. This traditional distinction exhibited many regimental variations, usually including the authorised grenade or bugle badge in the centre of the wing or strap. Worn on both shoulders by all ranks, the wings replaced epaulettes for all but field officers, who were instructed in 1809 to wear wings below their epaulettes — an order which probably confirmed or re-instituted a practice already widespread.

In full dress, grenadier company officers were authorised to wear a bearskin cap. It is described in the 1802 regulations as follows: 'Black



Below:
Battalion company officer's hat. This surviving original example, one of a pair which seem to have belonged to the same man, demonstrates what is apparently a regimental distinction between full dress and hats worn for other duties, this full dress example having a large feather plume (in the usual white-over-red) and bullion and crimson silk tassels at the extremities.

Bottom:
Service dress version of the battalion company officer's hat, with a much smaller plume. Made of black felt, these hats are bound with dark blue (now) ribbed tape; the cockade is pleated black ribbon, and the button and lace loop are gold.

Bearskin. On the Front, The King's Crest in brass on a Black Ground with the Motto "Nec Aspera Terrent". A Grenade on the Back part, with the number of the Regiment on it. The Royal Regiments and the six old Corps are to have the Crest and Grenade . . . The Height of the Cap (without the Bear Skin which reaches beyond the Top) to be Twelve Inches . . .', with ornaments in gilt for officers. The cap had a white feather. It was hardly ever worn on service, if at all; instead, officers were instructed 'to wear Hats . . . with a Gilt or Silver Grenade instead of button and with a White Feather' [plume]. Grenades also featured frequently in their turnback devices.

Similar caps were worn by the three 'Fuzileer' — Fusilier — regiments, of which two (the 7th and 23rd) served in the Peninsula. All were dressed as grenadiers, but with fur caps '. . . made in the same manner . . . but not so high, and not to have a Grenade on the Back Part of the Cap. These Regiments are also to wear the Felt Cap on Common Parades . . .' Officers were supposed to wear white-over-red plumes, but it appears that all-white was the colour usually adopted. Although the Fusilier cap *may* have been worn in the early part of the Peninsular War, it is unlikely that it was retained very long. Another feature of officers of these regiments was metal-scaled epaulette straps.

Few, if any, of the light companies retained the long-tailed coat; short-tailed jackets were universal, being theoretically more suitable for skirmishing duties, although in other respects they were styled similarly to the coat. As the dandies of the army, light company officers affected light cavalry styles and, most noticeably, wore 'stovepipe' shakos instead of hats. The shako resembled that worn by the rank and file, but sometimes displayed cords, large green feather plumes above circular cockades, usually bugle badges on the front, and frequently, square-cut peaks. Many regimental varieties existed, particularly in the early years of the war.

Though breeches and Hessian boots were common, stockings and low gaiters worn over low boots were also seen. Light company officers usually wore crimson sashes finished with tasselled cords worn looped around the side, rather than the knotted variety with tasselled ends. The introduction of the 'corded' variety was not simultaneous in all regiments, however; the light company of the 4th Foot appear to have adopted theirs only in 1809, and other regiments seem to have retained the 'Line' pattern for years afterwards.

THE CAMPAIGN WARDROBE

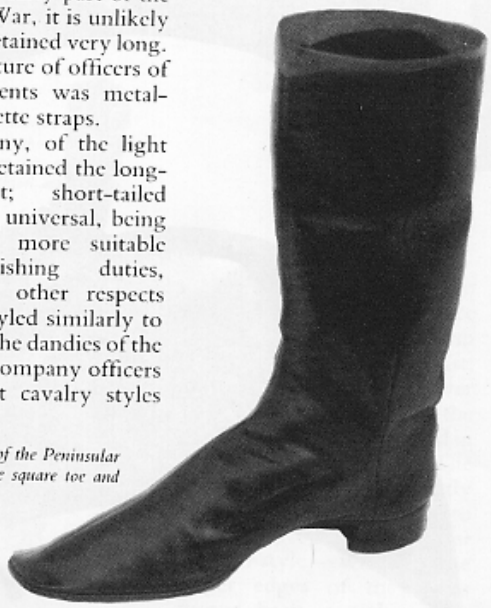
Each officer provided his own uniform, at his own expense; the magnificence of a regiment's costume might therefore persuade an impecunious subaltern to choose another corps, for memoirs and diaries of the day reveal that many were acutely conscious of the potentially enormous cost of equipping themselves for war or peace alike. A measure of the straits to which some officers were reduced is the fact that some tailors offered to buy second hand lace or to part-exchange insignia from officers moving to new regiments, or those effected by new regulations. The wealthy, however, could afford to lavish great expense upon their uniforms: Capt. Hobkirk of the 43rd, for instance, was reputed to have spent almost £1,000 on his uniform.

When George Elers joined the 12th Foot he noted that 'My outfit cost me £300 . . . No officer, with the exception of Colonel Aston, had such a kit. I had six regimental jackets, besides dress-coats, greatcoat, shirts about twelve dozen, and everything in the same proportion'. Even so, he soon had to make a major alteration when 'I was immediately appointed to the light infantry company. I was obliged to send up to London for a sabre and wings instead of epaulettes, and lots of narrow gold lace for my scarlet waistcoat . . .' Aston of the 12th *was* an exception, though: when going on service, 'His stock of clothes, etc., that he bought in England was immense; I have heard from fifty to one hundred pairs of boots . . . He lent me a loose jacket to wear. I said I was afraid I should deprive him of it, as there were no launderesses on board ship. He said: "Never mind; I have two hundred more"'.[4]

More usual were the financial difficulties from which Ensign William Bell of the 89th suffered in 1808: 'I am very sorry to say that owing to my having to procure two Regimental coats instead of one (as I had thought of) and those two very rich ones my money will run me short'; thus he could afford no greatcoat, 'but any of the officers would lend me theirs'.[5] So expensive was the kit, and so impecunious many of the officers, that it was usual on campaign for an officer to will away his effects to his friends, or for the clothing of a deceased officer to be auctioned among his comrades. Probably very common also was the purchase of uniforms cut-price, as a seasoned campaigner, George Simmons, advised his brother to do when he was about to join the 34th in the Peninsula, initially as a volunteer and subsequently to be commissioned.

The total cost for the entire kit on this 'shoestring' basis was calculated by Simmons at the remarkably low figure of £23 9s 0d — though even this sum was not inconsiderable when set against an ensign's daily pay of 5s 3d, out of which he had to buy his food. Although very many officers were commissioned without purchase, an ensigncy in a Line regiment cost £400; so from these figures alone it is obvious that an officer without private income could be in very straitened circumstances indeed unless he followed a course of extreme prudence. In such circumstances, Simmons's advice of 1811 is sound:

'You must procure Joseph a superfine red jacket. I was thinking of letting you get him a regimental 34th coat, but I am afraid it would be too expensive, although it would in the end be a great saving, as cloth is extremely dear in Lisbon; however, do as you can. The collar and cuffs, white Kerseymere, a white Kerseymere waistcoat, two pairs of strong grey trousers, made wide like sailors' trousers, three pairs of strong shoes (one pair short), strong leather gaiters. I have always found them the most preferable, as they keep your shoes from slipping off, and also prevent sand and gravel getting into your stockings. Three pairs of socks. If you could purchase a sword (not a sabre) similar to the officers' swords you may have observed on parade, and you can get it cheap, buy it; its being new is of no consequence. An old sash also you might procure cheap; it would answer as well as any



An officer's boot of the Peninsular War era; note the square toe and arched instep.

other. However, these things are now and then to be met with here.

'He must have a haversack made of dark fustian (not too large), a claspknife, fork and spoon; also a tin mug, which will serve him for wine, soup, and tea. You may also buy some pasteboard and make a cocked hat, or at least have it cut out in order that he can put it into his baggage, with some oil-silk, some broad black ribbon for a cockade, and some broad stuff for a binding. The tailor of the regiment will form it; a gold tallion for each end. His baggage must be as small as possible, as the convenience of carriage is very scarce — three shirts will be enough. He must also have a black leather stock with a buckle, a common rough greatcoat; let it be big enough (any colour, it is of no consequence). Could you get three or four dozen buttons like the 34th? they would be very useful afterwards. He must bring two or three toothbrushes and three little towels, or any other little thing that may have slipped my memory which may strike you'.[6]

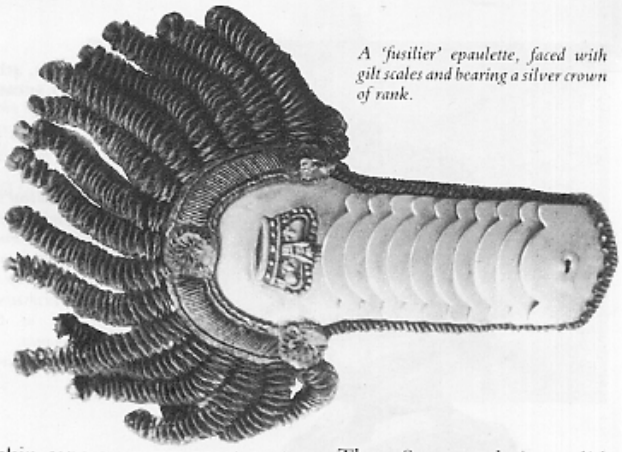
Other 'orders of dress' listed, but few would have been of great relevance in the Peninsular War, as opportunities for wearing 'court dress' were few, and practicable evening wear for parties and dinners could be made by utilising the ordinary coat, replacing service dress trousers with breeches and stockings. It had been common in many regiments to have a different uniform for morning parades, usually depending entirely upon regimental orders; but few of these can have extended to those on active service — though the practice of wearing dark blue breeches, prevalent in the early 1800s, may have lasted until the Peninsular War.

Undress frock coats, however, may well have been worn in the early stages of the Peninsular War. Termed 'Great Coats' in the 1802 regulations, they appear to have been more of the 'frock' type than a true greatcoat:' . . . of dark Blue Cloth, double breasted, with two Rows of Buttons and a falling Collar of Scarlet Cloth. Blue Cuff with Slits and to open with 4 Small Buttons. The Pockets to open at the Plait. Buttons similar to their respective Uniforms or Regimentals'. The extent to which such coats were used on campaign is uncertain, and was probably limited to the earlier years. Long braided coats, sometimes with fur collars and known, confusingly, as 'pelisses' or 'pelisse coats', were popular undress wear for officers in the later stages of the Napoleonic Wars.

Few patterns of forage cap seem to have been regulated even at regimental level. One officer ordered a cap from his tailor with no more precise specifications than that it should be 'neat but not gaudy';[7] and this lack of standardisation seems to have been usual. Examples exist with peaks (one type having a baggy cloth crown, like an Australian cricket cap); others are low, 'pork pie' caps similar to those worn by the rank and file. Campaign sketches show the use in the Peninsula of peaked caps with wide crowns, apparently covered in black oilskin, comparable to the contemporary styles already favoured by Prussian and other German officers.

The greatcoat was equally varied, with grey probably the commonest colour. Single-, or, more usually, double-breasted, it was often very voluminous, with a shoulder-length cape. Though the sword and sash could be worn over it, the greatcoat was sufficiently large to conceal even a sabre. The greatcoat usually had deep cuffs and large pockets — Gen. Skerret was in the habit of carrying a bottle of sherry in each pocket!

Cloaks were popular with some, as William Warre noted: '. . . as we can carry but little weight . . . a cloak lined with warm but light stuff is much better [than a greatcoat] as we oftener want a cloak to sleep in than to keep out the rain, and I have latterly practiced riding in an oil skin cape over my great coat . . . my cloth coat gets so soon wet, is so heavy when filled with water, and takes so many days drying, that I never carry it with me . . .'[8]



A 'fusilier' epaulette, faced with gilt scales and bearing a silver crown of rank.

A new set of regulations was introduced in 1812, which radically altered the appearance of the infantry officer. Instead of the tailed coat, the new uniform included a short-tailed, double-breasted jacket of the style already worn by light infantry. The bicorn was abandoned completely (except as a *chapeau bras* for evening and court wear) by the infantry, and was replaced by the false-fronted shako of so-called 'Belgic' or 'Waterloo' pattern, whose design probably evolved from the contemporary Portuguese *barretina* cap.

The new uniform probably saw only limited service in the Peninsula, though evidence is inconclusive. Lt. Maguire led the 'forlorn hope' of the 4th Foot at the storming of San Sebastian wearing a white-plumed bicorn 'to make himself conspicuous and recognisable', which might imply that his brother officers wore the shako; but the distinction may only refer to the plume. (Whatever the case, it proved too conspicuous, for Maguire was killed in the breach.) It seems probable that only newly arrived or re-clothed regiments would have worn the 1812 style; and even officers of re-clothed units, buying their uniforms personally, probably retained the old style until the end of the war or until old uniforms wore out.

The 1812 regulations did officially authorise two features which were already common: the grey greatcoat with a standing collar and shoulder cape; and long, grey overall trousers — though other colours, e.g. blue or white, were not unknown. Trousers could be regulated by regimental orders, e.g: 'grey overalls, patent leather at the bottom, three inches deep in front and five inches at the rear'.[9] **MI**

To be continued: *Part 2 will illustrate and describe further uniform variations on campaign; weapons; belts and belt plates; and personal campaigning equipment. It will also list the regiments which served in the Peninsula with details of facings, officers' lace, and known regimental peculiarities.*

Source notes:

(1) *Adventures with the Connaught Rangers 1804–14*, Lt. William Grattan (London, 1847)

(2) *Infantry Clothing Regulations, 1802*, W. Y. Carman; *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* Vol. XIX (London, 1940)

(3) *Standing Orders, 85th Regt.*, Lt.-Col. Thornton (1813)

(4) *Memoirs of George Elers*, ed. Lord Monson & G. Leveson Gower (London, 1903)

(5) *Letters of William Bell 1808–10*, ed. Brig. B. W. Webb-Carter, *JSAHR* Vol. XLVIII (London, 1970)

(6) *A British Rifle Man: Journals & Correspondence of Major George Simmons during the Peninsular War*, ed. Col. W. Verner (London, 1899)

(7) *Letters written by Lieut.-General Dyneley*, ed. Col. F. A. Whinyates (London, 1896)

(8) *William Warre: Letters from the Peninsula 1808–12*, ed. Rev. E. Warre (London, 1909)

(9) *Standing Orders, 85th Regt.*, as above.

(A further list of sources will be included in Part 2 of this article.)

Left:
Company officer, 4th (King's Own, Lancaster) Regt., 1808–09

This uniform is typical of a battalion company subaltern of a 'laced' regiment, the lapels being fastened across to conceal the facing colour. The gilt belt plate was rectangular with clipped corners, bearing a silver device of a lion and 'IV' within a crowned strap inscribed 'KING'S OWN REGIMENT'. The 4th Foot served at Corunna, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vittoria, St. Sebastian and the Nive.

Right:
Company officer, 45th (Nottinghamshire) Regt., 1811

This shows the rear of the ordinary uniform, with a typical arrangement of silver loops on pockets and skirts, and typical figure-of-eight turnback device; and campaign overalls. The 45th Foot served at Roleia, Vimiera, Talavera, Busaco, Fuentes d'Oñoro, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vittoria, the Pyrenees, Nivelle, Orthes and Toulouse. Their oval silver belt plate bore '45' within a crowned oval.

Photographs:
Right, and far right:
Typical example of an officer's coatee of an unlaced regiment with yellow facings (here, much faded). This coatee is tentatively attributed to the Worcester Militia, but is poorly documented. (It may conceivably have actually seen service in the Peninsula, since that unit provided a draft for a Provisional Battalion.) We show it here with the lapels buttoned back to form a facing-colour plastron; and in one of several configurations which showed facing-colour triangles at the top of the breast.

Below:
Grenadier company officer, 4th (King's Own, Lancaster) Regt., c.1808
Company distinctions are the white feather plume and grenade badge on the hat, and the 1803 pattern 'flank company' sabre suspended on slings from the belt. The frock coat (described officially as a greatcoat at this date) was generally much less capacious than the true, caped greatcoat; and is depicted as being worn as an undress uniform, instead of, rather than over, the scarlet coatee.

Right:
A selection of epaulettes of the period. Left: *silver lace, bearing a rank star and the bugle of the light infantry.* Top: *Light infantry company wing covered with gilt chain, with a silver bugle on a gilt dome in the centre.* Right: *plain gold lace.*

Right:
Company officer, 61st (South Gloucestershire) Regt., 1811–12
The bicorn hat covered with waterproof oilskin, and the sturdy gaiters of the type worn by the rank and file, are indicative of campaign dress. The coatee is typical for an unlaced regiment, with the buff facing colour worn also on the turnbacks. Note the distinctive regimental buckle and slider in place of the usual belt plate. The 61st served at Talavera, Salamanca, the Pyrenees, Nivelle, the Nive, Orthes and Toulouse.