

## History of The Rifles Regiment

The Rifles Regiment as we know it today was formed in 2007 but it's history dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 6 parts, we will detail the fascinating history of the Regiment and show how closely linked our area is with the history of The Rifles.

### **Part 1 – The Monmouth Rebellion**

Mere decades after the English Civil War, rebellion once again took hold of the nation. The Duke of Monmouth denounced King James II and sailed to Lyme Regis with the intent of taking the British crown for himself. His journey through the West Country saw him amass thousands of supporters from nearby towns and villages. These “soldiers” were untrained and ill-equipped with many of them wielding farming instruments as weapons, earning Monmouth's endeavour the name The Pitchfork Rebellion.

The rebellion was short-lived as just five weeks after Monmouth had sailed from the Netherlands, his army was defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor. The Duke of Beaufort and the Earl of Huntingdon raised regiments that were to become the 11<sup>th</sup> (North Devon) and 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Regiments of Foot in order to protect James II's seat on the throne. They were tasked with guarding prisoners until trial at the Assize courts (locally at Taunton Castle), later dubbed The Bloody Assizes.



**The Battle of Sedgemoor**

James Scott, Duke of Monmouth and Buccleuch by Jan van Wyck

## Part 2 – The Formation of Light Infantry

In the years following the Monmouth Rebellion, the newly formed regiments were deployed to various conflicts in the United Kingdom, Europe, and across the Atlantic in North America. Throughout these various battles, the need to develop tactics to create a more versatile, independently thinking soldier became apparent.

In 1758, all British battalions were ordered to form “light” companies. These companies were found on the left flank of their battalions and acted as skirmishers. Their uniforms were modified to increase comfort and practicality, especially in instances of forest warfare. Native American foes in the Seven Years War proved difficult for the British soldiers until the troops further adapted or abandoned their equipment and took best practice from these native warriors, donning leggings and moccasins and wielding tomahawks.

This looser, more independent form of soldiering was looked down on by those who ran the Army from London’s safe and comfortable Horse Guards Parade. When the Seven Years War ended in 1763 light companies were disbanded and soldiering returned to a more familiar disciplined and ordered manner.

Ongoing unrest in North America forced the light companies to be re-established in 1775, all to face humiliating defeat and be disbanded again.



**The Seven Years’ War**

The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West

Less than twenty years later, the British Army suffered dismally at the hands of the French in Flanders. It again became clear that the British had to adapt and send light troops into the field. To meet the immediate demand for light troops, Britain hired mercenaries from a range of European states, including Germany and Ireland. The Germans brought with them Rifles and Green uniforms – this was the first-time rifles were issued for service within the British order of battle.

In January 1800 Colonel Coote-Manningham was ordered to establish an “Experimental Corps of Riflemen” to be drawn from men raised from fourteen separate regiments. Each man was to be armed with a Baker Rifle, designed by London gunsmith Ezekiel Baker, to meet military, rather than hunting, requirements. The Baker Rifle was similar in accuracy to the original German rifles but it greatly reduced the amount of fouling (build-up of soot and gunpowder residue), allowing more shots to be fired between cleaning. Within two years, a Light Infantry Training Centre was established in Shorncliffe, Kent to train these new riflemen.

The Experimental Corps of Riflemen shed its “experimental” title in 1803 when it was renamed the 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles, or Rifle Regiment. Further light infantry regiments were established by Sir John Moore, the General Officer Commanding Southern England. Riflemen and light infantry were trained together, using the same tactics and concepts employed by Colonel Coote-Manningham.

The 95<sup>th</sup> Regiment adopted the green uniforms and black leather equipment of the German regiments in the British service, but light infantry regiments were ordered to conform to the regulations of their own companies. Bugle-horn badges and “wings” at the shoulders marked their role but they were resigned to skirmishes in the foliage in their red coats and pipe-clayed equipment. This unfortunately saw them become an easy target for riflemen on opposing sides.

### **Part 3 – The Peninsular War and Waterloo**

Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley (later known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Wellington) landed the British Army on the Iberian Peninsula in July 1808 to assist Portuguese and Spanish allies in from French invading forces. The exploits of the Light Brigade - formed during the war from the 43<sup>rd</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup>, and 95<sup>th</sup> Regiments – became legendary. Their march to Talavera (covering 62 miles in 24 hours), their masterful withdraw at Fuentes D’Onoro, and their successful storming of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz were all examples of how this division was the elite force of Wellington’s army.

The Battle of Salamanca in 1812 was the moment where the British are seen to have confirmed their dominance over the French forces. During the battle, all forming Regiments of The Rifles fought valiantly, killing or wounding some 14,000 French soldiers within the space of just 40 minutes. Though heavy losses were also experienced on the British side with the 11<sup>th</sup> (North Devonshire) Regiment suffering so heavily that they were nicknamed “The Bloody Eleventh”, the Battle of Salamanca is commemorated annually as Regimental Day of The Rifles.

Napoleon was eventually defeated in 1814 and the great Peninsular army disbanded and divided. There was however one more significant battle to take place – Waterloo. Though the army fighting here was a mere shadow of the one that partook in the Peninsular War, they still clinched victory from Napoleon’s lingering forces. With bugles sounding and bayonets fixed, 800 men from the 52<sup>nd</sup> Light Infantry charged at Napoleon’s veterans and

swept them from the battlefield. This was the finishing stroke of the battle and the Napoleonic Wars.

After Waterloo, Europe found itself at peace for the first time in centuries. The British Army returned to its regular duties around the British Empire and sought to expand and improve it further.



**Battle of Waterloo**

The Duke of Wellington at Waterloo by Robert Alexander Hillingford

#### **Part 4 – Growing an Empire**

Following tremendous success in the Napoleonic Wars, the traditional role of Rifle troop and the Light Infantry was expanded throughout the entire Army. Skirmishing, having proved so successful in the Peninsular Campaign, was adopted by the entire infantry so the title “Light Infantry” became less of a descriptor of a role and instead became a badge of honour for Regiments in honour of distinguished service.

The Army engaged in several conflicts throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. 1839 saw British troops invade Afghanistan for the first time in response to Russian forces seeking to increase their influence in the area – a move that directly threatened Britain-owned India. The campaign was initially successful but by the end of 1841 the Kabul Garrison found its position hopeless. They were forced to abandon the position in Kabul and make their way to India in 1842. Their withdraw had been preceded by Brigadier General Robert ‘Fighting Bob’ Sale’s brigade, which included the 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Regiment (which had become ‘Light’ Infantry in 1822), who fought their way through the Khoord-Kabul Pass. They occupied and subsequently found themselves besieged in Jellalabad. A week after the Kabul Garrison had left Kabul for India, a lone rider was spotted approaching Jellalabad. The rider was Dr William Brydon, the Garrison’s medical officer. He



was the only survivor of the Kabul Garrison, the rest having been slaughtered in the Khoord-Kabul pass by Afghanistan's forces.



**Dr Brydon Approaching Jellalabad**

Remnants of an Army by Elizabeth Thompson

In the following months, the Regiment held out in Jellalabad waiting for relief by General Pollock's force that was on route from India. The "Army of Retribution" was the first to break through the Khyber Pass and upon arriving at Jellalabad it discovered that Sale's brigade has broken the siege on its own. The exploits of the Brigade earned recognition with Prince Albert offering his patronage to the regiments title, becoming the 13th (1st Somersetshire) (Prince Albert's Light Infantry) Regiment of Foot." The Somerset Light Infantry were later based in Taunton's Jellalabad Barracks, named in commemoration of the battle.

After Russia failed to gain influence in Afghanistan, Russia turned its sights to Europe and took advantage of the weakening Ottoman Empire to expand its territory. With Mediterranean interests threatened, the British and French united and travelled to Crimea in 1854 to destroy the Russian Black Sea fleet and capture the strategic port of Sebastopol. This was the first time since Waterloo that Europe found itself at war on the continent.

Shortly after the Anglo-French Army's victory in the Crimean War, Britain's interests were once again threatened with the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Garrisons found themselves surrounded, Delhi was seized, and the British were vastly outnumbered by a force tens of thousands strong. The once-lucky Dr William Bryden, survivor of the Siege of Jellalabad, was once again besieged within Lucknow. The siege was eventually broken by the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Shropshire) Regiment who each won 4 Victoria Crosses for their actions and whose Regiment was bestowed the title "Light Infantry".

Operations in India successfully concluded for the British but they were soon once more engaged in conflict, this time in South Africa with the. During this time, there were changes in the naming and uniforms of the regiments. In 1881 the Cardwell Reforms of the British Army removed the “numbering” from Regimental titles, instead exclusively using county titles such as The Somerset Light Infantry. Uniforms were modernised at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with khaki being used in service on campaign. Some traditions still lingered on though as black buttons and bugle horns still distinguished rifle and light infantry regiments respectfully.

## Part 5 – The World at War

War broke out in Europe in 1914 and the antecedent regiments of The Rifles raised in excess of 200 battalions to service on the Western Front. Thousands of men perished and thousands more were injured in this “War to End all Wars”. The sacrifice and heroism of each soldier is commemorated in the awards the survivors received and the memorials erected in honour of the dead.

This war sadly did not end all wars as the Second World War loomed just over the horizon. Technology and tactics evolved rapidly in these inter-war years, changing the nature of warfare and what was expected of a soldier.

During WWII, Light Infantry Regiments fought as bravely as ever on land, sea, and in the sky. Major John Howard of The Ox and Bucks Light Infantry spearheading the allied invasion of Normandy. They landed six Horsa gliders close to the vital bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River, preventing German armour from reinforcing the defences of Normandy. In a stunningly executed operation, the gliders were skilfully landed within metres of the bridges just after midnight. This assault was



**Richard Todd in The Longest Day**

The Longest Day 1962

immortalised in the Hollywood blockbuster “The Longest Day” where the role of Major John Howard was played by Richard Todd, a war hero in his own right. Todd was actually the platoon commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion in The Somerset Light Infantry. This battalion helped reinforce the Major Howard’s position on the bridges and repelled all German attempts to re-capture the location.

Normandy, much like Salamanca in 1812, saw all the antecedent regiments of The Rifles fighting together and playing a major role in liberating western Europe. The German armour was never able to get past their defences and the Battle Honour “Normandy” takes centre stage on the Belt Badge of The Rifles to this day.

## **Part 6 – The Modern Rifleman – Swift and Bold**

The world was forever changed after the Second World War and regiments of The Rifles returned to policing the empire, though it was now in decline. The threat of the Cold War loomed in the background while antecedent regiments of The Rifles were sent to suppress insurgencies the far-flung corners of the world in Korea, Kenya, Malaya, Borneo, Aden, and Cyprus. Conflict soon erupted closer to home when The Troubles began in Northern Ireland. All battalions were at some point deployed to the province, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion completing more tours – 14 in total – than any other battalion in the British Army.

The Cold War’s end signalled more instability around the world from Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait to the collapse and subsequent civil war of Yugoslavia. The 21<sup>st</sup> century arrived with more challenges as 9/11 changed the course of history in 2001. Operations began in Afghanistan shortly after with the invasion of Iraq following in 2003.

The modern Regiment formed in the middle of a war – much as its forefathers had done. The Rifles as we know them today formed in 2007, building on the foundations created through the rich history of their founding regiments.

Riflemen today fight with the intelligence and ferocity that would make the Duke of Wellington’s Peninsular veterans proud. Modern warfare is ever-changing, and technology’s advances force The Rifles to continuously adapt and evolve their tactics as there are now even more deadly and unseen threats in the battle space.

The Rifles are brave, they are smart, they are swift and bold. We are proud to grant them the Freedom of Wellington.

