

## The Rifles' History

*"Pride of Regiment and love for the Regiment's history and tradition is the sacred Ark of the Covenant on which the British soldier depends in battle and on which Britain, through him, has again and again survived and won through to victory" Sir Arthur Bryant*

The Rifles' History can be traced back to 1685.

### 1685 to 1800



The Battle of Sedgemoor 6th July 1685

Like many of the modern regiments of the British Army, The Rifles can trace its roots back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In fact the birth of The Rifles goes back to 1685, when – following the suppression of the 'Monmouth Rebellion', the Duke of Beaufort and the Earl of Huntingdon raised Regiments, which were to become the 11<sup>th</sup> (North Devon) and 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Regiments of foot in order to secure King James II position on the throne. However, it was the British Army's experience of irregular warfare in North America during the Seven Years War – as brought to the cinema screens by the film 'Last of the Mohicans' – that forced it to develop *light infantry* to counter the threat posed by their American, French and native Indian foes. The tactics of column and line used by line infantry were not suited to the close and wooded country found in North America where rebels used lighting tactics to attack vulnerable bodies of men as they marched across hostile territory. Initially colonists and Indians were used as scouts before two Regiments were raised in 1755 as light infantry. One of these was the 85<sup>th</sup> (Bucks Volunteers). All those within it were trained to "load and fire lying on the ground and kneeling – to march in order, slow and fast in all sorts of land".



The Original Light Infantryman

From 1758 all British battalions were ordered to form their own 'light' companies. These companies were to be found on the left flank of their battalions and act as skirmishers and the advance guard of their battalions in the advance and the rear guard when forced to withdraw. For warfare in the forests, regulation pattern uniforms were not suitable and a more comfortable and practical form of dress was improvised. Equipment was either adapted or discarded – best practice was taken from the Indians: Knapsacks were carried; leggings, moccasins and weapons such as tomahawks were also adopted. The drum, a cumbersome instrument, was replaced by the Bugle Horn as a method of communicating orders on the battlefield. The concept of a soldier capable of independent thought was therefore born.

This form of soldiering from the outset was viewed as abhorrent by those who ran the Army from the plush surroundings of Horse Guards Parade. At the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 light companies were disbanded and the nature of soldiering returned to the characteristic disciplined and ordered manner that the Army was more accustomed to.

However, it was not long before events in North America once again forced them to be re-established. The previous lessons of fighting had been forgotten and these new light troops were found lacking when they once again went up against the rebellious colonists in 1775. They were forced to relearn the previously hard won lessons and ultimately proved to be successful.



The Battle of Paoli

On the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1777 at Paoli, light companies grouped together into a larger body, destroyed a vastly superior American force in a daring night attack. The rebels swore vengeance and decreed that any British soldier captured would be killed – after which those Regiments involved dipped their hackles into blood in order to stain them red as a mark of honour and to identify themselves as those responsible for this act – a honour which the Royal Gloucestershire Berkshire Wiltshire Light Infantry and the Light Infantry continued to maintain until they formed part of the Rifles in 2007.

After a humiliating defeat in America, light Infantry units were once again disbanded and 30 years of experience was once again lost.

In 1793 war broke out in Flanders – and the British Army suffered dismally. The French Army had developed new and potent tactics, in order to harass an enemy as never seen before – prior to a decisive assault by Infantry in column. Fired by revolutionary fervour, the French Infantry seemed invincible. Observers noticed that they had an abundance of light troops who made use of cover and ground to close with their enemy.

Britain realised that it needed to raise a similar force to match the French. Such a force could not be raised quickly and it would take some years before a reorganisation could be effected and light infantry regiments could take to the field. To meet the immediate shortage of light troops, Britain hired in mercenaries from German and other European states – including the Irish. German light troops, recruited from hunters brought with them their rifles and green uniforms – the first time they were to be seen in service within the British order of battle.



5/60th Rifleman

In 1797, 400 men of Hompesch's Mounted Rifles and 500 of Loewenstein's Chasseurs were drafted to form the 5/60<sup>th</sup> (North American) Regiment. They were the first regular unit of light infantry in the British Army and armed completely with rifles. Importantly they wore jackets of green: reflecting the need for camouflage and concealment when fighting in close country.

The chain of command, however, still did not agree with the concept of light troops as it did not sit well with the rigid British Army discipline system. The tactic of '*Infanterie légère*' was thought reprehensible to most British Officers. Nevertheless the Duke of York, in 1798, authorised the Commanding Officer of the 5/60<sup>th</sup> to write his '*Regulations of the Exercise of Riflemen and Light Infantry*'. The success of the French on the continent meant that Britain quickly lost its source of mercenary light troops. Had this not happened, it is likely that no British light Infantry would have been formed.

## The Birth of the Rifleman and Light Infantry



Colonel Coote-Manningham

In January 1800 Colonel Coote-Manningham, an officer who enlisted into the 39<sup>th</sup> Foot (later the Dorsets), was ordered to establish an "Experimental Corps of Riflemen" – drawn from men raised from fourteen separate regiments. Each was to be armed with a Baker Rifles – designed by Ezekiel Baker, a London gunsmith, in order to meet military rather than hunting requirements. The Baker Rifle had a similar accuracy to the original German rifles, but greatly reduced the rate of fouling allowing more shots between cleaning. It was what we would today describe as a battle winner – accurate to 300 yards; compared to British or French muskets which were lucky if they hit someone as close as 80 yards.

A popular song of the day went:

*Oh! Colonel Coote-Manningham, was the man,  
For he invented a capital plan,  
he raised a Corps of Riflemen  
To fight for England's Glory!*

*He dressed them all in jackets of green  
And placed them where they couldn't be seen  
And sent them in front, an invisible screen  
To fight for England's Glory!*



Sir John Moore

Then, in late 1802, Sir John Moore (commissioned into the 51<sup>st</sup> (later King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry), who at the time was General Officer Commanding Southern England, established the Light Infantry Training Centre at Shorncliffe. A year earlier he commanded the Reserve force of the expeditionary force deployed to Egypt to expel the French in Egypt. Part of this force was the 28<sup>th</sup> (Gloucestershire) Regiment of Foot who during the Battle of Alexandria on 21 March 1801 won the distinction of wearing a 'back badge' when attacked from the front by Infantry and in the rear by cavalry. Their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Chambers gave the order "*Rear Rank 28<sup>th</sup> Foot, right about face*". A single volley of musket fire was directed at the French attack and destroyed the cavalry as it thundered towards the Glosters. This meant that on that day the Regiment fought back to back and conducted a manoeuvre that was theoretically impossible to conduct and had never been rehearsed. It was an example of innovative thought and steadfastness by the Commanding Officer and his regiment respectively.

In 1803 the Experimental Corps or Riflemen was re-titled the 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles, or Rifle Regiment. However, Sir John Moore still saw the need for more radical change and so set about establishing British Light Infantry Regiments.



52nd Light Infantry

The first of these were the 43<sup>rd</sup> (Oxfordshire) and 52<sup>nd</sup> (Buckinghamshire) Regiments of Foot. They were to be trained with a dual purpose – to continue to be used as a 'regiment of the line' and act as light infantry when required. The 85<sup>th</sup> (Bucks Volunteers) one of the original regiments raised as light troops in 1755 (and subsequently disbanded on two occasions), was converted to light infantry for a 3<sup>rd</sup> time!

These riflemen and light infantry were trained together; in the same tactics and concepts by Colonel Coote-Manningham and Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie – Commanding Officer of the 52<sup>nd</sup>.



Riflemen

However, whilst the 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles were permitted to adopt the green clothing and black leather equipment of the German regiments in British service, light infantry regiments were ordered to conform to the regulations for light companies. Bugle-horn badges and 'wings' at the shoulders marked their role; but they were condemned to skirmish in the hedges, ditches and woods in their red coats and pipe-clayed equipment – an excellent aiming mark for the French, as it was for the American riflemen.

Every individual had to fully understand their duties – including officers! Officers were therefore drilled first – and they in turn trained their soldiers. Rifle and light infantry officers were required to treat soldiers with respect – the concept of '*doing only what was necessary and nothing that was not*' was born and an ethos of '*relaxed efficiency*' was instilled into every man.

However, many senior officers still considered the British 'light bobs' as little more than irregulars. Skirmishing (a German tactic) introduced the concept of fire and manoeuvre. Unlike the musketry of the line – a skirmish line used aimed fire – each rifleman carefully selecting his target and shooting with care. Light Infantry were grouped close by to provide intimate support to Riflemen who were later to reap havoc on their French opponents.

## The Peninsula War and Waterloo



Sir Arthur Wellesley

Under command of Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington), the British Army landed on the Iberian Peninsula in July 1808 to assist their Portuguese and Spanish Allies against the French. Such was the confidence of the French in their own abilities; they failed to take in the magnitude of the changes that had been undertaken within the British Army. Indeed Marshall Foy once remarked that "*the English soldier did not possess sufficient intelligence and address to combine with the regular duty of the line the service of inspiration of the sharpshooter.*" The Peninsular War was to prove him wrong.

From the outset the tactics of the British Riflemen and light infantry were to prove decisive. One of Napoleons commanders in Spain, Marshal Soult, wrote to the French Minister of War describing the effectiveness of riflemen stating:

*"The loss in prominent and superior officers, sustained for some time past by the Army, is so disproportionate to that of the ranks and file that I have been at pains to discover the reason; and have acquired the following information, which of course explains the cause of this extraordinary a circumstance."*

Soult goes on to state:

*“The men are selected for their marksmanship; they perform duties of scouts and in action are expressly ordered to pick off officers, especially Field and General Officers. This mode of making war and injuring the enemy is very detrimental to us; our casualties in officers are so great that after a couple of actions the whole number are usually disabled in the ratio of one officer to eight men.”*



Retreat to Corunna

The British Army in the Peninsular for a short period of time was placed under the command of Sir John Moore, who brigaded the 43<sup>rd</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> together to form a Light Brigade. The successful retreat to Corunna executed by Sir John Moore saved the British Army from destruction, during which the Light Brigade, under Brigadier General ‘Black Bob’ Craufurd, fought a series of successful rear guard actions against the French. During this retreat Tom Plunkett epitomised the qualities of a rifleman. One account of an incident where he was tasked by his officer to shoot a French General:



Tom Plunkett

*“Throwing himself onto his back and resting his Baker Rifle on his crossed feet with the butt under his right shoulder in the approved manner, Plunkett fired at and killed Colbert who was leading his soldiers from the front”.*

Apparently, having reloaded quickly, Plunkett then shot a second French officer who had ridden to General Colbert’s aid before dashing back to the British line.



Death of Sir John Moore

Sadly Sir John Moore was mortally wounded during the Battle of Corunna on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1809, just before the British Army embarked on Royal Navy ships and escaped back to England.

Napoleon himself paid tribute to Moore by saying “*his firmness and talent alone saved the British Army (in Spain) from destruction*”. Colonel Coote-Manningham was also wounded and although he managed to escape from Spain; he too was to die from his injuries.



Fuentes De Onoro by Chris Collingwood

When the Army returned to the Iberian Peninsula in April 1809, it was to remain there until the French were finally expelled in 1814. The exploits of the Light Division under ‘Black Bob’ Craufurd were to become legendary. The Light Division’s march to Talavera (where they covering the last 62 miles in 24 hours); their masterful withdraw at Fuentes D’ Onoro – over a distance of three miles whilst surrounded by French cavalry at Fuentes D’ Onoro; their successful storming’s of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz were all examples of what made the Division the elite of Wellington’s Army.



Battle of Salamanca

But it was at the Battle of Salamanca on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1812 that the British Army was to confirm its dominance over the French. During this battle all of the forming regiments of The Rifles covered themselves in glory. 14 000 Frenchmen under the command of Marshal Marmont were killed or wounded in some 40 minutes; as Wellington seized the opportunity to go on the offensive – destroying seven divisions of French Infantry who found themselves over extended before him. In the final act, where Ferey’s Division faced Clinton’s 6<sup>th</sup> Division in a deadly duel of musketry, the gallantry and heavy casualties of the 11<sup>th</sup> (North Devonshire) Regiment in particular earned it the nickname ‘The Bloody Eleventh’. It is the Battle of Salamanca that is celebrated as the Regimental Day of The Rifles and on the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle the Regiment was given the honour of receiving the freedom of the City.

With the eventual defeat of Napoleon in 1814, the great Peninsular army was dismantled and divided. Yet there was still one more great battle for some of Wellington’s men, namely Waterloo. But the army that fought there was a pale shadow of that which had triumphed in the Peninsular and which had swept Marmont’s army from the field of Salamanca.



28th at Quatre Bras

Nevertheless the 28<sup>th</sup> (Gloucestershire) Regiment distinguished itself at Quatre Bras – the only Regiment to be mentioned by Wellington in his 'Waterloo Dispatch'. Wellington himself was later to admit he failed to give credit to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Light Infantry commanded by Colonel John Colbourne who ordered his Regiment to charge at Napoleon's Imperial Guard as they made their majestic assault at Wellington centrally – in what was to become Napoleons last throw of his dice. With bugles sounding and bayonets fixed, Colbourne and his 800 light infantrymen charged at the cream of Napoleon's veterans – sweeping them from the battlefield. Thus, singlehandedly, Colbourne and the 52<sup>nd</sup> delivered the finishing stroke to Wellington's close but hard won victory over the French.

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## The First Afghan and Crimean Wars

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The traditional role of Rifle troops and Light Infantry was now expanded across the entire Army. Skirmishing, which proved so successful in the Peninsular Campaign, was adopted by the entire Infantry and so the title of '*Light Infantry*' became less of a '*role*' but instead was bestowed only on those regiments of the line as an honour for distinguished service.



British Cantonment during the First Afghan War

In 1839 the Army invaded Afghanistan for the first time. Its invasion was as a response to Russian attempts to increase its influence in the region and was seen as a direct threat to India itself. The campaign was initially successful; however by the end of 1841 the Kabul Garrison found its position hopeless. Surrounded and cut off from its line of communication back to India and under the command of General Elphinstone, the Army capitulated to Afghan tribesmen and was forced to leave Kabul. On the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1842 the Army of 16 800 soldiers, families and camp followers left Kabul on route to India.





General Robert Sale

Their withdraw had been preceded by Brigadier General Robert 'Fighting Bob' Sale's brigade, which included the 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Regiment, who fought their way through the Khoord-Kabul Pass and occupied and subsequently found themselves besieged in Jellalabad. On the 13<sup>th</sup> January the forward piquets of the 13<sup>th</sup> observed a lone horseman approaching the fortress.



Remnants of an Army

It was Dr William Brydon, the Kabul Garrison's medical officer. He was the sole survivor of the Kabul Garrison – the remainder had been slaughtered in the Khoord-Kabul pass by the Afghans.

In the following months the Somersets held out in Jellalabad waiting for relief by General Pollock's force which was on route from India. This 'Army of Retribution' was the first to successfully break through the Khyber Pass and when it arrived at Jellalabad it discovered that Sale's brigade had broken the siege on its own. After the destruction of the Kabul Garrison the exploits of Sale's Brigade were seen as the only 'silver lining' of a dark episode that shocked British society to its core. They became known as the 'Illustrious Garrison' and Queen Victoria subsequently bestowed the title of 'Light Infantry' upon them.

Having left Afghanistan, the British Army found itself fighting in India against the Sikhs of Randjit Singh.



The Battle of Truckee

The exploits of the 13<sup>th</sup> in the battle at the Heights of Truckee, having fought to the last man, have been immortalised in the story of the 'Red Thread of Honour'. The 53<sup>rd</sup> (Shropshire) Regiment earned the distinction of capturing the Koor-i-Noor Diamond and the 62<sup>nd</sup> (Wiltshire) Regiment's sergeants distinguished themselves at

the Battle of Ferozeshah in December 1845 when they carried the Colours out of battle after its officers had been killed.

Meanwhile, having failed to gain influence in Afghanistan, Russia switched its focus towards Europe and took advantage of a weakening Ottoman Empire in order to expand its territory. The threat to Turkey, as well as British and French interests in the Mediterranean, resulted in an Anglo-French force being sent to the Crimea in 1854 in order to destroy the Russian Black Sea fleet and capture the strategic port of Sebastopol. This was the first time since Waterloo that the so-called British 'European' Army had gone to war.



Fording The Alma

The Light Division was the first to ford the River Alma on the 20<sup>th</sup> September as the opening move of the battle which was to see the Russian position which was confident of holding out for 10 days – defeated in 2 hours. By this stage the British Army were now all equipped with rifles and simply out shot their Russian opponents. Despite a great victory, the main Russian Army was able to escape from Sebastopol. Whilst the Battle of Balaclava and the *Charge of The Light Brigade* in particular have become commonly associated with the Army's exploits of the Crimean War – it was the Battle of Inkerman, fought on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1854, which was the most significant for the Army.



The Death of Sir George Cathcart

The Rifle Brigade was involved in a pitch battle throughout the day in defence of the 'Barrier' opposed by a force ten times its size. At a critical moment when the British position was about to be outflanked, General Sir George Cathcart commanding the British Reserve, ordered two companies of the 46<sup>th</sup> (South Devons) and four companies of the 68<sup>th</sup> (Durham) Light Infantry into a forlorn charge down the slopes of the Kitspur into the massed ranks of the advancing Russians. Cathcart and all the officers of the 46<sup>th</sup> and 68<sup>th</sup> were either killed or wounded and command passed to the Warrant Officers and Serjeants to successfully lead the survivors to safety. To this day the Warrant Officers and Serjeants of The Rifles continue to wear the Inkerman Whistle and Chain as lasting reminder of the role of the Non-Commissioned Officers in this battle.

## The Indian Mutiny and Anglo-Zulu Wars



Miss Wheeler at Cawnpore

No sooner had the Crimean War ended; the British '*Indian*' Army found itself fighting for the survival of the Jewel of the Empires Crown – during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Garrisons found themselves surrounded – many fell to the mutineers and put to the sword. 'Remember Cawnpore' was a battle cry heard throughout this bloody campaign. Again the antecedent regiments of The Rifles found themselves fighting for the honour of the Empire in order to restore British rule to India.



The Siege of Delhi

The mutineers also seized Delhi, and for the mutiny to be quashed Delhi had to be retaken. The 28<sup>th</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles were to play a crucial role as part of the attacking force that consisted of 5 separate attacking columns. The 52<sup>nd</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup>, supported by Ghurkhas of the Sirmoor Battalion fought side by side – attacking the Lahore Gate. This close association with the Ghurkhas continues to this day. The British force numbered 5000 and opposing it were some 40 – 60 000 mutineers! Bugler Hawthorne of the 52<sup>nd</sup> earned eternal glory sounding the Regimental Call again and again whilst under withering fire as the 'Stormers' of the Regiments rushed the Lahore Gate and entered the city.



32nd Sortie at Lucknow

Meanwhile in Lucknow the garrison, manned by the 32<sup>nd</sup> (Cornwall) Regiment was besieged. With them were their women and children and all were well aware of what had happened at Cawnpore. Surrender would mean certain death and in an act of continual defiance the Union Flag was never lowered. The Garrison included Dr William Brydon (who we met earlier following the destruction of the Kabul Garrison in 1842). Having survived the

Siege of Jellalabad – we can confidently state that he was probably the unluckiest man in the Empire – having found himself now besieged in Lucknow! A force under Sir Henry Havelock managed to reach the beleaguered Cornishmen; but were unable to break out until a much stronger force, which included the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Shropshire) Regiment, under the command of General Sir Colin Campbell finally allowed the Garrison to escape.

The Cornwall's and the Shropshire's each won 4 Victoria Crosses for their actions at Lucknow. As a result of their conduct at Lucknow, the following statement was issued by Buckingham Palace on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1858:

*“Her Majesty Queen Victoria, in consideration of the enduring gallantry displayed in the defence of Lucknow, has been pleased to direct the 32<sup>nd</sup> be clothed, equipped and trained as a light Infantry regiment”. Proof if ever it was required to illustrate how highly regarded it was to be given the title of light Infantry. This was the last time the title would be bestowed on a Regiment until 2006 when the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment and the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire, Wiltshire Regiment became titled as Light Infantry.*



SS Sarah Sands

No story of the Indian Mutiny can be told without mentioning the ‘epic’ of the [Sarah Sands](#) – an iron built steam and sail driven troop ship. The conduct of the soldiers on board this ship was yet another example of the steadfastness of one of our antecedent regiments – the 54<sup>th</sup> (later 2<sup>nd</sup> Dorset's) Regiment. The Regiment was on board the ship on route to India at the time of the Mutiny, when its crew mutinied. The ship then caught fire. On both occasions the Dorset's saved the ship – first by suppressing the mutineers and then fighting the fire. During the fire the crew (having returned to duty following their mutiny) fled and rowed away with the women and children once the lifeboats were lowered; leaving the Regiment on board standing in three ranks whilst the ship burned. With no means of escape the Regiment set about putting out the fire – preventing the gunpowder store from exploding and saving the Regimental Colours from destruction. After 15 hours of exhausting effort, the fire was eventually extinguished. Yet the ship was some 800 miles from any port and after a further 11 days it finally reached safety in Mauritius. Hearing of the 54<sup>th</sup> heroism, Queen Victoria ordered that a Special Order of the Day be read out at the head of every unit of the British Army. The tale was told and retold in newspapers and journals across the Empire and finally immortalised by Rudyard Kipling.

With operations in India successfully concluded, the British Army in South Africa was soon engaged in conflict with the Boers in 1858. It was the last time that the Rifle Brigade would wear their Green Jackets in battle.



Acting Commissioner James Langley Dalton

In 1879 the 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Light Infantry formed the northern ‘Flying’ column of Lord Chelmsford's invasion of Zululand – avoiding the fate of the 24<sup>th</sup> Foot at Isandlwana and the successful defence of the mission station at

Rorke's Drift. Of note the successful defence of Rorke's Drift was organised not by Lieutenants Chard or Bromhead as popularly portrayed in the film 'Zulu' – but by Acting Commissioner John Dalton – a former senior non-commissioned officer of the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Shropshire) Regiment. His Victoria Cross is, as a result, 'shared' by The Rifles and The Royal Logistics Corps. The 13th were later to distinguish themselves with the final defeat of the Zulus at the Battle of Ulundi on 4th July 1879.

## The Second Afghan and Anglo-Boer Wars



66th with 'Bobby' the dog at Maiwand

A year after the end of The Anglo-Zulu War, during the Second Afghan War, the 66<sup>th</sup> (Berkshire) Regiment was almost annihilated at the  **Battle of Maiwand**  in January 1880. Surrounded by Afghan tribesmen they were slowly whittled down. At one point during the battle, only nine soldiers, two officers and 'Bobby' the dog were all that remained protecting the Regimental Colours. Together they rallied and made a last defiant charge against the Afghans. Of the 450 who fought in the Battle, only 161 survived. Queen Victoria personally presented 'Bobby' his Afghan Medal on his return to England.

The 1881 Cardwell Reforms of the British Army finally removed 'numbering' from Regimental titles and County titles were exclusively used. Thus famous titles such as the *Durham Light Infantry*, *King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, *King Shropshire Light Infantry*, *The Somerset Light Infantry* and *the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry* would be used alongside *The Rifle Brigade*, *The Oxfordshire Light Infantry*, *The Kings Royal Rifle Corps* and those of the non-light Infantry county Regiments that together formed the antecedents of The Rifles. In 1908 'Buckinghamshire' was added to the title of *Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry* – or Oxs and Bucks or OBLI's for short!

By the time the Second Anglo-Boer War started in 1899, Khaki uniform was now in Service on campaign; however black buttons and bugle horns still distinguished rifle and light infantry regiments respectively. Once again the British Army was found wanting in the early stages of the Campaign. The town of **Ladysmith** in particular was the scene of bitter fighting when it became besieged by the Boers. The town took its name from the wife of Sir Harry Smith, former Governor of South Africa and the famous Peninsular War officer of the 95<sup>th</sup>; and so it was fate that the Rifle Brigade would be involved in both its defence during the siege and its subsequent relief.



The Battle of Wagon Hill

During the siege the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment, with a platoon of the 13<sup>th</sup> (Somerset) Light Infantry, earned the battle honour of '*Wagon Hill*' for its courageous action against the Boers on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1900. The

War sadly claimed the life of Captain Freddie Roberts of the King's Royal Rifle Corps; whilst involved in an attempt to save the British Horse Artillery guns at the Battle of Colenso. Freddie Roberts was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.



Freddie Roberts at Colenso

His father, Lord Roberts (who won his own VC at Lucknow) was informed of the death of his only son as he landed in South Africa to take Command of the Army from the much criticised General Redvers Buller; to whom Freddie Roberts was his Aide de Camp.

The turning point of the War was the Battle of Paardeberg, fought 18-27 February 1900 at which the Duke of Cornwall's and Kings Shropshire Light Infantry fought with distinction, inflicting a strategic defeat on the Boers. After Paardeburg the road to victory was assured.

## The First World War

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the antecedent regiments of The Rifles raised in excess of 200 battalions for Service on the Western Front. Thousands of men perished in the '*War to End all Wars*' and the list of Battle Honours and the awarding of Victoria Crosses grew out of all proportions to previous campaigns. The sheer scale of sacrifice and heroism by soldiers of our antecedent regiments is too great to cover on this website. To that end this site will tell the story of three actions which stand out amongst the rest.



52nd Charge at Nonne Bosschen

The first is the action by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Oxs and Bucks Light Infantry on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1914. 'The 52<sup>nd</sup>', as they were still commonly known, were part of the defensive line when the Germans made another attempt to capture Ypres. On the personal orders of the Kaiser, the elite Prussian Guard was ordered to attack to finish off the British. Almost 100 years had passed when Napoleon had tried a similar tactic at Waterloo – and history once again repeated itself. The 52<sup>nd</sup> counter-charged the Prussian Guard at Nonne Bosschen wood, and in a frenzied bayonet attack, cleared them from the wood, preventing the fall of Ypres. Since Nonne Bosschen, the Regiment has always enjoyed highlighting (especially to members of the Brigade of Guards) their unique ability to deal with guardsmen of various types. Had the Prussian Guard succeeded, the war could easily have been '*over by Christmas*' – except that the Germans would have been victorious!

As the war entered its final year in 1918, two battalions earned the distinction of being decorated with the highest French award for bravery – The Croix de Guerre or Cross of War.

On 27 May 1918 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons found themselves deployed in a supposedly quiet sector of the line at Bois des Buttes and recuperating from the previous months fighting. Unfortunately for them this was also the planned line of advance for the last German attempt to capture Paris. The attack was launched in the early hours and in bad visibility. The battalion was surrounded and fought for their lives throughout the night and morning.



Bois Des Buttes

The fighting was all but over by midday. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Anderson-Moreshead was killed leading the battalion armed only with his walking stick. Only 40 of the original 580 men of the Battalion were able to escape – having held out for eight hours. Their actions had bought time for the French to rush forward reinforcements and successfully halt the German breakthrough. The Devons were the first British Army unit to be awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm Leaf.



Croix de Guerre

A few days later the 4<sup>th</sup> (Territorial) Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry was the second unit to receive this honour – counter attacking against the Germans occupying Bligny Hill. Such were the casualties that Lieutenant Bright led the assault right up to the slopes under heavy enemy fire. By the time they had secured the heights they were only 100 survivors left. The assault was witnessed by the French General Berthelot who was so impressed with the gallantry of the battalion that he secured an immediate award of the Croix de Guerre with Palm Leaf for the battalion and personal awards to three individuals who included Lt Bright.

Today all riflemen continue to wear the Croix de Guerre Ribbon with pride on their dress uniforms as a lasting symbol of bravery.

Four years to the day after the Battle of Nonne Boschen, the Armistice ended the First World War. Sadly it was not the '*war to end all wars*'.

The inter-war years had witnessed significant technological and tactical innovation within the German Army – despite the constraints placed upon it after their defeat in 1918. Whilst many viewed the Germans as the Army who led the way, they drew many of their ideas from the work of General Basil Liddle-Hart, a Light Infantry officer, who was the leading light in the development of British mechanised tactics. Sadly the Germans incorporated his work into their doctrine more effectively than the British.

## The Second World War

As with the First World War, space does not allow us to cover all the outstanding actions of our antecedent regiments; however, any account of the War will not be complete without mentioning two significant battles which took place during WW2.



Battle for Calais

German *Blitzkrieg* tactics in the spring 1940 invasion of France were so effective that by the 22 May it was clear that Calais was about to be surrounded. Alongside the French defenders stood the British 30th Infantry Brigade, in which the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Rifle Brigade, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Queen Victoria's Rifles were its principal units. The following message was passed from London to their Brigade Commander:

*"The eyes of the Empire are upon the defence of Calais and His Majesty's Government is confident that you and your gallant Regiments will perform an exploit worthy of the British name".*

Later the Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent the following message:

*"Every hour you continue to exist is of the greatest help to the BEF. Have greatest possible admiration for your splendid stand. Evacuation will not (repeat not) take place, and craft required for above purpose are to return to Dover".*

The Green Jackets were alone and surrounded. For days they fought on. Undeterred by the massive odds against them, small groups of exhausted Riflemen, commanded by equally exhausted junior officers and NCOS, continued to hold doggedly to their positions.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> May the Green Jackets made their last stand and by 1630 hours the final positions were overrun by the Germans. The defence of Calais was, by any standards, heroic. Against a backdrop of chaos, confusion and uncertainty, abandoned, outnumbered and outgunned and with their backs against the sea, the British with three battalions of Green Jackets at their core alongside 800 valiant Frenchmen, held a German panzer division at bay for the best part of three days. This three day delay was the "*crux*" as Churchill was to describe, to the successful evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk. Churchill added that by their last stand at Calais, the Green Jackets had "*added another glorious page to the glories of The Light Division.*"

Four years later the descendants of The Light Division would once again return to the shores of Europe; and descend they did – from the sky.





Major John Howard

In 1944, D Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, commanded by Major John Howard, were selected to spearhead the Allied invasion of Normandy; by landing six Horsa gliders close to the vital Caen Canal and Orne River bridges – thus preventing German armour from reinforcing the defences of Normandy.



Gliders at Pegasus Bridge

In a brilliantly executed operation the gliders were skilfully landed within metres of the bridges at 16 minutes past midnight – facilitating the capturing of the bridges. This assault was immortalised in the Hollywood Blockbuster '*The Longest Day*'. The role of Major John Howard was played by the actor Richard Todd.



Richard Todd

Richard Todd was no ordinary actor. One and a half hours after the bridges were captured the position was reinforced by the 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion The Somerset Light Infantry, in which Richard Todd was a platoon commander! The Germans launched many attempts to re-capture the bridges and all were repulsed. Later in the day Lord Lovat and elements of his 1<sup>st</sup> Special Service Brigade arrived to relieve the exhausted defenders. Normandy, like Salamanca in July 1812, found all the antecedent Regiments of The Rifles fighting together and playing a major role in the landings that would ultimately result in the liberation of Western Europe. The German armour was never able to get through and the Battle Honour 'Normandy' rightly takes centre stage on the Belt Badge of The Rifles.

## The Cold War and Northern Ireland

After the Second World War the antecedent regiments of The Rifles returned to the role of policing a *declining* Empire as well as meeting the threat posed by a new *Cold War*.



GLOSTERS at Imjin

No sooner had the Cold War started, the conflict in Korea saw the Durham Light Infantry, The King Shropshire Light Infantry and the Gloucestershire Regiment deploy as part of the international response to Communist aggression. The Korean War was brutal and to this day there is tension in the region. However, one battle stands out from the rest – fought by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Gloucestershire Regiment at Imjin between the 22nd and 25th April 1951.

The Battalion was surrounded by thousands of Chinese soldiers who pressed home their attack with fanatical determination. After three days of fighting the Glosters were concentrated on their final hill. Far below them in the darkness the Chinese hordes gathered for their next assault, signaling to each other by trumpet calls. The Glosters were irritated by the noise and so the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Carne wondered if anyone had a bugle horn with them.



Drum Major Buss at Imjin

Luckily Drum Major Philip Buss had one and was ordered to play all the daily calls he knew “except Retreat”. After a few warm up ‘peeps’, the Drum Major clambered out of his slit trench and despite the danger he faced, stood tall and began to sound the calls. He played ‘Reveille’ twice. He then sounded ‘Defaulters’, the ‘Cookhouse’, ‘Officers Dress for Dinner’, all the ‘Orderly NCO’ calls and a dozen others besides! The Drum Major was a formidable Bugler and he was not below form even in the heat of battle. The Adjutant described that “*the sweet notes of our own bugle, which now echoed through the valley below him, died away. For a moment, there was silence – the last note coincided with a lull in the action.*” When the action restarted there was only one difference: there was no sound of Chinese trumpet calls. There are not many Drum-Majors in the British Army who can claim to have silenced the enemy’s battle calls with a short bugle recital.



Captured Glosters

Sadly by 25<sup>th</sup> April all was lost. All attempts to relieve the Glosters had failed. Surrounded and with no chance of escape, the Battalion was forced to surrender. By this stage of the 917 men were reduced to 234 and a further 33 would die in captivity. Ninety five members of the Battalion were decorated for bravery – including a VC for the Commanding Officer and GC to Lt Terry Waters who chose death over making a propaganda broadcast whilst a Prisoner of War.

It is only right that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Bugle Horn continues to be worn as the cap badge of the Infantry's elite.



The Sunger Sekayan Action in Borneo by Terence Cuneo – Serjeant Danny Hunt carries Rifleman Martin to safety

After Korea the antecedent Regiments of The Rifles played their part in every other 'Small Wars' across the Empire. Soldiers deployed to all the far flung corners of the World to suppress insurgencies in Kenya, Malaya, Borneo, Aden, Cyprus until conflict closer to home erupted on the streets of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland would see every battalion deploy to the Province on numerous occasions. These small wars and in particular the hard fought lessons gained in Northern Ireland laid the strong foundations in leadership, innovation and independent thought which were to prove invaluable in 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflicts. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Light Infantry completed more tours – 14 in total – than any other battalion in the British Army. The Rifles continues to play an important role in Northern Ireland today where the 2nd Battalion is based.

## From Bosnia to Afghanistan and The Formation of The Rifles

The end of the Cold War also brought about greater instability around the world. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and their subsequent expulsion was the start of a period of almost continuous operations in the Region.



Lt Nick Ilic negotiates with Serbian Forces in Bosnia 1992

The collapse of Yugoslavia resulted in a vicious civil war that witnessed all the forming regiments of The Rifles playing an important role in bringing first peace and then stability to Bosnia Herzegovina. War in the Serbian province of Kosovo soon followed and once again our battalions would play their part in stability operations – the most recent the deployment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Rifles in 2010.

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century also brought about the greatest challenge to stability in the World. Battalions deployed to Sierra Leone to maintain peace and rebuild a society scarred by a brutal conflict; where the machete was the preferred choice of weapons. However, it was the events of 9/11 that were the catalyst for the start of operations in Afghanistan in 2001.



A bugler from 5 Rifles plays the last post as they lower the flag at FOB Oxford on Leaf Island following their last combat operational patrol from their forward operating base

The invasion of Iraq followed in 2003. The international response to terrorism, or the sponsoring of terrorism, has brought about a new characteristic of warfare – one of wars amongst the people – where there are no front lines and where the winning the support people is the prize. No other Regiment has suffered as much as The Rifles in Afghanistan.

The modern Regiment was therefore formed under fire – as its forefathers had done. There was no time to establish new foundations – instead the rich heritage of our forming Regiments were the unshakable roots which allowed the modern riflemen to flourish and succeed on operations. There is no doubt that the sacrifices made by all the founding Battalions of, and since 2007, The Rifles in both Iraq and Afghanistan have placed the Regiment into the centre of the hearts of our great nation.

From the streets of Basra to the plains of Helmand, Riflemen have fought and continue to fight in a manner that would make Wellington's Peninsular veterans stand in admiration.



The 2nd Battalion The Rifles, On Patrol, Sangin, Afghanistan 2009 by [Arabella Dorman](#)

They have faced challenges that no other generation has had to contend with; as technological advances present even more deadly and unseen threats in the battle space; the 24-hour news era has brought *their war* into *our* living rooms; and the actions of a single individual can now have immediate strategic implications.

It is the age of the 'Strategic Corporal' – fortunately the ethos of The Rifles – *those of a thinking fighting man* - have ensured that our riflemen have met the challenge head on and continue to do so today.