

32 - S - ARMY COMMISSIONS BY PURCHASE

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I have before me a copy of a letter dated 12 May, 1814, written by certain Lieutenant-Colonel William Fuller of the King's Dragoon Guards to a British Lord, in which is advised that a commission for His Lordship's son would cost £735. Further on in this article I shall state the prices as they were at the time of the Crimean War. Only recently did I read a book by a very well-known British author who claims that the British army of the 1850's was small, and that the Crimean War was to prove that it was shockingly organised, but he speaks only well of the navy of that period. I ask that my readers please bear in mind that in earlier days there was no such rank as second-lieutenant nor sub-lieutenant in the British army. The most junior commissioned rank in the infantry was that of ensign. In the cavalry, it was cornet until 1871, when it became sub-lieutenant.

Until the year 1849, there was no requirement for a candidate for a commission to have had any formal education, nor was there any entrance examination. What was required of the candidate was that he be of suitable social background, possess the private financial means to pay for the commission and to support his position in his regiment. One must bear in mind that I am dealing with a period when the British nobility and gentry were most influential in army affairs. The following were not required to purchase commissions:

1. Militia officers. An officer could apply for a free commission into a line regiment provided he brought with him a stipulated number of volunteers to serve in the ranks. This usually applied in time of war.
2. Sons of officers killed or died serving.
3. Sergeants promoted from the ranks.
4. Officers of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Artillery, and Royal Engineers.

The Royal Military Academy at Woolwich was established in 1741 for the education of boys between

the ages of fifteen and eighteen years to produce specialist officers for the Sappers and Miners (Engineers) and for the Royal Artillery. The Academy for future regimental officers at Sandhurst, was not founded until 1812, but it took fifty years before it came to be regarded as a career asset to have attended there. The Staff College for senior officers was established in 1799, but attendance there was not insisted upon for higher promotion until the late Victorian period.

Information obtained from the National Army Museum in London on the appointment of army officers during the early Victorian period is of interest. Let us regard a regiment as being a business company with limited liability, required to carry out certain government contracts. To view a regiment as if it existed as such a company, is merely to give a clearer picture of the situation. The colonel was purely an administrative appointment made by the government, and he was given a large cash amount to commence with, or a yearly or ten-yearly allowance for clothing, food, weapons, pay and other requirements. As a rule he stayed home during the period that the regiment served overseas in building up the Empire. He was responsible for the carrying out of all government instructions, and for recruitment in the United Kingdom to balance the wastage within the ranks of the serving regiment. He was like the managing director, and the officers below him like members of the board, with shares in the regiment and whose dividends depended on the monetary value of their commissions. The lieutenant-colonel was the true leader of the regiment in the more practical sense. Any surplus monies at the end of the appropriate period, was shared out. But many honest regiments used this surplus to provide schools, medical facilities and pensions for the widows and families of the disabled.

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The normal procedure was to apply to the colonel of the regiment in which the candidate desired a commission. If he approved, the colonel would refer the candidate to the regimental agent, who would receive the necessary purchase money and prepare papers for Royal Assent. If the candidate had no previous military service, he could only be granted the lowest commissioned rank, that is, ensign or cornet. The newly commissioned officer was not actually compelled to serve with the regiment, because with the approval of the commander-in-chief he could immediately be removed from the active list and go onto half-pay. The term half-pay could create the wrong impression, as a regimental officer's pay was never designed to afford him a living, but rather as an honorarium. The scale remained virtually unaltered between the reigns of William III and Queen Victoria. In many cases parents purchased commissions for their minor children, and when in later years these children commenced serving in the army, their seniority was taken from the date of their commissions. Only occasionally was any commission from the ranks granted, and this would happen when a sergeant had shown bravery of a very high standard or proved himself to be a leader of an exceptionally high order. As mentioned earlier on, he would not have to pay for his commission. The Militia regiments were officered by the squirearchy of the county and were used mainly to quell local unrest. A gentleman who had been commissioned into the County Militia, at virtually no cost, could apply for a free commission into a line regiment provided he brought with him a stipulated number of volun-

teers to serve in the ranks. As stated earlier on, this usually happened only in time of war.

The lieutenant-colonel's responsibilities included allocating the duties of the officers who served under him, and presiding over the regimental courts martial. He had to confirm the sentences of these courts especially those involving floggings, which he and the entire regiment would be required to witness at a parade. I have a record of the course followed in Grahamstown, after the arrival of the 1820 British Settlers, when a public military flogging was to take place. The military authorities had a large wooden equilateral triangle which stood about eight foot high. Horizontal and upright bars joined the opposite sides, so that a large grating was formed. The soldiers to be flogged were formed up alongside and guarded by an escort with fixed bayonets. Beyond stood the public who had come to view the floggings. Three persons officiated, namely the doctor, the duty officer, and the man who wielded the cat-of-nine tails, with his bucket of salt water. The soldiers to be flogged were stripped to the waist, and were tied to the triangle at the hands and at the feet. Normally the sentences were for forty-save-one, which meant thirty-nine lashes, but there were heavier sentences. The cat was dipped into the salt water, and after the flogging the soldier's back was washed with that saline liquid.

When a regimental officer wished to sell his commission for the rank he held, the theory was that it should be offered to the officers of the next



(Photo: Reproduced by the permission of the African Museum, Johannesburg) Cape Mounted Riflemen 1850

lower rank, in their order of seniority. If none could afford to buy the commission, it could be offered to officers of other regiments, or to officers on half-pay. Should a regimental officer wish merely to exchange with another of equal rank in another regiment, it could be arranged with the approval of the commander-in-chief. He could also exchange with an officer on half-pay. Both these arrangements were initiated by private negotiation between the officers and in most cases a cash adjustment was required. Prior to 1856, if an officer died, his family received no compensation for the cost of his commission. Instead, a free promotion was given to the next senior officer. As regards orphans and widows of officers, any support granted them was entirely by voluntary subscription. If the lieutenant-colonel of a regiment died, then the position was 'up for grabs' but the final decision was made by the colonel of the regiment, who would recommend anyone within reason who could afford the post, and was perhaps prepared to pay 'over the odds'. Where a lieutenant-colonel was promoted to the rank of major-general, he was not entitled to sell his rank of lieutenant-colonel because he did not have to pay for the rank of major-general. Most lieutenant-colonels avoided this heavy loss by selling out and going on half-pay just before their promotion was due.

The commanding general of an operation or area was granted the power to appoint a certain number of officers to his staff, for administrative purposes. It was not considered immoral to appoint friends or relations. A regimental officer who was appointed to a staff position could sell his commission in the regiment and go onto half-pay, and immediately be transferred back onto full-pay as a staff officer. There were two types of promotion to brevet rank. One was by a General Brevet, whereby all deserving officers on the active list received a promotion to mark some notable event such as the successful conclusion of hostilities or the accession of a monarch. The other type was as a reward for an act of bravery or distinctive service in battle. An officer thus promoted would keep his original rank and appointment in his regiment but would draw the pay and have the seniority in the army of his higher brevet rank. An officer might receive two or three brevet promotions and could thus conceivably be a captain in his regiment but a brevet lieutenant-colonel in the Army List and thus be eligible for promotion to a major-general. If two or more regiments were operating as a unit, the senior officer present would assume the rank of brigadier for the occasion. This could easily be a relatively junior regimental officer who happened to hold a

brevet lieutenant-colonelcy which was senior in date to the commission of his own regimental commander. He could thus be temporarily in command of his own commanding officer.

Earlier on I mentioned that in 1814 a commission in the King's Dragoon Guards cost £735. The price to be paid for a commission was fixed by the army and depended upon the rank to be bought and the social standing of the regiment. At the time of the Crimean War, to be an ensign in an ordinary infantry regiment would cost £450, and in the Foot Guards it would cost £1 200. To be a cornet in the Dragoons cost £840 and in the Life Guards it was £1 260. Promotion from ensign to lieutenant in an infantry regiment would cost £700, but the officer concerned would recover £450 by selling his ensign's commission. A review of old Army Lists clearly shows a number of blatant jugglings with commissions on certain occasions, with obvious fiddling and corruption. Prices of commissions were often inflated illegally, and this tended to result in the stagnation of poorer officers, regardless of ability. The colonel of a regiment could and did exert a great influence particularly in the case of senior appointments. Pressure could also be exerted by the civil executive if he held sufficient power, as in the case of Lord Charles Somerset during the period that he was governor of the Cape Colony, and who was a personal friend of the commander-in-chief and the Colonial Secretary. Consider how rapidly his son, Henry Somerset, rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel of the Cape Mounted Riflemen, leapfrogging over the heads of many officers with much longer service in the regiment. This was indeed the age of patronage, and almost any post, civil or military, could be secured in this manner. I have already mentioned that parents purchased commissions for their children when they were of tender age, and when eventually these children commenced military service, their seniority would be reckoned from the date of their commissions. The corruption of the whole system led to its abolition in 1870.

It might prove interesting to read further concerning the subject if suitable works can be traced. Commissions by purchase must have had its champions who felt that the system had merit, and it would be good to learn their views. Personally, I feel that there might be readers who will share with me the thought that indeed truth can be stranger than fiction.*

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