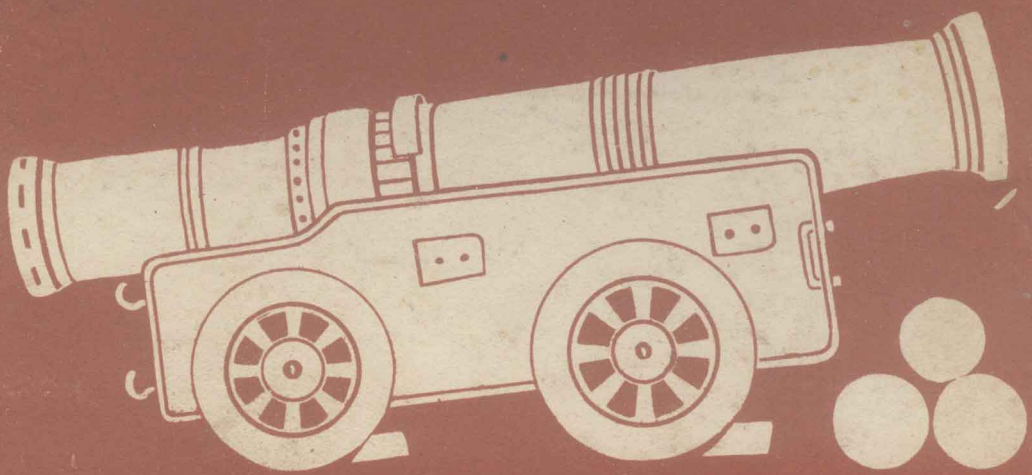
BRITISH SOLDIERS



S. H. F. JOHNSTON

BRITAIN IN PICTURES

THE BRITISH PEOPLE IN PICTURES

BRITISH SOLDIERS

GENERAL EDITOR
W. J. TURNER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is neither a history of the British Army nor an account of the wars in which this country has been engaged. It is rather an attempt to give an impression in a brief space of the part played by British soldiers in our history since 1645 *and of the way they lived and fought and died.*

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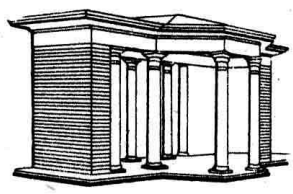
S. H. F. JOHNSTON

WITH
8 PLATES IN COLOUR
AND
25 ILLUSTRATIONS IN
BLACK & WHITE



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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES IN COLOUR

BLACK AND WHITE ILLUSTRATIONS

A Double-Armed Man
Engraving by W. Neade

I

THE once familiar red coat of the British soldier was seen for the first time in Windsor Great Park during the April of 1645. The New Model Army, formed by Ordinance of Parliament for a more efficient prosecution of the war against Charles I, was being mustered and exercised in its drill. The infantry of this new force were "Redcoats all," as a contemporary newspaper puts it, regiment being distinguished from regiment by facings of the colonel's colour; the breeches were of "grey or other good colour." The New Model Army was to beat the King at Naseby and the Scots at Dunbar and Worcester; it was to pacify Ireland and for a time govern the newly formed Commonwealth of England; six thousand men from it were to carry its reputation to the Continent and help defeat the Spaniards at the battle of the Dunes; some of its units were to pass, at the Restoration of Charles II, into the new royal standing army.

Though the New Model Army was the first regular British army, these men were by no means the first British soldiers. Where indeed are we to find the first British soldiers? The defenders of Maiden Castle and other prehistoric fortifications, the charioteers who fought so gallantly but so hopelessly against the legions of Caesar and Claudius, the Britons who

served in the Roman army—all these were British soldiers. So too were the English who fought against Dane and Norman, the mail-clad knights who fought in Ireland and France and against the infidel at Lisbon and in the Holy Land, the Welsh and English archers whose longbows won victory at Falkirk and Crécy and Agincourt, the men of the Free Companies, such as that commanded by Sir John Hawkwood, most of whose life was spent in Italy and whose monument in Florence Cathedral describes him as the most skilful general of his age. But our knowledge of these men is limited; we must pass on to more articulate times.

When the Tudors were on the throne the Royal Navy was born. But it was a backward age as far as the army was concerned. There was no standing army and the shire levies were ill-armed, ill-trained and ill-disciplined. They were called out in 1588 to defend the realm against the dangers of invasion by the Duke of Parma's Spanish army, but it was fortunate for England that Drake and his ships defeated the Armada and so relieved the militia of its task. There were, however, two gleams of light in the darkness. Many London militia men laboured hard to keep themselves efficient and British soldiers were beginning to win a reputation for themselves in wars abroad. Shakespeare must have been familiar with the exercises of the London volunteers on St. George's Fields at Mile End. Falstaff and Justice Shallow in their youth "lay all night in the windmill in St. George's Fields," and Captain Dumain, according to Parolles, had at one time "the honour to be an officer at a place called Mile-end to instruct for the doubling of the files." The London trained bands were still efficient in the seventeenth century; here is what Clarendon says of their conduct in the first battle of Newbury: "they stood as a bulwark and rampire to defend the rest, and when their wings of horse were scattered and dispersed, kept their ground so steadily that, though prince Rupert himself led up the choice horse to charge them, and endured their storm of small shot, he could make no impression on their stand of pikes, but was forced to wheel about. Of so sovereign benefit and use is that readiness, order, and dexterity in the use of their arms which hath been so much neglected."

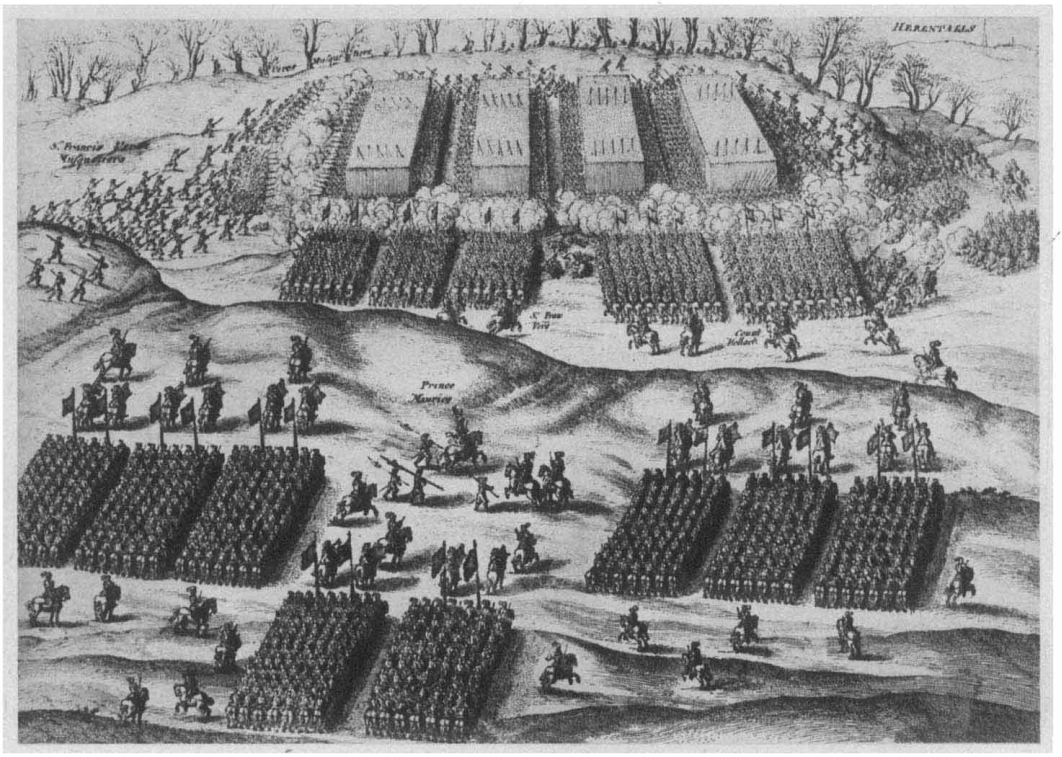
Volunteers from the London trained bands were included in the company commanded by Captain Thomas Morgan which left England in 1572 to assist the Dutch in their struggle for independence. These men were the first of a long succession of English, Welsh and Scottish soldiers who were to learn their trade in the Low Country wars. Elizabeth's favourites, Leicester and Essex, both fought in Holland, as did Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Philip Sidney, who died gallantly at Zutphen in 1586. But the really great figures in these wars were the men whose only reputation was that which they won in fighting the Spaniard—Lord Willoughby and Sir John Norreys, Sir Roger Williams and Sir Francis Vere. English regiments remained in the Dutch service until the outbreak of the Second Dutch War in 1665, when most of the men returned home and were formed into the

Holland regiment. They had to change their buff jerkins for red coats, but were allowed to wear buff facings. The regiment, later numbered as the 3rd Foot, is still known as the Buffs.

Many officers on both sides in the Civil War, such as the Cavalier Goring and the Roundhead Skippon, had learned their profession in the Dutch service. Others had fought in Germany during the Thirty Years' War and the best of these had served under the Great Swedish military reformer, Gustavus Adolphus. The bulk of the New Model Army, however, from Cromwell downwards, had no campaigning experience except that which they gained in the Civil War itself. More than half of its infantry in 1645 were pressed men and impressment remained the usual way of filling its ranks until 1652. The cavalry was from the first composed of volunteers. It was easy enough to get recruits, for, as Monk's chaplain wrote, "it was there a good employment for a gentleman, and as competent provision, to have near twenty shillings by the week, and live well and gentlemanlike, keeping themselves and their horses for some six shillings a week." The troopers were the aristocrats of the army since cavalry was then the decisive arm in battle. The horsemen advanced at a "pretty round trot" and "disputed it with sword and pistol" until they had broken the squadrons of the enemy and cleared them from the field. Cromwell then taught his horse to re-form and fall on the flanks of the infantry in the centre.

The foot-soldier, paid much less than the trooper, was armed either with a musket (usually a matchlock) or a pike. There were two musketeers to each pikeman, but the sixteen-foot pike was still regarded as the more honourable weapon, probably because the tallest and strongest men had to be detailed to carry pikes. In battle the infantry were preceded by a "forlorn hope" of musketeers, acting as skirmishers, who opened out to either flank when the regiment charged. In the attack the musketeers fired two volleys and the pikemen levelled their pikes and charged the enemy, the musketeers using their muskets as clubs. Battles were rarely decided by the infantry, although the battle of the Dunes in 1658 was virtually won as a result of the determined charge of the English foot against some of the best soldiers of Spain occupying a dominating position on an isolated sandhill. The real importance of the arm was to come later when the more efficient flintlock replaced the matchlock and the invention of the bayonet made the musketeer his own pikeman.

Although the New Model, with its rigid discipline, was an efficient army, it was never a popular one. Public opinion with a good deal of justice regarded it as the army of a religious and political faction rather than as the army of the nation. Cromwell's brief attempt to govern England through the Major-Generals and the intrigues which followed Cromwell's death implanted in people's mind a hatred of militarism and a suspicion of standing armies which was to have important consequences.



THE BATTLE OF NIEUPORT
Engraving from Sir Francis Vere's *Commentaries*, 1657

Sir Thomas Fairfax, "Black Tom," was the New Model's first commander. Only thirty-three years of age in 1645, his reputation was won mainly in campaigns against the Royalists in the north of England, although he had seen some service in Holland. From the beginning, however, he was overshadowed by Cromwell, who created the New Model Army and became its commander-in-chief in 1650. The soldiers sensed this fact, for when Cromwell first rode into their camp just before the battle of Naseby he was greeted "with a mighty shout" and the cry "Ironsides is come to head us." Cromwell had never heard a shot fired in anger until the outbreak of the Civil War, but he was a born organiser of victory, a brilliant leader of cavalry and a shrewd strategist. The most typical soldier, however, among the New Model's leaders was George Monk. At every stage in his career he is the honest soldier of fortune, with a keen grasp of his profession and a deep sense of loyalty to his paymaster of the moment. He was first a volunteer and then an ensign in the expeditions to Cadiz in 1625 and the Isle of Rhé in 1627. He was a captain in the Dutch army and a Lieutenant-colonel in Charles I's service. When the first Civil War was over, he served Cromwell loyally, especially as governor of Scotland. Cromwell dead, he

made the Restoration possible by insisting on the superiority of the civil power over the Army. His march from Scotland to London allowed the people of England to express its will and recall the King. He was to win new laurels and honours after the Restoration, but this sketch of his career may well end with the scene at Tower Hill on St. Valentine's Day, 1661, when men from Monk's own regiments were transferred to the royal service. They became the Lord General's regiment of Foot Guards, known also, from the place where Monk crossed the border on his march to London, as the Coldstream Guards.

ROBERT DUDLEY, EARL OF LEICESTER
1532-1588
Engraving showing a Knight armed for the Tilt-Yard

II

ON June 26th, 1650 Cromwell was appointed Captain-General of all the armies of the Commonwealth. A month before to the day, a third son was born to Winston Churchill, a Royalist and the squire of a small estate in Dorset. This son, John Churchill, later to be famous throughout Europe as the Duke of Marlborough, was a soldier from the age of seventeen to his death in 1722. He received his ensign's commission in the 1st Foot Guards, a regiment formed in 1661, with Royalists who shared Charles II's exile as its nucleus, and later given precedence over Monk's Coldstreamers. Before he was twenty he fought against the Moors while serving an attachment with the Tangier Regiment, specially raised

to garrison this possession which had come to Charles II as part of his Queen's dowry. Back in Europe he served in campaigns against the Dutch, first under Monmouth and then as colonel of one of the English regiments in the army of the great French commander Turenne. His was the main responsibility for the defeat of Monmouth's rebels at the battle of Sedgemoor and for carrying the army over to the side of the Prince of Orange in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Before falling out of William III's favour he led in person the charge of the Household Cavalry at Walcourt and distinguished himself at Cork and Kinsale.

It was thus no immature soldier who at the beginning of Anne's reign was appointed commander of both the English and Dutch armies. He had worked out ideas of his own on the conduct of war. At that time warfare was mainly a matter of sieges, since professional soldiers were too precious to be risked in battle, and wars were therefore long and indecisive. Marlborough believed that humanity and economy alike demanded speed which could only be obtained by seeking the decision of battle. The difficulty of committing to battle not only his enemies but also his allies prevented Marlborough from realising his aim completely, but his reputation as a soldier rests on his great victories, beginning with the attack on the Schellenburg and ending with the forcing of the Ne Plus Ultra lines. Marlborough was a statesman and diplomat as well as a soldier, but his qualities are seen at their best in the heat of action. With a very small staff and without any organisation higher than a brigade, the commander himself had to direct in detail the tactical conduct of the battle. At Blenheim every gun was sited by Marlborough himself. At Oudenarde, an encounter battle, the strain on the commander must have been exceptionally great; a Prussian officer reported back to his king, "Mylord Duke shone in the battle, giving his orders with the greatest sangfroid, and exposing his person to danger like the commonest soldier."

Marlborough was well served by his subordinates. Cadogan, his Quartermaster-general, was an invaluable staff officer. When he was captured by the French in 1706, Marlborough wrote to his Duchess, "Poor Cadogan is taken prisoner or killed, which gives me a great deal of uneasiness, for he loved me, and I could rely on him." So courteously were wars conducted then, however, that Vendôme at once released him and sent him back to Marlborough's headquarters. Marlborough had also some good fighting generals. Lord Cutts was nicknamed the "Salamander," because his element was fire, and he lived up to his name at the taking of Venloo and at Blenheim. Lord Orkney wrote home dry laconic letters showing a similar attitude to danger. At Blenheim he says, "I had the good luck not to be touched; only a horse shot under me." At Ramillies he commanded the British troops on the right and did not know that his attack was to be merely a feint. Marlborough had great difficulty in getting him to abandon the attack. Ten aides-de-camp and Cadogan had to be sent before he could be persuaded

THE 34TH REGIMENT OF FOOT
A Soldier's stance before the 'heels together' position of attention was introduced
Coloured engraving, 1742

to withdraw: "we had a great deal of fire . . . both musquetry and canon; and indeed I never had more shot about my ears, and I confess it vexed me to retire." Such were the commanders; what of the men they led?

That Marlborough could be called "Corporal John" is an indication of how well he cared for the men under his orders. Serjeant Millner, of the Royal Irish, tells in his journal how the troops were "animated by his graceful presence and his inviting example." It is clear that the British troops were the cream of his army. Certainly they thought so themselves. The sternly religious Captain Blackader of the Cameronians wrote in his diary after the battle of Schellenburg, in which the British suffered more heavily than their allies: "The British value themselves too much, and think nothing

can stand before them. We have suffered considerably on this occasion, and have no cause to be proud." But the British soldier's opinion of himself was confirmed by the orders given by Louis XIV to Villeroi in 1706 instructing him "to have particular attention to that part of the line which will endure the first shock of the English troops." At Ramillies in the same year Marlborough put his redcoats on the right in order to divert the French from the main thrust of the allied cavalry on the left.

The reputation won by the British troops seems a little curious when we remember how they were recruited. Recruiting in those days had an important effect on military operations. Campaigns were fought only in summer. It was then that the roads were fit for the movement of armies and the six months of winter were required to fill up the wastage in the ranks and exercise both old soldiers and recruits in the complicated drill that an eighteenth century battle demanded. Recruiting was a regimental matter, for the British army was little more than a collection of regiments each of them in a sense the property of its colonel. After a summer campaign in the Low Countries, a number of officers from each regiment would return to recruit, competing against each other with cajolery and bounties and helped only by the various Recruiting Acts which imposed conscription on certain classes—criminals, debtors and paupers. Only by iron discipline and unremitting care could such material be transformed into an effective army. Marlborough performed the miracle. He taught his cavalry to rely on shock, using the sword and not the pistol. His foot, armed with musket and ring bayonet, were taught to fire by platoons in directed volleys.

Not much is known about the men who fought and won Marlborough's battles, for those who wrote journals and books were hardly representative of their fellows. Serjeant Millner was more interested in routes and statistics than in human beings. Private Deane of the 1st Foot Guards was obviously a man of some education, while Matthew Bishop of Webb's, the 8th Foot, was a small landowner. But some of their sentiments must have been shared by the men in long, loose-fitting red-coats and gaitered breeches, with cocked hats on their heads—the men of Marlborough's marching regiments. They would have understood Deane's complaints about the marches after Oudenarde when Marlborough was trying to bring the French to battle again; "we were continually fateagued and bugbeard out of our lives by those who had as much will to fight as be hanged." They no doubt shared the belief of Matthew Bishop "that every Ball that kills or wounds his man has his Commission before it is fired." Bishop has something to say about the food: "we got two three Bushels of Beans, and a Bushel of Wheat at a Time; so some days we had boiled Beans, and sometimes when we mounted the Trenches, we made ourselves Dumplings, which we thought extremely good Living."

Of the various regiments which took part in the War of the Spanish Succession, we have space for only one—the 34th Foot, now the Border

Regiment. It was raised in 1702 as Lucas's regiment, fought in Spain in 1705, and was sent to the Low Countries in 1709. It was not a particularly distinguished regiment, but it has interesting literary connections. Richard Steele, the essayist, was a captain in it and he has preserved for us in *The Tatler* what is either a genuine soldier's letter or a most skilful imitation. Serjeant Hall of the 1st Foot Guards writes in 1709 from the camp before Mons to his friend Serjeant Cabe of the Coldstreams "I have received a very bad shot in the head myself, but am in hopes, and please God, I shall recover . . . We had but an indifferent breakfast; but the mounseers never had such a dinner in all their lives." After the war was over among its ensigns appears the name of Roger Sterne, the father of the author of *Tristram Shandy*. In the pages of that book we get the best imaginative pictures of the soldiers who fought and defeated Louis XIV and "the exorbitant power of France." The memories of Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim may have been of King William's wars, of Namur and Steinkirk, but it is clear that the two old soldiers followed closely Marlborough's campaigns, including the detailed topography of the march to the Danube, and that their characters were drawn out of a mind whose earliest memories were bound up with the traditions of one of Marlborough's regiments.

III

THE thirty years after the ending of the War of the Spanish Succession by the peace of Utrecht in 1713 were a bleak period in the history of the army. The clamour against a standing army, never completely stilled by the almost constant warfare against France since the Revolution of 1688, broke out with fresh vigour. Regiments were disbanded, the establishment was drastically reduced, Parliament even shirked its responsibility

for the small army that it reluctantly maintained. Control was in the hands of the Secretary-at-War, once a mere clerk to the Commander-in Chief but now a politician with a seat in Parliament, where he consistently refused to account for his actions. In theory, one of the two secretaries of state was responsible to Parliament, but in practice, as was said in 1718, "our armies know no other power but that of the Secretary-at-War, who directs all their motions and fills up all vacancies without opposition and without appeal."

The soldier's life during these years of peace was a difficult one. In England itself regiments were usually split into detachments and quartered in ale-houses, because of Parliament's unwillingness to build barracks. When Howard's regiment, the 24th Foot, returned to England from Ireland in 1734, three companies were quartered at Dunstable, three at Woburn, two at Hitchin, and one each at Luton and Redburn. Such a system allowed few opportunities for training and created a situation full of potentialities of friction between soldiers and civilians, especially as the main employment of the troops was to assist the revenue authorities to suppress smuggling. Ireland, where there were barracks, had its own establishment, and troops were also employed in making Wade's strategic roads in the Highlands. Unhappy as the soldier's lot was in England, however, it was paradise to his lot abroad in the colonial garrisons—Gibraltar, Minorca, Nova Scotia or the West Indies. The West Indies in particular were detested as a station; desertions were frequent when a regiment was ordered there, because not only would disease carry off large numbers of the men, but there existed no organised systems of reliefs and a regiment's stay abroad would probably be a long one. Bad conditions and inadequate pay meant that only the dregs of the population were willing to enlist, and discipline among such recruits could only be maintained by severe and brutal punishments. It was not surprising that in 1733 General Wade could declare to the House of Commons that "the discipline of our army is already in a bad way."

Yet when a new series of wars against France broke out, the much maligned British soldiers soon showed the same quality as the men who had followed Marlborough; all that was lacking was leadership like Marlborough's. At Dettingen in 1743 an English king appeared for the last time on the battlefield. After the battle, Charles Russell of the Guards wrote home to his wife: "Our men and their regimental officers won the day, not in the manner of Hyde Park discipline, but our foot almost kneeled down by whole ranks, and so fired on 'em a running fire, making almost every ball take place . . . the English infantry behaved like heroes." Fontenoy, one of the few French victories in this long series of wars, was an even more glorious day for the British infantry. They won the admiration of the enemy commander, Marshal de Saxe, by their two attempts to attack the French prepared positions on a narrow front. Fontenoy is also