

THE ST HELENA REGIMENTS OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

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THE TROOPS OF JOHN DUTTON

It is to Oliver Cromwell that we owe our possession of the Island of St Helena. He foresaw that unless the infant East India Company could secure a safe anchorage in the South Atlantic with supplies of fresh water, a good climate, and green foodstuffs, it would suffer a crippling handicap in its task of developing the eastern Empire. It was the Dutch who first secured this prize and then threw it away in favour of the Cape, a very bad anchorage for sailing vessels, a mistake which they later tried to retrieve. St Helena filled all Cromwell's requirements, and on 5th May, 1639 John Dutton landed on its shores, to annex and occupy it for the East India Company.¹ Nothing is known of John Dutton's soldiers, where they were recruited from, or if they belonged to any of the regiments of the period. Still less is known of their leader, the soldier mariner who built a fort, leaving a foundation stone' in its walls, and now known as the "Castle" the seat of the Government of St Helena for close upon three hundred years. Some details of the expedition are recorded on a stone' finely engraved by the master mason which has been built into the walls of the moat.

St Helena continued in possession of the Company, often a very disorderly and unruly possession, until January, 1673, when it was captured by a Dutch expedition from the Cape. The defence of the Island was a very discreditable episode in its history; and it seems to be fully established that treachery and insobriety, rather than the fire of the enemy, were the cause of its loss. Spiking his guns, which outnumbered those of the Dutch, the Governor ran away to Brazil, where he put a few soldiers and slaves in a sloop and sent it off to cruise in the track of ships so as to warn them that the island had fallen. It was this sloop that fell in with Captain Richard Munden and his ships, who had been sent by the King and Company to defend the island; but he was too late to prevent its capture, for when he arrived it was already in the hands of the Dutch.

THE TROOPS AND OPERATIONS OF SIR RICHARD MUNDEN

On the eastern slopes of St Helena there is a valley well known to history as Fisher's Valley (the home of Napoleon's "Nymph" and Polly Mason), along which runs a small stream from its source on Diana's Peak. Near the end of its course it trickles over the cliffs to find its way down to the sea in a small bay eight hundred feet below. The first one hundred and fifty feet of this miniature waterfall are as sheer as the face of a brick wall, the remainder of the descent being an almost vertical mountain side of rock and soil.

On board the sloop was a loyal slave, Black Oliver by name, who knew it was possible to land on the shores of the bay, and - what was more important - he also knew a way up

¹ Excellent reproductions of these stones appear in the "St Helena Almanack" for 1913, and in "A Tour through the island of St Helena," by John Barnes (London, 1817).

the cliffs. Having once reached the summit, the troops could then march across the island to the northern, or leeward, coast and secure the cliffs dominating the Dutch fort, named by them the “Good Fortune.” Once these cliffs were in possession of the attackers, the garrison must either surrender or be shot down like vermin in a pit.

Munden wasted no time. He entrusted his troops to Black Oliver, deciding they should land at the bay, ever since known as Prosperous Bay, with the task of taking the fort in the rear, whilst he sailed round with the fleet to the leeward coast to attack it from the sea. The troops under the command of Captain Richard Keidgwin landed and met with no opposition as the Dutch had only sufficient troops to man the fort. The ascent began after dark. When the troops reached the waterfall further progress was halted, so a British soldier called Tom went ahead with a rope and managed to reach the summit. Letting down his rope, he hauled his comrades up after him, who, as they waited their turn, shouted up to him, “Hold fast, Tom.” It is by this cry that the place has been named ever since, and it appears on every detailed survey of St Helena that has been prepared since 1812. The illustrious Tom is thereby immortalized, but the identity of this fine soldier, in spite of prolonged search in the St Helena Records, has never been discovered.

The ultimate fate of the other two heroes is not without interest. Black Oliver was given his freedom and a grant of land which can be recognized to-day as the estate of “Walbro,” situated near Hutt’s Gate. And in the garden there is lying a great round shot with a length of chain once used for shackling slaves. Later on in life he was involved in a mutiny and was hanged. Richard Keidgwin became the first Governor after Munden’s departure, but it was not long before he was locked up in the Castle by the turbulent soldiers and settlers. He was later transferred to India. Many of the soldiers received grants of land, and Vaughan, Luffkin and Pouncey are perpetuated, among others, by estates bearing these names to-day. The two last-named were sequestrated to the Government for mutiny. It remains incontestable that if Hold Fast Tom had been defended by a few resolute men, it could never have been scaled.

Having landed his troops successfully. Munden sailed round to the leeward coast, and began a heavy attack on the fort. To manoeuvre a sailing vessel on that difficult coast is a fine art, and Munden, advancing unsupported ahead of his fleet, received the full force of its reply. It took him a considerable time to bring the fleet up, the fort continuing to put up a very stout resistance. On 5th May, at about six in the evening, St Helena fell to Munden’s guns, never to be lost again.

After taking possession of the fort, Munden learned that Dutch ships were daily expected. He therefore left their flags flying on Sugar Loaf Hill and by this old stratagem succeeded in capturing the larger part of a valuable convoy. On his return to England Munden was knighted and rewarded.

THE ST HELENA MILITIA

Having recaptured their island, the East India Company sent out troops² of its regular forces to defend it. But St Helena is essentially a place where, if it were invaded, every man

² The St Helena Regiments are very well documented in the St Helena Records, of which the following are the main series:

1. Consultations .of the Governor and Council, in r41 Volumes, covering the period 1673 to 1836.

would have to fight, so the Company set about raising auxiliaries to assist the garrison in case of emergency. The origin of the Militia is to be found in the Royal Charter of 1673, when the island was created a Manor, whereby the Directors of the Company became “The Lords Proprietors of the island of St Helena,” owning the entire island, with powers of life and death over the inhabitants. Grants of land were made to the settlers, and it was a condition of every such grant that the holder should provide so many soldiers per acre for the Company. This was the service given to the Lords of the Manor as a condition of tenure. In later years opportunity was given of commuting this service by payment of a quit rent when the obligation to provide soldiers ceased. This quit rent is still paid on some of the so-called “free” lands to-day. Duties of these troops were to “stand to” in case of alarm. The “Alarm Gun” can be seen on the side of the main road leading to Longwood; its crew and guard lived at the close-by Alarm House, one of the oldest houses in the island. With the introduction of signals from the hills the use of the gun lapsed; but “three guns quick” fired from one of the modern batteries was used as a fire alarm within the memory of inhabitants still living.

After about 1770 it is doubtful if very much remained of this feudal form of service except a theoretical obligation in the case of holders who had not commuted their leases. The Company had been steadily growing in power and wealth and there were more regular troops to spare for the defences, which were now becoming elaborate. With the perils increasing around Great Britain, the Militia came into being; but although there may still have been a technical compulsory obligation, service in its ranks was voluntary, at any rate up to 1804, because in that year a law was passed making it generally compulsory. This enactment was so unpopular, and so much fuss was made, that any idea of compulsory service was dropped. When the Crown occupied the island in 1836, the Militia were not disbanded, and it has continued to exist in one form or another right up to the present day. It is curious that the Volunteer Ordinance of 1802 contained provision that service in the Volunteers did not exempt from the obligation to serve in the Militia of St Helena, although there was no Militia Ordinance on the Statute book. But under the Government of India Act of 1832 the laws of the Company were operative in certain circumstances.

The St Helena Militia, as far as is known, never saw service. Governor Beatson mentions them as having come to his assistance in the great Mutiny of the St Helena Infantry, and

2. Letters to London.

3. Letters from London, both covering the same period.

The Consultations are a record of the Government's business. In the case of the Regiments they include Muster ROM. Pay Sheets, Disciplinary Proceedings, Reports on the Defences and Schedules, giving the size and distribution of the Ordnance. Bound up with the Consultations is the “Annual Inventory of the Company's Stores,” which contains full details of stocks of powder, shot weapons, equipments and military stores generally.

The Letter series contain the correspondence between the Court and the Governor. The volumes contain what is always a most important item — namely, enclosures to letters. The enclosures to the Company's letters, that is the list accompanying each letter, have given a rich yield. The Governor's list gave the model of the well-known flight of steps, known as “The Ladder,” and also Seale's model of St Helena. The reprehensible habit of not filing enclosures to letters was founded very early in the island. These enclosures took the form of reports, in later years publications, sketches, maps, minerals, geological specimens, and a wide variety of other treasures. Buried somewhere in London there must be some rich deposits awaiting the excavator. The Company sent out every conceivable object, varying from complete libraries of eighteenth-century classics in fine bindings to coloured anatomical plates. These lists have been of immense value in St Helena.

A Manuscript Index prepared by Janisch is available to students of the above series. There are a wide variety of other records, including a confidential report on the defences prepared for Lowe by his C.R.E.

they were present at Napoleon's funeral dressed in rifle green on the left of the line. Their band played his coffin through Jamestown on its departure in 1840. Their exercise ground was at Francis Plain, the island's modern public recreation ground. They took part in the manoeuvres in which Sir Hudson Lowe used to exercise the troops, because there is a record of Mr. Secretary Brooke dashing off with his platoon of Militia to repel a landing at Hold Fast Tom, when his exertions were judged to have been successful. They certainly carried Colours, so whether they maintained the traditions of their green jackets is not known; it is probable they did because the first Volunteer Corps in the island was known as the "St Helena Rifles," and was also dressed in green with a horn and silver appointments on brown leather. The Colours carried at Napoleon's funeral are hanging over the memorial to their Colonel, Sir William Doveton, in St. Paul's Cathedral; it having been promised by Governor Patrick Ross, when presenting new Colours on Francis Plain, that they should rest there for ever. Those presented on this occasion are believed to be in St. James's Church. No print of a Militiaman in contemporary uniform appears to be available, and very little is known of their appurtenances or weapons. It is possible there may be a portrait of Sir William Doveton in existence wearing the uniform of 1815-1821. A beautiful gold sword of honour presented to a former Commanding Officer is exhibited in the Castle, together with a pair of silver epaulettes and some buttons, possibly of a later date than the sword.

THE ST HELENA ARTILLERY

The growth of the St Helena Artillery is largely the history of the Company. In its very early days it sent out soldiers who fought the guns. As the Company developed and grew, so did the defences of the island, until the artillerymen who manned them became merged into the "St Helena Artillery," troops of the Company's regular service, recruited, trained, and officered as such. The chief duty of the Corps was to man the fortifications, and it had a high reputation for its skill and discipline. It was the pleasing task of everybody who visited the island in the distant past, just as it is to-day, to write to their relatives giving their impressions of this fascinating outpost. Many of these letters and diaries have been published, and in a number of them are remarks very flattering to the Corps. But the number of men of the highest distinction³ who have visited and lived on St Helena is immense. Few, far too few, of their diaries and letters have been published, and any such contemporary document has a definite value in attempts to restore its historical background.

THE ST HELENA INFANTRY

This Regiment had the same origin and was recruited in the same way as the Artillery; but it did not attract such a steady and dependable type of man. Its record is marred by serious mutinies and much crime; and in 1815 the condition of the troops was such that the

³ Clive, Napoleon, and great Duke; Halley, Darwin and Harry Smith, are all included in what must be an immense list. Nothing is known about the Duke except what he wrote in his own published letters. He stayed at "Balcombe's" (the Briars), June-July, 1805, which was also occupied by Napoleon for a few weeks in 1815. It is said that he attended a christening. In after life, he was fond of posing as an authority on St Helena. Any information on his visit would be welcome.

Company could not contemplate Napoleon being sent to the island unless a substantial garrison of British Army troops was provided. But everything was in favour of discontent among soldiers in St Helena; the climate, neither too hot nor too cold; drink, chiefly in the form of a raw and rasping Cape wine, imported in great hogsheads; the lack of occupation; the evils of slavery; bad quarters; and the boredom induced by a never-changing routine. The main duty of the Infantry was to provide the Main Guard in Jamestown, with its guard rooms at the entrance to the town through the main gate on the right. The men were employed much as orderlies, and they also had much to do with the manning of the "Telegraph Stations" or, as they were called, "Signal Stations."

St Helena is an island of many high hills, often reaching to well over 2,000 feet. From these hilltops mile after mile of great expanse of glorious blue ocean can be seen on a clear day, and it did not take long before this great tactical advantage was put to good use. By using hills which were usually free of clouds, a most ingenious system of visual signalling was developed from one end of the island to the other; vessels could be sighted up to sixty miles away and the news flashed to the authorities. In an island which often did not know from one day to the next when it was likely to be attacked, the advantage was obvious, and Governor Beatson put it forward in a memorandum as one of the reasons why Napoleon should be sent to the island. The officer who did most for the system was Robert Patton, Governor at the time of the South American operations in 1806-7, who, according to his contemporaries, appears to have been in his second childhood.

Only three Governors of the island have ever, on their own initiative, sent the garrison away to assist in Imperial operations when reinforcements were urgently required, Brooke, Patton, and Janisch.⁴ The first and last were highly commended and rewarded because victory followed; but Patton was reprimanded and dismissed because the result was defeat. Let us therefore remember Patton for his services to the Signal Stations by obtaining help and expert advice from Home Popham.⁵

THE ST HELENA REGIMENTS OF ARTILLERY AND INFANTRY

The officers⁶ of both regiments, being professional soldiers, were recruited from the Company's regular service; but the Company was always generous to the sons of its

⁴ Brooke was highly commended and received a Sword of Honour for his exertions in the capture of Capetown in 1795. H. R. Janisch was the son of Lowe's confidential clerk; he was born on the island and was never off it. He received the C.M.G. for having sent troops after the disaster at Isandhlwana in 1879. There was no cable from the Cape, and he received the news of Isandhlwana before England did, and at once sent off the infantry of the garrison in H.M.S. Shah.

⁵ Various codes of signals are exhibited in the Castle. Patton and Home Popham seem to have evolved a frame using balls by day and lamps by night. The British Army used a contraption like a cricket scoring-board with numbers.

⁶ Lists of officers, and occasionally private individuals, can be found in the "East India Register." "The St Helena Almanack and Annual Register" is especially valuable. Printed at the Government Press, publication began probably in 1828. It continued with many gaps, becoming increasingly wider as the finances of the Colony deteriorated until 1913, when as a swan song two officers, Messrs. Hands and Bruce, turned out the best Almanack that has been produced. "The St Helena Almanack" is an invaluable production and many libraries have very fine runs. "The Annual Rent Roll," covering a hundred and fifty years and bound up with the Consultations, is also valuable, particularly before the land became engrossed. The Church Registers and those of the Registrar-General are also available. St Helena is fortunate to possess the Governor's copy of the Garrison Daily Order Book. With the transfer of the island to the Crown the records of the military administration passed to the care of O.C. Troops, and are no longer preserved in St Helena. The Government preserves the same series as under the East India Company, with the addition of Colonial Secretary's Letters Received and Sent. It is preserved in good letter guard books and letter books from 1836.

officers, both civil and military, and this accounts for so many belonging to the St Helena landed class. Provided the father was a good servant and the son had been educated in England, a career in the Company's service was an attainable ambition. With the establishment of Addis' combe, education at the College became a necessary qualification, with the result that in the last twenty years of the Company's rule St Helena enjoyed the benefit of highly qualified officers, who made a considerable contribution to the island's welfare. The last six Governors under the East India Company - Brooke, Patton, Beatson, Wilks, Walker and Dallas were all officers with distinguished records in India.

Both regiments served at the Cape in 1795, and, as noted by Fortescue,⁷ it was the nine guns of the St Helena Artillery that cleared the way to Capetown.⁸ Both regiments also shared in the reverses in South America in 1806-07.

For Napoleon's funeral every regiment then in the island shared in the honour of carrying the great soldier to his grave, the St Helena Infantry included.

It was after the death of Napoleon, under the leadership of Walker (Governor, 1823-1828), that the two regiments reached their highest efficiency and made their greatest contribution to the island's welfare.

A member of the Society, Major Jardine of Sir Lowry's Pass, Cape Province. has been kind enough to allow me to quote the details of the uniforms of the East India Company Regiments from the St Helena Calendar for the year 1828. No copy of an earlier date has yet come to notice.⁹ They are as follows:

Artillery	Cloth blue, facings red, lace gold
Infantry	Facings blue, lace gold
Medical	Cloth blue, cuff and collar scarlet, embroidery gold
Militia	No details. (The evidence, however, is conclusive that it was green, facings black velvet, lace silver)

A shadow fell across St Helena in 1829 when it became apparent that the days of the East India Company were numbered. In 1832 its occupation was terminated by the Government of India Act of that year which transferred the island to the Crown? as from 23rd April, 1834, by which date it had ruled St Helena for 175 Years.

The crown not being ready to take over its new charge on the appointed date, the Company consented to administer the island at its cost until a new Governor and garrison

T. H. Brooke, "A History of St Helena" (2 eds., 1808 and 1824, of which the second is the best), remains as the standard work on the history of the Island under the East India Company, except for its first chapter, which has been completely revised by the work of the India Office. A. Beatson, 'Tracts relative to the Island of St Helena, etc., London, 1816,' gives a well-documented account of the mutiny of the St Helena Infantry. For more detailed references students should consult the bibliography in Gosse, P. "St Helena, 1502-1938" (London, 1938).

⁷ Fortescue, "History of the British Army," Vol. iv, part 1, pp. 394-399 vol. v, PP- 314-316

⁸ This service is scarcely known about in St Helena, and the writer would be grateful for information of any personal record of the campaign that may be available which was written by a St Helena soldier and especially any unpublished diaries or letters. Information of any contemporary print of the St Helena guns in action would also be welcome. It may be open to argument as to whether the St Helena troops of today should carry any honours oil their appointments, but there seems little doubt that they are entitled to that granted for the Capetown operations.

⁹ In the Company's Letters from England dated 29th February, 1792, the following occurs: "Instead of the hats for the Infantry and Artillery being cocked as usual ado bound and looped with different colours we have ordered them all to be round hats. They are precisely the same as the hats worn by H.M. Regiments in India."

could be sent out. Early in 1836 Major-General Middlemore, the new Governor, appeared off the island with detachments of the Royal Artillery and the 91st Foot. He opened the proceedings by landing the troops in advance as if he expected resistance and followed them himself the next day to hoist the Union Flag and proclaim St Helena annexed to King William IV. Incidentally, this Proclamation had already been read two years previously and the Flag hoisted on the lawfully appointed date. The Union Flag, too, had been flying on at least seven points, including the Castle, for well over a hundred and fifty years; the inhabitants also had owed allegiance to the Crown since 16th December, 1673. There can be no doubt that these proceedings did not strike a happy note, particularly with a little Colony that had maintained the most cordial relations with an Imperial Governor and a very much larger garrison whom there is no reason to suppose ever had, like so many of its successors, anything but the warmest affection for the island and its people. This affection of British troops for St Helena and its people has persisted for generations and still continues.

On no institution in the island did the new Governor's actions fall more heavily than upon the two regiments. They had a long history, even in the history of regiments. They were not thanked; there was no ceremonial parade or leave-taking; the Colours were cut up and distributed among the officers, and the regiments were just summarily disbanded, as it were under guard, and faded away.¹⁰ They were invited to take service in the British Army at the Cape, but there is no record of volunteers being forthcoming. Officers and men had to find their way as best they could either to South Africa or England, where they had to fight for their pensions.

To-day the two regiments are forgotten except by the few to whom the history of St Helena makes a special appeal. It is in their descendants that both find an enduring memorial counting as these do many who have given distinguished service to the Crown. Bennett, Pritchard, Seale, Melliss, Doveton, Brooke, Sampson, Leach, and Alexander are all names that appear in the Muster Rolls. They belonged to a St Helena that has gone for

¹⁰ Both Regiments had many possessions such as furniture, glass and china bearing the Regimental badge, band instruments, and silver mess plate. Except for a beautiful silver-headed drum-major's staff, surmounted by the crest of the Company and inscribed "St Helena Artillery," and for an odd china plate or decanter, there are no relics in the island. It is commonly said in regard to the silver mess plate that the officers divided it up among themselves and took it away with them rather than it should be allowed to fall into the hands of Middlemore. Striking confirmation of this belief has come to light recently in what are known as the Pritchard Bequests in the Beaufort West Municipality of Cape Province, Union of South Africa. Ensign Charles Pritchard was a son of Lieut.-Colonel Henry Huff Pritchard, commanding the St Helena Infantry. Henry Huff Pritchard is known to history for an injudicious dispute with Lowe, as a result of which he was passed over for command. His son Charles was one of the disbanded officers and had received his commission from the Governor and Council on 11th March, 1833. He must, therefore, have been one of the last officers ever appointed to the St Helena Infantry because under the Act of Parliament the Regiment was due to disappear in twelve months' time. The Commission was ante-dated to 21st December, 1832, and for an Ensign "in this Island." Charles Pritchard made his way to the Cape, taking with him a number of relics, and made his home at Beaufort West, becoming a greatly respected figure and Chairman of the Municipality. He left his relics to his son, who on his death in 1921 bequeathed them to the Municipality in memory of his honoured father. The Beaufort West St Helena relics include the following: one large and one small silver salver with coat-of-arms; one silver wine cooler; three glass decanters and monogram "St Helena"; dinner plate; silver butter plate; silver spoon; two salt-cellars; gunmetal badge of the East India Company, worn by Ensign Charles Pritchard. There can be no doubt that the silver and glass are all part of the property of the Regiment which has been lost to view for so many years, bearing as they do, in the case of the silver, the crest of the Company, and, in the case of the glass, the monogram "St. H." Thus it came about that young Pritchard took with him his share of the mess plate to the country, the capital of which the Regiment had helped to capture forty years before.

ever, but it is a St Helena that is worth remembering. And on the island hills their regiments, the “St Helena Artillery” and the “St Helena Rifles,” again serve the same cause that they served.

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