

Cumberland Militia

The militia was introduced after the restoration of the monarchy to place a check on the power of the army, which had grown in strength and influence during the interregnum. Politicians found it difficult to manipulate the dispersed local militias. Traditionally they were the home defence of the country, being cheaper than supporting a standing army. The Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 showed that the system needed a complete overhaul if it was to protect the country from invasion; the regular army had to be recalled from Flanders to deal with the 1745 rebellion. In 1756 the 7 Years War began against France so it was imperative that the system was improved. After the major revisions of 1757-8 the Cumberland Militia was first formed in June 1760 and embodied in August 1760.

The Militia Act of 1757 required each county to pay for the militia out of the rates. Each county was to raise a fixed quota of men selected by compulsory ballot; however, if you could afford to pay you could engage a substitute.

In 1804 it was granted its "Royal" title and in 1881 it became the 3rd (Royal Cumberland Militia) Battalion of the Border Regiment.

Who served?

Entry into the militia fell short of true conscription, but the system was more cumbersome than simple enlistment, and as a result it was able to tap into supplies of men not available to the army. The number, which each county had to furnish, was laid down by an Act of Parliament. In 1796 the proportion of those required for militia service in Cumberland was 1 in 28; in other counties it could be as low as 1 in 8.

Those who were exempt varied from year to year but in general the following were exempt. Poor men with one legitimate child, men under 5ft 2ins, peers of the realm, officers of the army and militia, members of universities, clergy (including dissenting teachers and preachers), articled clerks, apprentices, mariners as they were subject to being "pressed" by the Royal Navy, regular soldiers below commissioned rank, former militia officers who had served four years and members of the volunteer corps such as the rangers and cavalry. In many ways the system acted as an additional tax on the manpower of the middle and lower ranks of society.

The regular militias were the county militias. The irregular militias were volunteer forces usually raised by one of the local gentry. Some were hardly active at all above parades, and were used as a means of avoiding the ballot for the county militia. The strongest of the irregular forces in the area and most active were the Cumberland Rangers.

How were they chosen?

The chief constable of each hundred was required to produce a list of all the men within his jurisdiction who were of the correct age and not exempt. The parish constable was to affix a copy of the parish list on the door of the parish church on the Sunday before the return had to be made so that all could see those included in the ballot. The high constable would then hear complaints from those who considered themselves wrongfully included in the lists, or that others were wrongfully left out. The quotas were then divided amongst the parishes and a ballot held to obtain the correct number of men required to serve. It was of great importance that the system of exemptions was fairly administered but this was not always easy. Many people did not bother to claim their exemptions until they were chosen in the ballot; this was tolerated, though illegal. This also meant that they had been included in the total of those available for service; this then put a heavier burden on those remaining. Quakers, however were to have substitutes hired for them and the cost was to be recovered from them by distraint of their goods. In 1806 the ballot covered men aged 18-45 years, by 1809/10 only men aged 18-30 were balloted before rising again to 18-45 years.

Military quotas for Cumberland

In 1757 the county was required to provide 320 men; this had risen to 1180 men by 1796-9. In 1802 the quota was 615 men and then would rise throughout the Napoleonic Wars. In 1779 there was one battalion in the regiment with less than eight companies, but which had three field officers because the Lord Lieutenant served as colonel.

The Militia liable books also survive for the three northern wards in Cumberland. These list men liable to serve, and indicates those that were chosen.

The ballot

A person balloted was not required to serve personally. If they did not choose to serve they had to provide a substitute. In these cases the 'principal' was excused from being chosen to serve again until it was his turn by rotation. Another option was to pay a £10 fine, but in this case he would be automatically appointed to serve again next time. The period of service varied from 3-5 years. If a parish could produce sufficient volunteers to fill their quota then no ballot was required.

The principle of obligatory personal service was never strictly pursued and every facility was provided so that the obligation could be discharged by voluntary enlistment and few balloted men were forced to serve except by their own free will. There was usually a pool of substitutes available and these men could be in almost in continuous service.

Officers

Each county would have one or two regiments depending on its size. It was intended that the militia should be commanded by men of property worth at least £444 per annum, and as far as possible those eligible should take their turn. Until 1802 the Acts provided that up to a third of the officers in each county must retire every four (later five) years if others duly qualified offered to serve in their place. The willingness of men of property to serve was greatly reduced once it became the practice to embody the militia for the duration of each war. Many who could undertake local and temporary service could not afford to neglect their private affairs and become to all intents and purposes regular soldiers for years on end. There was a permanent shortage of qualified officers and gradually Parliament watered down the system of property qualifications. The aim of the qualifications was to make militia officers independent of the government so as to ensure that the force would never allow itself to be used for unconstitutional purposes. They also succeeded in making it difficult to control militia patronage for political support.

Service

The militia were more like the territorial forces of today and were not usually permanently embodied. For training meetings during disembodiment the constable had to post a notice on the church door. The unembodied militia received twenty-one days of continuous training each year. Each man would be given notice of a call out for actual service in writing at his usual place of abode. When embodied, a militia corps might find itself stationed in quarters, in barracks or in camp. As a rule the militia would only be in barracks or camp when embodied for actual service. The purpose of the camps was to concentrate troops in large bodies, both to make training more efficient and so that they should be ready to oppose invasions. Camps assembled in the spring and dispersed in the autumn when it was considered that the weather became too bad for an invasion.

It was in quarters that a militia corps was most commonly to be found (for the twenty-one days). They were provided by the compulsory billeting of the troops in public houses and other 'licenced premises'. In Whitehaven in 1780 the principal inn had so many men put in it that the landlord had to hire lodgings elsewhere for them; otherwise he would have had no room for ordinary guests. Understandably billeting caused a great deal of resentment.

It was not usual to station regiments at home as in the event of riots the troops could not be relied on to fire at the mob which would likely contain friends and relatives. At harvest time generous furloughs were granted to the men so that they could assist with the threshing.

Whilst the men were on permanent duty, wives and families were paid allowances.

The Role of the Militia

The militia were never tested by an invasion but they did perform some humbler military tasks, the most important of these was guarding prisoners of war thereby freeing up the regular army for more active service abroad. During the period of the surviving militia lists England held a large number of mostly French prisoners captured during the Napoleonic Wars. Early in 1783 there were disturbances in the Berwick district because of the shortage of corn; the Cumberland and Northumberland militia helped to keep order, elsewhere they assisted the regular army in quelling riots. The militia was also used in various policing roles including apprehending smugglers.

The Regular Army

In 1806 Lord Castlereagh, minister of war, called for 2,800 volunteers from the militias to join the regular army and succeeded in obtaining most of them. Again in 1809 another 2,800 volunteers were raised from the militias and by 1814 something like 40% of the army's recruits came from the militia. After Waterloo the regular army was cut and the militias returned to their barely active role.

Irregular Militias

The Fencible Cavalry

The Fencible Cavalry was established circa 1779. 'Fencible' is a traditional Scottish term for an elite corps recruited from the yeomanry. It was an attempt to give the militia a cavalry arm by voluntary enlistment and selection. The provisional cavalry proved difficult to levy and almost impossible to train. It had been raised because there was a general belief in the eighteenth century that cavalry would be especially useful against an invasion as the enemy could bring few horses with them. In 1797 the Fencibles were told to stop recruiting and they were disbanded the following year. A cavalry arm did continue but under greater control.

The Rangers

The Loyal Edenside Rangers' Troop and its three companies were extant in 1801. They were succeeded in May 1803 by the Cumberland Rangers. In 1805, the Rangers consisted of a troop of officers and seven infantry companies, each under a captain. Their commander (in practice) was Lieut. Col Henry Howard of Corby Castle.

There were also the Penrith Local Militia, the Westmorland and West Wards Local Militia commanded by one of the Hassels of Dalemain, the Corby Volunteer Association and the Volunteer Artillery in West Cumberland. These were mostly disbanded by between 1805 and 1812 as they were taking recruits from the regular army which was very short of men.