



# Soldiers

of

## The British Civil Wars

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### Recruitment

The British Civil Wars were largely fought by men without previous military experience. At the outbreak of war in 1642 England did not have a professional army. Instead, each county had 'Trained Bands', part-time soldiers who were assembled for regular practice. However, the skills and equipment of these groups of local militias were variable and they were reluctant to fight far from home. Both sides drew on the expertise of a small number of seasoned soldiers who had fought in Europe and passed on their knowledge, but each side struggled to recruit, train, pay and equip effective armies at the outbreak of war.

To begin with, both sides relied on volunteers. Parliament's 'Militia Ordinance' and the King's 'Commissions of Array' were laws that allowed the local gentry to raise and equip armies ready for war. These local leaders called for men to attend a 'muster', bringing with them whatever weapons they owned. They inspired recruits by calling on national and local loyalties and offered incentives to fight. For instance, when raising a regiment for the King in the midlands, Henry Pierrepont, Viscount Newark, reminded the men assembled in Newark's market square in 1642 of their responsibility to defend their 'Liberty, Laws, Religion and the just privileges of both Houses of Parliament' as well as 'all that is near and dear to you'. He reassured the men that they were unlikely to be taken outside their county but promised that if this was necessary, he would not leave any man to face danger alone but would 'care for any one of you as I would care for myself.'

Very soon, however, each side conscripted men, and the war took them far away from their homes and families.

### Civilians

Civil war meant soldiers and civilians were in constant contact and few parts of the country were left unmarked. Winning the war depended on both the capture of territory and victory in battle. This meant that both sides established fortified military bases or '**garrisons**' in towns and large houses all over the country, as well as sending their armies long distances to find and engage the enemy. Armies were constantly on the move and marches of 30 miles or more in a day were not unusual. Soldiers were billeted in the homes of local people, often swamping the small communities of England such as Burmington in Warwickshire, a village with only 28 houses that quartered 450 soldiers before the battle of Cropredy Bridge in 1644. Soldiers in garrisons were dependent upon the people living in a wide area around them who were forced to give up their money, food and equipment for the army's use. In fact, the local population were often forced to supply the armies of both sides. In 1644, Lincolnshire was described as 'a ruined county.. no man hath anything to call his own or assure himself a quiet night's sleep, they are so surrounded with garrisons both of the King's and the Parliament's, what one leaves the other takes'. This devastating suffering, theft and damage

can be found listed in 'loss accounts', when civilians recorded their trampled crops, plundered valuables and the destruction of the ordinary objects and routines of everyday life.

## **Weapons**

Parliament had a strong advantage. It controlled London and the south-east, where the country's weapons were made and stored, as well as the navy and key ports, allowing it to import more equipment from abroad. Both sides relied on foreign imports of weapons. Famously, the King sent Queen Henrietta Maria to pawn the crown jewels in the Low Countries. She returned with mercenary soldiers, weapons and equipment, calling herself 'Her She-Majesty Generalissima Major' in a letter describing her procession at the head of an army that brought her through Newark and on to meet the King at Oxford, the royalist capital. Despite these attempts to meet the supply needs of newly formed armies, men like Captain John Hussey, who was killed fighting for the King at the battle of Gainsborough in 1643, went out onto the battlefield poorly equipped, wearing the remnants of family armouries.

## **Soldiers**

Civil War armies were made up of soldiers who fought on foot (Infantry) and those who fought on horseback (Cavalry).

## **Infantry**

At the outset of the civil war, infantry regiments of foot soldiers were made up of one third pikemen and two thirds musketeers, but as the war progressed armies relied increasingly on the firepower of musketeers.

## **Musketeers**

Matchlock muskets were cheap and heavy with a four-foot-long barrel and a killing range of around 100 yards. Muskets were loaded with individual charges of gunpowder that hung in wooden bottles from a belt worn across the body. Musketeers carried a smouldering piece of rope or 'match' to ignite the gun's charge. Lead bullets were either made commercially or by soldiers themselves, using moulds and nippers. Lack of standardisation meant bullets might need shaving or even gnawing to fit the gun's barrel. These weapons were unreliable, inaccurate and slow to reload but, with practice, musketeers firing together in successive ranks could create an effective shock and keep up constant fire. Short swords were also carried, although the heavy club end of a musket provided a useful close-range weapon, powerful enough to knock a soldier from his horse.

## **Pikemen**

Varying from 16 to 18 feet in length, pikes could be presented in a terrifying array of angled steel spikes to provide an effective defence against charging cavalry. Steel plates at the end of the long ash poles protected their points from being cut off during battlefield manoeuvres. Heavy armour, including leg guards (tassets), gradually fell out of use.

## **Cavalry**

High speed cavalry tactics meant heavy armour had fallen out of use and, at most, cavalry soldiers wore a back and breast plate and helmet. A thick leather 'buffcoat', worn under armour, offered further protection and comfort. Cavalry guns, either a carbine strapped across the body or pistols in holsters or tied to the wrist, had a flintlock mechanism more suited to use on horseback. Pistols were short-range weapons, not accurate beyond around 7 yards and ideally discharged at point blank range against the body. Cavalry soldiers were better paid than the infantry but were expected to feed and stable horses at their own expense.

## **Dragoons**

Named after a gun called a 'dragon' but now carrying a flintlock musket, dragoons were mobile infantry soldiers who generally dismounted to fight. They had a special role on the battlefield, sent ahead to secure bridges for instance or hide behind hedges to ambush the enemy.

## **Artillery**

Cannon were most useful in siege warfare, when they were stationed around towns that were surrounded in order to bombard defences. The largest of these were rare enough to be given names, like 'Roaring Meg', 'Sweet Lips' and 'Gog and Magog'. Smaller field pieces were still heavy enough to require teams of up to 15 horses to move them. Made of iron, cannonballs could be as small as tennis balls or as large as footballs and sometimes weighed upwards of 30lbs (14kg). A cannonball that bounced could decapitate a rank of 6 men at once. Robert Pierrepont, Earl of Kingston, captured at Gainsborough and transported along the river to Hull, was cut in half by a cannonball fired by his own side.

## **Battles**

Despite the dominance of firearms, combat was hand to hand and happened at close range. Tens of thousands of men faced one another across a battlefield, organised into regiments and drawn up in formation, with cavalry on each flank. The smoke and noise of the battlefield meant signals were beaten out by drums. It was impossible to tell the difference between the armies of each side. Regiments equipped by the local gentry were often provided with similar clothes, for instance the white coats worn by the Marquis of Newcastle's regiment, but a uniform was not used until 1645 when Parliament clothed the New Model Army infantry and dragoons in red jackets. Before this, in order to tell friend from foe, regiments used a code word or phrase (for instance 'God is with us') but these could be easily discovered. Field signs were also used to mark opposing sides and these varied from sashes and ribbons to bean stalks! Each regiment carried a colour or flag which it defended to the death. Legend has it that the hand of Sir Edmund Verney, who fought for the King at the battle of Edgehill, was found after his death, still clutching the royal standard.