

Clothing the military in colonial Queensland: a brief overview

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Queensland, the Australian colony named by Queen Victoria in 1859, offers a unique perspective on the development and use of military uniforms and equipment in the British Empire. In many ways it is typical of other Australian colonies, and similar situations may have developed in British colonies elsewhere. From 1860, and more particularly after 1869 when the British Regular Army withdrew from the continent, the colonial Queensland government generally exercised control of its own defences, establishing a small Volunteer Force for the task. It maintained this force for 40 years, during which time a Militia and small Permanent Force were established, reducing the number of actual Volunteer companies. The Commonwealth of Australia, nominally from 1901 though effectively from 1903, then took over the role of defending the country.

The first Volunteer infantry and mounted rifle companies, formed in Queensland during 1860, adopted uniforms of a style finding favour in the British volunteering movement. The uniforms were initially grey or blue. Facing colours appeared on cuffs, on trouser welts and on cap bands. By 1863, the colony had settled on the green uniform of the Rifle Regiments to clothe all except the newly formed artillery, who wore a semblance of the Royal Artillery uniform. An economic recession in 1866 almost wiped out the volunteer movement in Queensland, but when it staggered to its feet a few years later individual companies began to adopt scarlet tunics. A move by the colonial government in 1873 to ensure some uniformity saw all the Volunteer Force adopt a blue uniform not unlike an artillery uniform. This remained in vogue until replaced in 1878.

During the late 1870s there was a decided movement amongst many of the English and Scottish Volunteer Corps in the 'home country' to change from grey or green uniforms to the imperial scarlet. Cunningham noted that by 1877 *when the change took place, nothing could have been more popular than the national colour, and assimilation to the regular soldier. There was a nationwide move to scarlet, so that by 1878-9, 91 regiments wore scarlet, 66 green, and 57 grey of various shades.*ⁱ It was a change noted either by immigrants or visitors who were able to exert an influence in the cut and colour of the Queensland Volunteer's dress. As the larger part of the Queensland Volunteers were born in the UK and some had seen service with the Colours or in Volunteer companies, they rather naturally gravitated towards the familiar. Consequently, with few exceptions, uniforms worn in the colony from this time bore distinct resemblance to those worn by the British Army or British Volunteer corps. cursory investigation shows a similar theme in other Australian colonies.

Uniforms were to be supplied only from the capitation allowance, and remained the property of the Government. This allowance was paid by the Government to the Volunteer Company at a set rate per man who proved 'effective' in each year. Effectiveness was built around the number of parades a man attended, and his participation in the annual musketry courses. The need for a constant supply of items such as belts, ammunition pouches and haversacks strained the limits of the capitation allowance, particularly because of the high costs involved in employing local labour to manufacture the required articles. Eventually the importation of goods became more cost-effective than local manufacture.

In January 1882 it was recommended that uniforms be procured from England and issued from a central volunteer store, however no action was taken. During September 1883, prior to take up the position of Queensland Commandant, Colonel George A French RA, met with Lt-Colonel Drury (Queensland's Acting Commandant) and Major General Peter Scratchley in London to discuss an appropriate local uniform. They concluded that it was desirable to clothe the colonial force much the same as the Auxiliary Forces in England, which was of course, very similar to the Regular forces. When Colonel French gave his first report on the local forces to the Queensland Parliament in March 1884, he revealed that the clothing and equipment in Queensland was *almost as varied as the number of corps, and even in the same corps there are often several different patterns, the result being that they present a very motley appearance on parade*. Belts and helmets were also in a bad state, and there was no system for their supply. Colonel French believed heavy cloth tunics were unsuitable for the climate and intimated that *Indian Khakee*, which was expected to be adopted as the service dress of the British Army, would form a very good summer dress in the colony. Confirming the outcome of the earlier London meeting French advised *that for the present it is desirable to procure the bulk of the uniforms from England, & I would advise that steps be at once taken to order a supply for the Force*. He went on: *It may be as well to state that in certain details we cannot copy the Regular Forces, and that Special Instructions will have to be sent to the Agent-General on this point - thus our Artillery or Engineers cannot take the motto of the RA or RE 'Ubique', but should have the word 'Queensland' instead. This word might also be on all buttons, & special dies would have to be struck off. If my recommendations regarding a small Permanent Force should be approved of, it would be desirable to enlist therein a few Military Tailors, & then all or nearly all the Uniforms might be made up in this Country, & this is the direction towards which we should I think work.*ⁱⁱ

Requisitions for uniforms and equipment were transmitted to Queensland's Agent General in London in September 1884. A sense of urgency permeated the entire process, Colonel French noting that as the government had decided to have as much of the clothing as possible made up in the colony, no time should be lost in sending out the cloth. Certain details of the requisition were revealed in his letter. *In the event of the Agent-General being unable to obtain the uniforms &c from the Army clothing Factory, it will have to be obtained from a contractor, but ought to be passed by an Inspector of the Factory.*

*The Royal Artillery buttons can be used for the batteries here, but in event of the Imperial Authorities not having general service buttons (VR under a crown) it will be necessary to have a die made and buttons struck off for the other corps.*ⁱⁱⁱ Later actions would confirm that the general service buttons were not available, as arrangements were made for the striking of new Queensland pattern button dies shortly afterwards.

It was in 1885 that the purely volunteer system was dispensed with in Queensland, the changes introducing the Queensland Defence Force which was comprised mainly of partially-paid militia, with some volunteer corps, and a small permanent force. Although Queensland's military forces had been wearing uniforms which were similar to Imperial uniforms for almost two decades, the order directly from the Royal Army Clothing Depot, introduced specific pattern clothing to the colony. Thus it was that by 1885 Queensland's Field and Garrison Artillery wore the uniform of the Royal Artillery; the Brisbane Engineers the uniform of the Royal Engineers; the Moreton Mounted Infantry adopted the uniform of the 1st Kings Dragoon

Guards; and the Moreton Regiment that of the Royal West Surrey Regiment. Queensland's Marine Defence Force also adopted the uniform of the Royal Navy and that of its Naval Brigades. Scarlet remained the colour of infantry uniforms as other regiments were formed across the colony, though each initially received its own facing colours. As new volunteer corps were formed, the Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps adopted the uniform of the 92nd Gordon Highlanders, and the Queensland Irish that of the 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles.

Locally designed khaki uniforms also began to make their appearance in the mid-1880s, usually as undress uniforms, the Imperial pattern uniform being retained for full dress. The Mounted Infantry tried various full dress and undress khaki uniform, but for some years could not shake of the idea of wearing thick serge materials. It wasn't until the late 1890s that cotton khaki uniforms became more suited to the climate. Of the Infantry, all bar the 1st Battalion of the Moreton Regiment abandoned the scarlet tunic as full dress around 1890, though it was re-introduced in 1898. The Engineers retained their scarlet tunics until the late 1890s before giving way to the ubiquitous khaki. The Artillery adopted a working dress of khaki, but retained the full dress blues until around 1911, long after the Federation of the Australian colonies!

Published dress regulations for Officers, NCOs and men in the mid-1890s provide not only a detailed look at Queensland uniforms, but also those worn in the British Army. Combined with other archival material and a healthy supply of historic photographs it is possible to piece together a good slice of the puzzle of Victorian-era uniforms even though one might be separated by many thousands of kilometres from the 'old country'.

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- i. Cunningham, Hugh. *The Volunteer Force, a social and political history 1859-1908*, Archon Books, 1975
 - ii. COL/A390, 84/3619, QSA
 - iii. CSO, In-letter 84/3619, COL/A390, QSA