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British Military History for Dummies

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Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

This chapter is taken from "British Military History For Dummies" from John Wiley and Sons Ltd, ISBN: 978-0-470-03213-8, RRP £15.99. Available wherever books are sold. Copyright ©2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Chapter 1

Small Islands with Lots of Clout

In This Chapter

- Ticking off who Britain fought, and when (clue: watch out for the French!)
- Exploring weapons and tactics
- Discovering regimental spirit
- Understanding the modern British army's role

The British Isles may be geographically small on the world stage, but they have packed some serious clout over the centuries. This opening chapter looks at some of the reasons behind this, offering up some of the themes you can read about by delving further into this book.

The British (historically the English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and Manx) live in a small group of islands off the west coast of Europe. They have a reputation for being courteous, considerate, fair minded, law abiding, stolid, a little reserved, and gifted with an ironic sense of humour. In general this picture holds true, although visitors may not think so if they penetrate the centres of some metropolitan areas on a Saturday night! There, they can see a ritual that forms part of the mating game. Phase I involves lots of alcoholic drink. Phase II, which can be optional, involves fisticuffs and shouting. Phase III involves the actual acquisition of a mate. It's all a little raucous and 'twas ever thus. Had it been otherwise, Sir Robert Peel would not have founded the police force. This kind of event probably reminds visitors that the British do have a robust history. As you can read in Chapter 2, the first general historical record of Britons involves a scrap or two with Julius Caesar and his Roman boys. Since then, the British appear to have fought among themselves, gone on to fight everyone else, and left their bones on every one of the world's continents.

Checking Out Britain's Wars Through the Ages

Ready for a whistle-stop tour of action seen by British soldiers over the centuries? If you want to find out more about the historical build-up or aftermath of these campaigns, a useful companion volume is Sean Lang's *British History For Dummies* (Wiley) – although the basics you need to know are outlined in this book. OK, here goes with the action.

Part I of this book shows you that apart from squabbles between neighbouring kingdoms, the first British wars were against invaders, including the Romans, the Saxons, the Vikings, and the Danes. Then William and his Normans did a bit of conquering of the British Isles, and the Middle Ages really got into their stride with a lot of dynastic wars, mainly with the French, although the Scots, Welsh, and Irish came in for trouble, too. The Gunpowder Revolution (detailed in Chapter 5) more or less coincided with the wars of religion on the continent, in which the British played a comparatively minor role, save at sea. On the other hand, the residue of these spilled over into the British Civil Wars (see Chapter 6). In their turn, these indicated the need for a British Regular Army (the formation of which is outlined in Chapter 7). The eighteenth century found that army entangled in several dynastic wars on the continent and in various places around the world, including the West Indies, North America, and India (covered in Chapter 8). Most of these involved fighting the French, but other opponents existed too, including Jacobite rebels at home and American colonists across the Atlantic (see Chapter 9).

The French Revolution triggered 22 years of war, with one short break (more on the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars in Chapters 10 and 11). During these years the British army fought in the Low Countries, Ireland, Egypt, Spain, Portugal, France, North and South America, and South Africa. The long series of victories that Wellington won during the Peninsula War and at Waterloo improved the army's popularity at home and enhanced its reputation abroad.

On the other side of the world was another British army, but this one belonged to a commercial organisation: In India the Honourable East India Company ran its own army, subdivided into the Bombay, Madras, and Bengal armies. These consisted mainly of regiments composed of Indian soldiers, plus a handful of European regiments, which were as near as the British ever got to having their own foreign legion. During the middle of the nineteenth century the British Empire began to expand at an unprecedented rate. The Honourable East India Company fought wars in Afghanistan, Scinde, and the Punjab (see Chapter 12). The mutiny of most of the Bengal army's Indian regiments resulted in savage fighting and atrocities committed by both sides, but

was finally crushed (as explained in Chapter 14). After this the British government assumed responsibility for India and reorganised the Indian army. It fought another major war in Afghanistan and a large part of its strength was always deployed on the restless North West Frontier (see Chapter 15).



The Crimean War was the only occasion when the British army was committed to a European war during the nineteenth century. This war was notable for the bravery and fortitude of the troops and for the bungling of the government departments responsible for running the army (outlined in Chapter 13). The war was also the first occasion on which war correspondents were able to report what was taking place at the front, and saw the appearance of the war photographer.

The army was almost continuously employed in various parts of Africa from 1868 until 1902 (more on this in Chapter 16). It fought the Zulus in South Africa, the Ashanti on the west coast of the continent, the Egyptians in Egypt, and the dervishes in the Sudan. Some people may think that because the British were fighting poorly equipped native armies their task was an easy one. It was not. Both in Africa and other parts of the world, the British army was invariably outnumbered by a very wide margin, fought its battles far from any possible source of help, and knew that if it lost the best its survivors faced was to be massacred on the spot. Britain was also involved in two wars against the Boers, who had their own ideas about how wars should be fought: The first war was short and sharp and resulted in a Boer victory; the second was prolonged and involved considerable effort on the part of the British Empire before the Boers submitted.



During the First World War the British army expanded to many times its former size. It fought on the Western Front, the Dardanelles, in Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Italy, Salonika, and Germany's former colonies (Part V). It sustained horrific casualties, but solved many of the problems of industrialised warfare by inventing the tank, and it finally led the Allied advance that broke German resistance on the Western Front in 1918.

Political neglect ensured that the army entered the Second World War under strength and ill-equipped. In fact, it did not reach a condition capable of tackling a first-class enemy until mid-1942. The first phase of the war ended with the humiliation of the British army being evacuated from Norway, Dunkirk, Greece, and Crete. It subsequently fought successful campaigns in North Africa, the Middle East, Tunisia, Sicily, Italy, Normandy, and northwest Europe. In the Far East, preparations for war were even less satisfactory. The easy victories that the Japanese won in Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and Burma damaged British prestige so seriously that even the subsequent complete destruction of the Japanese army group in Burma did not quite make up for them. This proved to be a factor in the transition from Empire to Commonwealth (read more in Part VI).

Moving with the Times: Key Strategies through History

Weapons, of course, play a major part in the way wars are fought, and the British army has seen many changes in both weapons and tactics. In more than 2000 years, the British have managed to produce their fair share of innovations. As you can find out in Chapter 2, Caesar didn't like the Britons' chariots one bit. The longbow (put through its paces in Chapter 4) was a uniquely British battle winner and in some ways actually a better weapon than the musket that took its place. Its rate of fire was certainly faster and it was more accurate. The effect of an arrow storm on packed enemy ranks was devastating. So why bother to change? Here are some reasons:

- Artillery outranged the archers.
- Muskets also had a longer range than longbows, even if they were less accurate.
- The kinetic energy stored in a musket ball was sufficient to fell a man or a horse or punch a hole through the best plate armour.

As the quality of the musket improved, the British army developed its own approach to infantry firepower. The infantry of other nations formed a three-deep battle line or attacked in *column* (see Part III), but the British preferred to fight in a two-rank *line* enabling more muskets to be deployed on the additional frontage. They also preferred to deliver precise volleys at close quarters, then charge with the bayonet while the enemy was disordered. When attacked by cavalry, they formed *squares* four ranks deep, bristling with bayonets. These were almost impossible to break and emphasised the stubborn streak of those forming them.



When it came to inventing the tank in the early twentieth century, the British beat the French by a short head (read more about tank development in Part V). The tank changed the nature of land warfare altogether, a fact that British governments of the 1920s and early 1930s completely ignored. They starved the army of funds and, apart from the development of a few prototypes, tank production stagnated. Far-sighted officers like Major General J.F.C. Fuller continued to promote their theories on mechanised warfare, which the Germans gratefully put into practice (as discovered in Chapter 20). When the government of the day finally accepted that Hitler was a dangerous maniac bent on reversing the verdict of the First World War, it embarked on a tank production programme that was too little too late and none too cleverly thought out. Instead of concentrating on one general-purpose tank for mass production, it decided it needed three different types:

- The *light tank* for colonial warfare and reconnaissance
- The *cruiser tank* intended to equip the armoured divisions
- The *infantry tank*, heavily armoured and slow to support infantrymen

By the end of the Second World War British tank production had caught up with itself. Indeed, in the field of assault engineering Major General Sir Percy Hobart's 79th Armoured Division, the largest division in the army, actually led the world (mentioned in Chapter 23).



Other factors that influence the way the army fights its battles are terrain and climate. Over the centuries, for the British army these have included the:

- Forests of North America
- Jungles of the Far East
- Mountains of the North West Frontier
- Temperate landscapes of Europe
- Veldt of South Africa
- Wastes of the Western Desert

In all of these places, and many more, it has been forced to adapt its skills and operate in temperatures that fry the brain or freeze it.

Remembering the Regiment: Traditions and Spirit



One highly prized and much admired asset possessed by the British and some Commonwealth armies is an intangible quality defined as *regimental spirit*. It is rooted in many things – a sense of family, comradeship, geographical background, tradition, pride in achievement, continuity, uniform, and a conviction that however good other regiments may seem, one's own is better.

The army encourages regimental spirit in a number of ways. It holds regimental days to commemorate famous battles. The officers' and sergeants' *messes* (quarters) contain portraits, paintings of battles, silverware donated by past members, trophies, scrapbooks, and photograph albums. In addition, the officers' mess houses the regimental *Colours* (flags) and the caskets containing the illuminated Freedom scrolls that towns and cities in the regiment's recruiting area present, confirming their citizens' esteem for the regiment and granting it the privilege of marching through with Colours flying, drums beating, and bayonets fixed.

Regimental spirit is tribal, and intentionally so. It has been proven time and time again that a regiment that fought well at Blenheim or Minden or Waterloo or any other hard-fought battle instinctively fights just as well when the going gets rough elsewhere. To put the concept at its simplest, the lad – or these days, the lady – needs to prove he's as good as his dad.

Realising the Army's Role in the Modern World

Since 1945 the British army has played a number of roles, often simultaneously. During this time of 'peace', the British army has:

- Overseen an orderly withdrawal from Empire
- Played a major part in the Cold War against the communist bloc in Europe
- Fought major wars in Korea, the Falkland Islands, the Persian Gulf, and Iraq
- Conducted successful jungle campaigns in Malaya and Borneo
- Carried out protracted counter-terrorist operations in Ulster
- Been involved in peace-keeping operations in the Balkans and elsewhere

Chapter 25 considers the army's role since the Second World War.