

Red Feathers

Shirley Babis of Embleton, a member of WAGS, raised an interesting question recently on behalf of Sister Philomena of the Sisters in the Order of St. Joseph. Sister Philomena is a descendant of Private Thomas Patrick Donnelly of the 46th Regiment (1). The soldier was a Crimean War veteran, who later served in India and arrived in WA on the 'Hougoumont' in 1868. Our response to the specifics of the request about the 46th Regiment, a unit blessed with the striking nickname 'Red Feathers', led to some interesting information.

In 1741 Colonel John Price raised a new Regiment of Foot at Newcastle in northern England. War drums were beating at the time and it was listed as the 57th, later reduced to the 46th after peace came and some army reforms of 1751 sorted out the numbering system (2).

The early campaigns of the regiment did not go well: it was overwhelmed in the rout of a Hanoverian army by Bonnie Prince Charlie at Prestonpans (1745) and was present during a failed British attack on the fortress of Ticonderoga near the border of French-held Canada (1758). Then came the Niagara campaign and a moment of glory that made the regiment's name as a solid, successful outfit capable of operating both on conventional European battlefields and amongst the rough and tumble of forest, mountain and hill terrain. Led by an able officer (Colonel Eyre Massey) the 46th crushed a vastly superior French force at the battle of La Belle Famille (July 26, 1759) and thus secured the capture of Niagara (3).

Additional triumphs came during the conquests of Montreal (marking the final defeat of the French in Canada, 1760) and the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1762. The British besieged and captured Havana in the same year, although the officers and men of the 46th and other regiments were decimated by yellow fever in occupied Cuba (4).

The regiment gained a reputation for invincibility and scored success after success during the American War of Independence. Its share in one victory (a bloody surprise attack at the battle of Paoli, September 21, 1777) infuriated the rebels, who swore vengeance. The men of the 46th and 49th regiments jeered at the enemy and dyed the feathers in their hats red in defiance to mark themselves out during future battles. Hence they were called the 'Red Feathers', although the 46th did collect other nicknames, including 'Murray's Bucks' (after one of their colonels) and the 'Surprisers', perhaps on account of the Paoli affair (5).

The 46th kept on winning against the rebels in North America and the French in the Caribbean, notably in the capture of the islands of St Lucia (1778) and St Eustatius (1781). One of the feats it achieved alongside other 'bush warfare' veteran regiments was the spectacular repulse of a French counter-attack on St Lucia (December 18, 1778), described by the British Army's best known historian thus: "a more brilliant series of little operations by both army and navy...it would be difficult to find" (6).

Towards the end of the war the 'Red Feathers' and their officers, like many other regiments, were pretty grumpy when county titles were forced upon them by a circular order of August 31, 1782. They became the 46th (South Devonshire) Regiment of Foot. Needless to say, its recruiting sergeants operated wherever they had to and many Irishmen joined up as the years rolled by (7).

The 46th ended up in the Caribbean again during the Napoleonic Wars and collected a worthy battle honour for defending Dominica against great odds in 1805. A contemporary historian praised the soldiers but poured scorn on the island's governor for fleeing to a fort further inland (8). The 46th did garrison duty for many years in New South Wales and should by rights have gone to the Crimea as a complete regiment in 1854.

Sadly, a scandal intervened and only two companies were sent for the first operations. The court martial of a Lieutenant Perry, a man of lower class origin who forcibly resisted bullying and verbal abuse by his peers, tied up quite a few officers from other companies in judicial procedures. The 46th Regiment men present at Inkerman in November, 1854 fought bravely until running out of ammunition - and lost a third of their number. A new round of army reforms in 1881 resulted in the unit being united with the 32nd Regiment to form the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (9).

Private Thomas Patrick Donnelly (1827-1890) received a land grant in Perth and lived out the remainder of his life in WA. John and his wife Mary Heffernan (or Clarke) were the parents of at least ten children. Mary achieved a unique feat – she died as late as 1932, possibly the last surviving 'old soldier's wife' (10).

Notes

- (1) Letter from Shirley Babis, January 5, 2010
- (2) A Wikipedia site on the 46th Regiment gives a brief general summary; for the Royal Warrant of 1751, see Ascoli, D. *A Companion to the British Army 1660-1983* (Book Club Associates, London, 1984), pp30-32

(3) Brumwell, S. *Redcoats: the British soldier and war in the Americas, 1755-1763* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp252-254

(4) *Ibid*, p296

(5) T.J.McGuire, *The Battle of Paoli* (Stackpole Books, Pennsylvania, 2000) provides a detailed, balanced account and a complete order of battle. For the other 46th Regiment nicknames, see Brereton, J.M. *A Guide to the Regiments and Corps of the British Army* (The Bodley Head, London, 1985), p146

(6) Fortescue, Sir John, *A History of the British Army* (McMillan, London, 1899-1930), Vol.3, pp265-266

(7) Ascoli, pp33-34

(8) James, W.M. *The Naval History of Great Britain* (New edition issued by R.Bentley, London, 1837; reprinted by Conway Maritime Press, 2002), Vol.4, pp176-181

(9) Mercer, P. *'Give them a volley and charge!'- the battle of Inkerman, 1854* (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1998), pp2, 112-113, 117-118; Ascoli, p124

(10) Broomhall, F.H. *The Veterans* (Hesperian Press, 1989), B77-78; *The West Australian*, Saturday, August 27, 1932

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