

History of the Grenadier Guards

The life of the Regiment began in Flanders. At many times in the last 300 years the towns and villages of the Low Countries have been familiar to men of the 1st Guards.

They fought in 1658 and again in 1704, against great odds, on the road between Furnes and Dunkirk. Under the great Duke of Marlborough they bore their part in the victories of Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet.

At Waterloo in 1815 they won their name, a name to which great honour was added a century later in the mud and suffering of the Western Front.

In 1944 they entered Brussels at the head of a victorious British Army. They have returned gloriously many times to Flanders



1656

King Charles II was in exile and England lay under the military dictatorship of Cromwell, the Lord Protector. In May of that year the King formed his Royal Regiment of Guards at Bruges, under the Colonelcy of Lord Wentworth. The Regiment was first recruited from the loyal men who had followed their King into exile rather than live under tyranny, and their reward came in 1660 when the King was restored to his throne.

After the Restoration, a second Royal Regiment of Guards was formed in England under the Colonelcy of Colonel John Russell. In 1665, following Lord Wentworth's death, both Regiments were incorporated into a single Regiment with twenty-four Companies, whose royal badges or devices, given by King Charles II, are still emblazoned on its Colours.

The Regiment, later termed "The First Regiment of Foot Guards", and now called "The First or Grenadier Regiment of Foot Guards", has fought in almost every major campaign of the British Army from that time until our own. Under the last two Stuart Kings it fought against the Moors at Tangiers, and in America, and even took part as Marines in the naval wars against the Dutch.

1689-1815

In the Wars of the Spanish Succession, the 1st Guards served under a commander who had joined the King's Company of the Regiment as an Ensign in 1667. His name was John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough who was Colonel of the Regiment and who, with his brilliant victories of Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706), Oudenarde (1708) and Malplaquet (1709), established his reputation as one of the greatest soldiers of all time.

The 1st Guards took part in his famous march from the Low Countries to the Danube in 1704, and when the British stormed the fortified heights of the Schellenberg before Blenheim, the Regiment led the assault.

In the long series of wars against France - then the chief military power of Europe - that covered fifty-six of the 126 years between 1689 and 1815, the 1st Guards played their part. They fought at Dettingen and Fontenoy, where the superb steadiness of their advance under a murderous cannonade won the admiration of both armies.

Rigid attention to detail, flawless perfection of uniform and equipment and a discipline of steel were the hard school in which the tempered metal of the Regiment was made for the service of the State.

Yet running through that tradition of discipline, of harsh punishments, of undeviating rule, ran a vein of poetry, of humour, of loyalty to comrade, of sense of belonging to something greater than any individual, something undying and profound. And the letters and diaries of men of the Regiment of those days bear witness to it.

1793

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the 1st Guards were among the first British troops to land in Europe, crossing to Holland in 1793. Driven from the Continent two years later, they returned in 1799 when another British Army attempted, though in vain, to liberate Holland.

In the autumn and winter of 1808 they took part in Sir John Moore's classic march and counter-march against Napoleon in Northern Spain and, when under the terrible hardships encountered on the retreat across the wild Galician mountains the tattered, footsore troops, tested almost beyond endurance, showed signs of collapse, the 1st Foot Guards, with their splendid marching discipline, lost fewer men by sickness and desertion than any other unit in the Army.

Subsequently they took part in the battle of Corunna and when Sir John Moore fell mortally wounded in the hour of victory it was men of the 1st Foot Guards who bore him, dying, from the field. Next year, they fought again in Spain under one of the great Captains of history, an officer also destined to become Colonel of the Regiment, Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington. Under Wellesley, they took part in the desperate engagements of the Peninsular War.

When, after the victorious peace that followed, Napoleon escaped from Elba and re-entered Paris, the Regiment returned to the Low Countries. In the middle of June 1815 the Emperor struck at the British and Prussian forces north of the Meuse, seeking to separate them and destroy them severally.

1815

After a fierce encounter at Quatre Bras on June 16th, 1815, in which the 3rd Battalion suffered heavy casualties, Wellington's Army withdrew to Waterloo and, on Sunday June 18th, was fought the battle in which the Regiment gained its present title and undying fame.

During the morning the light companies of the Guards defended the farm of Hougoumont, the light companies of the 1st Guards being withdrawn later to join their battalions - the 2nd and 3rd Battalions.



At evening these two battalions, together forming the 1st Brigade, were in position behind the ridge which gave shelter to the Army. At this point Napoleon directed his final assault with fresh troops - the Imperial Guard, which had hitherto been maintained in reserve.

That assault was utterly defeated, and, in honour of their defeat of the Grenadiers of the French Imperial Guard, the 1st Guards were made a Regiment of Grenadiers and given the title of **First or Grenadier Regiment of Foot Guards** which they bear to this day. The Grenade was adopted as a badge and the Bearskin Cap was worn after Waterloo.

1854

During the Crimean War, the 3rd Battalion formed part of Lord Raglan's Army, which stormed the heights above the River Alma and besieged the Russian fortress of Sebastopol. During the early part of that grim siege was fought, in November 1854, the battle of Inkerman.

The defence of the Sandbag Battery in the fog against overwhelming odds is one of the epics of British military history. On that day the Brigade of Guards, of which the 3rd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards formed part, lost half its officers and men, but not a single prisoner or an inch of ground.

The Grenadier Guards fought at Tel-el-Kebir and in the Boer War, proving the worth of discipline and esprit de corps in the era of khaki, machine guns and open order as they had done under the old dispensation of muskets and scarlet and gold.

1914

In the first Great War of 1914-18, they fought in nearly all the principle battles of the Western Front. At First Ypres all but four officers and 200 men of the 1st Battalion and 4 officers and 140 men of the 2nd fell in action.

The regiment won the battle honour 'Ypres' twice; firstly in 1914 and then again in 1917.

During this war a 4th Battalion was formed for the first time and covered itself with glory in the critical fighting in the spring of 1918. The Marne, the Aisne, Ypres, Loos, the Somme, Cambrai, Arras, Hazebrouck and the Hindenburg Line are inscribed on the Colours of the Regiment, commemorating its part in the bloodiest war of our history.

Before the final victory was won and Britain's new Armies broke the German Imperial Army, 12,000 casualties had been suffered by the Regiment.

The rank of Guardsman replaced that of Private in all Guards Regiments in 1919, an honour awarded by the King in recognition of their great effort during the War.

1939

In 1939 the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions again returned to the Continent, forming part of the British Expeditionary Force under Lord Gort, himself a Grenadier. During the retreat of 1940, the traditional discipline of the Regiment stood the test as it had done at First Ypres, Corunna and Waterloo.

Two of its Battalions fought in the Division commanded by Major General, later Field Marshal, Montgomery, and another in that commanded by Major General, later Field Marshal, Alexander. At Dunkirk, which the Regiment had garrisoned under Charles II, it took part in the defences of the perimeter, under cover of which the embarkation of the Army was made. In the course of that year the 4th Battalion was re-formed, and in 1941 two further Battalions, the 5th and 6th, were raised.

The Regiment was represented in the Eighth Army's famous advance to Tunisia, taking part in the battle of Mareth, where the 6th Battalion, the first to meet the enemy after the evacuation of Dunkirk, suffered heavy casualties but won the respect of friend and foe alike. The 3rd and 5th Battalions shared in the invasion of North Africa; all three Battalions were engaged in the invasion of Italy and the Italian campaign, the 5th Battalion forming part of the force that landed at Anzio.

Meanwhile, in England, the 2nd and 4th Battalions had been converted to armour, and the 2nd Battalion, with the 1st Battalion, which had become a Motor Battalion, served in the Guards Armoured Division under the command of Major General Allan Adair, another Grenadier, and later to become Colonel of the Regiment. The 4th Battalion formed part of the 6th Guards Tank Brigade. These three Battalions fought in the battles of Normandy and across France and Germany.

1944

In September 1944 the 1st and 2nd Battalions entered Brussels. On September 20th, tanks of the 2nd Battalion and troops of the 1st Battalion crossed the Nijmegen Bridge. In 1945 the Army entered Germany.

Since 1945 the Regiment has served in virtually every one of the 'small campaigns' and crises which have marked the last few decades, and has continued its traditional and privileged task of mounting guard over the person of the Sovereign.

The British public most frequently sees the Grenadier at his ceremonial duties in time of peace. But behind this ceremony lies a tradition tested on the battlefields of British history, a tradition as valid today as ever, a tradition of discipline, comradeship, loyalty and fidelity to one another, to the Country and to the Crown.

1991

In the Gulf war of 1991, the 1st Battalion went from the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) - Germany - to fight in their Warrior armoured personnel carriers. They then returned to London to Troop their Colour on the Queen's Birthday Parade in 1992, before going to South Armagh for a six-month operational tour in Northern Ireland.

They then carried out operational tours in the Falkland Isles and a two-year operational tour in Northern Ireland. In 1998 they trained in the United States of America, were on operations in Northern Ireland in 1999, conducted training in Canada in 2000 and Norway in 2001, served in Northern Ireland in 2001 and were in Canada again in 2002.

They trained in Kenya and served in the Falklands in 2003. In the winter of 2004 / 05 they deployed to Bosnia on peace keeping duties and in 2006 were on operations in Iraq.

Present Day

The Regiment now consists of the 1st Battalion whose Left Flank Company, the 'Inkerman Company', retains the inherited privileges of the 3rd Battalion.

Number 3 Company was reformed for the deployment to Afghanistan.

The 2nd Battalion was placed in suspended animation in 1994, but the traditions and the Colours of the Battalion are carried by the Nijmegen Company, the incremental Company, which carries the name of the battle honour won by the 2nd Battalion in 1944.

During the Regiment's long history, seventy nine battle honours have been awarded. Thirteen members of the Regiment have won the Victoria Cross and one the George Cross.

