

THE RIFLE VOLUNTEER CORPS of ALRESFORD 1859-1908

by

John Reid.



Alresford
Volunteers

In early 1859 the citizens of Alresford in common with their fellow countrymen believed that the Emperor Napoleon III of France was ambitious of dominating Europe, as his uncle had fifty years before and among other moves was planning to invade Southern England. If this came about, Hampshire would of course, be in the front line. That the recently re-constituted military command had this in mind is evident in the clause which appears in the prospectus for the building of the Alton, Alresford and Winchester Railway and which states: 'would provide a direct link from the South Camp at Aldershott(sic) with the military establishments, at Winchester, Dorchester and the South Coast of England; including the Military Hospital near Southampton' (the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley). Contemporary newspaper accounts suggest that this would enable the local militia to be reinforced quickly with regular troops,

It was feared that, if the Royal Navy was unable to prevent a French landing, the Regular Army with a large proportion of its strength in India and on colonial service would be too small to repel the invaders. Much

alarmed the public demanded action. Lord Palmerston the Prime Minister, ordered the strengthening of the defences of Portsmouth and The South Coast, and HMS Warrior was launched in 1860 for the purpose of patrolling the Channel.

At the same time the government was urged to reform the Volunteer forces, which had been raised previously between 1793 and 1813 but had then been largely disbanded. The Poet Laureate; Lord Tennyson, caught the patriotic mood in a dramatic poem which appeared in 'The Times' on the 9th May:-

There is a sound of thunder afar
Storm in the South that darkens the day,
Storm of battle and thunder of war.
Well, if it does not roll our way,
Storm! Storm! Riflemen, form!
Riflemen, riflemen, riflemen, form!

Three days later the government agreed to the formation of a Volunteer Rifle Force. Each local Corps would be independent and would meet its own expenses for uniform, drill hall, drill sergeants, rifle range etc. The government would however, supply Long Enfield muzzle loading rifles and make grants based on attendance and standard of marksmanship,

The Volunteers were not initially intended as front line soldiers. The emphasis was on proficient marksmanship with the rifle. Volunteer sharpshooters would operate in small units and their intimate knowledge of their districts would make their most effective role in operating on the flanks

and communications of the enemy. Drill was therefore kept to a minimum and uniform was as simple as possible. There was no shortage of public spirited volunteers and within a short time local, Corps had been formed over the whole country. The main response came from the numerous useful and intelligent class of clerks and shopkeepers with officers from the gentlemen of the district.

Alresford was no exception. On 21st June seventy influential residents from the district attended a public meeting at The Swan Inn Assembly Room with Lord Ashburton of Northington Grange in the chair. He impressed on the meeting "the desirability of taking measures for the defence of the country and especially the propriety of the middle classes doing their share of the work". It was agreed to form a Volunteer Rifle Corps in Alresford and donations were given to form a fund for expenses. Each Volunteer was to pay for his uniform and accoutrements (shoulder belt, waist belt with 20 round pouch and bayonet frog) and pay £1. in subscription per annum.

To organise the formation of the Corps a committee was set up; the Hon, J.T. Dutton J.P. of Hinton Ampner, F, Marx Esq., J.P. of Arlebury, W, Jetty Esq., J.P. of Langtons, J.M. Carter, Esq., J. Calvert Esq., and Messrs, Hunt, Bailey, May and Richards. Their function was to decide on the fitness of those who wished to enrol, to find grounds for local exercises and shooting practice, to select, uniform, choose offices and so on.

The 16th. Hampshire Rifle Volunteer Corps of Alresford was constituted on 14th June 1860, when the Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire, the Marquis of Winchester, presented commissions to the two leading gentry of the Town, Francis Marx. (Lieutenant in Command) and William Jetty (Ensign) and to Dr. J. Lipscomb of 'The Lindens' (Hon. Ass. Surgeon).

A fortnight later 33 men from Alresford and district were sworn in before magistrates. Among them were the following, leading citizens and tradesmen of the town:-

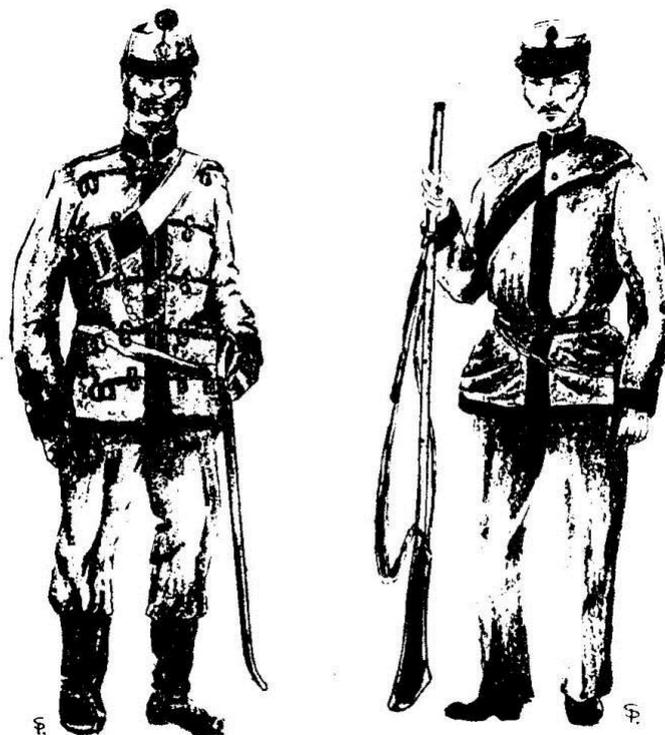
| | | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|------------|----------------------|
| A. Blackmore | Solicitor | R. Fowler | Bootmaker |
| C. Hunt (Sgt) | Brewer | H. Russell | Saddler |
| W. Hunt | Architect | J. Moody | Printer & Bookseller |
| W. Dykes | Tailor | E. Ross | Inn Keeper |
| J. Sensier | Grocer | N. Jourd | Shoemaker |
| J. Chapman | Ironmonger | J. Calvert | Draper |
| H. Spary | Ironmonger | J. Fowler | Builder |
| W. Hill | Miller and Maltster | B. Hall | Brewer |
| E. Lane | Confectioner, Grocer & Baker. | | |

Their uniform consisted of a light grey tunic with green facings, light grey trousers with a green stripe down each outer seam and light grey forage cap (kepi) with green piping. Uniforms were worn for the first time at the Church Parade on 26th August, no doubt rather self consciously, but with pride.

The Volunteers soon became a familiar and popular sight in the Town. Headquarters were established at The White Hart Public House in West Street, later renamed The Volunteer Arms (today No.35); this was also their social centre, where they could drop in for an off duty drink. In the hall of the British School in The Dean (today used by Wild Brothers Builders) regular drill training took place under Co. Sgt. MacDonald of the Hants Militia, the first of a succession of instructors; the hall was also the armoury. A rifle range was built in the large field that is just beyond the railway bridge on the southern side of the road from Alresford to Bishops Sutton. Social events were held such as the Annual Ball, first held in The Swan Inn Assembly Room and later in the Town Hall, and an Annual Supper. The Volunteers band was much in demand for

social events and together with the riflemen took a leading part in the celebrations in Alresford of Queen Victorians Golden Jubilee in 1887.

In December 1861 the 1st Administrative Battalion Hants Rifle Volunteers was created to establish uniformity in training among the six independent companies that had come into being in the Winchester area. Apart from his weekly local training a Volunteer was expected to attend eight official exercises each four months under regular Army instructors. So the men of Alresford were kept busy with frequent reviews, inspections, exercises and 'sham fights' at different locations throughout the south from Salisbury to Aldershot. An annual camp under canvas was held perhaps on the Isle of Wight or Hayling Island or at Hackwood Park. Battalion shooting competitions were held on Teg Down and other ranges, while the best shots competed on Wimbledon Common, from 1860 the home of the National Rifle Association, until it moved to Bisley in 1890.



Officer and Volunteer 1860

Volunteer events always attracted large numbers of civilian spectators seeking an interesting and exciting free show, and travel to and from all these activities was made much easier for the Alresford Volunteers - and their supporters! - when the Mid Hants Railway opened in 1865.

By the end of 1861 there were over 50 men in the Alresford Corps which entitled it to become a Company with a Captain, Lieutenant and Ensign. Their consistently good all round standard, smart appearance and enthusiasm owed much to Francis Marx, who exercised an excellent influence on those under his command and established a sound basis for the future. He was held in the highest regard in the Battalion too and had the honour of being made its first Major. When he died in 1876 from injuries received in a riding accident, it was said of him, "The gallant Major was in all respects a Volunteer of the best type; patriotism and loyalty was a part of his nature. He never said an unkind thing of anyone, yet he was a disciplinarian and none could help obeying him for his own sake".



The Volunteer Arms. West Street

The crushing defeat of France by Prussia in 1871 sent another wave of alarm through Britain. The Regular Army was reformed, the Volunteers were armed with a better rifle, the breech loading Snyder, and in 1877 were issued with a smarter uniform more in line with that of the County Regiment; a scarlet tunic with black facings and white buttons, a white belt, dark blue trousers, and a blue glengarry bonnet with a red tuft. Four years later they adopted the blue cloth helmet with a brass spike on top, the English version of the German "Pickolhaube".

The role of the Volunteers was gradually brought closer to that of the Regular Army. In 1880 the 1st Administrative Battalion was consolidated with the 1st Hampshire Rifle Volunteer Corps, in which the individual Companies lost their independent status and became lettered Companies, Alresford becoming 'C' Company. Training continued as actively as before, but in 1885 a new type of camp was held in Avington Park, which tested successfully a horsedrawn transport service that was being developed for the Volunteers. However, the most memorable occasion of this period must surely have been the Volunteers review by Queen Victoria in 1881 at Windsor and in 1887 at Aldershot to celebrate the Golden Jubilee, when the Alresford contingent mustered 78 men.

Eventually in 1908 the citizen army of the Rifle Volunteers, which had expanded greatly during the Boer War, was absorbed along with the County Militia, with the Territorial Force (renamed Territorial Army in 1921). The 1st Hants provided the 4th Battalion the Hampshire Regiment which was organised, equipped and trained on Regular Army lines and was intended in the event of war to relieve one of the regular Battalions which would then be available to fight in France.

So for a period of fifty years citizens of Alresford, although never called upon to fight had willingly and loyally given up their spare time to contribute to the defence of their country, as they were to again in the Home Guard in the Second World War.

Sources;

Hampshire Record Office

Hampshire Chronicle

History of the first Volunteer Battalion, Hampshire Regiments 1859 - 89 - T.Stacey Cove.

Regimen.cal History of the Hampshire Regiment Vol. 1 - C,T, Atkinson,

The Rifle Volunteers - R. Westlake

The- Territorial Battalions'1839 ~ 1985 ~ R. Westlake

Dwellings in Alresford - I. Sanderson

Royal Hants Regimental Museum., Winchester ~ Col. Darroth, Searles House, Southgate Street.

ACROSTIC - Hampshire Chronicle October 1860.

Thrice happy nation? freedoms mart!

Heaven towards thee bears a watchful part;

Each dweller in this land has thee at heart.

Valiant, noble and generous are thy sons,

Oft have they conquered, bled and for thee died!

Long may be thy yet remaining ones

United in thy glory - England's pride!

Never shall a foe invade thy - peaceful shores

Treasured beyond a thought, ourselves, our lives,

E'en as from Nature, above our spirit soars -

Eternal love for home, our hearts, our wives,

Reason shall bear its sway - dispel our fears,

Success and fame attend "The Volunteers".