

State Papers Military (1714-1782)

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One of the many fascinating aspects of British eighteenth century history was the emergence of the nation as a European power of the first order. Since the fall of Calais in 1558 English military forces had played only a minor role in European diplomatic and military affairs. At home, however, the experience of military government under the Commonwealth (1649-1660) had made the English political classes determined never to allow the restored Stuart monarchs the freedom to maintain a powerful army. Under Charles II (1660-1685) an army was maintained, but constrained by persistent financial weakness, so a force of European dimensions was impossible to support. When William III took the throne in 1688, he brought with him a desire to use English resources to bolster his Dutch patrimony which was under direct threat from Louis XIV's ambitions. This meant employing an English army in Flanders (1689-1697). While parliamentary suspicions remained strong through the eighteenth century, Parliament broadly supported the monarch enabling William, Queen Anne and their Hanoverian successors to embark on diplomatic pathways underpinned by a growing and more capable army. The army expanded from about 8,800 in February 1685 when James II came to the throne, to 40,000 in the crisis of November 1688. With parliamentary support William was able to build an army of 69,000 from his new British subjects. The army peaked at about 75,000 during the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713), 90,000 in the Seven Years War (1756-1763), and, inclusive of militia, 150,000 in the War of American Independence (1775-1783)^[1]. This expansion of numbers was matched by its geographical reach. By the late 1750s British armies were operating in Europe, North America, the West Indies and, to a lesser degree, the Indian sub-continent. However, this expansion of operations was not matched by major

changes in the administrative or political infrastructure.

The army remained a royal force. The commander in chief was the monarch - William and the first two Georges, particularly, were enthusiastic soldiers determined to maintain their personal control of the army.^[2] Parliament was equally determined that financial control would remain with them through the annual renewal of the Mutiny Act and approval of the army estimates, which specified the numbers of troops to be legally maintained for the year. At the operational level, the basic unit of the British army, the regiment, was owned by its colonel. The colonel and his officers held their commissions at the monarch's pleasure, but these commissions were also a form of property that carried a market price and afforded an income both through the salary attached and the profits that could be made by managing the regimental finances.

A further element within the military administration was the Office of the Ordnance. This office was responsible for all artillery, small arms, ammunition, tentage, siege train tools and supplies.^[3] All British regiments and the Royal Navy had to apply to this office for these crucial tools of their trade.

For the historian this complex administrative process has an important benefit - it carried with it the need for significant correspondence between its parts. In this system the Secretary at War played an interesting role and the records that remain from his office are an important source for our understanding of the mechanics of eighteenth century British military administration. The Secretary at War was originally the monarch's military secretary. When the monarch did not exercise command in person, the Secretary of War

acted as secretary to the Captain-General or Commander in Chief. He conveyed orders that he received from the monarch or, more usually, one of the Secretaries of State acting on the monarch's behalf, to army personnel. He received replies and many other types of information, which he passed on to the Secretaries of State.^[4] He was not responsible for military policy or strategy, nor the financial estimates, which were all decided by the king and his closest advisors in cabinet or inner cabinet. He did not have a co-ordinating role between the various elements of military administration. Nor was he responsible for the operational effectiveness or efficiency of the army.^[5] His main task, apart from routing correspondence to the appropriate recipients and providing occasional advice, was to present the annual estimates to the House of Commons. This made him a significant political figure, but not of the first rank. He was not a member of the cabinet, unlike the Master General of the Ordnance or the First Lord of the Admiralty. As his practical functions were limited, his office was quite small by the standards of the great departments of state and thus he commanded little patronage. The influence of the Secretaries at War was more dependent on their personal political standing or capability than by the power of their office.^[6]

While the Secretary at War did not co-ordinate, he held a position through which important correspondence flowed and from this the historian can get at the detail of contemporary concerns about military affairs. The National Archives War Office (WO) series of documents provides a wealth of material about the detailed work of the office, such as the in and out correspondence, commission and establishment lists and troop deployments.^[7] Nevertheless the SP 41 series is

particularly interesting, as these bundles focus on the correspondence sent by the Secretary at War to the Secretaries of State. These were the matters that went beyond the routine. They were matters that required decisions, or were responses to enquires from the ministerial decision-makers and even information that the Secretary at War thought should be passed on to the cabinet.

The type of information flowing through this correspondence differed according to the tide of events. Peace and war created very different patterns of correspondence, as did the beginnings and ends of wars. Altogether, the series provides a picture of how the army was connected to the decision-making bodies of state and the ways in which soldiers, civilians and politicians used that connection.

Petitions, Requests and Commissions

Petitions of all sorts are scattered throughout the correspondence, ranging from requests for commissions and posts, arrears of pay and leave of absence, to requests for clemency after judgements in courts martial^[8]. Less formal than petitions to the king were requests to the Secretaries of State from communities relating to the troops in their area. An interesting example of this occurred in May 1769, when Robert Browne, the London agent for the Governor and civil authorities of Fort Louis Senegal, petitioned that convicts should not be sent out as recruits for the garrison. 'Nineteen sturdy cutthroats' armed and inside the walls of the fort, would only increase the calamities of the garrison, not its defence^[9].

As a war approached or a peace seemed probable, the expansion or reduction of the army led to streams of

petitioning. With war in the offing, aspiring officers petitioned the king on their own behalf or employed the good offices of patrons to put forward their cases for commissions or posts. Old officers returning to the colours were conscious of preserving their seniority as the new appointments were made. The Secretary at War had to pass these petitions on to the king and the Secretaries of State for the king's decisions. In April 1740, Captain Lind, in a newly raised regiment of Marines, complained that his colleague in the same regiment, Captain Jackson, had been given seniority in the listing, despite Lind having previous seniority. The Secretary at War, Sir William Yonge, investigated, found Lind was correct and sent the King's order to change their respective seniorities in the marine regiment^[10].

Even the Secretaries of State, who had direct access to the king, went through the Secretary at War in their formal recommendations to commissions. For example, in March 1740, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, the Duke of Newcastle, wrote to the Secretary at War, Sir William Yonge, asking him to recommend to George II a Mr Massey for a vacancy in Colonel Blakeney's regiment as Blakeney himself wanted Massey and as he was due to depart within days as adjutant general on an expedition to the West Indies, Newcastle wanted to keep him in good humour^[11].

The reduction of the army when peace was restored inevitably led to officers being dismissed from the service as their regiments were disbanded. The financial and career threats were clear. Officers petitioned the king to be allowed to exchange into regiments that were to remain on the establishment. Those wishing to retire petitioned for the military command of town garrisons.^[12]

Once a commission had been granted, or a petition heard, it was communicated to the recipient through the Secretary at War's office. Copies of the commissions can be found in the bundles SP41/41 to SP41/45.

Statistical data, Operational information and Intelligence

Although the Secretary at War did not make policy or initiate commands, it was through his office that orders and information flowed upon which decisions were made. Lists of regimental strengths, dispositions, officers and garrisons were passed to the secretaries of state. These lists are invaluable if the historian is looking for individuals. In the case of Captains Lind and Jackson, mentioned above, we have a complete list of the appointments made by the king to those marine regiments and where both those officers fitted into the seniority list^[13].

Operational deployment orders came through this office, giving a good idea of how the army was distributed in response to ministerial requirements. After 1749, rotation of regiments between garrisons began and the significant movement of troops was the subject of correspondence between the Secretary at War and the ministry. Throughout the century civil unrest necessitated the movement of troops to support the civil power, and ministerial instructions to the Secretary at War to move troops to areas of disturbance were common. In 1779, as fears of a Franco-Spanish invasion were mounting, economic distress had led riots by stocking weavers in Nottingham and Derby. Viscount Weymouth ordered the Secretary at War, Charles Jenkinson, to arrange for the Commander in Chief, Lord Amherst, to send troops to

be quartered in the area to restore the peace [SP41/18, Weymouth to Secretary at War, 14th June 1779].¹¹⁴

Military commanders-in-chief normally corresponded directly with the Secretaries of State, but occasionally, interesting reports arrived on the Secretary at War's desk from more junior officers which were passed on to senior ministers. Captain Backhouse, commanding officer of the 79th foot at Manila, gave a detailed account of the negotiation leading up to the return of the city to the Spanish in 1764¹¹⁵. Also, copies of orders to commanders, drawn up by senior officers, to be sent on to them by the Secretary at War, remain in this collection.

Occasional snippets of intelligence were also filtered from the mass of correspondence in the office to be passed on to the Secretaries of State. Operational reports from officers, particularly during the two rebellions (1715 and 1745) often contained important information that the Secretary found necessary to pass on. Sometimes this consisted of the Secretary's own interpretation of the situation. During the 1745 rebellion, Yonge informed the Duke of Newcastle's secretary, Andrew Stone, when he had doubts about the loyalty of some officers. For example in November 1745, he wrote explicitly concerning a junior officer; 'I think it Plain that Ensign Cameron now in Scotland is a Jacobite'¹¹⁶.

The Ordnance and the Militia

Two other important sets of papers exist within this collection. The Ordnance correspondence consists of detailed lists of all types of stores to be sent to garrisons and regiments, and appointments of engineers. This type of correspondence is found

throughout the series, but the bundles SP 41/34 to SP41/40 are dedicated to this. From 1759, with the passage of the Militia Act, the Secretary at War was charged with ensuring orders relating to movement and supply went out to this new force. The political battle over the establishment of the militia between 1755 and 1759 was long and hard, but it became a significant element within the military forces of the crown as it expanded during the American War of Independence. While its relationship with the Secretary at War was the same as with regular forces, the militia remained separate from the regular army and the correspondence preserved in the state papers is a useful way of examining the differences and the local patronage network that underpinned its organisation.

Conclusion

Overall, this collection provides a valuable insight into how the army was administered and its relationships with the various ministries of the period. It shows us the concerns that soldiers and civilians brought to the attention of the King, commander-in-chief and ministers and vice versa.

NOTES

^[1] J. Childs, *The British Army of William III, 1698-1702* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 102-103; H.C.B. Rogers, *The British Army of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1977), p. 19; P. Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (London, 1964), p. 524

^[2] A. Guy, *Oeconomy and Discipline: Officership and Administration in the British Army, 1714-63* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 23-26

^[3] H.C. Tomlinson, *Guns and Government* (Woodbridge, 1979). The history of the office is best followed in unpublished theses such as I.F. Burton, *The Secretary at War and the Administration of the Army during the War of the Spanish Succession* (London, 1960); C.R. Middleton, *The Administration of Newcastle and Pitt: The Departments of State and the Conduct of the War, 1754-60 with particular reference to the Campaigns in North America* (Exeter, 1968); G.W. Morgan, *The Impact of War on the Administration of the Army, Navy and Ordnance in Britain, 1739-54* (Leicester, 1977); J.L. Pimlott, *The Administration of the British Army, 1783-1793* (Leicester, 1975)

^[4] For the relations between the Secretaries of State and the Secretary at War see, M.A. Thomson, *The Secretaries of State, 1681-1782* (Oxford, 1932), pp. 65-77. See also, T. Hayter, *The Army and the Crowd in Mid-Georgian England* (London, 1978), pp. 54-74.

^[5] There was no single official that fulfilled this function until 1794 when a Secretary for War was created.

^[6] See for example, G.A. Jacobsen, *William Blathwayt: A Late Seventeenth Century Administrator* (Oxford, 1933); T. Hayter, (ed.), *An Eighteenth Century Secretary at War: The Papers of William Viscount Barrington* (London, 1988).

^[7] Particularly useful are WO1 (in letters), WO3 (out letters- Commander in Chief), WO 4 (out letters- Secretary at War)

^[8] While petitions can be found in all volumes, a whole volume of undated petitions can be found in SP41/48

^[9] SP 41/25, Robert Browne to Earl of Rochford, 22 March 1769

^[10] SP 41/12, Yonge to Harrington, 10 May 1740

^[11] SP 41/12, Newcastle to Yonge, 25 March 1740

^[12] The notification of royal decisions can be found throughout the series, and collated lists of applications for commissions can be found in the bundles SP41/45 to SP41/47. The parchment commissions can be found in SP41/41 to SP41/44.

^[13] SP 41/11, Commissions to the Marine Regiments, enclosed in Yonge to Harrington, 10 December 1739

^[14] SP 41/18, Weymouth to Secretary at War, 14 June 1779

^[15] SP 41/25, f. 20, 40a, Barrington to Conway, 30 July 1765

^[16] SP 41/16, Yonge to Stone, 08 November 1745

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