

History of The Royal Sussex Regiment

"The Orange Lillies"



The "Orange Lillies" at Louisburg, 1758 in a watercolour by R. Simkin

The Regiment was raised in Belfast in 1701 by Arthur Chichester, 3rd Earl of Donegall who owned large estates in the north of Ireland. As a mark of his favour to the Earl who raised the Regiment at his own expense, King William III gave permission for the officers and soldiers to wear orange facings on their uniforms. It is a curious coincidence that the family name, Chichester, of the Regiment's first Colonel should be the same as that of the City which was the Regiment's home for many years. The Regiment's seniority number was 35, but it was first known as The Belfast Regiment or, in common with other Regiments, by the name of its Colonel.

War was declared against France in 1702 and the new Regiment was one of six which were placed on the establishment of the Navy for sea service. They were to serve not as marines but as land forces to make landings as required. A British fleet with the Regiment on board sailed for the coast of Spain and a landing was made near Cadiz. The expedition ultimately failed and a smaller force of which the Regiment was part sailed for the West Indies in order to attack the French and Spanish settlements in the Caribbean. However by the Autumn of 1703 the expedition had suffered so many casualties from yellow fever that it was forced to return home and the Regiment recruited.

There was not much time for recruiting as, early in 1704, the Regiment embarked for Spain where it was to remain for the next three years. During the winter it took part in the gallant defence of Gibraltar for which it was eventually awarded the battle-honour "Gibraltar 1704-5". It lost its first Colonel, the Earl of Donegall, who was killed in 1706 in the fighting at Barcelona although the Regiment itself was not present. In the Spring of 1707 it was at the disastrous Battle of Almansa where the Allies were defeated and the Regiment, in common with many others, was practically wiped out. The shattered remnants returned to Ireland where it was reconstituted. The Colours, which had been lost in the Battle, were amongst those recovered from a Church in Madrid three years later. Except for a seven-year tour in Minorca the Regiment remained in Ireland for the next forty-eight years.



Charles Otway, Colonel of The Regiment 1717-64

Charles Otway was Colonel of The Regiment from 1717 to 1764. During this long period the Regiment was known as "Otways" and, shortly before his death he turned down an offer of £6,000 for the Colonelcy.

The Seven Years War, which saw Britain supporting Prussia against France, Austria, Russia and others, was declared in the spring of 1756. British troops fought in Europe, India and the America with the 35th sailing for North America.

On 9th August 1757 it formed part of the garrison of Fort William Henry when it was overwhelmed by a superior French force under General Montcalm and forced to surrender. The British were allowed to march out with the honours of war, however the French were unable to control their Native American allies and some members of the Regiment and their families were massacred - the story is told in James Fenimore Cooper's novel "The Last of the Mohicans". Present on 27th July 1758 at the capture of Louisburg on Cape Breton Island, the following year the Regiment took its revenge on Montcalm. On 13th September 1759 it fought on the right of the British line under General Wolfe at Quebec. Facing it across the battlefield was the French Regiment Royal Roussillon - however, the steady fire of the British soon broke the French who turned and fled. Regimental tradition states that the men of the 35th picked up the frenchmen's plumes and palced them in their own headdress. In 1881 the "Roussillon Plume" was incorporated in the badge of the Royal Sussex Regiment. The 13th September was commemorated annually as Quebec Day, and the Regimental Depot at Chichester is still called Roussillon Barracks. Further Battle Honours for the capture of Havannah and Martinique were added before the Seven Years War ended in 1763.



Charles Lennox, Colonel of The Regiment 1803-18

The Regiment returned to North America once more to fight in the War of Independence. It saw some tough fighting, against many who had been comrades only a few years earlier; at the Battles of Bunker Hill, Brooklyn and White Plains. After garrison duties in New York City the Regiment took part in the capture of St. Lucia and remained in the Caribbean until returning to England in 1785.

In 1782 George III added county titles to infantry regiments in order to help recruiting and it became the 35th (or Dorsetshire) Regiment although the reason for the connection with Dorset is not known. The first real connection with Sussex came in 1787 when Charles Lennox, later to succeed his uncle and become 4th Duke of Richmond, joined the Regiment - Lennox not only recruited Sussex men for the Regiment from his family estates in the County but, in 1804, obtained Royal permission for the title "Sussex" to be transferred from the 25th Regiment of Foot (later to become the King's Own Scottish Borderers) to the 35th.

Against Napoleon

Lennox was in command of the Regiment in 1794 in the West Indies where casualties from sickness were again far more numerous than those inflicted by the French. In 1799 a 2nd Battalion of the Regiment was formed, mainly of men of Sussex and both Battalions went to serve in Holland under General Abercrombie. Ensign John Renton distinguished himself by saving the Colours of the 1st Battalion from capture in hand-to-hand fighting at the Battle of Bergen. The following year both Battalions played a prominent part in the capture of Malta from the French and the King's Colour of the Regiment was the first British flag to be hoisted on the ramparts after the capture of the Island. The Regiment was also stationed in Malta in 1804 and it was a subaltern of The Royal Sussex Regiment, Lieutenant Thorpe, who lowered the Union Flag for the last time on the day on which the Island was granted her independence.

The 1st Battalion remained in the Mediterranean and on 4th July 1806 distinguished itself at a resounding victory over the French at Maida in southern Italy where the steadfast British line defeated the French columns which had previously driven every continental army before them. Until Napoleon's final defeat, the 1st Battalion continued to serve in the Ionian islands. On 15th June 1815 a ball was given in Brussels by the Duchess of Richmond, the wife of the Colonel of the 35th when news broke of Napoleon's entry into Belgium. The 2nd Battalion was with a reserve brigade at Hal near Waterloo and took no part in the fighting. Following the decisive victory the 2nd Battalion took part in the allied Victory March through Paris and formed part of the Army of Occupation before being disbanded.

A Royal Regiment - Orange to Blue

The Regiment spent five years stationed in Ireland before serving in the West Indies for ten years. It was highly commended for the help it gave to the inhabitants of Barbados after the hurricane of 1831 in which 2,500 were killed. On its return home in 1832 the Regiment was given the title 'Royal' by King William IV in recognition of its outstanding achievements. As a result of this honour the old orange facings on the uniforms gave way to the blue facings of a 'Royal' Regiment. The background of the Regimental Colour was also changed from orange to blue. Perhaps this change of the colour of the facings was timely as the Regiment was due for another tour of duty in Ireland. This was followed by eleven years in Mauritius where it was commended by the Governor for its good conduct.

Following the long peace after Waterloo, the Regiment was to serve a number of times in India. At the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 it was in Burma, but was swiftly deployed to Calcutta where it helped to disarm six Regiments of Native Infantry. After service against the mutineers during the next two years, the Regiment was presented with new Colours on 26th February 1859 at Meerut by Lady Canning, the wife of the Governor-General (these Colours would be laid up in Chichester Cathedral in 1928). In 1863 at Fyzabad, the 35th was to have its first association with the 107th Foot who would subsequently become the Regiment's 2nd Battalion.

Raised at Chinsurah, India in 1853 for service with the Honourable East India Company as the 3rd Regiment of Bengal European Infantry. In 1859, 500 men chose to take their discharge rather than remain in the Indian Army. Their places were filled by members of British Regiments, but in 1861 it became part of the British Army where it was known as the 107th (Bengal Infantry) Regiment. In 1863, 78 men of the 35th Regiment volunteered to join them at Lucknow. In 1875 when the 107th arrived in England for the first time it shared a Depot with the 35th at Chichester. When, in 1881, the 35th and 107th were amalgamated to form the 1st and 2nd Battalions The Royal Sussex Regiment, the Maltese cross of the 107 formed part of the Regiment's insignia with the Roussillon Plume commemorating the 35th's part at Quebec.

In 1882, the 1st Bn was sent to Egypt where it would take part in the Battle of Abu Klea filling the breach of a square broken by the Dervishes. Later, some 20 men under Captain Lionel Trafford manned the two Nile Steamers which arrived just days too late to save General Gordon in Khartoum. The 2nd Bn spent many years in India taking part in the Hazara Campaign of 1888 and the Punjab and Tirah Campaigns of 1897-98. During the Boer War, the 1st Bn served along with the 3rd (Militia) Bn - among their duties was to guard Boer POWs on St Helena. Also serving were members of the Regiment's three Volunteer Battalions who formed three successive Active Service Companies to reinforce the 1st Battalion.

This was the first time that Volunteer Units had served abroad. Some members of the Regiment rode horses and took on the role of Mounted Infantry forming mobile columns to round up Boer Commandos.

Despite many entreaties to be sent to Flanders, the 1st Bn spent the First World War on the North West Frontier of India. The 2nd Bn remained in France for the War, losing 1,723 Officers and Men killed. The 4th Bn saw action in Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine before being sent to France. Whilst serving with the 2nd Bn at Aubers Ridge (May 9th 1915), the 5th (Cinque Ports) Bn received heavy casualties. It later served in Italy. The remaining Service Battalions saw action in all theatres of war, including Palestine where the Sussex Yeomanry served dismounted and fought as the 16th Battalion of the Regiment. In 1919, the 11th (Southdown) Bn saw action in Russia. In all, the Regiment lost 6,800 members whose names are recorded in the Regimental Chapel of St George in Chichester Cathedral.