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A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE DEFENCE FORCES OF SOMERSETSHIRE

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The defence of the individual, of the family, of the tribe and the community is as ancient as humanity itself: our ancient earthworks, our legends and our earliest history bear witness to the age-long interplay of aggression and protection. It is not, however, until we arrive at the end of the 7th century and the emergence of a more or less stabilised government after the centuries of chaos, which followed the decay of Roman administration in England, that we can trace something of the organisation of military forces in England in general and in the south-west in particular. In the reign of Caedwalla (685-688) the existence of a force of freemen between the ages of 16 and 60 is recorded, and this force was responsible not only for fighting, when this became necessary, but also for the construction and upkeep of forts, bridges and strategic communications. Caedwalla's successor, Ine, who consolidated the shire of Somerset, continued with a Fyrd, as the force was called, of much the same pattern — a force which was liable for service in war and to act as custodian of the peace under the organisation and direction of the ealdorman of the shire.

A hundred and fifty years later when King Alfred (871-899) succeeded in driving the Danes from Wessex — it is recorded that in the fighting by the Fyrd the men of Somerset played a major part[1]—the defence force was overhauled and modernised. Alfred seems to have been the first to create a recognised "officer-class" by appointing selected Thegns (owners of five hides of land) to be responsible not only for leading units and sub-units of the Fyrd but also for the lay-out and maintenance of a strategically organised system of strong points, "burghs", for use both as bases of static defence and pivots of mobile manoeuvre: he also introduced the administrative subdivision of the shire into Hundreds and arranged a system of "staggering" the call-up for service in the field so as to enable him to prolong the total period for which his forces could be kept in action. The Fyrd remained a part-time force until the early

[1] Hence the motto of the County "Sumorsaete Ealle"—"all the men of Somerset", who came to meet Alfred two days before the Battle of Ethandun (A.D. 878).

11th century when Cnut (1016-1035) added to it a whole-time element in the form of his Danish bodyguard, a force of some two to three thousand professional fighting men.

This was the pattern of the force which Harold (1066) adopted and used so successfully at Stamford Bridge against the Norwegian invaders, but which met with last-minute disaster at Hastings.

After the Norman Conquest, William I's military requirements included defence and internal security in England as well as the provision of an expeditionary force for use on the Continent. These requirements were met by retaining the Fyrd for home defence (with the Thegnhood replaced by a system of Knight-service) and raising a potential expeditionary force under the Feudal System by which the barons had to provide a specified number of troops, supported by professional whole-time soldiers[2] employed in the defence of vital points such as Royal castles and lands.

By the end of the 11th century the Fyrd under the control of the ealdorman had become the Militia under the Sheriff of the County who was responsible for mustering the levies and also for the custody of the royal castles. As early in the Norman period as 1067 the Militia in Somerset were called out to repel the landing of Harold's brother near Porlock, and later during Robert's rebellion and in Stephen's reign there was fighting about Bath, Ilchester, Castle Cary and Dunster, as well as in other areas.

As the years passed the feudal system began to fail as the practice of buying-off liability for service increased. Towards the end of the 12th century Henry II established the Militia as the Constitutional Force, and at his Assize at Arms in 1181 in effect gave the Militia their first charter. As formerly, all fit men between the ages of 16 and 60 were declared liable for training and service, and a scale of armour and arms to be provided by knights, free laymen, burgesses and the " ommunity of freemen" was laid down. Minor amendments to the system were made during the 13th century, but in 1285 the main principles laid down at the Assize were confirmed by Edward I in the Statute of Winchester which provided the first parliamentary sanction for the compulsory arraying of the Militia, and for payment for service to levies acting outside their own county. Edward's "forward policy" towards Scotland, Wales and France increased

2 It is about this period that the term "soldier" appeared — i.e. a professional man of war who earned pay in *solidi* or *soldi* for his service.

the need for an expeditionary force: this he raised by voluntary enlistment, or alternatively by empressment, from the Militia. In Somerset, levies were raised for service in Wales, Scotland and Gascony — a most unpopular service, particularly as at this time it had to be paid for by the County, and not the Crown. This situation was righted by Edward III in a Statute of 1327 which provided that no man should be compelled to leave his shire except to meet invasion, and that forces serving abroad (a term which included Wales and Scotland) should be paid by the Crown — at the princely sum of 2d. *per diem*.

During the 13th century the control of the Militia passed from the Sheriff to the Constable of the County, assisted by the Constables of Hundreds, and then back to the Sheriff. In 1403 Henry IV affirmed the right of the Crown to the supreme control of all the armed forces— an affirmation which remained unchallenged until the early 17th century — re-affirmed the powers of the Commissions of Array in counties, and made the Sheriffs of counties responsible for the organisation and administration of the Militia[3].

During the 14th century the Militia in Somerset were called upon for various defence services such as the provision of 200 bowmen for the defence of Plymouth, and the garrisoning of smaller ports and harbours in expectation of a French invasion.

In the 15th century the County was not seriously involved in that "miserable and disastrous period", the Wars of the Roses: there was fighting at Taunton, which was besieged by the Yorkist Earl of Devon, and there were sporadic episodes from time to time until "the mist of medievalism melted in the sunshine of the Renaissance" with the coming of the first of the Tudor Kings in 1485.

Henry VII, not surprisingly, keenly appreciated the need for a strong and efficient Constitutional Force, and in addition to increasing the liability for military service to include holders of office or fees under the Crown and holders of honours and lands under letters patent, he, like Cnut before him, raised a permanent Royal Bodyguard—which, as the Yeoman of the Guard, still exists. It is under the vigorous foreign policy of the Tudors and because of the opposition and jealousies which that policy engendered that a great phase of expansion of the Militia now begins.

[3] Among his other duties, the Sheriff was responsible for the collection of 6 wing feathers from each goose for the shafts of the bowmen.

In 1511, two years after coming to the throne, Henry VIII issued a writ to Sheriffs of Counties for "the better enforcement of the Statute of Winchester" and at the same time instituted Commissions of Array for the provision of the forces he needed for his projected campaign in France. A year later the Militia were arrayed in Somerset for the defence of the Bristol Channel coast. The strength arrayed at that time is not recorded, but 12 years later, in 1524, the muster-returns show 3,020 archers and 6,900 billmen. From that time onwards there were ever-increasing demands to be met, and by 1544 Somerset's quota of the levy raised by the King for service overseas in France was 7,825 men plus horses, transport vehicles, supplies and cash. In Somerset, as in the west country at large, this military contribution was disliked so much as to give rise to civil disturbances: in consequence Henry appointed Lord Russell to be his personal "lieutenant" in Dorset, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall and made him responsible for restoring order and for general military organisation acting through Commissions formed in each county and through the Sheriffs. Thus "The King's Lieutenant" emerged — at first for a group of counties — the prototype of the present day Lord Lieutenant. Uncertainties and discontents in the reigns of Edward VI and Queen Mary formed an uneasy inheritance for Queen Elizabeth I who at the beginning of her reign was faced by the possibilities of unrest or even rebellion at home as well as aggression by her enemies from overseas. One of the Queen's earliest Acts was to appoint Commissioners to form "Associations" of county notables. In Somerset we find such familiar names as Popham, Speke and Windham as Commissioners, and Luttrell, Paulet and Phelips among the names of those appointed as "capitaynes" to lead "the first thousand footmen of Somerset" (the first recorded instance of the grouping of the Militia of the Hundreds into a larger unit).

Early in 1560 the muster-returns showed a strength of 5,330 men "all fairly furnished with weapons" in Somerset, a number which later that year rose to 6,770 "Ablemen" and 5,493 not fully trained. To train and organise such a large number necessitated some decentralisation of control and at about this time Deputy Lieutenants were appointed to call musters, to fine absentees, to administer discipline and to carry out tactical planning such as the siting of beacons and strong points.

In 1569, when the Pope absolved English Roman Catholics from allegiance to the Queen and the attitude of the Roman Catholic Powers of Spain and France became menacing, preparations for defence were intensified and every resource was exploited: archery was encouraged in the villages—even among the children—particular attention was given to horse-breeding, and everyone (including the Bishop, Dean and Chapter of Wells[4]) contributed something towards the protection of the county.

By 1572 some 7,000 ablemen were mustered in Somerset: by 1580 the number had risen to 12,000 able footmen, 47 demi-lances, 38 light horse and, probably, a far larger number of private horse. Of this force 4,000 were allotted to the formation of a mobile reserve for reinforcing the maritime counties (e.g. Dorset and Devon) and were organised in four units each of one thousand: the remainder were organised in their Hundreds to be trained as "bands" (probably the origin of the Trained Bands of the Stuart period). In 1584 the Association of Somerset, sitting at Quarter Sessions at Wells, reported to the Privy Council that Somerset had disposed 3,000 men for the defence of their Bristol Channel coast; that there were towers and cannon at Porlock, Hurlstone, Uphill, etc.; that watchers and beacons were ready; that households were organised for service; that all of age were under training in the use of arms and armour; that children were being trained in archery, and that musters of the Militia were being held every two months. In 1587 and again in 1588 the Muster Master, an official appointed by the Queen's Lieutenant, reported in extremely favourable terms upon military preparedness in Somerset saying "I assure your Lordship it doth exceed annie county that ever I came in . . . The truth is it is a most gallant county for men of armour and readiness".

As it turned out, there was no work for this brave array; for, when the long-expected expedition from Spain took the high seas, the Armada, first sighted off the Isle of Wight, was driven up the Channel by the ships of Drake and Hawkins to their doom and the battle passed from the West.

It seems that, not unnaturally, a considerable reaction set in after so many years of intense effort and the Deputy Lieutenants (by now the Sheriff had shed the last of his responsibilities towards

4 The Bishop, 4 light horse and 10 lances; the Dean and the Sub-Dean, each 1 lance; the Chapter, 2 lances.

the Militia) had a difficult task to maintain interest in the subject of defence. At the beginning of the 17th century the first of the Stuart Kings found the Militia to have sadly fallen away in efficiency, and both James I and Charles I were greatly concerned to remedy this state of affairs. It was, it will be remembered, a conflict of views upon the control of the Constitutional Force which was the culminating point in the unhappy dispute between King and Parliament. Parliament presented a Bill claiming the right to nominate Lieutenants of Counties and to place the control of the Militia and the Trained Bands under both Houses: in return, King Charles rejected the Bill and proclaimed himself Head of the Constitutional Force—as his predecessor Henry IV had done two centuries earlier. Nevertheless, in 1642 Parliament passed an Ordinance under which they began to appoint Lieutenants (Lord Hertford, the then existing Lieutenant, was appointed to Somerset, but refused the appointment and was replaced by Lord Bedford).

As soon as it was seen that the struggle between King and Parliament could be resolved only by resort to arms, both parties endeavoured to raise the Militia to their own support — the King by Commissions of Array in accordance with the ancient constitutional practice, Parliament by a Militia Ordinance. The resulting confusion and uncertainty led to the splitting of the Militia into local factions, the raising of a number of small private armies, and a great deal of unorganised fighting. In Somerset, where leaders such as Lord Hertford, Lord Bath and Lord Paulet were active in organising Royalist forces, the struggle swayed first one way, then another until finally the County, like the remainder of the country came under the sway of the Lord Protector and the Major Generals. On the Militia, rent in two and not always consistent in its temporary allegiances, the Civil War had lamentable results.

Charles II at his restoration lost no time in trying to provide himself with an effective Constitutional Force: in addition to constituting a small, whole-time, Standing Army out of the remains of the Parliamentary New Model Army, he reconstituted the Militia by a series of Militia Acts passed in 1661 and the two following years, and succeeded in producing an organisation which endured, practically unaltered, for the next hundred years. In this organisation the Trained Bands had no place, excepting in London and the greater cities, and once again the Militia was established as the

defence force; Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants had the powers restored to them which they had held under Charles I; the liability for service between the ages of 16 and 60 was arranged on a property-qualification, and it was made clear that no militia could be compelled to serve out of the Kingdom. The reorganisation does not seem to have produced very satisfactory results so far as Somerset was concerned when, in 1685, the Militia was called up at the time of the Monmouth rebellion. The five units in the County, centred respectively on Bath, Wells, Crewkerne, Taunton and Bridgwater were arrayed by the Lieutenant, the Duke of Somerset, for the preservation of law and order, for the repression of sympathisers with Monmouth, and for delaying him after his landing so as to gain time for the deployment of the Standing Army. In none of these objects can the Militia be said to have succeeded: the battalions from Crewkerne and Taunton on making contact with Monmouth's scratch force near Axminster made "a remarkably rapid and unpremeditated strategic movement to the rear" (*vide Victoria History of Somerset*) leaving officers and their colours behind them; there were wholesale desertions from the battalion at Wells; the battalion at Bridgwater does not seem to have come into the picture at all, and it was only at Bath that the Militia stoutly refused Monmouth's demand for surrender. It was not until after the battle at Sedgemoor that the Taunton battalion re-appeared to form a cordon across the county from the north coast to Dorset and to round up and guard prisoners — a duty shared with them by the newly-raised "regular" unit which in course of time was to bear the honoured title of The Somerset Light Infantry.

The landing of William III at Torbay, four years later, left Somerset militarily unmoved, and, with the exception of a mild repercussion from "The Forty Five", which resulted in the raising of a volunteer company of Foot by Ralph Allen at Bath and something similar at Hinton St. George by the second Lord Poulett, the Militia seems to have faded away until only two units remained, each consisting of seven companies, each company 60 strong. This situation seems to have lasted until 1757 when "An Act for the Better Ordering of the Militia Forces in the Several Counties of that Part of Great Britain called England" was introduced by William Pitt. By this Act a new principle was introduced in the selection of men for service in the Militia by ballot. The Militia were made liable to come under the provisions of the Annual Mutiny Act when

under training or under Articles of War. All between the ages of 17 and 50 were liable for service for three years, and *quotas* for each County were laid down — Somerset's *quota* being the modest number of 840. Even this demand proved to be distasteful, particularly when it was found that of the two battalions which were formed the 1st was sent for duty to Plymouth and the 2nd to Bideford (prior to going to Guildford where in 1763 it was disbanded).

During the War of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars there came a great expansion of the Defence Force comparable with that of Tudor times. At the end of the 18th century Militia-service was less popular than ever, and in consequence it was decided to expand the Militia by the creation of additional volunteer companies, troops and batteries. In 1794, under the stimulus of the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Poulett, who explained the scheme to the Commissioners (the prototype of the Territorial Army Association of today), recruiting was opened in the County. The City of Bath was the first to move — and to move swiftly. Within a month the Somerset Fencible Cavalry had been raised there and had six troops at nearly full strength. The movement spread rapidly throughout the County and at the end of about seven weeks a regiment of Fencible Cavalry, eight troops of Yeomanry Cavalry, and a regiment and ten companies of Fencible Infantry had been raised. This was excellent so far as it went, but it became obvious that volunteering was being carried on at the expense of the Militia which was still low in public esteem. In 1796 it was decided to increase the Militia by 60,000 men and at the same time to raise another 15,000 volunteers and 20,000 Provisional Cavalry (cavalry of militia-type, unpopular and short-lived). Somerset's *quota* of Militia was 2,960 organised as the East Somerset Regiment of Militia under command of the Earl of Cork and Orrery and the West Somerset Regiment of Militia under command of Lord Poulett. A great wave of recruiting and volunteering followed: between the years 1798 and 1804, 115 units and sub-units came into being. Every town, every village, was full of volunteers in the colourful uniforms of the time, drilling and marching: by the end of 1804 there were 20,000 volunteers in arms in Somerset resolved to defend their county and their country from the invasion which Napoleon so obviously intended to carry out. In the end, the invasion — like that other intended invasion of 1588 — failed to materialise, and again re-action set in. By the time

that the threat was dissipated enthusiasm for military service was on the wane, and soon the Home Defence forces began to melt away, until only a few units were left in the County — notably the Yeomanry Cavalry, the Frome and East Mendip Volunteer Cavalry reconstituted by the Prince Regent in 1814 as the North Somerset Yeomanry, and the West Somerset Regiment of Gentlemen and Yeomanry Cavalry which became the West Somerset Yeomanry.

From the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the middle of the 19th century military activity, Regular and Auxiliary, remained at a low ebb, though both the Somerset Yeomanry Regiments and some temporarily-raised local troops were employed from time to time to support the Civil Power in quelling the various disturbances connected with the agitation for Reform.

The Crimean War (1853-55) afforded a painful illustration of the depths to which our military organisation had sunk, and in 1859-60 a sudden sharp dispute with Napoleon III caused anxiety about the obvious inadequacy of our Home Defence. By this time the production of a rifle in place of the old smooth-bore musket had stimulated interest in civilian circles and a number of rifle-clubs had been formed: the Government now decided to try to exploit this interest and to encourage the clubs to form "rifle volunteer corps". In Somerset there were no such clubs, but in 1859 St. Decuman's Cricket Club at Williton resolved to constitute themselves a rifle volunteer Corps, and by November of that year had got thirty members. At a meeting of Deputy Lieutenants in Taunton the idea for forming volunteer corps was generally approved and by the end of 1859 action was being taken in this respect by some fourteen districts in the County. During the year which followed these corps were loosely grouped into three "administrative battalions", at respectively Bath, Wells (which later gave way to Weston-super-Mare) and Taunton, for general administration and co-ordination of training.

In 1863 it was enacted that these new rifle-volunteers should be considered as liable for military service in the event of invasion (after the need for call-up had been reported to the House of Commons); that a capitation-grant of 3d. per efficient volunteer should be made to corps, and that the establishment of each unit should include a professional, whole-time adjutant and staff-instructors. Eight years later, in 1871, the control of Volunteers was

vested in the Crown and commissions to Volunteer-officers were issued, and signed, by the Queen and not by the Lord Lieutenant as had been the procedure until that time.

In 1882 a "Consolidation Act" provided for the constitution of "administrative battalions" as operational units bearing the title of the appropriate County Regiment, e.g. 1st Volunteer Battalion Somerset Light Infantry. Thus the volunteer force became fixed within the general framework of the Army — and so remained until in 1907 the Auxiliary Forces of the Crown were re-organised, the ancient title Militia was exchanged for Special Reserve, and the Volunteers became the Territorial Army.

It is at this point that this outline-account must end — not because there is no more to record but because the achievements of the auxiliary forces of Somerset in the War in South Africa, in the Great War and in the Second World War and after are such as to demand a volume to themselves. In ending, it is not irrelevant perhaps to seek to emphasize the theme of part-time service in defence — sometimes by direction, sometime purely voluntary— which runs through our history and how often that history repeats itself. The Saxon Fyrd of King Alfred; the Militia levies of Queen Elizabeth I; the Militia, the Fencibles and the Yeomanry and the Volunteers of the Napoleonic age; these and their fellows combined to build up the tradition which in 1940 inspired the Local Defence Volunteers, later the Home Guard, to spring up overnight in response to a call from the Secretary of State for War to defend their country and their homes from German invasion. In Somerset there were nine Home Guard battalions who kept watch and ward— at first with shot-guns and cudgels in their hands — for nearly five long years (and were temporarily revived in a later emergency). It was this same tradition, this same inheritance of the spirit of active defence, which prompted the response to the call for precautions against air raids and, later, for the constitution of a Civil Defence Corps — which exists today to carry out voluntary unpaid service preparing itself for the rescue and succour of injured and homeless in disaster arising out of any cause.

From Saxon times to Queen Elizabeth II the picture is aptly presented by Captain Thos. Orde, the Queen's Muster Master in 1588, when he wrote of the County of Somerset that it was "so well furnisht with able bodies and comely personages that I assure your Lordship it doth exceed any County that ever I came in".