Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

OFFICERS MESS UNIFORM H270

Mess uniforms first appeared in the British Army in about 1845. The original purpose was to provide a relatively comfortable and inexpensive alternative to the stiff and elaborate full dress uniforms then worn by officers for evening social functions such as regimental dinners or balls. Mess dress is still worn by officers and non-commissioned officers in the army, navy and air force when attending social events.

The colour and style of the uniform varies according to regiment, but generally a short mess jacket is worn along with a waistcoat. The jacket either fastens at the neck or is worn with a white shirt and black bow tie (as would have been the case with the mess uniform in this box). Most British Army regiments' mess dress also has high-waisted, very tight trousers known as overalls, the bottoms of which buckle under heeled boots (or 'mess wellies').

The mess uniform in this box is that of the Royal Engineers. As a named regiment their origin lies in the early eighteenth century. On 26 May 1716 a Royal Warrant of George I authorised the Royal Regiment of Artillery and the Corps of Engineers as separate entities. In 1787 they were granted the title the Royal Engineers. Commissions were awarded on merit, unlike the cavalry or infantry, where they were purchased. Engineer and Gunner officers received their professional training at the Royal Military Academy, at Woolwich. Their nick-name is the Sappers - which derives from the fact that construction of saps or trenches to enable the enemy fortifications to be assaulted was one of the tasks which they frequently had to perform. In today's army engineers perform a variety of tasks, from bricklaying to surveying.



Right: Dress uniform of the Royal Artillery.

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Mess Jacket



The tailor's label inside the collar tells us that this jacket was made by Flight's Ltd. of New Burlington Street, London. The jacket is dated 5 October 1928. Its owner is given as Lieutenant E. C. Croghan.

The badge on the lapels is that of the Royal Engineers. It represents an eighteenth century grenade with flames coming from it. An embroidered grenade was first worn on the tail of a Royal Engineer's officer's full dress scarlet coatee in 1824, and in the following year a brass grenade was introduced for other ranks of the Royal Sappers and Miners. The grenade was later worn on the epaulet and then on the collar. The number of flames to the grenade has varied, but in 1922 a nine-flamed grenade, with the motto 'Ubique' below it, was authorised. The Royal Artillery grenade is similar, but has only seven flames. Ubique means everywhere in Latin. The reason often given for this motto is that the artillery and engineers have served everywhere the army has been, too many places to name in battle honours.

The shoulders of the jacket are decorated with three buttons, or pips, as they are more usually called. This tells us that Lieutenant Croghan at some point became a captain. In the British army ranks are indicated by pips and other badges on the shoulder. A lieutenant wears only two pips.

The emblems (three crowns) and motto ('Tria juncta in uno') is that of the senior order of British Knighthood - the Order of Bath. Since 1830 a modified Star of the Bath with the motto and three crowns has served as the rank badge in most of the British Army.

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Waistcoat



The tailor's label inside the waistcoat belt tells us that this jacket was made by J. Daniels & Co. of Artillery Place, Woolwich. The waistcoat is dated August 1922. Its owner is given as C. T. (?) Seagrim. This is probably Cyril Seagrim who, although his own military career seems to have be undistinguished, was the brother of Derek and Hugh Seagrim the only two members of the same family who have both been awarded the Victoria and the George Cross.

The Seagrim family came from the class who, in the nineteenth century, either followed a career in the army or the church. Their grandfather fought in the Crimea while their father, the Reverend Charles Paulet Cunningham Seagrim, began his career in the church as a missionary in Basutoland. Altogether four of his sons joined the army. Hugh was executed by the Japanese in 1944 for leading a guerrilla campaign behind enemy lines in Burma. He was awarded the Victoria Cross after his death. Derek was killed in 1943 fighting the Germans in Tunisia. Cyril's career in the Royal Engineers seems to have been less eventful.

Trousers



The tailor and owner of this pair of trousers are unknown. Several of the buttons are marked F. Phillips & Co. Cairo. Whether these are original or replacements is unclear. All of the items of uniform in this box show signs being carefully repaired.