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The organisation of the landward services in the first decade of the 21st Century largely reflects a structure adopted in the second decade of the 20th as the military minds of the time sought to surmount the challenges of industrial warfare as encountered in the trenches of World War One (WWI, 1914-1918).

A hundred-and-ten years ago when the British Army mobilised for the South African War (1899-1902), military organisation generally and infantry organisation specifically hardly resembled the current model. The infantry team, section and platoon, as we know it today, did not exist; and, the company, as well as the battalion, were different creatures also.

"When the Second (Special Service) Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment formed the first Canadian contingent to South Africa, the battalion organization followed the British example, as had the Militia for many years," wrote Captain Michael O'Leary in "The Canadian Infantry Section Attack Part One: Attrition Training in a Manoeuvre Army". [i] The battalion's companies consisted of 125 men commanded by a captain, with two or three lieutenants, and included four sergeants, four corporals and two lance corporals. The officers were "more understudies to the OC [officer commanding] than platoon commanders [ii]," he wrote in an article entitled "The 21st Century Infantry Company."

O'Leary continues in his Infantry Section primer that the "company was the basic tactical unit; it drilled as one entity and was seldom split." When this was required, a "half company" would be task-organised under command of one of the lieutenants and detached from the company. The NCOs [non commissioned officers] had administrative and training responsibilities, but did not exercise independent tactical command over groups of men." In the second article he elaborated NCOs "provided technical expertise in musketry, drill and daily living for the soldiery; they were the professionals while the officer corps still dabbled in chivalric

ideals of command through example rather than knowledge.

"The rifle and bayonet remained the mainstay and only true infantry weapon of the time. Battalions might have a few machine-guns or infantry howitzers, but these were seen as anomalous to purists. Tactically, the company was handled much the same as it had been in Wellington [iii] 's era. Hundred-man companies grouped in battalions; deployed in close order to repel cavalry, or open order to minimise the effects of artillery. Lines of infantry trading volleys, until one or the other was morally weakened enough to be defeated by the bayonet."

Origin of terms

Few today know the origin of the terms we use, yet they are of more than academic origin; as is the military ranks with which they are so closely identified with. Raymond Oliver, in Why is the Colonel Called "Kernal"? [iv] notes the rank "captain", long identified with company command, comes from the Latin word "*capitaneus*" that meant "chieftain", which in turn came from an older Latin word "*caput*" that meant "head". Oliver writes a captain could head a unit of any size "but as armies evolved his post came to be at the head of a company, which by the 16th Century was usually 100 to 200 men. That seemed to be the number one man could manage in battle."

In the late European Middle Ages (1300-1500) so-called "free companies" of mercenaries, headed by a captain who was both military commander and businessman, offered their services to the highest bidder. When takers were few, these companies would pillage and plunder the countryside or threaten a town with the sack, unless their ransom demand was met.

It is likely that to help put an end to this anarchy that round 1505 King Ferdinand II of Aragon (Spain) started grouping companies together into "*colunelas*" or columns. These consisted of about 1000 to 1250 men under a "*cabo de colunela*" or "head of the column". Since the *colunelas* were royal or "crown" units, rather than mercenary, they were also called "coronelias" and their commanders "coronels". From this the current rank of "colonel." According to Oliver, the French copied the colunela idea from the Spanish and from it developed their regimental system. The British in turn copied the French.

In the absence of a staff system as understood today, the regiment had to improvise an administrative system. Discussing the modern rank "major, Oliver noted one way this was done:

"Sometimes the captains of the companies making up the regiment would choose one of themselves as colonel, another as lieutenant colonel and a third as sergeant major (major meaning 'greater' as compared to minor that means 'less.' 'Lieutenant' means 'in place of' or 'placeholder'. A lieutenant colonel thus acted in place of the colonel when the latter was absent.) Each would still be captain of his own company. In practice the Colonel was often absent looking after his interests at court or playing politics for his own and his regiment's benefit leaving the Lieutenant Colonel as the effective commander of the regiment, aided by the sergeant major who was senior to the other captains." Oliver continues that as the regimental system became permanent during the 17th and 18th Centuries, the "sergeant" portion of the title gave way leaving the major as the regimental staff officer.

There is evidence a regiment consisting of up to 12 companies was somewhat clumsy and the battalion, or "battle squadron" was introduced as an intermediate level of command. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* notes the term "battalion" entered French then English from the Italian "*battaglione*" from around the 1580s. By 1708 its meaning as "part of a regiment" was established.

From the mid 17th to the mid 18th Century , the b attalion was the smallest tactical unit in the Swedish Army. At the time it was still an *ad hoc* unit formed just before battle "by joining four foot companies from a foot regiment of eight companies. The commander, an Överste (Colonel), led the first battalion and his deputy, a Överstelöjtnant (Lieutenant Colonel) the second battalion."

As an aside, the concept "brigade" was reportedly invented as a tactical unit by the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) to to overcome the lack of coordination between his regiments. According to the wikipedia

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- Captain Michael O'Leary, The 21st Century Infantry Company, undated, http://regimentalrogue.com/papers/21st.htm , accessed February 1, 2011. First published in The Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin (Vol. 2, No. 1), February 1999.
- Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769 – 1852) was an Anglo-Irish soldier and statesman, and one of the leading military and political figures of the 19th century. His most remembered military victory was the defeat of French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo on the outskirts of Brussels, Belgium, in June 1815.
- Raymond Oliver, Why is the Colonel Called "Kernal"? The Origin of the Ranks and Rank Insignia Now Used by the United States Armed Forces, Office of History, Sacramento Air Logistics Center, McClellan AFB, August 1983, available online at http://www.afhso.af.mil/topics/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=15294 and http://www.history.navy.mil/trivia/trivia04.htm , both accessed on February 1, 2011.
- Battalion, Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper, from Dictionary.com, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/battalion , accessed February 2, 2011.
- Battalion (Sweden), wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carolines_Battalion , accessed February 2, 2011. As can be inferred here, the German and Swedish equivalent of Colonel, Överste and Oberst, are derived from the term "overseer."
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