

"The Blue Hackle, Tartan Patches and the Kilt"

(An Address to Recruits of the Regiment)

The most common question put to officers and N.C.Os. by recruits is: "Why do the Camerons wear the Blue Hackle?" Furthermore, the tartan patches we wear on the shoulders of our battle dress are rather taken for granted. Do the younger Camerons know that these patches have a story? It is only when one tries to relate the history of the Blue Hackle and the tartan patches that one realises that their story is bound up with the account of the battle for the retention of the kilt at the start of the war in 1939. This account makes one wonder if after all the restoration of the kilt, for all purposes, would not be to the benefit of the Highland Regiments and the Camerons in particular.

The writer, far from pretending to be omniscient on these matters, intends to start the ball rolling with his interpretation of the origin of the Blue Hackle, the tartan patches and the fight for the kilt. This interpretation will, for obvious reasons, have a strong 1st Battalion bias. However, the past editions of the "79th News" have been scoured both to check the writer's memory and to garner facts from other sources. If, as a result of this article, further information is forthcoming which throws more light on their history, then some small service may have been done to those Camerons whose duties are to interpret the past for the benefit of the new Camerons.

This story must begin before the war, when the words, "Once a Cameron always a Cameron," held true. In the summer of 1939 the 1st Battalion, as part of the 2nd Division, was stationed in Malplaquet Barracks, Aldershot. Battle dress had been heard of, but chiefly from such sources as the fourth leader of the "Times" and pictures in "Punch" of slovenly looking creatures in pantaloons, chewing straws and labelled — "Soldiers of the future?" Reports had also arrived to say that the Militia men (now called National Service men), who had just been called up, were being dressed in this queer garb. The 1st Battalion, however, felt safe in its smart service dress jackets with tartan trews for musketry order and the kilt for both ceremonial and field training.

So the war came. On the 23rd September, 1939, the Battalion, as part of the B.E.F., left for France dressed in Field Service Marching Order, consisting of the service dress jacket, with "collar dogs" removed, the kilt and khaki hose and puttees. No kilt aprons or sporrans were worn. The officers carried ash walking sticks. The blow fell not long after the arrival of the Battalion in France. On the 28th September an order was published stating that it had been decided that "the active service dress of Highland Regiments would be the universal battle dress." The reasons given for this order were the impossibility of maintaining the supply of kilts and the unsuitability of this dress for modern war. A similar order abolishing the kilt had been issued by the War Office in 1914, but it had been rescinded the same year.

The news of this order, which reached the Battalion in early November, was greeted with rage and sadness, and no one's wrath was greater than that of the C.O., Lieut.-Col. D. N. Wimberley (now the Colonel of the Regiment). The C.O. felt that this order might well have been deliberately held back until the Camerons and other regular Highland Battalions had been sent overseas, where their ability to appeal against this harsh edict was weakened by distance and the strict war-time censorship of all correspondence from the B.E.F. The C.O. felt that with an effort the kilt might still be retained until the order was again rescinded. The supply situation could be met if the worst came to the worst by the adoption of a universal tartan or even a hoddie grey or khaki kilt. The only new problem presented by modern war was the possible extensive use of gas of the mustard type, which attacks the exposed parts of the body. Lieut.-Col. Wimberley had tackled this very problem at the Anti-Gas School in the U.K. before the War, and he had contended that with special hose tops anti-gas and "pants" anti-gas, a Highland soldier was if anything better protected from the terrors of enemy gas than a "breaked" soldier. Several officers and men, including the C.O. himself, were already