

The origins of officers rank badges.

From medieval times, devices such as pennants and shield patterns though to the full development of heraldry had been used to identify very senior ranks such as the monarch or other leaders of armies. With no nationally organised army, such practises were largely a matter of personal choice and contemporary protocol. More formal military structures evolved out of such developments as Cromwell's New Model Army formed in 1645.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, rank was generally denoted by the quantity of lace and through other decoration used on uniforms. While a crossed sword and baton device was already used by generals by 1800, the different grades of general were only distinguished by the grouping of the buttons on their coats until the Crimean War.

Badges for field officers were first introduced in 1810, and for captains and subaltern officers in 1855. These badges consisted of (and still consist of) crowns and stars, the latter being more likely to be called 'pips' today (although this term is technically incorrect).

The star or 'pip' is that of the Order of the Bath, except in the Household regiments. The Life Guards, Blues and Royals, Grenadier Guards, Coldstream Guards and Welsh Guards use the star of the Order of the Garter, the Scots Guards that of the Order of the Thistle, and the Irish Guards that of the Order of St Patrick. The Crown has varied in the past, with the King's Imperial Crown being used from 1910 until it was replaced by the St Edward's Crown from the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953.

All officers' badges on service dress were originally of gilding metal, except for Rifle regiments and the Royal Army Chaplains' Department, which used bronze instead. A variety of alternative materials and prints have been used on various styles of dress.

Originally insignia were worn on the collar, but were moved to the shoulder boards in 1880 for all officers in full dress, when the system of crowns and stars was reorganised. From this time, until 1902, a Captain had just two stars and a Lieutenant one star. From 1871, the rank of Ensign Cornet in cavalry regiments) was replaced with the rank of Second Lieutenant, which had no insignia. The 1902 change gave the latter a single star and the insignia of Lieutenants and Captains were increased to two and three stars. In addition to the shoulder badges, officers' ranks were also reflected in the amount and pattern of gold lace worn on the cuffs of the full-dress tunic.

From 1902, a complex system of markings with bars and loops in thin drab braid above the cuff (known irreverently as the asparagus bed) was used at first, but this was replaced in the same year by a combination of narrow rings of worsted braid around the cuff, with the full-dress style shoulder badges on a three-pointed cuff flap. Based on equivalent naval ranks, Colonels had four rings of braid, Lieutenant-Colonels and majors three, captains two and subalterns one. In the case of Scottish regiments, the rings were around the top of the gauntlet-style cuff and the badges on the cuff itself. General officers still wore their badges on the shoulder strap.

During World War I, some officers took to wearing similar jackets to the men, with the rank badges on the shoulder, as the cuff badges made them too conspicuous to snipers. This practice was frowned on outside the trenches but was given official sanction in 1917 as an optional alternative, being made permanent in 1920, when the cuff badges were abolished.

Brigadier-Generals wore a crossed sword and baton symbol on its own. In 1922 the rank was replaced with **Colonel-Commandant**, a title that reflected the role more accurately, but which many considered to be inappropriate in a British context. From 1928 the latter was replaced with the rank of Brigadier with the rank insignia used to this day.

Historical ranks

Captain-General: (17th century) a full General

Serjeant-Major-General: (17th century) shortened to Major General

Brigadier-General: replaced by Colonel-Commandant in 1922

Colonel-Commandant: replaced by Brigadier in 1928

Serjeant-Major: (17th century) shortened to Major

Captain-Lieutenant: (ca. 17th & 18th century) the lieutenant of the first company in a regiment, whose captaincy was held by the regimental colonel. On promotion to full captain, the period in this rank was treated as having been a full captain for pay and pension purposes, since he effectively commanded the company

Ensign: lowest subaltern rank in infantry regiments; replaced in 1871 by Second Lieutenant

Cornet: cavalry equivalent of ensign replaced in 1871 by Second Lieutenant.