

King's Corporal and Kitchener Sergeant Appointment

I have been asked a number of times about the appointment of a 'King's Corporal' and had to admit my ignorance of the subject. However, I thought it was time to improve my knowledge of the subject.

The history of King's Corporal and Kitchener Sergeant in the Army is known to some, but is frequently the subject of some debate. A writer to the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* in 1935 (discussed in volumes XIV p245, XV p62 and XXII p130), states that the current tradition of the rank was instituted as a reward for gallantry during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and existed during that campaign only. Private soldiers, it is said, once promoted King's Corporal - supernumerary to regimental establishment - could never be reduced except by order of the King himself.

A later *SAHR Journal* in 1936 quotes *The Naval and Military Journal* - the latter stated the King's Corporal was a 'mention in dispatches'. It further suggested that there was a proposal put forward in 1901 to the effect that soldiers who had distinguished themselves in war-time, but were unsuited to be NCOs in peace-time, should be given some mark of distinction on the right arm, preferably an embroidered band, carrying with it a step in rank whilst actually on active service, with additional pay, and a donation of £10 at the end of it.

Some members of the War Office Committee who sat to consider the proposal objected to the monetary grant, urging that such was derogatory to the soldier, but one of them pointed out that 'Lord Roberts had not hesitated to accept £100,000, so I cannot see why a soldier should object to receive £10'.

The idea, however, was not adopted, though some men were specially promoted to sergeant in the field in the latter stages of the Boer War, and were generally known as 'Kitchener Sergeants'.

Many inquiries were made during World War 2 on the question of King's Corporal, whether it really existed or not. On 22nd October 1944 a letter appeared in *The Times* referring to the statement made by the Secretary of State for War in Parliament on 10th October. It had been asked on what authority Lord Kitchener had promoted a rifleman of the Rifle Brigade to the rank of King's Corporal on 8th December 1901. Other correspondents cited additional instances. *The Times* writer asked: 'Can any authority say what the award is intended to convey to the recipient if it is not recognized in the War Office?'

My research reveals that a number of soldiers serving in South Africa with 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers and 1st Battalion The Welsh Regiment received immediate promotion for gallantry in the field. The order announcing the promotions and subsequently published in the *London Gazette* stated that 'the General Commanding-in-Chief had been pleased to sanction the following promotions of NCOs and men for distinguished gallantry in the field (should they be desirous of accepting it). Such promotion to take effect in each case from the date mentioned on which the act was performed'.

2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers

Promoted Corporal for Gallantry in the Field:

3618 Pte Benjamin BENYON (Llanfaes, Brecon), B Company - 'on February 2nd, 1901, with Pte A Cox for gallantry, during an attempt to relieve Modderfontein, volunteered to carry message to general officer commanding though fire was coming from all sides from not more than 700 yards distance'.

4064 Pte Alfred COX (Newport). (see Pte Benyon above)

6266 Pte Charles PRICE (Dinedor, Herefordshire) - 'for gallantry during the defence of the post at Middlefontein 24th January 1901 during which he was wounded'.

6006 Pte George PRICE (Wrexham) - 'for gallantry in the defence of a picquet post 18th April 1901'.

1st Battalion The Welsh Regiment

Promoted Sergeant for Gallantry in the Field:

7545 LCpl H ISAAC (Cardiff) (2nd Volunteer Company) (*Lord Kitchener's Despatch dated 12 June 1901*) - 'On 20th May 1901, fifty Boers attacked a train near Alkmaar; with only five men Corporal Isaac ran to assist the escort and rendered valuable service'.

Promoted Corporal for Gallantry in the Field:

8195 Pte E MURRAY (*Lord Kitchener's Despatch dated 8th August 1901*) - 'for extremely plucky conduct when train was derailed near Alkmaar and attacked by enemy'.

Our regimental records make no mention of the terms 'King's Corporal' and 'Kitchener Sergeant', I can only assume these were colloquial terms generally used by soldiers at the time rather than official titles promulgated by an Army Order. Furthermore I have found no reference to any special badge worn by the recipients - it can be assumed this may have been officially rejected along with the £10 award!

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