

A LANYARD COLOURED WHITE

“The Artillery wear a white lanyard as a penance - they deserted their guns whilst under fire - it’s a sign of cowardice”. How many times has this story been related? In fact, it seems that every recruit passing through Army Recruit Training Centre is told in full detail, of our “shameful” past. The only problem is that no one can remember the battle, nor the date, of this act of “abandonment”; a good number of people however seem to think that it took place somewhere in South Africa during the Second Boer War. It is strange how stories can develop out of sheer ignorance.

The battle so often referred to in the “lanyard - cowardice” story would appear to be Colenso, which took place in December 1899, where the 14th and 66th Field Batteries RA were in support. The battle of Colenso is a story in itself and is so too long and involved to be recounted here, however in short, the Gunners deployed too close to the Boers’ forward trenches and came under heavy murderous fire. Many of the Gunners were killed, others badly wounded, and yet the guns continued to be served, one of them up until the last of the detachment were killed.

Numerous attempts were made to rescue the guns, including troops of both the Devonshire Regiment and the Scots Fusiliers, but they were stopped by the Boers’ heavy fire. Finally, a mixed band of volunteers, which included a number of Gunners, made good.

On horseback they stormed the gun position, and at great cost of life, they limbered-up what guns they could and made for safety. General Sir Redvers Buller, the British commander in the battle, then gave the order that no more attempts were to be made to recover the remaining guns, however none of these were to fall into Boer hands.

The Gunners paid a heavy price for what was, in the long run, a successful operation. It is true, they had to be rescued - another catch cry that is often thrown at the Gunners, but so too did D company 6 RAR in their gallant battle at Long Tan, there is nothing to be ashamed of in being saved.

To desert one’s guns is to leave them, intact, to the enemy, however, to leave them in an unserviceable state for any number of reasons, can be a matter of common sense. The Royal Artillery, for obvious reasons left their guns at Dunkirk, as all corps involved in the evacuation left behind countless stores and equipment, but their guns were firstly rendered completely unserviceable and unrepairable.

There have been many cases of Gunners losing their guns, but it must be remembered that it is well-nigh impossible for the Gunners to defend themselves and man their guns and where guns have been lost intact to the enemy, the men have died at their posts, serving their pieces until the end. A number of Victoria Crosses bear witness to this.

Even in our era Gunners have lost guns. 102 Field Battery, at FSB Coral in May 1968, lost one gun during the battle, and the Battery itself retrieved it, just as 1 RAR lost and regained their mortars.

The Gunners however were wearing their lanyards before that long hot December day in the Natal, for there is a story behind the origin of the white lanyard.

The lanyard had an active role in war. It was originally a piece of cord, approximately four feet in length, used to secure a jack-knife which was issued to both artillery and the cavalry. The knife had a couple of uses, the blade was for cutting loose in emergencies horses which became entangled in the head and heel ropes of the picket lines, and the spike of the knife was used as a hoof pick, for the removal of stones from the horses’ hooves. The fuse key was also attached to the lanyard.

Hanging loose, the lanyard soon became dirty and for the day-to-day barrack routine it looked out of place on an otherwise smart uniform, so for peace time purposes, the lanyard was plaited, and blanched white, to match the white bandolier and the white waist belt worn by the Gunners of the day. The lanyard was worn on the left shoulder with the end containing both the knife and the fuse key tucked into the left breast pocket.

In 1920 the lanyard was moved to the right shoulder, simply because of the difficult problem of trying to remove the knife from the pocket underneath the bandolier. By now the bandolier and belt, worn with the battle dress, had long ceased to be white, whilst the lanyard remained so.

The knife was removed in 1933 and then became a straight cord, worn purely as an ornamental item of dress. In 1955 it was, for a short time, re-introduced in the plaited style, but it quickly went back to the straight lanyard currently worn today.

There is no truth either to the popular story behind why A Field Battery wears the lanyard on the left shoulder. Legend has it that the HRH The Prince of Wales (later to be King Edward VIII) granted the Battery honour of wearing the lanyard on the left shoulder for the services rendered during the Second Boer and Great Wars, and also for being his escort on the Australian Royal Tour of 1920 (the year the lanyard changed shoulders, for the reasons already explained).

There are photos of Gunners of A Field Battery, taken in 1915, clearly showing lanyards on the left shoulders - it is just that the Battery never bothered to change over when the rest of the RA and RAA did. There is no proof, either here in Australia or Britain, of such a decree being made, or on behalf of the Prince of Wales. Unfortunately, the Infantry Centre's "Military Traditions and Customs" publication is incorrect with regard to its information on this subject.

There is another item of dress which is often confused with the lanyard, the aiguillette was originally a piece of cord worn by the cavalry, with the sole purpose of tying up bundles of forage. As time progressed however it became less and less serviceable and more decorative, until today it is now merely a ceremonial item of dress, worn as a badge of office by officers of the General Staff and ADC. In the British Army, it is still worn by the Household Cavalry. It is the aiguillette that is incorrectly described as the lanyard in "Military Traditions and Customs".

This then is the true story of the lanyard. As time has gone by other Corps and units have adopted it as an item of dress, wearing it in their own appropriate colours. It is perhaps interesting to note that a good number of Gunners today still wear a lanyard in the bush, to which is attached a modern version of the clasp knife, not very much different in design to that carried by the Gunners of over eighty years ago, on that hot bloody day in 1899, at a place called Colenso. The name Colenso was granted as an Honour Title to the two Batteries involved in the battle, and Honour Titles are not granted for acts of cowardice. Our lanyard has an honourable and useful history, and we can be proud to wear it white, not coloured.