

The Purchase System in the British Army:

A Good System of Promotion?

Chris McKay

March 15, 2002

The system of purchasing commissions in the British army began soon after the army's permanent inception during the English civil war. By the nineteenth century, the British government did not only accept the system but that institution actually regulated and participated in purchases. When a Member introduced a Bill into the House of Commons in 1871, the debate against abolishing the system was so strong that advocates of abolishment had to persuade Queen Victoria to issue a Royal Warrant to that effect. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see that perhaps having officers buy their way up through the ranks was not the best method of promotion. Nevertheless, it lasted over two hundred years. We need to ask, therefore, why did the system last so long? This essay will examine many of the reasons presented as to why the system should continue, focusing on the nineteenth century as the period of the strongest debate. It will be divided into three main sections. First, it will look at the lack of a better alternative for advancement; second, it will look at the reasons the officers themselves did not want the system abolished; third, this essay will examine the outside factors against abolishment, such as the cost and the political arena in which it was discussed.

One of the greatest arguments against the abolishment of the purchase system is the lack of a better alternative. One of the alternatives to the purchase system was simply to promote men from the ranks. This may seem like a perfectly good solution to the modern armed forces member, and it certainly did occur in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. During the wars against Napoleon, the need to fill vacancies caused by death were such that there were not enough members of the upper or middle class attempting to purchase commissions. The same held true during the Crimean War. Even in peacetime, units posted to unhealthy locations such as the West

Indies required another source for their officer class. Under Wellington, therefore, “more than one in twenty officers were commissioned from the ranks.”¹ In a table by Harries-Jenkins, he states that of first commissions granted in 1855, 1063 of 1378 were by non-purchase.² Nevertheless, Commanding Officers frowned upon this method of commission.

There were several commonly used reasons why Commanding Officers disliked the idea of promoting men from the ranks. The first reason was that officers promoted from the ranks would not fit in at the officer’s mess. These men came from a different social background than that of the other officers. Often they were not accepted, and they would never become gentlemen. This may seem a small problem, but often it led to bigger problems.

The Duke of Wellington, himself, espoused the most often presented reason for not promoting men from the ranks. Promoted men

do not make good officers; it does not answer. They are brought into society to the manners of which they are not accustomed; they cannot bear being at all heated in wine or liquor...they are quarrelsome, they are addicted to quarrel a little in their cups, and they are not persons that can be borne in the society of the officers of the Army; they are men of different manners altogether.³

Thus, men rising from the ranks, in the minds of most of the upper class, due to their low status in society, and due to their rejection by the other officers, could not be trusted and would often become drunkards. Officers did not just make statements, however; many believed it and, therefore, promoting men from the ranks was discouraged.

¹ Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The Armies of Wellington* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994), 28.

² See Table 8, Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, *The Army in Victorian Society*, Studies in Social History, ed. Harold Perkin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1977), 67.

³ Evidence (Q.5, 853) before *His Majesty’s Commissioners for inquiring into the System of Military Punishments in the Army*, C.59, 1836, XXII, quoted in Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society*,

In addition to being drunkards, the army felt that these men would be ineffectual officers because they would never gain the respect of the men of the ranks they recently vacated. This subject has been strongly debated. Some historians put forth the view that the men agreed with Wellington's assessment. These historians often quote Benjamin Harris. He states that "it requires one who has authority in his face, as well as at his back to make them [soldiers] respect and obey him. They see too often, in the instance of sergeant-majors, that command does not suit ignorant and coarse-minded men."⁴ Harris believes that these men do not immediately hold the respect of their men and often try to gain it using strict discipline. Horace Wyndham, as Spiers put forth, articulates the alternative position; "the average private would much rather follow an intelligent lance-corporal than somebody who is all blue blood but no brains."⁵ Thus, the debate among modern historians seems endless, but, as Spiers continues, "[o]fficers...were not interested in canvassing rank and file opinion."⁶ Rather, the officers continued to believe the men would rather their social superior lead them.

Thus, the army rejected the idea of commissioning the rank and file, but there are other alternatives for choosing promotion. For example, reformers repeatedly suggested throughout the nineteenth century that the army could choose officers from a certain class, but that Commanding Officers should only advance them based on their merit. In the reform-minded Victorian era, the benefits seemed obvious, but many people rejected

1815-1914, Themes in British Social History, ed. J. Stevenson (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 5.

⁴ John Harris, *Recollections of Rifleman Harris as told to Henry Curling*, ed. Christopher Hibbert (London: Leo Cooper Limited, 1970), 67.

⁵ H. Wyndham, *Following the Drum* (London: 1914), 63, quoted in Spiers, 6.

⁶ Spiers, 6.

this. For example, even a very reform-minded man, which DeFonblanque was, could see the drawbacks:

Constituted as our Government is, the claims of political supporters and adherents are so strong as to influence most powerfully the patronage of the executive, and although pre-eminent services might as a rule be recognised and rewarded, the claims of party would under ordinary circumstances assert themselves superior claims of service. This liability to the abuse of patronage, which arises less from the faults of our public men than from the nature of our institutions, operates as powerfully upon the army as upon the other branches of the public service.⁷

The fear of abuse of this system was enough to continue the system of purchase. A system that could be almost completely free from abuse did exist, however.

The army used the alternative of promotion by seniority for general officer ranks, as well as for all ranks in the Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers.⁸ This system had several advantages in that it was straightforward and, as mentioned above, it left little room for politics. The officers also hated it. The reason for this was that “within these corps [Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery] the rates of promotion were agonizingly slow.”⁹ As Spiers has calculated, on average in 1838, the length of time the junior colonel in the artillery had served was almost forty-two years. He also points out that “Sir George Wood, who commanded the artillery at Waterloo, was only a major twenty-one years after the battle.”¹⁰ Strachan also notes this problem when he says that in “1840 all the artillery lieutenant-colonels were over fifty years old, and not one of the captains had served less than thirty years.”¹¹ The infantry and cavalry could not afford to have officers so aged. Thus, just like the idea of promoting the men from the ranks or

⁷ E.B. DeFonblanque, “Treatise on the Administration and Organization of the British Army,” (London: 1858), 128-129, quoted in Harries-Jenkins, 80.

⁸ Harries-Jenkins, 79-80.

⁹ Spiers, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hew Francis Anthony Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army, 1830-54* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 118.

promoting officers based on merit, the idea of promoting officers based on seniority was rejected for most of the nineteenth century.

There were many arguments against the abolishment of the purchase system – not just arguments against the alternatives. One such reason the purchase system lasted through most of the nineteenth century was that the officers in the army did not want it changed. This may appear to be obvious, especially if the reader recalls the statements against alternative systems, but the statement needs to be qualified. Although, in theory, the senior officer would have the first opportunity to buy a subsequent rank, this was not always the case. Occasionally, a more junior or a less competent officer would pass over another for promotion. This would cause anger and bitterness. Spiers notes that this would get worse, however, because “the officer who was thwarted had little hope of redressing his grievance. Since protest was likely to prove abortive and half-pay retirement seemed a miserable and depressing prospect, the bypassed officer generally acquiesced.”¹² Despite this anger and bitterness, however, Spiers goes on to say that “[v]ery few officers, even the disadvantaged, endorsed the desire of Trevelyan to abolish the purchase system.”¹³ We must examine, therefore, why the officers felt this way.

Clearly, one of the reasons officers did not want to abolish the purchase system was that “it would have transformed the character and ‘tone’ of the officers’ mess, a prospect that had little appeal for the serving officer.”¹⁴ In other words, officers saw the officer corps as an exclusive club and he did not want to allow lower classes into that club. A reason for retaining the purchase system, strongly believed in by the officers of

¹² Spiers, 21,

¹³ *Ibid.* See also, Bruce, Anthony, *The Purchase System in the British Army, 1600-1871*, Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), 130.

¹⁴ Spiers, 22.

the time, was the idea of *esprit de corps*. Although this term is hard to define, it was the basis for the British military system. Every soldier belonged to a Regiment of which he was supposed to be – and most often was - proud to call home. Among the officers, this *esprit* would have meant being a gentleman. Spiers states nicely that

[a]n officer had either to be born and bred and educated as a gentleman, or be prepared to act and behave like a ‘natural’ gentleman within the confines of regimental society. Embodied in the norms of gentlemanly behaviour were requirements of dress and deportment, an emphasis on honour and integrity, and a conformity with the manners and etiquette of polite society. Upholding these standards of behaviour was deemed necessary for maintaining the harmony and concord of the officers’ mess.¹⁵

Thus, the *esprit de corps* for an officer would have involved dressing and acting in the manner befitting a gentleman. The officer corps assumed, therefore, that only gentlemen, with proper breeding and education, would be able to uphold these standards.

Although almost all officers felt this way, there are more concrete reasons why they did not want to abolish the system. This essay alluded to one of these reasons in the previous section – namely, that the purchase system allowed young officers to obtain higher rank quickly. This is closely tied with another, somewhat oversimplified argument that is very hard to disagree with. That is that the purchase system had worked well in the past. Brereton, when discussing the introduction of the Army Regulation Bill in Parliament, says that “[t]he diehards predictable vociferated that what had been good enough for Britain’s greatest leaders, Marlborough and Wellington among them, should not be tampered with by a politician who had never led so much as a platoon.”¹⁶ This idea of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ hardly seems an adequate argument against reform.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1,

¹⁶ J.M. Brereton, *The British Soldier: A Social History from 1661 to the Present Day* (London: The Bodley Head Limited, 1986), 76.

Yet, the officers in the army would have firmly believed in it. This is one reason why they rejected the abolishment of the purchase system.

The Duke of Wellington articulated another reason officers felt that Parliament should not abolish the purchase system. While arguing against officers having purely military training, the Duke said made it clear that he felt that the education given to gentlemen was more beneficial. Here he was arguing for a public school education for officers, but Spiers summarizes the statement by saying an officer has many responsibilities beyond fighting battles. Rather, he must be capable of looking after many civil responsibilities and only an education in a public school would afford him that ability.¹⁷ This may seem an exaggeration on Wellington's part, but he certainly knew the abilities required to command an army in a foreign nation. If we take a brief look at the role Wellington played in Spain – having to appease an ally, while attempting to win a war – it is understandable that he, along with other officers of the time, would think that the lower ranks¹⁸ would not be able to perform all the functions necessary of an officer. Although there are many reasons why officers would not want to end the purchase system, this is not the only reason why it lasted so long. In the Victorian era of reform, there would have to have been more reasons than that to prevent change.

A major reason why Parliament did not abolish the purchase system before 1871 was the expected cost to the Crown. This can be broken down into two sections. The first way that abolishment would cost the crown money was that it was assumed the officers already holding commissions would have to be bought out. Since many of them had purchased their original commission and the subsequent advancements, they would

¹⁷ Spiers, 13.

lose a large sum of money if they were unable to sell their rank when they retired. It has been estimated by Strachan that it would cost four million pounds to buy out every officer, and estimates climb as high as twelve million pounds.¹⁹ Strachan notes that it would be unlikely that the government would produce this money,²⁰ but it is just as unlikely that a Bill ending the purchase system without financial retribution would pass both houses. This became a stalemate, therefore, and a large contributor to the length of time the purchase system continued to be in use. Only a Royal Warrant could break the stalemate. Thus, in the end, ending purchase did not cost the government the one-time fee. The government was forced, however, to incur the continuously rising costs of paying its officers.

The costs of being an officer in the nineteenth century went far beyond buying a commission. Brereton points out that an ensign, in 1870, was paid *7s 6d* per day. With this money, he had to pay his mess bill, including the cost of a band, as well as for his uniform.²¹ This is an increase in pay from 1867 when an ensign would receive only *5s 3d* per day. This is the context in which Wellington said “three-fourths of the whole number receive but little for their service besides the honour of serving the King.”²² Harries-Jenkins offers a fitting bill for an officer of the Hussars. His total bill comes to £347 9s. It becomes clear, when reading this that an officer would have to have a private source of income to be able to afford the costs of commanding in the army. Thus, another barrier to the to the abolition of the Purchase system was that the government would have to pay

¹⁸ In Wellington’s eye, the phrase ‘lower ranks’ could also be read as ‘lower classes’. He felt they were synonymous as they often were.

¹⁹ Bruce, 126.

²⁰ Strachan, 117.

²¹ Brereton, 77.

²² “Report of the Select Committee on Naval and Military Appointments”, 1833, Evidence of the Duke of Wellington at p. 274, quoted in Harries-Jenkins, 86.

to clothe and feed its officers. The average officer would not be able to afford these amenities themselves.

It gets worse for the government, however. The rates of pay were abysmally low. Harries-Jenkins compares the pay of a lieutenant-colonel in the Victorian army to that of a clerk first class in the War Office, a similar rank in a different branch of the army. Whereas the army would pay the colonel a meager £365 per year, it would pay the clerk £670-800 per year. He states that “[t]here was certainly no class of comparable social status, with the possible exception of the naval officer and the country clergyman, who had to work for so little.”²³ As well, officers, on their decision to retire, could sell their commissions. The government saw this as being in lieu of a pension program.²⁴ Thus, if Parliament eliminated the purchase system, the government would not only have to pay the costs of its officers, but also raise wages and institute a regular pension plan.²⁵ The government seemed unwilling to do this or buy out the commissions of serving officers. The great cost to the government was one of the greatest obstacles to the abolition of the purchase system, and therefore, one of the reasons why it remained in place for so long.

Another reason why the purchase system lasted so long is that the army was a reflection of the very society from which it tried to separate itself. Although many historians assume this, Spiers points it out directly. He states in an introduction to the officer class that:

[t]he military was not the sole profession which relied on the services of gentlemen. The Established Church, the Bar, the highest ranks of civil service (especially the Diplomatic Service) and the magistracy were all dependent upon

²³ Harries-Jenkins, 86.

²⁴ Strachan, 117.

²⁵ Bruce, 97.

the public spirit, probity and education of those whom contemporaries described as gentlemen.²⁶

Thus, we can see that the society of the times was such that gentlemen held positions of authority. Although the purchase system may have been unique to the British army, excluding all but landowners was not. One of the main reasons that the purchase system remained throughout the nineteenth century was that the attitudes of the members of society had to change before its institutions would change.

The attitudes of society were very important in another reason for the persistency of the purchase system. Perhaps the most important reason was the desire of the British people and their government to keep the army apolitical. There was an old fear of large standing armies and the involvement of officers in politics dating back to the civil war.²⁷ Both the Government and the people felt, however, that if officers had a stake in the country – in other words, if they owned land – they would care about the country for which they were fighting. Lord Palmerston was very succinct in pointing out why he believed the purchase system should continue:

It was very desirable to connect the higher classes of society with the army...if the connection between the army and the higher classes of society were dissolved, then the army would present a dangerous and unconstitutional appearance. It was only when the army was unconnected with those whose property gave them an interest in the country, and was commanded by the unprincipled military adventurers, that it ever became formidable to the liberties of the nation.²⁸

From this statement, therefore, we can see that one of the main reasons why the purchase system lasted throughout most of the nineteenth century was because of an old fear that the army might become involved in British politics.

²⁶ Spiers, 1.

²⁷ Harries-Jenkins, 84. See also, David Chandler, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

²⁸ "Hansard", vol. 140, 4 March 1856, p. 1,791-1,850, quoted in Harries-Jenkins, 84-85.

Queen Victoria abolished the purchase system in the British army in 1871 after she issued a Royal Warrant to that effect. From this information alone, we can see that it was very difficult to change the system of promotion. It can be argued that the sole reason for this was that the officers disliked the idea of opening their ranks to other social classes. Although this certainly played a role in the tenacity of the purchase system, it was certainly not the only factor. Rather, the lack of a better alternative and the social conditions throughout the nineteenth century also contributed to the length of time the purchase system remained in effect.

Bibliography

- Brereton, J.M. *The British Soldier: A Social History from 1661 to the Present Day*. London: The Bodley Head Limited, 1986.
- Bruce, Anthony. *The Purchase System in the British Army, 1660-1871*. Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series. London: Royal Historical Society, 1980.
- Chandler, David, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- DeFonblanque, E.B. "Treatise on the Administration and Organization of the British Army," 128-129. London: 1858. Quoted in Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, *The Army in Victorian Society*, Studies in Social History, ed. Harold Perkin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1977, 80).
- Evidence (Q.5, 853) before *His Majesties Commissioners for inquiring into the System of Military Punishments in the Army*, C.59, 1836, XXII. Quoted in Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815-1914*, Themes in British Social History, ed. J. Stevenson (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 5.
- "Hansard." Volume 140. 4 March, 1856, 1,791-1,850. Quoted in Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, *The Army in Victorian Society*, Studies in Social History, ed. Harold Perkin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1977, 84-84).
- Harries-Jenkins, Gwyn. *The Army in Victorian Society*. Studies in Social History, edited by Harold Perkin. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1977.
- Harris, John. *Recollections of Rifleman Harris as told to Henry Curling*. Edited by Christopher Hibbert. London: Leo Cooper Limited, 1970.
- Haythornthwaite, Philip J. *The Armies of Wellington*. London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994.
- "Report on the Select Committee on Naval and Military Appointments, 1833." Evidence of the Duke of Wellington, 274. Quoted in Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, *The Army in Victorian Society*, Studies in Social History, ed. Harold Perkin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1977, 80).
- Spiers, Edward M. *The Army and Society, 1815-1914*. Themes in British Social History, edited by J. Stevenson. London: Longman Group Limited, 1980.
- Strachan, Hew Francis Anthony. *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army, 1830-54*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- Wyndham, H. *Following the Drum*. London: 1914, 63. Quoted in Edward M. Spiers,

The Army and Society, 1815-1914, Themes in British Social History, ed. J. Stevenson (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 6.