

MILITARY FURNITURE

by Treve Rosoman

Much military furniture was a result of necessity; war and campaigning consisted of long, tedious hours of boredom waiting for things to happen and very short bursts of activity, often violent and brutal. To overcome the discomfort soldiers either resorted to true regional furniture, that is they made it from whatever was lying around, or if they were senior in rank or sufficiently wealthy, usually both, they took furniture with them.

Furniture made on campaign has almost certainly not survived. The numerous letters and journals from the Peninsular War, 1808-14, are amongst the early references to conditions on active service. For example, when Ensign Bell, 34th Regt., was asked how he slept after his first and very wet night in the open, he replied "Slept like a fish. I believe they sleep best in water!" "Bravo! You'll do" was the reply and Bell was immediately accepted by his new fellow officers. Both officers and

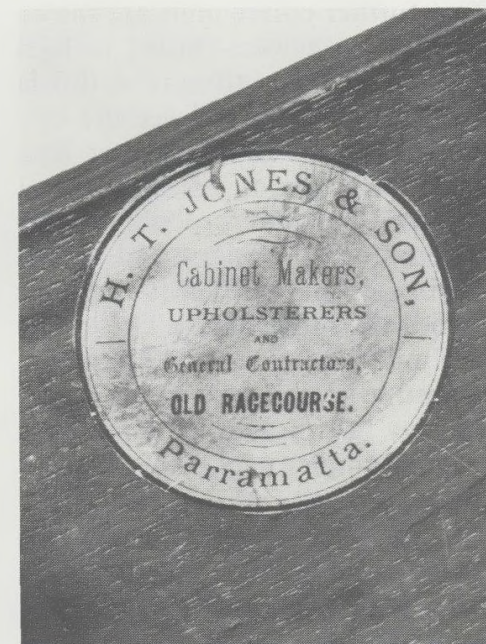


Figure 1. Military chest of drawers made from Australian walnut and cedar, c.1890. Maker's label "H.T. Jones & Son, Cabinet Makers, Old Racecourse, Parramatta". Courtesy Christie's South Kensington.

men shared appalling conditions and there is the splendid story of Quarter Master Sergeant Anton, 42nd Royal Highlanders, and his wife who built themselves a number of huts during their service in Spain. After his third hut Anton described himself as "a regular Robinson Crusoe when regimental duties permitted".

Forty years later in the Crimean War similar awful conditions occurred. A young cavalryman, Lieut. Richard Temple Godman, 5th Dragoon Guards, sent home a series of splendid letters to his relations. He too built a hut sunk below ground level but was flooded out after one storm; he also wrote that he had no chair or table to write on,

Figure 2. Two cavalry officers, possibly father and son, in the style of David Morier, c.1740, in the style of David Morier. Of special interest is the folding chair upholstered in Hungarian point or flame stitch on which the older man sits. Courtesy Christie's.



eventually recording on 27th July 1854, "I have got a small table and camp stool made by the artillery wheeler, which makes me much more comfortable". Less fortunate was Lieut. Balfour, Scots Guards, who when on campaign in Egypt in 1882 records the use of empty wine cases for tables and chairs but says also "I have ordered two more pairs of trousers. They get so frightfully dirty from sweat and sand and grease and torn by nails, etc., on rough seats".

Perhaps the apogee of campaign furniture was that made during the Great War of 1914-18. The Germans and Austrians excelled in making log furniture from the abundant fir forests of the mountainous Italian Front and the Ardennes region of the Western Front; the log cabins as settings were most picturesque.

Special military furniture was also made, of course, most notable being the brassbound chest of drawers commonly made of mahogany, teak or camphorwood (figure 1). These were made for barrack use and rarely, if ever, taken on active service. However, beds and chairs (figures 2, 3 and 4) were taken. Folding beds have a long history, back to the field bed of the medieval period. They were certainly taken on campaign during the 17th century and in 1709 Samuel Crew of Falmouth, Cornwall, advertised that he made "all sorts of FIELD-BEDS, where all Gentleman that go by the Packets for Portugal or Spain may be furnish't as in London". This advertisement also shows the dual nature of most military furniture in that travellers to foreign parts and the colonies bought the same items.

Most collectors of furniture have heard of cabinetmakers such as Morgan and Sanders, Thomas Butler and perhaps William Pocock, all of whom were flourishing during the period 1790 to 1820. They were makers of fine, expensive pieces for "the Quality" and as such beyond the scope of the article. However, around the country were makers of folding or knock-down furniture; they were often centred on towns that had overseas trade, such as Bristol and Falmouth, or had naval/military connections, such as Rochester and Aldershot. They made furniture for



Figure 3. Camp scene by Henry Alken of the 2nd Dragoon Guards c.1840. This shows well one type of folding chair, probably made of beech with a cane seat and back. Note also the travelling trunk. Courtesy The Parker Gallery.



Figure 4. Headquarters for the staff of the Royal Artillery, South African Field Force, during a quiet moment on the Modder River, c.1900. Apart from the very rustic furniture a folding canvas chair may be seen in the background. Courtesy National Army Museum.

a common use that had to be tough, resilient, looked well and did not cost a great deal as the loss rate through active service must have been high. For example, were a ship to be caught unawares by the sudden appearance of the enemy the furniture in the captain's cabin would as likely as not be thrown overboard because that cabin formed part of the ship's gun-deck which was cleared from stem to stern in order to work the guns efficiently. The methods used to construct folding furniture did not differ greatly from those used for ordinary pieces but great ingenuity was often employed to disguise the fact that, for example, the legs of a pembroke table were detachable.

Army General Orders are a source for the uses of military furniture as, for example, on 7th March 1776 at Boston, Massachusetts, during the War of Independence a general order was issued, "The Regt. are to bring immediately all the Barrack furniture, but such as are Judg'd necessary for the voyage, to the store in King St." Four days later at 8.30 a.m. the situation had deteriorated for the morning order stated "The Troops to have all their Baggage on board ship by five O'Clock this Afternoon, if any is found on the Wharfs after six, it will be thrown into the sea". The more senior in rank the officer was, the more baggage he was allowed. Army General Orders issued during the 1870s laid down the maximum sizes for chests of drawers as being 3ft.6ins. x 2ft.2ins. x 2ft. Weight allowances were also made as when Lieut. Balfour complained of using wine cases he recalled "Jos (Lieut.-Col Vanneck, Scots Guards) indeed, has the luxury of a folding chair, but then he can carry 80lbs".

The late 19th century saw a great



Figure 5. Interior of other ranks barrack room, Royal Irish Regt., c.1898. The stark appearance of the room and its iron-framed furniture is considerably softened by a splendid example of soldier's art in creating a chimneypiece complete with mantel clock and flower vases. Courtesy National Army Museum.

expansion in the Army and the Empire it policed. The period also saw a great expansion of the industrialisation of furniture making. New ideas on hygiene and health care were reflected in the furnishing of other ranks' barracks (figure 5). At this period soldiers lived, ate and slept in the same room, perhaps as many as a dozen men or more. Iron beds were issued which could be folded up during the day; iron framed tables and benches with wooden tops occupied the centre of the room. Mass-produced "Windsor chairs" (figure 6) were brought in huge quantities from High Wycombe and were used in all shades of military establishments from the officers' mess down to the guard-room. However, the officers did have a further element of luxury to add to the humble

Windsor. This was a slip-over cushion with a quilted back and a frilled apron that appears to have been made of leather cloth or similar material. These were in common use from at least 1860 onwards (figure 7) and were still offered for sale by the Army & Navy Stores in March 1914.

Military furniture really ceased to have a separate existence with the end of the 1914-18 war. Although still made during the inter-war period, the break-up of the Empire in 1947 and the subsequent decline in the use of troopships meant the end of a fascinating furniture type. Heavy brass folding beds weighing up to 40lb. have no place on a troop-carrying aeroplane and Britain has no Empire to police by regular troop postings.



Figure 6. Two Windsor chairs used until 1976 at the Royal Army Ordnance Corps depot at Hereford. A. Stamped at the back of the seat WC/YLI/GLENISTER/MAKER/WYCOMBE/1893. B. Stamped at the back of the seat MAKER/HIGH WYCOMBE/1915/WG. Courtesy National Army Museum.



Figure 7. Officers of the 86th Regt. at breakfast in their mess in Ireland, c.1860. The Windsor chairs and their leather-cloth covers are very prominent. Courtesy National Army Museum.