

THE MEURON REGIMENT AT THE CAPE. FIRST PHASE, 1781-84. A PRELIMINARY SKETCH

From 1781 onwards various foreign regiments were in turn stationed at the Cape. The reason for this state of affairs was that France (1778) and Holland (1780) had eventually been dragged into the American War of Independence which had broken out in 1776. The Netherlands did not have sufficient manpower with which to defend the extensive possessions of the Dutch East India Company in the Orient and therefore appealed for naval and military aid to her French ally to protect the Cape against the English. France being similarly concerned about her own colonies in India and Mauritius, readily agreed.

Throughout its history the Dutch East India Company had been accustomed to recruit officials and soldiers for its service from many countries. In July, 1781 for the first time, however, an entire foreign regiment arrived in Cape Town, when the *Pondicherry Regiment*¹ of French troops disembarked, to be followed in May, 1782 by the *Luxemburg Regiment*, which departed in February, 1783. In this month the *Waldener Regiment*² arrived, which in turn sailed for Batavia in April of the same year. Later during the French revolutionary wars the tables were turned and this time it was German mercenaries, the *Wurtemberg Regiment*, which was stationed here to protect the Cape against the French.³ Not only were there French and German mercenary troops in the Company's service, however, but a Swiss regiment too, the *Regiment de Meuron*, served at the Cape from 1783 to 1788.

The Role of Mercenary Troops

Conscription and national armies are familiar to us today, so that we are apt to forget that these are comparatively modern phenomena. For a thousand years or more previous to the 18th century all European countries had, in fact, employed mercenary troops to help fight their wars. Even in the American War of Independence, Britain too engaged thousands of German mercenaries.⁴ For centuries the doughty mercenaries of Switzerland were hired by most of the nations of Europe at one time or another. Swiss troops became famous for their prowess on the battlefield and were the best disciplined and organised infantry in Europe.⁵ For centuries young Swiss men went to war, in much the same way as in the 19th century they took to hotelkeeping, to catering for the tourist trade or to engaging in

1. Laidler, Dr. P. W. Growth and Government of Cape Town, p. 142.
2. Theal, Dr. G. M. History of South Africa, 1725-95. Vol. II: pp. 186, 216.
3. Prinz, Prof. J. Das württembergische Kapregiment, 1786-1808. Die Tragödie einer Soldnerschar. Stuttgart, Strecker & Schröder, 1932.
4. Chorley, Katherine. Armies and the Art of Revolution. London, Faber, 1943. p. 72.
5. Dändliker, Dr. Karl. A short history of Switzerland. London, Swan Sonnendchein, 1899, p. 121.

industrial enterprise. In those days they sought their fortune in military adventures which offered the chance, in addition, of fabulous loot or prize money.⁶ Switzerland at that time was a poverty-stricken country, unable to support its entire population and so from economic necessity it had to export men. In fact since the 15th century until today the Papal Guard has always consisted of Swiss troops,⁷ while during the French Revolution, after Louis XVI had fled from the Tuilleries, the massacre of the King's Swiss Guard by the Paris mob (which resulted in 780 Swiss losing their lives), drew world-wide attention to these mercenaries.

The various Swiss cantons had at different times entered into profitable contracts with the French kings, whereby, in return for providing a definite quota of men, the canton in question earned foreign exchange and hard cash in the form of an annual subsidy. It stands to reason that the authorities in many cantons endeavoured to rid themselves of undesirable or obstreperous citizens by sending them abroad on foreign military service. It is true to say that the patrician classes too for decades derived much of their wealth from raising troops of Swiss mercenaries in return for subsidies and pensions.⁸ The soldiers were all volunteers who received enlistment money as well as a contract for a definite period of service, at the expiration of which the officers retired on a pension equal to full pay. The colonels were proprietors of the corps and received an agreed remuneration on handing over the troops, as well as an annual salary thereafter.⁹

Mercenaries in Dutch Service

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries the Netherlands repeatedly became involved in wars, waged both in Europe and in her far-flung overseas possessions. Whenever the Mother Country was at war, the Dutch East India Company automatically became implicated. As the Company's forces were totally inadequate for defending her colonies, French and other regiments of mercenary troops were employed to increase the garrisons, while naval assistance too had to be sought.¹⁰ J. J. Cotton corroborates that

"the garrisons in the pay of the Dutch were rarely above one-quarter or one-third Dutch; the remainder were composed of French and English deserters and renegade continental adventurers who came for the purpose of making or mending their fortunes."¹¹

Throughout the 18th century military service in the Netherlands employ in particular became popular among the Protestant Swiss. By 1790 there were no less than six Swiss regiments (7,000-8,000 men) in the service of

-
6. Bonjour, E., Offler, H. S. and Potter, G. R. A short history of Switzerland. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 107.
 7. Dändliker. *op cit.*, p. 99.
 8. Bonjour. *op. cit.*, pp. 281, 290.
 9. Vreussieux. History of Switzerland. London, S.D.U.K., 1840, p. 211.
 10. De Jongh, D. Het Krijzwezen onder de Oostindische Compagnie. 's-Gravenhage, 1950, pp. 176-7.
 11. Cotton, J. J. His Majesty's Regiment Meuron. *Calcutta Review*, 117, 1903, p. 193.

Holland.¹²

The Regiment de Meuron was such a mercenary troop, which from 1781-1795 was in the service of the Dutch East India Company and thereafter transferred to British employ. This regiment was stationed at the Cape, in Ceylon, in India and finally in Canada, where in 1816, after nearly 40 years' service abroad, it was finally disbanded.

Comte de Meuron and his Regiment

When the Netherlands in December, 1780 entered the war against Britain and so became the ally of France, Holland appealed to the French Government for help in defending its colonial possessions. The French Minister of War, Navy and Marine, the Duc de Choiseul,¹³ who had for many years been in close touch with the Swiss mercenaries in French employ, quite naturally, considering the shortage of manpower, suggested raising a Swiss regiment to defend the Cape of Good Hope. After offering the task of raising it to various officers, he eventually gave the Comte de Meuron, captain in the Swiss Guards, the opportunity.¹⁴ The proposal was acceptable to the Chamber of Seventeen and De Meuron was keen to undertake the task.

De Meuron's first step was to apply to the authorities of the canton of Neuchâtel, his home province, for permission to recruit men for his regiment. Although Cleghorn says:

"The Colonels Proprietors of Regiments are a class of officers well known in Switzerland, and they have a right to negotiate for their regiments without consulting the governments of the different cantons,"¹⁵

yet De Meuron wanted to keep in their good books, in case he ever needed their support.

Charles-Daniel de Meuron was born on 6th May, 1738, at St. Sulpice (Neuenburg) in Neuchâtel and had two brothers Pierre-Frédéric and Théodore-Abraham. He received his education at Val-de-Travers and at Rochefort. In 1755 he entered French military service and joined the Swiss Regiment de Hallwyl, destined for service in the marines. The regiment formed part of the garrison of Rochefort, later taking part in the defence of the l'Île d'Aix against British attacks. In 1757 he embarked on a French ship with part of his regiment, which was abroad for 33 months defending Martinique and other French colonies against the British navy. He was

12. Vreussieux. *op. cit.*, p. 210.
13. Étienne François, Duc de Choiseul (1719-85), previously French Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1758-70, who had built up the French army and navy, also developing the colonies. At this time he had less power than formerly, but was a bold and energetic man. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition.)
14. Eynard, Paul. *Les Tribulations d'un Général Suisse au Service de l'Angleterre, d'après une Correspondance et des Documents inédits sur le Régiment de Meuron (1795-1799)*. *Le Mois Suisse*, V (52), July, 1943: p. 43
15. Neil, William, *editor*. *Cleghorn Papers*, a Footnote to History, being the Diary 1795-6 of Hugh Cleghorn of Stravithie, Professor of Civil and Natural History, University of St. Andrews, 1773-93, employed on Secret Service by the British Government, 1793-97, first Colonial Secretary of Ceylon, 1798-1800. London, A. and C. Black, 1927, p. 50.



Charles Daniel C^{te} De Meuron:

General (Comte) Charles Daniel de Meuron, proprietor of the Meuron regiment in the service of the Dutch East India Company. Showing his signature on a contemporary document. The portrait is from a painting in the possession of M. Paul Eynard in Switzerland. The portrait shows how he looked while at the Cape.

From: Le Mois Suisse, July, 1943: p. 48.

wounded three times in sea battles.¹⁶ In 1760 he returned home and in 1762 married Marie Fillon of Morveaux near Cognac, of which marriage there were no children. On account of his wounds in the campaign, he in 1763 at the end of the Seven Years' War left his regiment with a pension and with the decoration of the Croix du Merité Militaire.¹⁷

Upon his release De Meuron joined the Gardes Suisses, in the Regiment d'Erlach with the rank of sub-lieutenant; in 1767 he was promoted to lieutenant with the rank of captain and in June, 1768 to that of captain with the rank of colonel. The family had in 1768 been enobled.¹⁸ In his agreement with the Dutch East India Company, he was given the rank of colonel and his brother Pierre-Frédéric was appointed as his second in command, but De Meuron was named the "colonel-commandant-proprétaire". After seeing service with the regiment in India and at the Cape, when in 1786 he returned to Europe, he surrendered the command to his brother. Subsequently in 1795-97 he went overland to India to supervise the transfer of his regiment from Dutch to English service.¹⁹ Returning to Switzerland, he died at Neuenburg on 4th April, 1806. De Meuron had collected a large number of natural history objects at the Cape and in India, which he in 1795 presented to Neuchâtel and which form the basis of the good museum today to be found in that town.²⁰

Writing in 1795, Cleghorn, a contemporary, says of De Meuron:

"I have observed that there are two passions which have much influence on the mind of the Comte de Meuron The one is a strong attachment to his own interests, and the other a deep resentment against the Dutch East India Company."²¹

He also insinuates that the love of money was a dominating force in De Meuron's character. As the reason for the latter's antagonism to the Company, he suggests that "the terms of the capitulation with the Dutch East India Company had never been executed on their part".²² De Meuron on the other hand confessed his aims to be:

"In me love of glory was decidedly the ruling passion, that self-interest never directed my conduct."²³

As the result of what follows, we may draw our own conclusions.

Contract with the Dutch East India Company

The contract or capitulation was signed on 28th May, 1781 between the Comte de Meuron and two representatives of the Dutch East India Company, P. E. Vandeperre, a director of the Company, and F. G. Boers,

16. Régiment Suisse de Meuron. État Nominatif des Officiers Suisses qui ont servi dans le Régiment de 1781 à 1816. Neuchâtel, H. Wolfrath, 1886, pp. 6-7.

17. Jeanneret, F. A. M. and Bonhote, J. H. La Biographie Neuchâteloise, pp. 140-141.

18. Historisch-Biographisches Lexikon der Schweiz. Neuenburg, 1929. Band V: pp. 94-5.

19. Cotton. *op. cit.*, pp. 195-7.

20. Jeanneret and Bonhote. *op. cit.*, p. 144.

21. Neil. *op. cit.*, p. 59.

22. *ibid.* *op. cit.*, p. 50.

23. *ibid.*, p. 20.

its legal adviser,²⁴ who had come to Paris for the purpose of concluding the agreement. In terms of this contract, the former agreed to provide before 1 November, 1781 "a fully armed and equipped regiment of one and twenty units, no one to be less than 5 Holland feet in height", at least two-thirds of the regiment was to be drawn principally from the Swiss cantons in general, as well as from Neuchâtel in particular. The rest were to be Germans, but all its members were to be Protestants. The regiment would bear the name of De Meuron, its colonel proprietary who had the right to appoint officers, except for the officers of two companies, which the Dutch would nominate.

In the contract he was called "Chevaliér de Meuron, Colonel d'infanterie et capitaine-lieutenant des gardes Suisses de Sa Majesté Très Chrétienne". The capitulation²⁵ consisted of 25 articles, in which, as was characteristic of the Dutch East India Company, provision was made in great detail for every possible contingency. The regiment was to consist of 10 companies of 102 men each, while attached to every company there were to be 12 gunners, 4 sergeants and 4 corporals. The officers' establishment was to include a commander with the rank of colonel proprietary, a lieutenant colonel, a major, 10 captains, 10 lieutenants, a lieutenant paymaster, 3 ensigns, a head surgeon with 10 assistants and a sergeant major. All officers should have had at least six years' service, all captains and lieutenants four and sergeants three years.²⁶ The Swiss military code would be in operation and no one, except for high treason, was to be subject to Dutch law. The regiment was engaged for five years, but should it be a disbanded, officers were to receive a pension equivalent to half pay for the rest of their lives.

The Colonel was exhorted: "Il leur rendra bonne et brave justice . . . et leur paiera leur prête tous les huit jours."²⁷ The colonel-in-command was paid 3,000 florins per annum, a private soldier 108 florins, the chief surgeon 600 florins, a major 1,800, a captain 1,200, an ensign 480 and a sergeant 240. To obtain very definite clarity regarding exchange problems, the florin was to be calculated at the rate of "vingt sols courant". When the regiment assembled at Ile de Ré, the Colonel was to receive £300 for raising it. Should the regiment be short of the required number of men, severe penalties were imposed which the Company could invoke against De Meuron. The Company for its part was to pay for the annual replacement of uniforms and weapons,²⁸ a matter which later at the Cape gave rise to much dispute and discord.

By the end of July, 1781, the regiment stood fully equipped and up to full strength on the island of Oleron in Brittany. Owing to fierce gales

24. Cotton. *op cit.* p. 198.

25. *ibid.*, pp. 197-9.

26. Eynard. *op. cit.*, p. 44.

27. Cotton. *op. cit.*, pp. 198-9.

28. De Meuron, Théodore. Charles-Daniel de Meuron et son Régiment. *Musée Neuchâteloise*, Organe de la Société d'histoire du Canton de Neuchâtel, XVII (Oct., 1880); p. 20.

the troops did not embark until a month later.

The Regiment at Sea

Eight companies set sail on the ship *Le Fier* and the remainder in a smaller ship. The two ships formed part of a convoy of 300 merchantmen, under the escort of nine French men of war, commanded by Admiral La Motte Piquet. Swarms of English privateers immediately started attacking the convoy and continued to harass it so much that it broke up, each ship making shift for itself. The smaller ship reached the Cape six weeks before *Le Fier*. During the voyage insubordination was rife and a mutiny was with difficulty suppressed. Capt. d'Alberade of *Le Fier* wanted to push on ahead, but De Meuron very fortunately refused. Some of the ships proceeded to the West Indies, but 17 refitted in the Canary Islands. Having at first been battered by storms, the remnants of the convoy now lay becalmed. At the inauspicious moment d'Alberade announced that provisions would not last till the Cape was reached. Scurvy soon broke out and one quarter of the 800 men on board were laid low, half-rations being by that time the order of the day. Fortunately an escort vessel, the *l'Hermione*, came to the rescue and agreed to share some of her provisions, thus somewhat alleviating the situation.²⁹

The Regiment Arrives at the Cape

Table Mountain at long last appeared on the horizon, a welcome sight after the dreary and miserable voyage. On 7th January 1782 the regiment landed. Colonel de Meuron immediately lodged a written complaint with Governor van Plettenberg against Captain d'Alberade of *Le Fier*. The former alleged that the captain had filled his ship with merchandise for trading; consequently the men's equipment and ammunition had been piled on deck, the result being that sun, rain and saltwater had caused it to deteriorate. The inadequate supplies of provisions and water had furthermore caused the death of 103 men from scurvy and others had had to help the sailors man the ship. The Colonel rendered a bill for damages of 270,000 florins, including "permanent injury to the health" of his men.³⁰ The Dutch East India Company had in fact paid 1,200 florins per head for the transport of these men to the Cape, which was twice as much as the French were doing for sending their men all the way to Mauritius. Van Plettenberg hemmed and hawed, but was extremely reluctant to take a decision in the matter and finally referred De Meuron's grievances to the Chamber of Seventeen in Europe for redress. The final upshot was that nothing came of his complaints.

Colonel de Meuron further requested Governor van Plettenberg in his official capacity to thank the captain of the ship *l'Hermione* for having come to the assistance of his troops on the voyage.³¹ The Governor was quite prepared to do so and sent "M. le Chevalier de Peron, commandant van

29. Cotton. *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

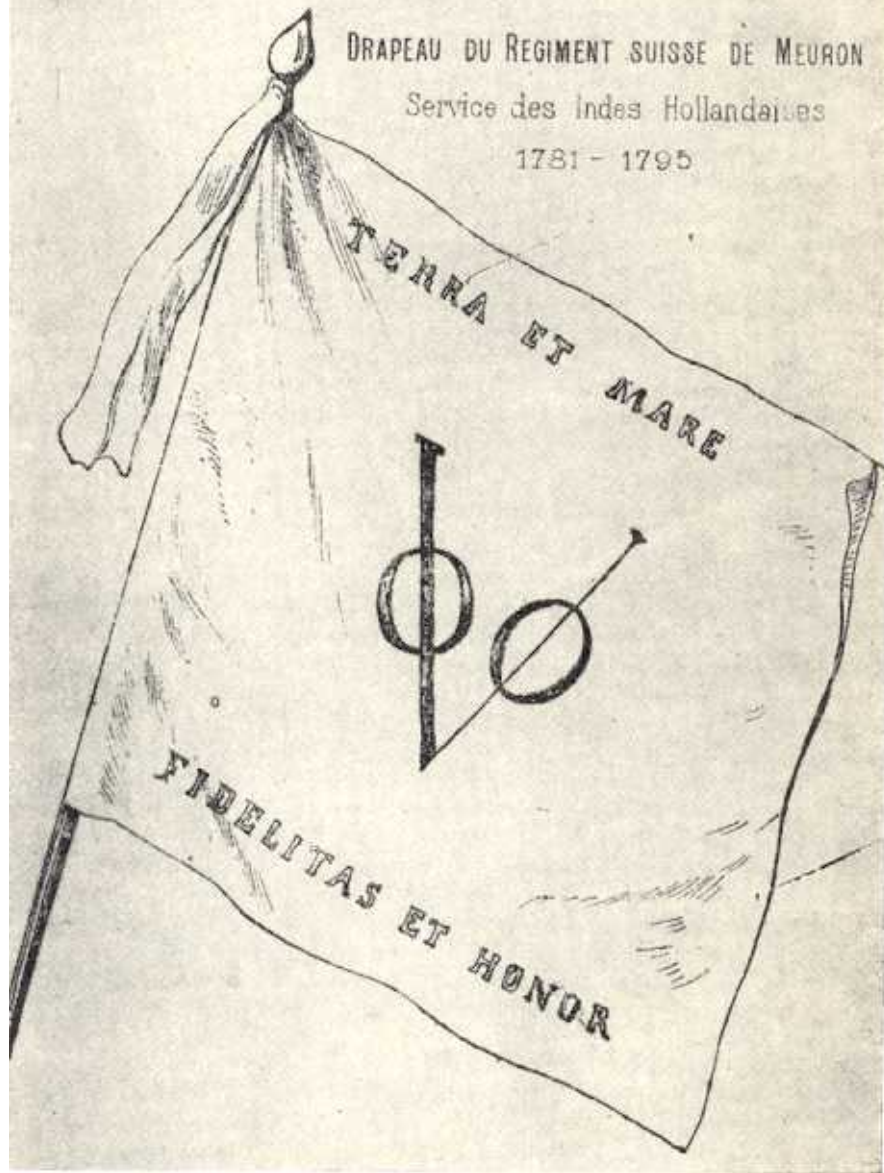
30. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

31. Kaapsche Archiefstukken, 1783. Resolutiën van den Politicquen Raad aen Cabo de Goede Hoop. 25.2.1783. Pretoria, Government Printer. 1938. Deel I, p. 53.

DRAPEAU DU REGIMENT SUISSE DE MEURON

Service des Indes Hollandaises

1781 - 1795



The flag of the Meuron Regiment, while in the service of the Dutch East India Company. The monogram of the latter, V.O.C. (i.e. Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), appears on the centre of the flag, but has been wrongly rendered as V.O.O.

From: Musée Neuchâtelois, Jan., 1880: following p. 144.

het Frans freguat l'Hermione" a profuse letter of thanks in French for his services:

"A la Noble Compagnie des Indes Hollandoises . . . nous oblige Monsieur de vous en faire les remerciements les plus vives."

He further stated that he was informing the Chamber of Seventeen accordingly, which body would pass on the information to the French king and to his "Ministre de la Marine". In addition, as a token of appreciation, Captain de Peron was presented with one aum of red and one aum of white Constantia wine.³²

When the men had sufficiently recuperated from the ill-effects of the long voyage, the regiment was despatched to Ceylon on *l'Hermione* to reinforce Admiral de Suffren's fleet. They were involved in two sea battles in February and September, 1782 against the English. Once the situation in India was settled, De Meuron's troops were ordered back to the Cape, arriving in January, 1783. The Regiment was housed in the centre block and right-hand wing³³ of the new hospital which had been built on the open space facing what was later known as Caledon Square. As the Cape garrison had been doubled and trebled by the various mercenary regiments stationed here, for which housing had to be found, this building had from 1781 been requisitioned as a barracks. Part of it only was henceforward used as a hospital. Continuing to be used as a military barracks, it was finally demolished early in the present century, but the name of Barracks Street reminds us of this fact.

The Regiment de Meuron shared garrison duty with the French Regiment de Pondicherry, which was under the command of Brigadier de Conway, while Colonel R. Jacob Gordon was head of the Colony's militia. Some of the French regiments had been here since July, 1781 to assist in defending the Cape.

Friction between French and Swiss Troops

In Holland at this time, as was the case too in the 1790's, there was acute dissension between the Francophiles and the Anglophiles. The Chamber of Seventeen meanwhile was extremely worried because it was estimated that 14,400 men were required for the defence of her Indian possessions and

"daarboven 4 à 5,000 man aan de Kaap, waar bestendig nieuwe troepen moeten worden geacclimatiseerd, om vervolgens naar Indië te worden gezonden. In werkelijkheid waren nu slechts 7,757 Europese soldaten in Indië in dienst, en 1,600 aan de Kaap."

The Company realised that

"het wederom oorlog voeren tegen de Engelschen een hachelijke zaak bleef, het uittarten van Engeland een roekeloze".³⁴

32. *ibid.* Uitgaande Brieven van den . . . Raad van Politie, 27.2.1783: p. 459.

33. Burrows, Dr. Edmund H. A History of Medicine in South Africa. Cape Town, Balkema, 1958, p. 51.

34. Colenbrander, H. T. Frankrijk en de Oost-Indische Compagnie in de Patriottentjaren. *De Gids*, 1899 (3), p. 33.

Moreover the position was that:

“Intussen waren de sympathieën voor Frankryk er bij de Nederlandsche Compagnie niet op versterkt. Die feitelijke hulp, haar verleend, had Frankrijk zich duur laten betalen. Aan de Kaap . . . sloegen de fransche militairen een meesterachtigen toon aan, dien de oude Compagniestroepen kwalijk verdroegen.”³⁵

The French soldiers stationed at the Cape had in fact adopted a very patronising manner both towards the local inhabitants, as well as to the other troops. In view of the fact that they point blank refused to salute the Meuron colours, they were soon at loggerheads with the Swiss regiment. To vindicate their wounded honour and pride, the Swiss officers sought satisfaction in the accepted manner of the day: a lengthy series of duels were fought with their French counterparts, even the respective commanding officers becoming involved. Probably no one wanted to risk exposing himself unnecessarily and honour having in name anyway, been appeased, everyone had perforce to make the best of an unhappy situation.

Garrison Duty

After the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ended the American War of Independence, the military forces at the Cape were faced with the deadly monotony of garrison duty. The men rapidly were bored, so they became restive and other problems ensued. The troops had meanwhile become aware of the scarcity throughout the Colony of skilled workers and so quite a number of men, who had been induced by promises of work and of better wages by the wealthier colonists, deserted and disappeared into the interior. Owing to the far-flung distances, lack of adequate communication and inability of the Company to exert its authority in the ill-defined frontier districts, only a small proportion of these men was ever caught. Many even changed their names. In the few cases where such deserters were however apprehended, they were brought back as prisoners to the Castle and shot as deserters. Undoubtedly the regiment in these ways suffered a serious and continuing drain of its manpower.

It has been estimated that during the 14 years (1781-95) that the Meuron Regiment was in the Dutch East India Company's service, 2,277 non-commissioned officers and men passed through its ranks,³⁶ of whom 42 died in battle, 139 during voyages at sea and 329 in hospital from a variety of diseases, a total death roll of 510 men (i.e. 22.4%). In addition 637 were dismissed for a variety of reasons, 55 were taken as prisoners of war by the English and 189 deserted.³⁷

Colonel Gordon's Position

Many complications resulted from the presence of different bodies of

35. *ibid.*, p. 14.

36. De Meuron, T. *op. cit.*, June, 1885: pp. 146-155.

37. Cotton. *op. cit.*, p. 210; and K. A. Resolutiën. *op. cit.* 13.2.1783: p. 453, and 17.2.1783: p. 457. In the *Musée Neuchâtelois*, April, 1885: p. 112, Théodore de Meuron gives the following statistics which vary from the foregoing: Died 624; discharged 623; deserted 189; prisoners of war 107; sentenced to the galleys 13; promoted from ranks to officers 92; passed into English service 629.

foreign mercenary troops in Cape Town. In fact, when first the news of the contract between the Chamber of Seventeen and Colonel de Meuron reached the Cape, Colonel R. Jacob Gordon immediately presented a memorial to the Governor requesting clarification as to whether he as commanding officer of the Company's troops at the Cape would be in control of all military forces³⁸ "relatief tot het nieuw aangekomene Regt. van den Collonel Meuron" and wanting to ascertain whether

"Colonel en Hoofd van 's E. Compagnies militie alhier Robbert Jacob Gordon . . . ten opsigte der onlangs hier aangekomene Meuronse Troupen gaarne eenige Elucidatie wenschende t'rlangen . . . of het detachement van het Regiment van Meuron het welk nieuwlingen alhier, ter Guarnisoen aangekoomen is, onder syne ordres en verantwoording staat dan niet . . . synde dit detachement op 2 differente Reisen gewapend aan wal gekomen, sonder dat èr hem de minste kennis van is gegeven, of dat by verder iets van hen gehoord heeft."³⁹

After careful deliberation, Governor van Plettenberg, a very cautious man, replied that foreign mercenary troops fell directly under the Governor:

"den heer Collonel Meuron het Particulier bevel, over zijn Regiment diend te blijven voeren, zo als den Heer Brigadier Conwaij over de Fransche troupen⁴⁰ en . . . Gordon over de Hollandsche en de vergaderde militie."

He spoke of Gordon as "het hoofd der militie".⁴¹

The latter therefore actually exercised no authority over the Pondicherry and Meuron regiments, although he was in command of the other troops stationed at the Cape, including the Luxemburg and Waldener mercenaries, because the latter had concluded different types of contract with the Company. This complicated position naturally, from a military point of view, was extremely unsound. Gordon moreover maintained that there were too few troops in any case for the adequate defence of the Colony.⁴² He clearly realised that at a time of crisis this divided command would be disastrous and a cause of grave weakness. There was too the further factor that undoubtedly his professional pride — his *amour propre* — was hurt. This emerges clearly when later the case of Lt.-Col. de Sandol-Roy — of which more on another occasion — was considered by the Council of Policy and he gave it as his opinion

"Dat hij van het begin . . . had te kennen gegeven, dat nadien Sijn Edele de directie van dit Regiment van Meuron . . . op zig genomen had, de zaak in quaestie oversulx deesen Raade niet aanging."⁴³

These were the words of a deeply wounded and sorely offended man who was trying to defend himself from the inevitable results ultimately of the Governor's actions.

38. K.A. Resolutiën. *op. cit.* 18.2.1783: p. 46.

39. *ibid.* 28.1.1783: pp. 18-19.

40. That is, the Pondicherry Regiment.

41. K.A. Resolutiën. *op. cit.* 25.2.1783: pp. 62-4.

42. *ibid.* 18.2.1783: p. 47.

43. *ibid.* C. 76, 21.5.1784: pp. 298-9.



An ensignbearer of the Meuron regiment in the service of the Dutch East India Company, carrying the regimental flag with the mottos Terra et Mare, Fidelitas et Honor arranged on the cross of the Swiss Flag, superimposed on the old Dutch flag. The uniform worn while the regiment was at the Cape.

From: *Musée Neuchâtelois*, Jan., 1880: p. 16.

An application⁴⁴ by De Meuron for increased “serviesgeld en subsistentie gelden” for his senior and junior officers was approved by the Council of Policy in March, 1783 on the grounds that

“Niet alleen de levensmiddelen en alle andere onvermijdelijke behoeftens inderdaad tot exorbitante Prijzen zijn gesteegen, maar bovendien ook d’officieren geen Logementen dan tot zeer zwaare Huuren kunnen bekoomen, en zij dus zo wel als d’onder officieren geensints kunnen bestaan.”⁴⁵

The Colonel had in addition complained about the low value of the paper money in local circulation and the inadequacy of the “kostgeld”, demanding a larger ration of bread, while insisting that steps should be taken to ensure a more adequate supply of firewood, which had proved to be very scarce.⁴⁶

Twenty men who were giving Colonel de Meuron much trouble, were at his request transferred to the Company’s own service and sent to Batavia, but Van Plettenberg saw no prospect of being able to offer him replacements in their stead. The Dutch garrison in any case was already below strength.⁴⁷

An Eventful Day

Friday, 28th March, 1783, was an exciting day in Cape Town and even the entry in the “Dagregister gehouden in ’t Casteel de Goede Hoop” waxes almost poetic — in a rather bombastic fashion, it is true — about the gorgeous weather:

“Het Uyt spanzel zig in d’afgeweekene nagt van veel vogt ontlast hebbende vertoonde zig heeden aan alle zyden onbetooogen het welk verzelde gaande van stilte en tusschenpozen zagt’ N. N. W’t en W. Z. W. windjes een aangename dag weers maakte.”

On this particular morning the Swiss troops, which had by this time somewhat recovered from the worst effects of their trying voyage, were paraded for formal inspection by Governor van Plettenberg.⁴⁸ He rode on horseback from the Castle to the Parade to review them at an elaborate ceremony, during which they marched past him in colourful array: the many-hued uniforms of the various ranks added to the gaiety of the scene, while the regimental flags, which were carried aloft by the ensign bearers in front of the regiment, flapped gaily in the gentle breeze. Many citizens of band contributed to the impressiveness of the occasion. Many citizens of the town, both high and low, flocked to watch how the Swiss, those redoubtable military men, would acquit themselves on this ceremonial occasion. Owing to the large number of sick and worn-out men at the time of their disembarkation, the local inhabitants had not previously had an

44. *ibid.* 12.8.1783: pp. 70-71; and C. 76 — 1784 (16.3.1784): p. 175.

45. *ibid.* 4.3.1783: pp. 70-71; and 25.3.1783: pp. 96-8.

46. *ibid.* 29.4.1783: pp. 126-8.

47. *ibid.* 25.3.1783: p. 96.

48. Kaapsche Archiefstukken, 1783. Dagregister gehouden in ’t Casteel de Goede Hoop, 28.3.1783: p. 291.



Mew

*at the
Veuchât*

Indi

opportunity of taking stock of this latest addition — of 1,200 men — to the very small population of the Cape Town of those days.

Nearly two months later an echo of this review is heard when Colonel Gordon, in the course of a discussion in the Council of Policy about the Meuron troops, complained that the Governor had reviewed the Regiment “sonder hem als hoofd van 's Compagnies militie”. He had, however, sent his adjutant to the review with instructions to count the troops on parade, as the result of which it was ascertained that the Regiment was far below the strength it should be, in terms of Colonel de Meuron's contract with the Company.⁴⁹ Gordon's strictures of the Colonel caused the Governor to withhold a “Certificaat der Regeering”, an official testimonial to the effect that Colonel de Meuron was fulfilling his contract, which the latter was anxious to secure.

A Few Personalities

The officer who in 1781 was placed in charge in Paris of the outfitting of the Regiment de Meuron for prolonged service overseas, was Captain *Yorck*, who is often referred to as the Duc d'Yorck by some authorities.⁵⁰ This is the same man who in later life, during the Napoleonic Wars, was to become the famous Prussian *Field Marshal Count Yorck von Wartenburg* (1759-1830), who from 1812 onwards played a decisive part in leading the Prussian resistance to Napoleon.⁵¹

How did a Prussian officer come to take part in equipping a regiment under French auspices for Dutch colonial service? Having fallen foul of the Prussian army authorities for some military misdemeanour, Yorck fled to Holland armed with a letter recommending him to the Princess of Orange (of Prussian birth) and was fortunate enough to secure a position as captain in the Pondicherry Regiment for service in the Dutch East India Company's colonies.⁵² For some time he was stationed in Paris and it was at this period that the French authorities put him in charge of equipping the Meuron Regiment. He sailed from La Rochelle himself in July, 1782, with replacements for his regiment. He was in Cape Town for a while and then went on to India, where he fought under Admiral de Suffren. He returned to Europe in 1786 and on Frederick the Great's death in that year, he re-entered the Prussian Army.⁵³ This famous military leader then was linked with the history of the Meuron Regiment both when it was first being formed, later in Cape Town and then again in the East.

Paul François Nicolas, *Comte de Barras* (1755-1829) was a Frenchman who from 1795-99 was one of the members of the Directoire and an early protector of Madame Josephine Beauharnais (later the Empress Josephine). He was a cadet in the Pondicherry Regiment which Suffren's fleet landed in Table Bay on 21st June, 1781. Until March, 1783, he

49. “. . . dat 'er op verre na hun getal niet bevonden was”. K.A. Resolutiën. *op. cit.* C. 76 — 1784: p. 307.

50. De Meuron, T. *op. cit.* XXII (1885): p. 112, 146.

51. Cotton, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

52. Régiment Suisse de Meuron. *État nominatif. op. cit.*, p. 12.

53. Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie. Leipzig, 1898. Vol. 24: pp. 595-605.



General (Comte) Charles-Daniel de Meuron, in the 1790's, about the time he transferred his regiment from the Dutch to the English service.

From: *The Cleghorn Papers*, ed. by Rev. W. Neil, London, Black, 1927. Facing p. 162.

was stationed at the Cape, when as the result of a quarrel with De Conway, commanding officer of the Pondicherry Regiment, he, fortunately for himself, was sent back to France with despatches. Shortly afterwards he resigned his commission and settled in Paris where later, during the Revolution, he came into prominence.⁵⁴ At the Cape he had become very friendly with Lieut-Colonel François de Sandol-Roy, the man who became involved in a violent dispute with De Meuron and who consequently in November, 1785, obtained his discharge. Subsequently Barras proved a useful friend to him, when he used his influence to have De Sandol-Roy appointed to high posts in the Napoleonic army.⁵⁵

The third person to be mentioned here, falls into quite a different category: *Thibault*, who was to make a name for himself as an architect at the Cape and who is probably the member of the Meuron Regiment best known to posterity in South Africa. In the records of the Regiment the following mention of him occurs:⁵⁶

“Thiebault, Louis de Buttes. Entré au régiment 1er juin 1781. Nommé lieutenant 1er juillet 1783. — Donna sa démission le 15 août 1785 pour entrer au corps de génie au Cap de Bonne Espérance”.

Thibault has been described as “a protégé of Meuron, who sent him to Paris for his education”.⁵⁷ In 1774 he was a student in the Royal Academy of Architecture in Paris. Originally he joined the Meuron Regiment in the engineers’ corps and on transferring to the Dutch East India Company’s service, was appointed a lieutenant of engineers, as well as director of a military school in Cape Town. The Cape records state that

“Thiebault, lieutenant, provisional benoemd tot het opzigt en bestier van ’s Compagnies gebouwen”⁵⁸

In August, 1786, the records mention that while

“Lieutenant Ingenieur Thiebault als directeur van het militaire kweekschool eene hulp nodig hebbende tot onderwys der jonge lieden”,⁵⁹

there is no doubt that his “vlijt en bequaamheid”⁶⁰ were of a high order. The military school of which he became head was situated in Wale Street.⁶¹

Most probably the reason for his transferring to the Company’s service, was that he wanted to settle at the Cape, because in 1786 he married Elisabeth van School, a daughter of a local colonist.⁶² In 1788 he was promoted to the rank of captain.

54. Cotton. *op. cit.*, p. 203.

55. Régiment Suisse de Meuron. *Etat Nominatif. op. cit.*, p. 12.

56. *ibid.* *Etat Général des Officiers.*

57. Botha, C. Graham. Louis Michel Thibault, 1750-1815. A notable French architect at the Cape. *Architect, Builder and Engineer*, June, 1924: pp. 7, 9-11.

58. K.A. Resolutiën. *op. cit.* C. 79 — 1786 (7.2.1786): p. 163.

59. *ibid.* 4.8.1786: p. 899.

60. *ibid.*, p. 1011.

61. Gordon-Brown, A. *Pictorial Art in South Africa during three centuries.* London. Sawyer, 1952, p. 121.

62. De Villiers, C. C. *Geslacht-register der oude Kaapsche Familien.* Kaapstad, Van de Sandt de Villiers, 1894. Dl. 3: P-Z, p. 417.

Postscript

Some officers and men from the Regiment took their discharge in Cape Town, married daughters of Cape burgers and settled here. When the Regiment left Cape Town, a depot for training new recruits continued to be maintained here until 1793 and was manned by the Regiment. There are many other aspects of the history of the Meuroor Regiment at the Cape, which still require consideration, particularly during the remainder of the Regiment's stay at the Cape between 1784 and 1788.

R. F. M. Immelman
(Librarian, University of Cape Town)