

# The Artists of The Artists Rifles

## The First 35 Years

by Patrick Baty

*“We are a nuisance to Europe, we have our systems and our policy...and their external result is terror and danger to others and people are therefore justified in voting us a pest.”<sup>v</sup>*

So admitted an embarrassed Foreign Secretary to the British Ambassador in Paris following an unsuccessful attempt on the French Emperor’s life in January 1858.

### THE THREAT

It emerged that the would-be assassin, an Italian Felice Orsini <sup>ii</sup> and most of his fellow conspirators, had lived in Britain as refugees while they were organising their plot against Napoleon III. Furthermore, a Birmingham gunsmith had made six copies of the bomb to Orsini’s careful specification. It was Britain’s willingness to offer sanctuary to the enemies of foreign regimes that was seen to pose a problem by many in Europe. <sup>iii</sup>

While there might have been misgivings about the British, there was genuine concern in this country about the intentions of the French. Napoleon III had come to power following a coup d’état in 1851 and comparisons were being made between the French standing army of about 400,000 men and the British Army of 153,285, of which only 42,000 were effective and in Britain. <sup>iv</sup> The prompt French action, following lessons learnt during the Crimean War, to replace their wooden warships with ironclad ones and the concern shown by Queen Victoria about the increased strength of the fortifications at Cherbourg contributed to the general unease. <sup>v</sup>

### THE RESPONSE

At a public meeting held in a London concert hall on 16th April 1859 resolutions were passed to press for increased defence measures including the enrolment of volunteers. Two weeks later fears of a possible invasion were increased when France declared war on Austria.

The poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson, wrote a poem entitled *The War*, which was published in *The Times* on 9th May 1859. This seemed to be a direct appeal to the reader:

*There is a sound of thunder afar  
Storm in the south that darkens the day  
Storm of battle and thunder of war!  
Well, if it do not roll away,  
Storm, Storm, Riflemen form!  
Ready, be ready against the storm!  
Riflemen, riflemen, riflemen form!*



Three days later the Government bowed to pressure and issued a circular authorising Lords Lieutenant to raise volunteer corps in their counties. <sup>vi</sup>

The main purpose of the volunteer corps was to teach the use of the rifle in order to prepare units to operate in open country in their local areas.

A volunteer was liable to be called out “in case of actual invasion, or of appearance of an enemy in force on the coast, or in case of rebellion arising in either of these emergencies.” <sup>vii</sup> While under arms volunteers were subject to military law and were entitled to be billeted and to receive regular army pay. They were not permitted to quit the force during actual military service, and at other times had to give fourteen days notice before being allowed to leave the corps. Members were to be considered “effective” if they had attended eight days drill and exercise in four months, or 24 days within a year. They were to provide their own arms and equipment and premises were to be found by commanding officers.

Within two years a considerable number of volunteer rifle corps had been raised with an average of 7,000 recruits being enlisted each month. It seems that the predominant motive behind the numbers was patriotism and the sense of duty a spontaneous reaction:

Like a snowball throughout the United Kingdom – it only required a slight move to become a mass of overwhelming power and if called upon to protect the country it will explode like a fulminated still and scatter an enemy in the most precipitate manner. <sup>viii</sup>

Standards of competence and efficiency also increased and by 1881 each volunteer battalion became part of a Regular regiment. <sup>ix</sup>

The volunteers were encouraged to place equal emphasis on the social side as well as on military matters. Where a corps was able to provide its own Drill Hall, there would also be mess facilities and its own social centre. Sports were a big feature and inter-corps competitions were arranged. As they were largely self-

**Continued...**

## The Artists of The Artists Rifles (cont.)

funded, money would be raised by holding dances, bazaars, fêtes, entertainments, theatrical performances and concerts.

### THE ARTISTS RIFLES <sup>x</sup>

Among the young men in London who were seized with patriotic emotion by the threat of a French invasion was a student at Cary's School of Art in Bloomsbury, Edward Coningsby Sterling. He was a ward of Thomas Carlyle and had some basic military experience, having served in the Cornish Militia. In 1859 he called a meeting of fellow members of the life class with a view to forming a volunteer group to join one of the new volunteer companies which were being created. The results were disappointing – only two decided to join him. <sup>xi</sup> However, word got around the artistic community and in early 1860 a meeting took place at the studio of a well-known portrait painter, Henry Wyndham Philips, <sup>xii</sup> which was to result in 119 members forming a corps of painters, sculptors, engravers, musicians, architects and actors.

This new unit, of one company in strength, was named the 38th Middlesex (Artists) Rifle Volunteers, otherwise known as the Artists Volunteer Corps or Artists Rifle Volunteers (RV). Towards the end of 1860 an official headquarters was established at Burlington House, the new home of the Royal Academy. Drill was performed in the gardens at the rear of the building from 7 to 9am and 4 to 7pm. However, in 1868 the Corps moved to the Arts Club, then in Hanover Square, as the gardens were to be built over to accommodate new galleries and the Academy Schools.

There were two kinds of membership of the Corps: those enrolled for military service, who had to provide their own uniform and equipment, pay an entrance fee of 10s 6d and an annual subscription of a guinea, and those Honorary members who were under no liability for military service but who paid an additional 10s 6d entrance fee and an annual subscription of two guineas.

It would be very easy to produce an enormous list of well-known members of the artistic world who joined the Artists Rifle Volunteers, and to a certain degree a list of some sort is necessary to emphasise the talent that existed in the unit in these early days. However, as well as focusing on the range of skills possessed by some of the early members it is interesting to see what linked so many of them.

The early enrolment registers show a preponderance of painters, ranging in age from the early 20s to the mid 40s. Many were already showing signs of a successful career - John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and Thomas Woolner were founding members of the *Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. George Frederick Watts had already won a prize for the decoration of the Houses of Parliament in 1843, and was just beginning to come into the public eye. William Morris was on the verge of forming Morris & Co with fellow volunteers Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Rossetti amongst the firm's founders. John Ruskin, an Honorary member, was the most influential art critic of his time as well as being a talented water-colourist.

Some other early members belonged to that group of Victorian artists who mostly lived in the St John's Wood area of London and were known as the *St John's Wood Clique*. Their work typically took the form of anecdotal historical narratives. Henry Stacy Marks, Philip Hermogenes Calderon, John Evan Hodgson, and William Frederick Yeames were amongst them and although their work is little known today, most will be able to call to mind the image of Yeames' "And When Did You Last See Your Father". One of them and a fellow volunteer was the painter and photographer David Wilkie Wynfield who attempted to imitate the painterly effects of old master artists such as Titian, using the new medium of photography. He recorded many of his friends in a series of portraits of them dressed in medieval, oriental or renaissance costumes and was to develop the technique of shallow-focus portrait photography. <sup>xiii</sup>

Frederic Leighton was a man of great dynamism and many abilities. Fluent in his teens in French, Italian and German and destined originally to be a doctor like his father he showed early promise as an artist. He trained initially on the continent, firstly in Frankfurt with the *Nazarene* painter Eduard von Steinle and then in Rome. He mixed happily with Roman high society and with the ever-growing circle of English visitors and expatriates and was an accomplished dancer. "I don't know what he is like as a painter," said a girl with whom he had danced, "but I know he is the best waltzer in Rome."



Frederic, Lord Leighton. Self-portrait, 1880.

## The Artists of The Artists Rifles (cont.)

As he was away from England until 1860 he had yet to make his mark on the artistic scene, but by 1864 he had been elected an Associate of the Royal Academy and a full RA four years later. Nonetheless, his leadership skills were clearly evident at that meeting in Wyndham Philips' studio as he and Alfred Nicholson, a musician, were made ensigns (Second Lieutenants). At the same time Millais and Arthur James Lewis were elected Lieutenants and Wyndham Philips Captain.

Lewis was No 2 on the first enrolment register of 5th October 1860. An amateur artist and a haberdasher and silk merchant, of the firm of Lewis and Allenby, he was very well connected:

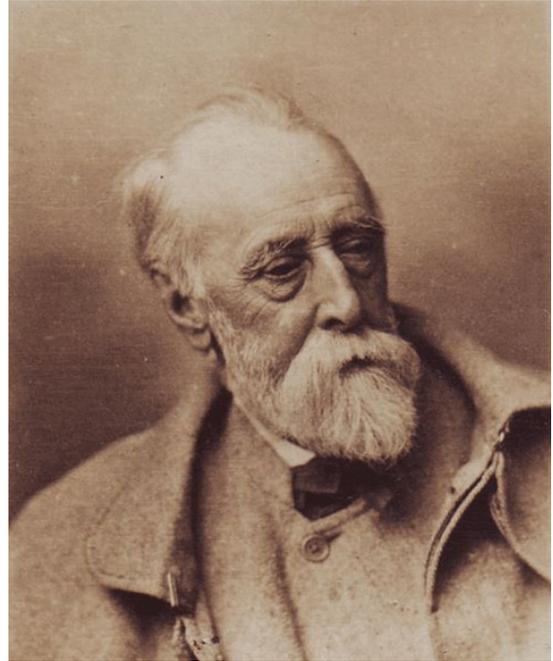
“No man had a wider acquaintance with artists than he. He was... the companion and friend of all the painters of his time...”<sup>xiv</sup>

Throughout the 1860s he held musical evenings at his rooms in Jermyn Street, and later at his large house in Kensington, Moray Lodge.<sup>xv</sup> Here, up to 150 lovers of the arts would gather to discuss the arts, smoke and sing part-songs and other popular music. The singers were known as *The Moray Minstrels* and included many others who became members of the Artists Rifle Volunteers – John Leech (the Punch cartoonist), Field Talfourd (an artist and No 19 on the enrolment register), Frederick Walker and all of his colleagues of the *St John's Wood Clique*. Charles Perugini was also a regular attender who was to have a successful career as an artist and who was an enthusiastic volunteer, being later commissioned into the Corps. Perugini's wife, Kate, was the daughter of Charles Dickens and the model for the young woman in Millais's famous painting 'The Black Brunswicker.' Marriage linked other members, as Lewis married the actress Kate Terry in 1867, whose sister, the famous Ellen, was married to George Frederick Watts.

Valentine Cameron (Val) Prinsep was an honorary member of the *St John's Wood Clique* and another keen volunteer, eventually being promoted to senior Major in the Corps. His parents had leased Little Holland House, in Kensington, and made it another hub of artistic society.<sup>xvi</sup> He was No 5 on the enrolment register and clearly knew many of the other originals. His mother was the sister of pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron who was later to acknowledge David Wilkie Wynfield as the main influence on her own work, writing that “to my feeling about his beautiful photography I owed all my attempts and indeed consequently all my success”.<sup>xvii</sup>

Other early photographers who joined the Corps were Roger Fenton, whose images of the Crimean War are well known, the elderly all-round sportsman Horatio Ross and the Frenchman Camille Silvy.

The lawyer and author of *The History of Great Britain During the Reign of Queen Anne*, Frederick William Wyon, was also one of the originals. He came from a family of medalists and engravers to the Royal Mint and it was a brother of his, and fellow volunteer, J.W. Wyon who designed the Corps' cap badge. This was composed of



G.F.Watts.

two heads, that of Mars (the Roman God of War) and Minerva (the Goddess of Wisdom).

Algernon Swinburne might have seemed an unlikely member of the Corps delighting as he did to flout Victorian sensibility where he could. When his 'Poems and Ballads' was first published in 1866 he was castigated as the “libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs”.<sup>xviii</sup>

Architects were well represented amongst the early members. Robert Edis, who went on to command the Corps in 1883,<sup>xix</sup> had been No 8 on the original enrolment register. Influenced by the well-known architect and fellow Artist William Burges, who had sponsored his membership of the Corps, he owned his own practice when he joined. By 1864 he was President of the Architectural Association. He specialised in commercial premises and private houses although the Great Central Hotel at Marylebone was one of his better known commissions.<sup>xx</sup> Frederick Pepys Cockerell was another original architect member. The son of Charles Cockerell, the architect, archaeologist, and writer, he is perhaps most remembered for The Carlisle Memorial Column at Castle Howard. Horace Jones, another member of the Artists, went on to design Tower Bridge and the markets of Billingsgate, Leadenhall and Smithfield.

The playwright and actor-manager Alfred Wigan was No 7 on the first enrolment register of 1860. He took part in the first Royal Command Performance, which was staged at Windsor Castle in 1848. In 1867 he formed a new company at the Queen's Theatre, which included the (soon-to-be) major stars of their day Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. The biography of the Shakespearean actor Barry Sullivan, who joined the Artists in December 1860, tells of his receiving a certificate for rifle practice by Lieutenant Palmer, the Corps' Instructor, in the following May.<sup>xxi</sup>

## The Artists of The Artists Rifles (cont.)

Rather tellingly we are told, in the same work, that:

“One of the chief characteristics of the corps, even to the present day, is the social position of its members.”

The Artists Rifle Volunteers were never one of the ‘smartest’ regiments, although they were always ‘well-connected’. In the early days especially, celebrated as some of the artists were, they were of little military value. William Morris, for example, seems to have had problems telling his right from his left during close order drill, ‘invariably begg[ing] pardon of the comrade whom he found himself facing.’ Holman Hunt was forever losing parts of his disassembled rifle and Ford Madox Brown managed to shoot his own dog ‘the first time he was set to target practice.’<sup>xxii</sup> Watts, aged 43, was hardly robust although did ride over to Wimbledon Common to see the manoeuvres. However they did act as a magnet to more recruits from the artistic community who, although they might have enlisted for sound patriotic reasons, were also attracted by the possibility of showing to and discussing their work with their seniors.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Some of these early members had clearly been swept up with the national feeling at the time and soon failed to keep up their obligations or became disenchanted with the military way of life. Rossetti, for example, seems to have questioned every command given and his name does not appear on the Volunteer Review held in front of Queen Victoria in Hyde Park in June 1860.<sup>xxiv</sup> Edward Poynter (later knighted and elected President of the Royal Academy), Edwin Long R.A. and George Vicat Cole R.A. all seem to have had very short careers with the Volunteers. However Watts, Leighton, Morris, Perugini, Prinsep, Edis, Haag, Wynfield, Walker, Hodgson and Richmond were some of the better known artists who continued to be members long after any threat to national security had passed.

As the years went by the composition of the Corps broadened. By 1893 painters and sculptors represented less than 5 per cent of the membership, with architects 12 per cent, lawyers 12 per cent;



*The Last of England, by Ford Madox Brown, 1855.*

doctors 10 per cent and civil engineers 6 per cent. The City and ‘miscellaneous occupations’ provided the remaining 55 per cent. The unwritten rule seems to have been that each candidate for the regiment should be of ‘good social background and education’, or a ‘gentleman’ in the broadest accepted sense of the term.<sup>xxv</sup> They were essentially a middle class phenomenon relying heavily on the public schools and universities for recruits. It was little surprise that they became an officer training unit in the First World War.

When the same corps was renamed the 21st SAS (Artists) Volunteers in 1947, its strength resided in the hallmark of the first volunteers: ‘independence and irregularity’.<sup>xxvi</sup>

*A version of this article appeared originally in London Historians Members’ Newsletter of November 2012*

**Continued...**

## Notes.

- i Lord Clarendon to Lord Cowley (private) 16th January 1858. Cowl. P. PRO FO 519/177 ff.49-52.
- ii An Italian revolutionary and leader of the Carbonari.
- iii An excellent account of the effect can be found in “The Orsini Affair and the Crisis of 1858” by Terry Jenkins in History Today, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2008.
- iv Ian F.W. Beckett. Riflemen Form. The Ogilby Trusts. 1982. 18.
- v Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Life of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. 1895. 197.
- vi War Office Circular, 12 May 1859, published in The Times, 13 May.
- vii Volunteer Act 1804 (44 Geo.3 c.54).
- viii (Beckett 1982, 29).
- ix Further changes took place between 1906 and 1912 as part of the Haldane Reforms.
- x Originally an apostrophe was placed in the word Artists’. However this was officially dropped from the full title in 1937, as it was so often misused.
- xi The painters Field Talfourd and John Milner Allen.
- xii At 8 St George Street, W1 (behind Sotheby’s).
- xiii An exhibition of these entitled “Princes of Victorian Bohemia: Photographs by David Wilkie Wynfield” was held by the National Portrait Gallery, London. Photography Gallery. 28 January - 14 May 2000.
- xiv Henry Stacy Marks. Pen and Pencil Sketches. 1894. Vol. 1. p.184.
- xv It was demolished in 1955 for the building of Holland Park School.
- xvi They had a 21-year lease on it from Henry Fox, 4th Baron Holland thanks to the painter George Frederic Watts, a friend of both the Hollands and the Prinseps.
- xvii <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/julia-margaret-cameron-related-photographers/>
- xviii Barry Gregory. A History of The Artists Rifles 1859–1947, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2006. 8.
- xix By that stage it was known as the 20th Middlesex (Artists) Rifle Volunteers.
- xx Now ‘The Landmark London’.
- xxi Robert M. Sillard. Barry Sullivan and His Contemporaries - A Histrionic Record. 1901. p.36.
- xxii William Evan Fredeman ‘Visionary Vanities: Leaves from the Pre-Raphaelite apochrypha,’ The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies. Fall 1987, 10.
- xxiii (Gregory 2006, 11).
- xxiv ‘(‘Visionary Vanities,’ 10).
- xxv Gregory 2006, 52.
- xxvi Sir William MacPherson, quoted in Caroline Dakers. The Holland Park Circle. 1999.65.



### About Patrick Baty

*Patrick Baty has spent the last thirty years investigating the paints and colours employed in the decoration of historic buildings. He has carried out the technical analysis of the decoration of many hundreds of buildings, as can be seen on his website – [www.colourman.com](http://www.colourman.com)*

*He has advised on the redecoration of projects ranging from King Henry VIII’s Royal Beasts and the Royal Festival Hall to Tower Bridge. Patrick also writes and lectures on the subject of historic decoration.*

*With his wife, Alex, he runs the family business, Papers and Paints, in Chelsea. They specialise in colour and are constantly developing new ranges, many of which are for other companies in the UK and Europe. Accurate colour measurement has been a focus, and Patrick has pioneered the making of colour surveys, dealing with many important public and private institutions.*