

Of Swine Feathers.....

By Charles Singleton

Whilst garrisoning the city of Gloucester, several regiments had Swedish Feathers issues to them. Amongst those receiving them, were the musketeers of Col. Edward Massey's and Col. Nicholas Devereux's regiments.

Both regiments, were to supply large contingents of musketeers for service with Wallers army on several occasions including Cropredy Bridge and took part in Massey's aggressive raiding along the Welsh Marches, the Forest of Dean and into the West Country.

The deployment of large groups of musketeers without the support of pike divisions was a process that was gaining momentum throughout the middle of the 17th century. The King's Oxford army was to make great use of them during the break out from Oxford in early June 1644, and later under Sir George Lisle at the battles of Cheriton and 2nd Newbury in the same year. Sir William Waller on numerous occasions mounted his musketeer's to aid strategic operations. In August 1644 Waller was to attempt to mount a very large number of his musketeers in the fashion of dragoons. He asked the Committee of Both Kingdoms for 50 guidons, 100 dragoon drums, 5,000 belts for muskets and 2,000 swords. The lack of horses however, was to stymie his plans.

Other factors led to the increased use in musketry. The enclosed nature of much of the British landscape encouraged the use of greater numbers of musketeers as cavalry would not be so much of a threat in such an environment. Fighting amongst the hedgerows was to become very much a character of fighting in the British Isles. Indeed, in the debate along which line of advance on which to invade England in 1648, the roads through Lancashire were chosen as the terrain was very close.

A significant factor in the greater reliance on firearms was the growing realisation that the musketeer was not hapless against mounted attack. Turned on its end, the 5ft long musket made a very effective weapon in the melee. This English style of close quarter fighting was noted with some discomfort on the Continent.

This aggressive style of defence was to see cavalry on several occasions come undone against bodies of musketeers. At Marston Moor, Sir Charles Lucas and his brigade, having help break the Allied right wing cavalry was wounded and captured and his horse scattered as it attempted to attack the Scottish and English infantry. The same fate awaited Ireton who was to lead a division of horse into the Duke of York's regiment of foot at Naseby. The same Duke of York, the future James IInd was fight against English foot at the Battle of the Dunes in 1658. In the description of the fighting he gave, he seemingly was lucky to get away with his life....

"...when we had broken into this battalion, and were got amongst them, not so much as one single man of them asked for quarter, or threw down his arms, but every one defended himself to the last: so that we ran as great a danger by the butt end of their muskets as by the volley which they had given us. And one of them had infallibly knocked me off my horse if I had not prevented him when he was just ready to have discharged his blow by a stroke I gave with my sword over the face, which laid him along up the ground".

The Swedish or Swine feather was an early attempt to introduce a greater degree of flexibility and self-defence to the musketeer without the need to be supported by slower moving divisions of pike.

The Swine feather was essentially a musket rest, but with a pike head on the receiving end. It could be used to form a defensive palisade of spear points if placed in the ground, whereby the musketeers could, in theory, retreat behind and fire at their foe in safety. A favorite of armies on the continent, and supposedly used to by the Army of the Covenantant.

Sir James Turner, in his 1683 book 'Pallas Armata, Military Essayes of the Ancient Grecian, Roman and Modern Art of War' described them thus

“ I think I may reckon in this place the Swedish Feather, among the defensive arms, though it does participate in both defense and offence. It is a stake five or six-foot-long, and about four fingers thick., with a piece of sharp iron nailed to each end of it. By the one end it is made fast in the ground in such a manner that the other may lay out so it may meet the breast of a horse, whereby a body of musketeers is defended as with a palisade, against the rude charge of a squadron of horse, which in the meantime they gall and disorder with their shot. I have seen them made use of in Germany, and before I left that war saw them drop out of use. When the infantry of several regiments or brigades are drawn up in battle, and the pikes and those stakes are fixed in the ground, they make a delightful show representing a wood. The pikes resembling the tall trees and the stakes the shrubs.”

Whether the Swedish Feathers were ever used in action is unknown as we have no accounts. However, the decision to issue them to Devereaux's musketeers demonstrates an understanding in the current military developments elsewhere in Europe.