

H. Mills

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THE RETURN OF THE ARMORER



FRENCH TRENCH HELMET, 1915



SAPPER'S HELMET, MIDDLE OF NINETEENTH CENTURY



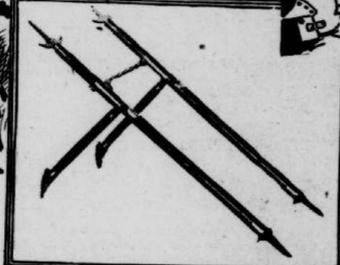
- 1-Pistol shield of Henry VII (Obverse and Reverse).
- 2-Skull Cap, Late Seventeenth Century.
- 3-Sapper's Helmet, Middle of Nineteenth Century.
- 4-Crests, Late Seventeenth Century.
- 5-Steel Skull Cap, 1815.
- 6-Gorget, Early Eighteenth Century.
- 7-Chapel de Fer, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century.
- 8-Pikeman's Pot, Middle of Seventeenth Century.



SAPPER'S MANTLE OF LEATHER, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



MODERN SQUARE SHIELD



CHEVAL-DE-FRISE, 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

MARSHAL MAURICE of Saxe, writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, deplored the disuse of defensive armor as being the cause of large number of casualties in battle. He very truly observed that most of the wounds caused by spent bullets, sword, lance, or pike thrusts would be minimized, if not prevented, by the use of some kind of metal protection. He does not suggest that its weight and unwieldiness was any drawback, for he recommends a cuirass made of buff leather, re-enforced with metal strips, weighing in all 30 pounds, as a very useful equipment, and he gives as his opinion that it was only the cost of armor which brought about its disuse. From the middle of the sixteenth century there had been much discussion as to the practical value of armor, and Sir John Smythe, writing in 1590, cites the death of Sir Philip Sidney from a spent bullet as a reason for adhering to the old fashions in military equipment. As early as 1569 armor was proved by musket or pistol shot, and in 1590 Sir Henry Lee, master of the armories, arranged a trial to determine the respective merits of Shropshire iron and "Hungers" or Innsbruck metal, with results disastrous to the homemade product.

In the "Verney Memoirs," under the date of 1667, we find that one Richard Hals proved his armor with "as much powder as will cover the bullet in the palm of the hand." It was this proof by musket shot, combined with the gradual decadence of the craft of the armorer, who had by this time lost the art of tempering his metal, which produced the graceless and cumbersome equipment of the seventeenth century—proof against firearms, it is true, but so heavy and inconvenient as to be entirely unsuited for extended expeditions, and for the new school of military tactics. The last relic of the complete suit of plate was the small crescent-shaped gorget worn by infantry officers up to about the year 1830. Once this had been a practical protection to the throat, but latterly it shrank to a small plaque of brass, little larger than a regimental badge. Quilted armor, brigandines, and chain mail were occasionally used after field armor had been given up; but these were solely used against the attack of the assassin. Napoleon III is said to have worn a defense of mail; the cavalry of the Confederate army in the American Civil war favored a vest lined with plates of steel; and Ned Kelly, the bushranger of our own day, wore a helmet and cuirass of bulletproof boiler plate. The thin strips of steel used in the brigandine were only of value against sword cuts, and it was for this purpose that they were employed in the "secretes" or hat linings, of which there are still large numbers in the Tower, and in the hat of Bradshaw the regicide, in the Ashmolean museum, Oxford. The modern French and German defenses of this nature would seem to be quite useless against long-range rifles. For many years inventors have brought forward contrivances, claimed to be bulletproof, which provided thrilling turns on the music hall stage, but none ever dared to face the service rifle wearing their invention. As has been repeatedly pointed out in recent articles on this subject, the only value of armor at the present day is as a protection from glancing or spent bullets. It has no value whatever against the point-blank impact of a projec-

tile, for, even if the defense is not penetrated, the resultant shock is as serious as a bullet wound. It is therefore this glancing surface which should be studied if armor is to have any place in modern warfare, and metal of a high temper and light in weight should be employed. It is unthinkable that such defenses will ever be officially recognized, for, if issued on a large scale, they would greatly impede the mobility of troops already carrying more dead weight than did the soldier of the sixteenth century in his suit of half-armor. If such contrivances are purchased privately an exhaustive test should be insisted upon, and proof should be recorded by some responsible body, as it was in the days of Charles I, when the Armorers company of London were ordered to carry out such tests and stamp all armor that satisfied the conditions with their mark. If these defenses are carelessly made of indifferent material they will assuredly be far more of a danger than a protection.

It is impossible to criticize the modern productions without seeing them in actual use in the trenches, but it would seem that the pistol shield with crossed bars is in direct opposition to the theory that the "glancing surface" is of importance, for here, wherever the bullet strikes, it will deliver the full force of its blow and will not fly off at a tangent as it would from Henry VIII's pistol shield which is preserved in the Tower. The plain skull-cap seems to fulfill the required conditions, except that it should be provided with a brim curving outward, like the chapel de fer of the sixteenth century. The French helmet appears to provide some lodgments for the bullet in the straight brim and high comb, but again it should be noted that it is impossible to criticize practically until the defense is seen in action.

Besides the ordinary body armor of the late seventeenth century in the Tower collection there are a few interesting specimens of siege implements which were the precursors of modern contrivances. The chevaux de frise of the days of Wellington are a series of sergeants' pikes joined by horizontal rods, and so arranged that they can be stretched across a road or the breach in a wall as a protection against cavalry—an anticipation of the present barbed wire entanglement. The sappers' mantels of leather and iron have continued in use from the time of the Romans up to today, and the weighty trappings that were used in the middle of the seventeenth century show that even then armor was seriously used in the trench work. Several of the eighteenth century muskets in the Tower of London have brass cups fixed to the barrel or butt from which grenades were thrown, a necessary precaution when the fuse used was the slow match. Step by step we can trace the evolution of military invention, and it is peculiarly interesting to find that today, in the light of all our scientific knowledge and experience, we are suddenly forced back to make use of appliances of four hundred years ago which we had but recently stigmatized as relics of barbarism.

The facts show that from the stone age onward armor never became extinct. It has always been worn. At the present day, to be sure, it appears less for service than as a uniform of the body-guard of royalty. And you recall that corselet and steel headpiece are still seen in St. James park, or in Potsdam, or indeed in Republican

France, where the tradition of the bodyguard of the emperor still survives. But even these relics of ancient armor are known to be serviceable, saving many a guardsman from wounds of saber or lance or even high velocity projectiles when striking at an angle.

It is true that the disuse of armor followed the invention of better grades of powder, but it must, nevertheless, be remembered that, during the time when armor was worn oftener in Europe, gunpowder was in common use. During the latter half of the sixteenth century not only cannon but guns and pistols were seen everywhere. Nevertheless armor continued to be used. It was in many cases the matter of expense which limited the wearing of armor; for in those days the cost of armor was high, very high. Clearly, therefore, a man would be less apt to wear a really good harness—one which might have cost the equivalent of ten thousand dollars in the present purchasing power of money—when the protection it gave him was not complete; he preferred then to wear common heavy armor, and in the end to neglect wearing armor altogether.

When he found that his enemy kept away from him, the range of firearms increased. Later on he "took a chance" of receiving a wound.

It was only during the Thirty Years war, say before 1650, that cheap armor of very great weight—almost intolerable—came into general use. Then, too, one must remember that there was for a long time a feeling that armor was not heroic. Even in earlier centuries many a distinguished officer thought it chivalrous to appear in battle only partly armed. Thus we read of historical personages going into battle with helmet visor raised, and of such a knight errant as Sir Philip Sydney fighting bareheaded. The feeling that it is discreditable to wear armor is strong even at the present day.

The reasoning runs. It is cowardly to take an unfair advantage of an adversary. Surely a man in a duel would not wear a shirt of mail; so why should he be armored in battle, which is only a duel on a larger scale?

Shields should be and are already in constant use. It may be recalled that the Japanese developed this system effectively in their war with Russia, especially in the capture of "Two Hundred and Three Meter hill," where they moved along in front of the advancing infantrymen. In earlier times the Japanese sometimes wore a flat shield slung upon the breast, but always as a defense against shot.

When one considers the value to the community of even one soldier, surely no nation should afford not to protect him as best it can.

The descendants of an individual may amount to thousands in the course of a couple of centuries, so one can figure out what the human losses to the countries now at war must represent in the future. If armor will save even a few hundreds of men it will certainly pay as a national investment to use it. The time will soon come when governmental commissions will take up this matter effectively.

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