

The Napoleon Series

How Senior Officers Were Promoted in the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars

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When one researches the promotion and assignment of senior officers in the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars it becomes very apparent that its system of doing so was unlike any other army's in Europe. The researcher will soon come across a variety of terms, such as regimental rank, substantive rank, army rank, brevet rank, and local rank that can cause confusion and lead to erroneous conclusions. This article examines the different ways an individual was promoted to general officer and what these promotions meant. This is meant to be a general overview and being the British Army there are always anomalies and exceptions to the rule.

Regimental Rank

Until July 1814, the only permanent rank in the British Army was regimental rank, this was also called substantive rank. Every officer was assigned to either a cavalry or infantry regiment, or a corps such as the Royal Artillery or Royal Engineers, regardless of his rank. This included all general officers. Within a regiment there was one colonel and one to three lieutenant colonels. The number of lieutenant colonels in the regiment varied for the cavalry and for the infantry was usually equal to the number of battalions the regiment had. For the Royal Artillery, there were generally two lieutenant colonels for each artillery battalion.

Once an officer held a rank in the regiment, it was his for the rest of his life unless he was cashiered and forced out of the army. An officer, especially one who was older, could sell his commission to a junior officer and use this money to retire on, or he could go on half pay. A lieutenant colonel in a light dragoon regiment was authorized to sell his commission for £4982 while a lieutenant colonel in a line infantry regiment could sell his for £3500. This was the equivalent to almost 12 times the annual pay of the light dragoon lieutenant colonel and 11 times the annual pay for that of an infantry lieutenant colonel.

The commission was supposed to be offered to the senior officer in the regiment who was junior to that rank. For example if a lieutenant colonel decided to sell his commission, regulations stated that he had to offer it to the most senior major in the regiment. If that officer could not afford to buy it, then it was offered to the next senior major. If no one in the regiment was able to buy it, the officer selling the commission could offer it to any other major in the army who was looking to purchase his next rank. Although army regulations prohibited the selling of a commission for a higher price than what was authorized, it was not unheard of for an officer to sell it for a much higher price through his regimental agent.

Another way an officer could be promoted within a regiment was by appointment. With the expansion of the army after war broke out in 1803, there were many vacancies to be filled and many officers were promoted without having to purchase it.

The regimental colonel never purchased his rank. He was always a general officer and was responsible for the administration of the regiment. The position was a sinecure and the colonel never commanded the regiment or its battalions on active service.

General Brevets

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary Wars on the European Continent, the British Army found that it had too many old officers in its senior ranks that were incapable of commanding on active service. These officers prevented officers who were junior to them from being promoted and placed in positions of command. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army recognized this problem and instituted a series of mass brevet promotions to major and above. These promotions were called general brevets. A list of when the brevet promotions were made can be seen at: [General Brevet Calendar of the British Army 1790-1819](#)

Eligibility for promotion in a general brevet, was determined by the officer's date-of-rank in the rank he was currently holding. The general brevet had a start date and a cut-off date and all officers whose date-of-rank was between those dates were promoted. All general brevets for colonels and generals were on the same date. For example all officers who were promoted to colonel in the General Brevet of 25 July 1810, had a date-of-rank of 25 July 1810. When the general brevet was announced, the names were listed in order of seniority. It was rare for an officer to be promoted a colonel or general officer outside of the general brevets, so seniority was generally established based on when the officer was promoted to lieutenant colonel. This seniority would never change, since all officers who were promoted in one general brevet would be promoted together in future general brevets.

The number of officers promoted in the general brevets varied from year-to-year. For example:

Rank	Number Promoted in General Brevet of			
	25 April 1808	25 July 1810	4 June 1813	4 June 1814
General	10	0	17	31
Lieutenant General	32	23	51	64
Major General	54	68	77	75
Colonel	71	95	90	144
Lieutenant Colonel	41	42	51	125
Major	87	27	88	351

All officers who met the date-of-rank criteria were promoted, regardless of their ability or past performance. They did not even have to be employed at the time. For example, in October 1810 Major General Stafford Lightburne was relieved from his brigade command by Wellington for “. . . many little improprieties which render him a discreditable person with the army.”¹ He never had any military duties after he returned to England. Yet, this did not prevent him from being promoted to lieutenant general in June 1813 and if he had not died in 1827, he probably would have been promoted to general.

Promotion of an officer to a brevet rank was a prerogative of the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. The Duke of Wellington could only recommend a promotion of a deserving officer. However on 23 April 1811, he was given permission to promote twelve captains to brevet major and six majors to brevet lieutenant colonel. He was also allowed to promote six British officers serving with the Portuguese Army to either brevet major or brevet lieutenant colonel.² This privilege was extended in the latter years of the Peninsular War, with the understanding that it was not to be abused. These promotions were in addition to the general brevets, which were happening yearly by that time.

Army and Brevet Rank for Junior Officers

Army rank was different than regimental rank. It was rank usually tied to a specific position, almost always on the staff somewhere. When the officer was appointed to the staff he would be promoted to the rank that this position called for. As long as he held the position he would receive the pay and privileges of his new rank. Once he returned to regimental duties, the officer would receive the pay and privileges of his regimental rank. Custom however, dictated that the officer was called by the highest rank he ever held.

A junior officer could be given a brevet promotion to the next rank. However to receive a brevet promotion, an officer had to be at least a captain. For some officers this promotion was based on merit or an act of heroism. Most however were promoted by general brevets. This was done to promote those with long service in their regimental or army rank. The promotion was always in army rank and the holder of the rank did not receive any additional pay or privileges unless he was in a position that called for the rank. Regardless of whether his duties were regimental or on the army staff, a brevet promotion made him eligible for further promotions in army rank. Like an individual with army rank, when a holder of brevet rank served with his regiment, he was called by his brevet rank.

General brevets to lieutenant colonel began in 1790 and to major in 1794. They were usually a yearly occurrence until 1805, when they stopped for three years. In 1808 they became a yearly event until 1814.

Neither army nor brevet rank affected seniority in the regiment. A junior officer could be senior in army rank than an officer who was senior to him in regimental rank. For example in 1815, Captain Richard Llewellyn of the 28th Foot, was the 4th senior captain in the

¹ *Wellington's Dispatches* (enlarged edition); Vol. 4, pages 314-315. General Lightburne's name was suppressed in the volume.

² *Wellington's Supplementary Dispatches*; Vol. 7, pages 111 - 112

regiment with a date of rank of 28 February 1805. His army rank was major with a date of rank of 23 April 1812. Senior to him in the regiment were Captains William Meacham and William Irving, both with the regimental date of rank of 9 July 1803. Both of them had the army rank of major, with a date of rank of 4 June 1814. If Richard Llewellyn was serving in a position that authorized him to use his army rank of major, he was considered senior to Captains Meacham and Irving. Upon his return to his regimental duties he would revert back to captain and would be junior to them.

Brevet Promotions to Colonel

The first general brevet to colonel began on 18 November 1790. This promotion gave all lieutenant colonels with a date-of-rank between 1779 and 1781 a promotion to brevet colonel. This promotion was army rank, not regimental rank. Three years later there was another general brevet to colonel for lieutenant colonels with a date of rank between 1781 and 1782. Yearly brevet promotions to colonel continued until 1803. There were no brevet promotions to colonel in 1804, but two in 1805. Three years later, in 1808, the brevet promotions began again and continued yearly until 1814.³

In order for an officer to be promoted to brevet colonel, he had to be a lieutenant colonel. For most officers the lieutenant colonelcy was usually his regimental rank, however the brevet also included those who held army or brevet rank of lieutenant colonel. By 1800, the only way a lieutenant colonel could be promoted earlier than his peers was to be appointed an Aide-de-Camp to the King. Almost every year there was a general brevet, several lieutenant colonels who were too junior to be promoted by the general brevet were named an ADC.⁴ With the appointment came a promotion to brevet colonel. They were placed on the bottom of the seniority list for that year's brevet colonels.

Like those who had been promoted to brevet major or brevet lieutenant colonel, promotion to brevet colonel was army rank. The officer did not receive the pay and allowances of a colonel, unless he was serving in a position that called for that rank. As with other brevet promotions, custom allowed the officer to be referred to as colonel, regardless of whether he was serving in a colonel's billet or with his regiment. The promotion did create opportunities for those serving in Wellington's Army in the Peninsula. Temporary brigade command was often given to the senior officer in the brigade. Occasionally, a deserving officer who might be junior in regimental rank than others in the brigade, was senior to them in army rank. This permitted him to take command until a permanent commander was appointed.

Brevet Promotions to Major General

Brigadier General was either local rank or staff rank usually given to an officer on the staff of some Military District or Army. Within the army rank structure an officer was promoted

³ This cycle of yearly brevet promotions was due to the expansion of the army in response to the Peninsular War. As soon as the war was over in 1814, the promotions stopped, until there was a final one in August 1819.

⁴ The exact number would vary from year-to-year. In 1808 and 1809, two were appointed each year, while in 1810 eight were.

from colonel to major general. The promotion dates for those promoted to major general was similar to those promoted to colonel, with the brevets given in 1790, 1793 to 1803, two in 1805, then yearly from 1808 to 1814. There were no further brevet promotions until the final one in August 1819. Promotion to major general was based on when an officer was promoted to colonel. For example those officers promoted to major general on 4 June 1813 had been promoted to colonel on 25 July 1810.

Brevet Promotions to Lieutenant General and General

Promotions to lieutenant general and general was also considered a brevet promotion. The schedule for these promotions was similar to that for colonels and major generals. By 1808 they were yearly and continued until 1814. A final brevet promotion was also done in August 1819.

A Change in Regulations in July 1814.

Just because an officer was promoted to general, it did not guarantee the army would ever employ him as a general. All generals' rank was brevet rank and there were no permanently paid or employed general officers prior to July 1814. A general officer retained his regimental commission despite being promoted. A general would only receive the pay and allowances of his rank if he held a position calling for that rank. If he was not in a general officer's billet, his pay and allowances reverted back to whatever his regimental rank was. This could be a drastic cut in pay for some.⁵ That being said, once a major general was promoted to lieutenant general, there was a good chance he would be appointed a regimental colonel. Should he not hold a general officer's position, he would be unemployed and his pay revert back to his regimental rank, which in this case would be that of the regimental colonel.

Although the brevet promotions allowed a regimental officer to progress in seniority by army rank, it still slowed down promotions at the regimental level. In July 1814 all general officers were given the option of keeping their regimental rank or taking permanent unattached rank as a general officer. Should the general be unemployed he would receive half pay of whatever his rank was as a general officer or his pay as the regimental colonel, whichever was greater. Most of the generals took the permanent rank, however a few chose to stay with their regiments.

Appointments on the Staff

Occasionally an officer was appointed in a higher rank to the staff of an expeditionary force or army. This appointment was for a specific position and if the position went away, the officer would lose his promotion. This happened to Colonel James Craufurd who was appointed a brigadier general to command a brigade in Wellington's force that was going to Portugal in 1808. He commanded it until the army was re-organized on 5 September and his brigade was disbanded. He chose to remain with the army as a colonel. When a re-organization of the army took place on 8 October he was given command of a newly

⁵ Major General Frederick Robinson's regimental rank in the 18th Foot was only a major!

formed brigade. Since his original appointment as a brigadier general on the staff was no longer valid, he was not allowed to keep his appointment as a brigadier general, but commanded the brigade as a colonel.

Local Rank

A third kind of rank was known as local rank. This was usually given to officers assigned to a foreign station such as North America, an expeditionary force, or an army on active service, such as Wellington's Army in the Peninsula. To hold local rank, the officer had to be appointed on the staff of that organization. Holding the local rank authorized the officer to receive the pay and benefits of that rank. Once the officer left the location or his position went away, his rank would revert back to his army rank.

There was no set rule for determining the number of authorized local rank positions. It depended upon the size of the force and what the government was willing to pay for its staff. A commander could temporarily promote an officer however there was a chance that the Commander-in-Chief of the Army might not approve the promotion and the officer would go back to his former rank. Wellington was able to have most of his division commanders appointed to the local rank of lieutenant general and a handful of his brigade commanders and senior staff officers who were only colonels, promoted to the local rank of major general.⁶ Between 1809 and 1813, Wellington also promoted 37 colonels to local brigadier general, most of whom were promoted to major general in the next general brevet.

As the Peninsular War continued, more and more generals were promoted to local rank. This cause problems for those officers who joined Wellington's Army after many of the local rank promotions were made. Occasionally these officers, who were still only major generals, were senior in army rank to those with local rank. For example, Major General William Beresford had a date-of-rank of 25 April 1808, but was a local lieutenant general with a date of rank of 16 February 1809. As a major general he was junior to Major General Brent Spencer, who had a date-of-rank of 1 January 1805; and to Major Generals Stapleton Cotton, Rowland Hill, and John Murray who all had a date-of-rank of 30 October 1805. Similar situations also affected those who were brigadier generals, local or on the staff, and their date-of-rank as a colonel was junior to other colonels in the army. It eventually went to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, who ruled that local rank did not affect seniority if the holder was junior to an officer who did not have local rank. Thus, William Beresford's local rank of lieutenant general did not place him above Major Generals Spencer, Cotton, Hill, and Murray. For brigadier general rank, seniority was based upon the seniority as a colonel and not by date of appointment.

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⁶ These colonels included George Murray, James Kempt, William Borthwick, John de Bernewitz, Richard Hulse, Edward Pakenham, and Henry Mackinnon.