Author Saul David looks back on the treatment of the Military from the formation of the first professional army to the present day

Britain has long acknowledged a 'duty of care' to its armed forces that dates back to the reign of Henry VIII. It began as an unspoken pact between society and the military, and was only formally codified by the British Army as a 'covenant' in the year 2000. The key passage reads:

"Soldiers will be called upon to make personal sacrifices – including the ultimate sacrifice – in the service of the Nation. In putting the needs of the Nation and the Army before their own, they forego some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces."

In return, British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they (and their families) will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service."

Noble words, but ones that have not been honoured. In 2007 the Royal British Legion complained that Gordon Brown's government was not looking after the needs of troops returning from conflict, particularly in terms of injury compensation and healthcare. Earlier this year former army chiefs accused David Cameron of breaking the military covenant, this time over Coalition plans to cap military pay rises at 1 per cent (a real-terms cut). 'This sends a poor message to those who are fighting on the front line,' said a former Chief of the Defence Staff. 'You are asking someone to risk their lives and that puts them into a special category.'

More recently, The Times reported that the Ministry of Defence was considering draconian cuts to army housing for married couples, and that 'numerous officers and lower ranks – about 80 this year and more next year – are being made redundant mere months' before the date they would have become eligible for an immediate pension after 16 years of service. 'This means,' opined a Times leader ('The Unpensionables', 24 August 2012), 'that families who may have planned their lives around a future with a guaranteed income, albeit a modest one, must re-plan their lives without.'

Such shabby treatment of soldiers was ever the case. When the restored King Charles II formed the first professional army in 1660, the full extent of the state's 'duty of care' for soldiers was to make a modest provision for those maimed in battle. For those who lost their place through age, illness, or under pressure from 'better men', there was nothing. It was to cater for the 'succor and relief of veterans broken by war and age' that Charles II founded the Royal Hospital at Chelsea in 1681; yet when the hospital finally opened its doors in 1692, its maximum capacity of 476 veterans was only a fraction of the number of soldiers who qualified for assistance. To compensate, therefore, James II introduced a scheme in 1685 for pensions to be given to privates and NCOs who had been either disabled on active service or who had served for a minimum of 20 years. The sum given to a private soldier was a miserly 5d a day (3d less than

his normal pay, which was modest enough), barely enough to live on. And still nothing was paid to those who fell ill or were dismissed before they had served 20 years.

These regulations were still in place a century and a quarter later at Waterloo, though the daily rate for pensions had risen slightly in line with army pay (which was finally increased from 8d to a shilling a day in 1799, the first rise since the days of the Commonwealth). Small wonder that after every major war from the 17th to the 19th Centuries, the cities were full of disbanded soldiers begging in the streets. Inevitably many turned to crime (as they still do today), particularly ex-cavalrymen who were allowed to keep their horses and became highwaymen. So bad did it become in London after the Nine Years War (1688-97) that a line of guardhouses was built on the road from the City to Kensington to protect travelers from ex-soldiers. Never popular at the best of times, soldiers were now feared and despised in equal measure.

With such poor conditions of service – in addition to the low pay, food was poor and discipline harsh – it was hard to find recruits. During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), the government resorted to sentencing minor criminals to service in the army, and to release others if they volunteered. It also used 'crimpers' (the army equivalent of naval press-gangs), increased the signing on bounty from £2 a head in 1703 to £5 in 1708, and passed no fewer than nine recruiting statutes during the war. Small wonder that the author Daniel Defoe noted: 'In winter, the poor starve, thieve or turn soldier.'

Recruitment was also a problem during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1806, to make soldiering more attractive, the authorities reduced the term of enlistment from twenty-one years to seven, and increased the bounty to £18.12s (over a year's pay). But the measure failed either to improve enlistment rates or to change the general character of recruits, and from 1808 new soldiers were given the choice of signing on for either seven or twenty-one years, with the vast majority opting for the latter (and an extra £5 5s).

Among the first of the 'seven years' men was Thomas Pococke of the 71st Highlanders. The son of 'poor but respectable parents', Pococke joined the army in 1807 after failing as an actor. He served through most of the Peninsular War and at Waterloo (having extended his service), and later wrote a graphic account of his experiences in the ranks. It does not make easy reading. 'I could not associate with the common soldiers,' he noted of his life as a raw recruit, 'their habits made me shudder. I feared an oath – they never spoke without one; I could not drink – they loved liquor; they game – I knew nothing of play. Thus was I a solitary individual among hundreds.'

Yet Pococke served his time and, having faced and cheated death on numerous occasions – notably at the battles of Vimeiro, Corunna, Fuentes de Onoro, Vitoria and Waterloo – he was discharged in the winter 1815 without a penny. Having left the army sound of body and without the requisite twenty years' service, Pococke was not eligible for a pension. He was last heard of working as a road mender 'with a number of other poor labourers thrown out of general employment'.

Thus did Britain carry out its 'duty of care' to veterans of the most famous battle in our island's history. Of course times have changed and, compared to 200 years ago, today's army

pensions are relatively generous: all soldiers are eligible for an annuity after just two years' service (and, unlike other public sector workings, without the need to make monthly contributions), while those who stay in for at least 12 years are also entitled to a tax-free resettlement grant. But the debt the state owes its warrior is not just financial. It's also – as the military covenant stresses – about soldiers and their families receiving 'fair treatment' and being 'valued and respected as individuals'. Which is why, when it accused the government of not keeping its side of the bargain in 2007, the British Legion made a number of recommendations to improve the financial support and health monitoring of soldiers on active service, the speed and amount of injury compensation, the level of access veterans had to healthcare, and the quality of advice, support and representation given to bereaved families.

The official response was that the government 'must do more', but that fulfilling its part of the deal was 'not always easy and takes both time and money'. The recent furore over the Ministry of Defence's plans to cut army pay (in real-terms) and housing for married couples, and the scandal of officers being made redundant before they can claim their pensions (costing them as much as £250,000 over a lifetime), suggests that Cameron's Coalition government is no closer to honouring the Miltary Covenant than its Labour predecessor was.

Saul David is Professor of War Studies at the University of Buckingham and the author of All the King's Men: The British Soldier from the Restoration to Waterloo and Great British Commanders: Marlborough, Wellington and Slim (e-book only), were both published on 2 February 2012