

YORKSHIREMEN RETAIN THEIR MILITARY PRIDE AFTER CUTBACKS HIT TANK REGIMENT

PEACE is taking its toll on the British forces. **MARK BREALEY** visited Germany to report on the demise of a proud regiment.

YORKSHIRE soldiers who shrugged off danger in Northern Ireland and the Gulf are understandably bitter at having to surrender to men in grey suits — armed with calculators.

But with cutbacks now the greatest enemy of the British Army, the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards know they must be sacrificed to ease the burden on the tax payer.

The 400-strong tank regiment will officially amalgamate on August 1 with the Chester-based 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, to form the Royal Dragoon Guards. It will be the first merger to arise out of the defence cuts announced last year, and will see the pound note taking rare precedence over military history and tradition.

Many of the soldiers — nearly all from West Yorkshire — are filled with anger and resentment over the amalgamation. But they also accept their fate with dignity and intelligence, knowing cutbacks are inevitable with the declining military threat.

It was in this mood they greeted their Colonel-in-Chief, the Duchess of Kent, who visited their base in Detmold, Germany, for the regiment's farewell parade.

In the sergeants' mess the night before the parade, Sgt Nigel Whitaker, 35, of Bradford Moor, said: "I've been in this regiment for 18 years and we're like a big family, so what is happening to us now is some sort of divorce."

"It's a very traumatic experience and I'm upset about it, but we'll get on with it because there's nothing else we can do."

Another sergeant, father-of-three Mark Inkester, 29, of Great Horton, Bradford, said: "The best thing about this regiment is the blokes. Ninety per cent of us are from Yorkshire, and we've got Yorkshire grit and work well together. We can mix with anyone, but Yorkshiremen are honest and down to earth, and see outsiders as wimps."

"Everyone was really worried when the amalgamation was announced. Some of the lads wondered if they'd have jobs. It's very sad, because we're not just losing the regiment's name, we're saying goodbye to its tradition and history."

The crude simplicity of the amalgamation belies the crushing impact it is dealing to the pride of the soldiers.

Both the 4th/7th and 5th have about 400 men and women each. Each is being halved to create the new 400-strong regiment, which will be based at Paderborn, about 25 miles from Detmold.

The Army says there will be no sackings. Every person lost in the cutbacks is either choosing to leave the Army, is being transferred to another regiment, or is taking voluntary redundancy.

It is a delicate balancing act to make sure neither regiment feels the other is getting a better deal,

involving the new uniform, cap badge and hierarchy.

The most important thing for the 4th/7th is that the new Royal Dragoon Guards headquarters will be in York, so it will recruit mainly from Yorkshire.

But on the other side, the 5th's Colonel-in-Chief, Prince Charles, will keep the post for the new regiment, with the Duchess of Kent becoming deputy.

Royal

"We like the Duchess because she's an approachable royal," said Lance Corporal Andrew Robinson, 28, from Holme Wood, Bradford. "She's got time for the lads, and she's told us she's upset about the amalgamation."

The 4th/7th worked overtime to prepare for the Duchess's final visit to Detmold, a well-off town where a former German World War Two

military base has been home to the regiment for nine years.

The 33-strong military band had just a week to rehearse the music for the 90-minute parade, with two-hour practice sessions beginning each day at 6am.

Bandsman Mark Holt, 20, from Wilsden, who plays the cornet, admitted he was nervous.

"It's my first and last big parade with the regiment," he said before marching on to the parade ground. More than 500 relatives and friends of the regiment were on the airfield on a bright but bitterly cold day to see the 180 soldiers taking part.

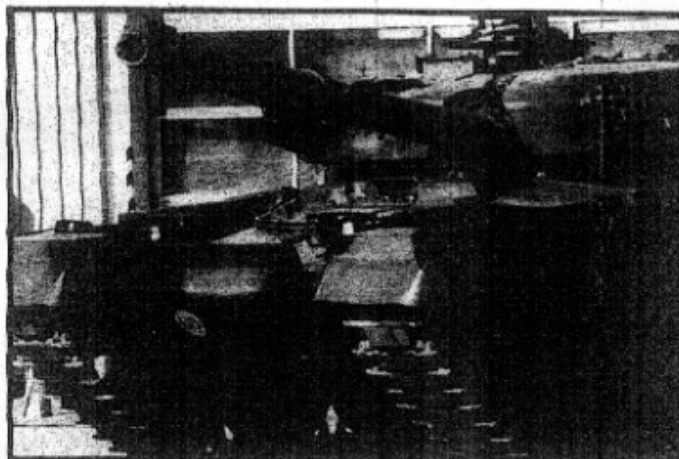
It was an impressive sight as the adjutant's commands brought about synchronised turns and moves, without trace of the emotion welling up inside.

The soldiers were then ordered to march off the parade ground for the last time, to the tune of On Ilkley Moor Baht 'At.



● The Duchess of Kent inspects the farewell parade, left, and bandsman Mark Holt from Wilsden, below, who played the cornet in his first and last big parade

Army peace-keepers forced to surrender



SYMBOL... A Chieftain tank used by the regiment

Chief, 42, gets another shot at school



Lt Col Charles Thwaites

THE commanding officer of the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards is leaving the Army — to become a student.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Thwaites will begin a degree in environmental management at Salford University in October — at the age of 42.

"I'm quite looking forward to not having responsibilities such as those I have at the moment," he said.

"I feel sadness with the amalgamation, but I also feel great pride. The farewell parade was an historic day, and we're now entering a new era."

Lt Col Thwaites said he had some fears over the

scale and speed of the Army cuts, but it was accepted they were inevitable.

"We've reached a point in the Army where cuts are bound to happen," he said. "There's no other way of going about things, and it would be a waste of taxpayers' money had we waited any longer."

The 4th/7th was born when two cavalry regiments amalgamated in 1922, but their origins date back more than 300 years.

The regiment played a big part in the Allies' success in the Gulf War. It has also served in Palestine, North Africa, Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Belize.

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