The Buffs uniform shown above would have been similar to those worn on Melville Island 1824

The year was 1824 and Northern Australia had to be defended against the threat from the French and the Dutch. There had been a strong military presence in Australia since the establishment of the convict settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788. The British Army was present in Australia from 1788 until 1870 when it was decided that the Imperial Garrisons would be withdrawn. However, in the formative years the scattered military stations, penal settlements and garrisons were an essential part of the overall defence of this huge island settlement.

This is a story of 'The Buffs'-The 3rd Foot- East Kent Regiment that was posted to Australia from 1823 to 1827 to defend the vast continent, guard convicts, secure the penal settlements, and provide internal security. They achieved their mission through hardship, endurance, and determination that enabled the authorities to secure Northern Australia from other colonial powers and pave the way for its future settlement.

Location of Fort Dundas, Melville Island, Australia

Governor Brisbane in Sydney was concerned about the security and trading opportunities of Northern Australia. The Dutch and French traders and explorers were hovering around the Coburg Peninsula as the Timor and Arafura Seas possessed the highly prized Chinese delicacy of a sea slug (commonly known as the sea cucumber due to its cucumber shape) called 'Trepang'. This delicacy abounded in
the warm tropical waters of northern Australia and was said to be worth more than all the tea in China.

The Dutch East Indies colonies were well established and so was Portuguese Timor that had been used as a trading post since 1509. There had been petitions from the East Indies Trade Committee in London to establish settlements in Northern Australia for trading with the Chinese and the ‘Macassan Trepangars’. Captain James John Gordon Bremer of the Royal Navy (Later to be Admiral Bremer) was tasked by Governor Brisbane to explore the northern coast and select a suitable port area for the establishment of a military station and penal settlement. Captain Maurice Barlow of the Buffs accompanied Captain Bremer RN, and took with him 24 soldiers of ‘The Buffs’ (Nicknamed the Buffs due to their yellow/ buff colour on their uniform) in addition to 27 Marines from the 3rd Company Royal Marines.

Melville Island, Northern Australia.

The mission of the military force was to secure Northern Australia for the British by establishing a military station on Melville Island in 1824. Military stations were established using convict labour around Australia and ‘ring fenced’ the continent for defence. Such stations already existed in Hobart, Launceston, Moreton Bay, Port Philip Bay, Albany, and Fremantle in Western Australia.

Fort Dundas 1824
Melville Island was chosen as the most suitable position as it was ideally placed to control the northern coastline of Australia and the trade routes with the East Indies. The Island is situated just to the north of today's modern city of Darwin that became the capital of Australia’s Northern Territory in the 20th Century. However, in 1824 Melville Island was outside the jurisdiction of the Governor of New South Wales and a Royal Navy war ship was authorised in London England by the British Secretary of War Earl Bathurst on 17 February 1824 to take formal possession of Northern Australia including Bathurst and Melville Islands and the eastern side of the Coburg Peninsula.

This northern coastline had a harsh climate that included two seasons. The first was steamy wet weather with heavy tropical rain and cyclones (October to March) and the second season was a hot dry season (April to September). The vegetation and climate was vastly different from temperate climate of Sydney Cove. It included mango swamps and tropical forests and possessed many tropical diseases that awaited the settlers.

Captain James Bremer Royal Navy

The military force sailed from Sydney New South Wales on 24 August 1824. It included HMS Tamar that was commanded by Captain Bremer RN and the supply and support vessels ‘Lady Nelson’ and ‘Countess of Harcourt’ that contained the convicts and provisions for the penal settlement.

HMS Tamar sailed around the Coburg Peninsula but was unable to find a suitable site and so the search continued around Melville and Bathurst Islands. Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsula was at first selected as the settlement site, but due to a lack of adequate fresh water Captain Bremer explored Melville Island. At last a port and site was discovered with a good harbour, defensive features, and fresh water. The military force disembarked on the 30 September 1824 and he named the settlement ‘Fort Dundas’ probably after the Commander in Chief of the British Army Sir David Dundas.
Supply Ship ‘Countess of Harcourt’

The first urgent task was the construction of the Commissariat’s storehouse and it commenced on 6 October 1824. It was built of heavy timbers with a thatched roof and measured 60 feet in length by 18 feet wide that enabled the preservation and security of supplies. Throughout all penal settlements in Australia the Commissariat’s Storehouse was always the first building to be completed. Mr Miller- the Senior Commissariat placed twelve months supply of food, materials and other provisions into the storehouse. The sawing of the local timbers was known to be difficult and two prefabricated timber buildings had been transported for the quarters of the Officers and these were erected and are shown in the attached pictures.

The local Tiwi tribesman observed the landing of the military force but probably expected the ships to sail away as they were used to intruders. The Tiwi sent their women and children to a save place where they would not be found whilst the armed tribesman made initial contact. They approached two convicts cutting timbers on 25 October 1824 and took their axes from them in compensation for the timber they had cut. The tribesmen remained close to the landing point but were forced away at bayonet point by the Royal Marines. In another incident a Midshipman and Corporal Gwilliam of the Royal Marines and a small party of convicts became surrounded and Cpl Gwilliam fired his musket and the working party retreated to their boat. They were pursued along the beach and Cpl Gwilliam fired and killed a tribesman.

When the Tiwi tribesman realised the ships were staying and a settlement was being constructed the attacks became more frequent. On 26 October 1824 over 20 tribesmen ambushed two convicts and killed convicts James Campbell and Edward Lowther. Private John Cooke walked into the bush and failed to return and his wife searched for him unsuccessfully. Warriors speared Surgeon Doctor John Gold and the storekeeper John Green to death. The Tiwi consisted of tribesmen from the tribes of Manipula, Malaulia, Wilrangwila, Minguila and others and they were fierce fighters armed with spears that could be thrown quickly and accurately.

On 30 October 1824 over 100 painted warriors ambushed convict working parties. The soldiers of the Buffs and the Royal Marines responded with their slow loading and inaccurate
muskets and cannons. Afterwards the fortifications and buildings were under constant siege and the Tiwi killed livestock (pigs and cattle), burnt haystacks and stole clothing and other useful items. They were cunning, well camouflaged, and brilliant at ambushing. They were very cautious against the armed soldiers but this did not deter them from continuously harassing the settlers.

A typical cannon of the period.

The next vital building to be completed was the ammunition magazine. Convict stonemasons constructed it of local quarried stone and as soon as it was built they commenced ‘Fort Dundas’. The stone quarry was also developed to meet the construction schedule of buildings. This military fort was also built from the local stone. It was designed to hold artillery guns and cannon for protection against the hostile Tiwi tribesman. It contained an armoury, defence fortifications, and strong dry stonewalls. The Fort was one of two built purely for defence against the hostile aboriginal tribesman, whereas the other Forts built around Australia were for defence against the navies of other Colonial powers. The size of the Fort was 75 by 50 yards with 5 feet thick walls and surrounded by a defence ditch measuring 10 feet deep by 15 feet wide. The Fort contained two 9-pounder guns, four 18-pounder guns, and one 12-pounder gun. Each gun had 50 rounds of round shot and 8 rounds of grape shot. The ammunition was carried off HMS Tamar and most of it was stored in the magazine.

On 12 November HMS Tamar sailed for India leaving the 34 Buffs and 27 Marines to defend the settlement against the ferocious tribesmen. Captain Barlow was the Officer in Charge of the Garrison and the Tiwi vastly outnumbered his soldiers. Not only did the soldiers have to fight the Tiwi but they also had to fight disease and starvation.
The convicts and the soldiers soon built their fort, and it provided safety from the Tiwi tribesman and would now pave the way to providing future settlement of Northern Australia. The soldiers wore the heavy wool uniforms of the recent Peninsula War along with their cumbersome Shako. The tropical heat, flies, mosquitoes, and constant perspiration created enormous discomfort and they longed to be back in the cool and bracing climates of East Kent as many had come from the Kentish towns of Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Deal, Folkestone, Hythe, and Ramsgate as well as Ireland. The hot climates in India and Australia were not only uncomfortable but also full of disease and poor food and then there was always the enemy. No medals were issued for their bravery and service in Australia.

Their weapons were the inaccurate muskets from the Battles of Waterloo period, and the ‘Buffs” had used them in the Peninsula War during the battles of Douro, Talavera, Albuera, Vittoria, and the Pyrenees. But these young soldiers had never encountered fast moving Tiwi warriors who attacked with their spears and then disappeared back into the dense tropical jungle. They were expert at ambushing and harassing. The soldiers thought they only had to defend the settlement against the French or Dutch. This first penal settlement in Northern Australia was important to the Royal Navy who defended the coastline and the sea-lanes to Sydney, Moreton Bay, Norfolk Island and later to New Zealand. Fort Dundas was a vital link in the chain of defences.

By early 1825 there was 84 persons and the settlement slowly grew. The Buffs had a unique convict labour force with them. In most cases the convicts were fellow countrymen and had volunteered to labour at Fort Dundas in return for a ‘ticket of leave.’ A special arrangement was struck whereby, after a year of labour and good behaviour the Officer in Charge Captain Barlow would grant each convict his or her ticket of leave. This would enable the convicts the freedom to return to Sydney and seek their own life in the Colony. The ticket also enabled them to work for themselves and establish their own lives and importantly it was the closest document to a pardon by the authorities. However, a watchful eye was always kept on the convict by the local magistrate and police.

Records show that the Buffs guarded over 40 convicts whose prison time had nearly expired. Each convict selected for this new settlement possessed a trade or skill that would be useful and the list included the following:

- 3 Stonemasons
- 5 Carpenters
- 3 Plasterers
- 2 Blacksmiths
- 2 Bricklayers
- 2 Cabinetmakers
- 1 Boatbuilder (excellent for building roofs)
- 1 Plumber and glazier
- 1 Waggoner
- 1 Horseshoer
- 1 Cook
- 1 Chairmaker

Logistic and medical support for the settlement was also a priority and the military force included an assistant surgeon, 3 commissariat supply officers, and 3 mechanics. An overseer controlled and organised the employment of the convicts. The tickets of leave convicts were often employed as supervisors of the small work gangs and their main task was the construction of the Fort and the many outbuildings including armoury, magazine, accommodation, and food storage. Work gangs could also be large sawyer teams of up to 24 convicts or small gangs of bricklayer teams of 5 or more convicts. The Buffs guarded the gangs and maintained good order and provided security against attack.

Fort Dundas soon ran into trouble with ticket of leave convicts wanting to return to Sydney Cove to escape the disease and sickness of the tropics. The number of convicts available for work was decreasing and so in February 1825 a resupply ship ‘Sir Philip Dundas’ arrived with
vital provisions and 17 more convicts. As sickness increased Captain Barlow was forced to use his soldiers to supervise the work gangs.

On 20th September 1826 Captain Barlow returned to Sydney with the Buffs and was relieved by Major Campbell and soldiers of the 57th Regiment. The Buffs returned to Sydney and were assigned to other posts before they sailed from Sydney to Calcutta, India for their next posting in 1827.

Major Campbell set about recording the amount of work to be undertaken and the amount completed. There were a set of standards for convict work and for instance a convict sawyer was expected to produce 250 feet of timber per week into slabs and posts. The working day commenced at 0800hrs to 2000hrs or sunset with a midday break during the hottest part of the day from 1100hrs to 1500hrs. The settlement gardens were a priority for Major Campbell and he introduced a system whereby the ticket of leave convicts were paid one shilling a day with free garden produce for their work, however, if they were not working they had to pay one shilling a day for the fresh garden produce. The head gardener John Robinson was a most important convict as 3 convicts had already died of scurvy.

Escape from Fort Dundas was futile as it was an extremely isolated and harsh outpost and the Tiwi would kill any escaping convict. The only survival method was to work hard for a ticket of leave and return to Sydney. Resupply ships were infrequent and a lack of replacements meant that survival was difficult.

By 1827 Fort Dundas was in a critical condition. The soldiers and the convicts were all in poor health after 2 years of malaria, dysentery, dengue fever, tropical ulcers, and other diseases. Development of the settlement had come to a halt and Major John Campbell’s work program was in ruins. To make matters worse the garden crops failed due to the harsh climate and food became scarce.

Major George Hartley replaced Major Campbell in March 1828 but he became ill soon after he had assumed command. He did not recover. Alcohol and drunkenness exacerbated the situation and clashes occurred between the convicts and the soldiers. The worst episode occurred in September 1828 when a riot occurred and convicts were flogged, imprisoned and denied their ticket of leave. The riot may have begun because Major Hartley refused some convicts their ticket of leave that they had earned and promised. In 1829 it was decided to abandon the penal settlement and everyone was transported back to Sydney Cove.

In 1999 an archaeological dig found a military button with ‘3’ inscribed on it and this relic reminds us of the amazing efforts of the 3rd Regiment of Foot- The Buffs and we thank the soldiers of East Kent. Today the Museum in Darwin displays relics of the Buffs as a reminder of their amazing efforts to settle Fort Dundas and Melville Island.

When it became obvious to Sir Thomas Brisbane, Governor of New South Wales that settling the north coast was difficult he ordered another settlement to be established at Fort Wellington, Raffles Bay. This military station was positioned on the northern edge of Coburg Peninsula and Captain James Stirling RN commanding HMS Success and the resupply ship ‘Mary Elizabeth’ landed at Fort Wellington with a military force of 14 Royal Marines and 30 soldiers from the 39th Dorsetshire Regiment and 22 convicts under command of Captain HG Smyth. After initial success it was also abandoned in 1829. Port Essington had also been established and located on the Coburg Peninsula. It was later renamed Victoria Settlement after the young Queen in 1837 and consisted of 24 houses and a hospital. Escape Cliffs was the fourth settlement and was located at the mouth of the Adelaide River and established by the newly formed Government of South Australia in 1864.

Finally a settlement at Port Darwin was established in 1869 and it survived the rigours of isolation, cyclones, disease, drunkenness, lack of resupply, and attacks by the ferocious local tribes. The settlement was sponsored by the state of South Australia and trading grew and the settlement prospered. Today it is testament to the soldiers of the Buffs who helped establish the very first settlement at Fort Dundas.

The abandoned Fort still stands with its earthwork redoubt, perimeter defensive bank, ditch and its 2 prominent gun batteries.(210 feet long by 125 feet wide) along with the thick walls of the storehouse or church.
The Buffs along with other British Army regiments were not awarded medals or recognition for their service in this remote land. However, many of the soldiers left Australia and went over to New Zealand to fight in the Maori Wars in 1845 and were subsequently awarded a medal for their service. There were no battle honours, awards for bravery, service medals or regimental medals. The only mention of Fort Dundas was in a few reports to the Governor of the Colony Sir Thomas Brisbane and the Colonial Secretary.

The names of some of the people who served at Fort Dundas between 1824 and 1829 include the following:

- Captain James John Gordon Bremer RN – HMS Tamar
- Ship’s Officers
- Lieutenant John Golding RN
- Lieutenant John Downey RN
- Lieutenant John Septimus Roe RN
- Second Master John Davis RN
- Surgeon Matthew Cappoul
- Assistant Surgeon Joseph Chartres
- Lieutenant Henry Clayton Royal Marines
- Lieutenant Charles Cartwright Williamson Royal Marines
- Gunner James Strachan
- Boatswain James Stocker
- Carpenter John Charters
- Sicklemore John Cooney
- Midshipman Francis Smyth
- Midshipman Alfred Nelson Fairman
- Midshipman French Scott
- Volunteer James Kirkpatrick
- Volunteer Alfred Paul
- Volunteer Robert Campbell Jackson
- Masters Mate Frederick Henry Glass
- Admiralty Midshipman Samuel Hood Linzee
- Admiralty Midshipman John Fulford
- William Gough Tomlinson Admiralty Clerk
- Captain's Clerk John O'Brien (jnr)
- Acting Second Master John Wilson
- Captain George Brunn-ship ‘Countess of Harcourt’
- First Officer George Clayton ‘Countess of Harcourt’
- Ships Surgeon Robert Armstrong ‘Countess of Harcourt’
- Second Officer John McDonald ‘Countess of Harcourt’
- Master John Samuel ship ‘Lady Nelson’
- **Captain Maurice Barlow 3rd Regiment Buffs**
- **Ensign Everard 3rd Regiment Buffs**
- Major John Campbell-(paid from 14 August 1825 – 300.00 pounds pa)
- Major George Hartley
- Lieutenant W Bate Royal Marines(paid from 25 Sept 1826 – 91.50 pounds per annum.)
- Mr John Gold-Surgeon –killed by TIWI warriors.
- Mr John O’Brien Purser
- Mr Henry Ennis Supernumerary Purser
- Mr George Miller Senior Commissariat Officer
- Mr John Henry Green – Assistant Commissariat
- Mr Wilson Commissary’s Clerk
- Mr Talmarsh Storekeeper
- Private John Cooke originally from the 39th Regiment and disappeared.
The plaque commemorates the last resting place of those who came to Fort Dundas 1824-1827

Royal Marines who died on active service and are buried at Fort Dundas Cemetery
- Sargent John Brookshaw – died 31 December 1826
- Corporal Samuel Gwilliam- died 11 June 1825
- Private William Bennett – died 6 June 1825
- Private William Burton – died 10 November 1826
- Private Courtney – accidently killed 18 May 1825
- Private Reece Jenkins – died 16 January 1825

The Buffs who died on active service and are buried at Fort Dundas Cemetery
- Private Thomas Burley – died 1st June 1825
- Private George Farrell – died 20 December 1825
- Private John Flinn – died 22 November 1825
- Private Samuel Hodder-16 March 1825
- Private James Potvine – died 27 June 1826

57th Regiment who died on active service and are buried at Fort Dundas Cemetery
- Corporal John Bailey – died 3 May 1827
- Corporal Patrick Brown – died 21 September 1827
- Private Richard Calvert – died 2 January 1827
- Private Edward Pembrick – died 6 January 1827
- Private John Warren – died 1 February 1827

Names of Settlers at Fort Dundas
- Mrs Cooke – wife of Pte John Cooke.
- Sarah Fearly - assisted Surgeon John Gold
- John Robinson – convict Head Gardener
- William Lockwood - convict clerk
- Henry Feathers- convict bricklayer
- William Potter – convict blacksmith and nail maker
- Edward Lowther – convict and killed by Tiwi
- Julius Campbell- convict and killed by Tiwi.
- Edward Chapman-blacksmith
- The Walker Family
- Nicholas Battis-bandsman
- Thomas Williams-convict cook (African convict)
- James Kelly-tailor
- Robert Kitt-plasterer
- William Barnes – trader
- 2 women
- 19 African Convicts

**Civilians who died and are buried at Fort Dundas Cemetery**
- John Gold JP 2 November 1827. Assistant Surgeon. Killed by TIWI warriors and died on the day as Sophia Hicks and John Green.

**Convicts who died and are buried at Fort Dundas Cemetery**
- Nicholas Baptiste - 5 May 1825 – Died of Scurvy.
- Julius Campbell – 26 October 1826 – Killed by TIWI warriors
- Thomas Davis – 14 August 1825
- Stephen Jepson – 7 December 1826
- Henry Johnson – 2 December 1826
- Robert Christopher Kitt – 28 March 1825
- Joseph Lorian aka Franks – 10 March 1827
- Richmond Moore – 6 November 1825
- Francis Plomer – 10 March 1827
- Ephraim Rawlinson – 23 May 1825
- Thomas Robinson – 25 August 1825
- Thomas Sullivan – 18 September 1826
- Charles Thompson – 12 May 1825
- Patrick Tiernam – 25 January 1826

Written by Lt Col Peter Denham, Retd  
24 April 2016  
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