

# Dirks and Skean Dhus

*James H. Hillestad, Member No.6, hones in on two unique “weapons” which adorn Scottish uniforms.*

**F**or centuries, Scotland lived a violent life. Guns, swords, and knives played prominent roles in military and civilian life -- not just for combat, protection, and hunting, but also for decorative dress.

Highlanders were greatly feared for their downhill, all-out, blood-curdling screaming charge, brandishing claymore swords and shields. The shield, called a targe, was a round, wood-and-leather object, with brass studs and a 10-inch brass spike at the center. It was carried looped over the left arm, and was, in itself, a lethal weapon. Often overlooked, the dirk (knife) was concealed in the left hand, and was used in close combat. This combination of weaponry came to an end with the defeat at Culloden.

The claymore broadsword is well-known by military history enthusiasts -- but what exactly is a dirk? Tracing its origins to a ballock knife -- a stabbing weapon with a triangular blade -- the dirk emerged in the 17th Century coincident with the demise of armour, as a lighter knife with a single sharpened edge. Later, both edges were sharpened. Generally the blade measures about 11 inches, with the grip adding another six inches, for an overall length of 17 - 18 inches. When not in use, the dirk is worn on the hip, suspended from the belt in a leather sheath.

Until the early part of the 19th Century, all members of Highland

Gordon Highlander dirk -- Crimean War (author's collection)



Dirk worn by a Black Watch Ensign, No.10020





Skean Dhu worn by "The Lone Piper," No.10016



An 1812 portrait of Colonel Alasdair Ranaldson by Sir Henry Raeburn. Note the dirk and skean dhu.



Dirk detail showing small knife and fork

regiments carried dirks, officers and men alike. Gradually, the dirk became an officer's accoutrement and increasingly more of an article for "dress" wear.

At the same time, the grip became more ornate. Made of ebony, boxwood, oak, or mahogany, it was carved with Celtic interlace or basket weave designs and studded with silver or brass nails. At the top of the grip, on the pommel, would be a silver cover, often inlaid with a "cairn gorm" -- a form of Scottish quartz from the Cairngorm mountains of central Scotland. The stones are beautiful, ranging in color from deep orange to smokey-grey.

Often a small bi-knife and fork were housed in separate, verti-

cal compartments on the front of the sheath. These pieces were also decorated at the tops of their pommels with matching cairngorms.

The skean dhu (Gallic for "black knife") is worn in the top of the right hose by officers and other soldiers in kilted Highland regiments. Its origin is uncertain. One version has it that the skean dhu evolved from the 17th and 18th Century Scottish armpit dagger. When entering into a friendly household, this weapon would be "un-concealed" by putting it into the top of the stocking. Another version suggests that the knife was used by gamekeepers for skinning purposes and was kept in the stocking-top readily available



Skean Dhu -- current day (author's collection)



for use. The blade measures between two and four inches. With the hilt, the overall length is about seven to nine inches.

Examples of dirks and skean dhus can be found on W. Britain figures, confirming yet again the company's attention to detail in producing fine quality figures. ■

Jim Hillestad, a life-long student of history, displays his collection of toy soldiers, dioramas, drums, and other militaria in The Toy Soldier Museum in northeastern Pennsylvania.

*For a virtual tour of the museum visit:*  
[www.the-toy-soldier.com](http://www.the-toy-soldier.com)