

# [PDF] Legions Of Rome: The Definitive History Of Every Imperial Roman Legion

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#### Description:

**About the Author** STEPHEN DANDO-COLLINS is an award-winning historian and novelist. He is the author of several highly acclaimed works on ancient history. He lives in Tasmania.

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# I THE MEN

*'Every country produces both brave men and cowards, but it is equally certain that some nations are naturally more warlike than others.'*

VEGETIUS, *De Re Militari*, FOURTH CENTURY

*Down through the centuries, millions of men served with the army of imperial Rome; half a million during the reign of Augustus alone. The history of the legions is the collective story of those individuals, not just of Rome's famous generals. Men such as Titus Flavius Virilis, still serving as a centurion at the age of 70. And Titus Calidius, a cavalry decurion who missed military life so much after retiring he re-enlisted, at the reduced rank of optio. And Novantius, the British auxiliary from today's city of Leicester, who was granted his discharge thirteen years early for valiant service in the second century conquest of Dacia. Any analysis of the legions must begin with the men, their organization, their equipment, and their service conditions.*

## I. WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

The origins of the legions of Pompey, Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius go back to the Roman Republic of the fifth century BC. Originally, there were just four Roman legions - *Legios* I to IIII (the legion number 4 was written as IIII, not IV). Each of the two consuls, 'who were charged both singly and jointly to take care to preserve the Republic from danger', commanded two of these legions. [Vege., III]

All legionaries were then property-owning citizens of Rome, conscripted in the spring of each year into the armies of the two consuls. *Legio*, the origin of the word 'legion', meant 'levy', or draft. Service ordinarily ended with the Festival of the October Horse on 19 October, which signalled the termination of the campaigning season.

Men of 'military age' - 16 to 46 - were selected by ballot for each legion, with the 1st Legion considered to be the most prestigious. Rome's field army was bolstered by legions from allied Italian tribes. Legionaries of the early Republic were appointed to one of four divisions within their legion, based on age and property qualifications. The youngest men were assigned to the *velites*, the next oldest to the *hastati*, men in the prime of life to the *principes* and the oldest to the *triarii*, with the role and equipment of each group differing. By Julius Caesar's day, the conscripted infantry soldier of the Republic was required to serve in the legions for up to sixteen years, and could be recalled in emergencies for a further four years.

Originally, republican legions had a strength of 4,200 men, which in times of special danger could be brought up to 5,000. [Poly., VI, 21] By 218 BC and the war between Rome and Carthage, the consuls' legions consisted of 5,200 infantry and 300 cavalry, which approached the form they would take in imperial times. From 104 BC, the Roman army of the Republic underwent a major overhaul by the consuls Publius Rutilius Rufus and Gaius Marius. Rutilius introduced arms drill and reformed the process of appointment for senior officers. Marius simplified the requirements for enrolment, so that it was not only property owners who were required to serve. Failure to report for military service would result in the conscript being declared a deserter, a crime subject to the death penalty.

A legionary would be paid for the days he served - for many years, this amounted to ten asses a day. He was also entitled to the proceeds from any arms, equipment or clothing he stripped from the enemy dead, and was entitled to a share of the booty acquired by his legion. If a legion stormed a town, its legionaries received the proceeds from its contents - human and otherwise - which were sold to traders who trailed the legions. If a town surrendered, however, the Roman army's commander could elect to spare it. Consequently, legionaries had no interest in encouraging

besieged cities to surrender.

Marius focused on making the legions independent mobile units of heavy infantry. Supporting roles were left to allied forces. To increase mobility, Marius took most of the legionaries' personal equipment off the huge baggage trains which until then had trailed the legions, and put it on the backs of the soldiers, greatly reducing the size of the baggage train. With the items hanging from their baggage poles weighing up to 100 pounds (45 kilos), legionaries of the era were nicknamed 'Marius' mules'. Until that time, the maniple of 160 - 200 men had been the principal tactical unit of the legion, but under Marius' influence the 600-man cohort became the new tactical unit of the Roman army, so that the legion of the first century BC comprised ten cohorts, with a total of 6,000 men.

Half a century later, Julius Caesar fashioned his legions around his own personality and dynamic style. Of the twenty-eight legions of Augustus' new standing army in 30 BC, some had been founded by Caesar, others moulded by him. The civil war, between the rebel Caesar and the forces of the republican Senate led by their commander Pompey the Great, created an insatiable demand for military manpower. At the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC, Caesar led elements of nine legions; Pompey, twelve. For the 42 BC Battle of Philippi, two years after Caesar's murder, when Mark Antony, Marcus Lepidus and Octavian took on the so-called Liberators, Brutus and Cassius, more than forty legions were involved.

## II. SOLDIERING FOR AUGUSTUS

The emperor Augustus, as Octavian became known from 27 BC, totally reformed the Roman army after he finally defeated Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BC.

In the professional army of Augustus, the legionary was a full-time soldier, sometimes a volunteer but more often a conscript, who signed on, initially for sixteen and later twenty years. Towards the end of his forty-three-year reign, Augustus was to boast: 'The number of Roman citizens who bound themselves to me by military oath was about 500,000. Of these I settled in colonies or sent back into their own towns more than 300,000, and to all I assigned lands or gave money as a reward for military service.' [*Res Gest.*, I, 3] That retirement payment was standardized by Augustus at 12,000 sesterces for legionaries, 20,000 for men of the Praetorian Guard. After the completion of his enlistment, an imperial legionary could be recalled in an emergency to the *Evocati*, a militia of retired legionaries.

On Antony's death, Augustus controlled approximately sixty legions. Many of these were promptly disbanded. 'Others,' said Cassius Dio, 'were merged with various legions by Augustus', and as a result 'such legions have come to bear the name *Gemina*', meaning 'twin'. [Dio, LV, 23] By this process, Augustus created a standing army of 150,000 legionaries in twenty-eight legions, supported by 180,000 auxiliary infantry and cavalry, stationed throughout the empire. He also created a navy with two main battle fleets equipped with marines, and several smaller fleets. In addition, Augustus employed specialist troops at Rome - the elite Praetorian Guard, the City Guard, the *Vigiles* or Night Watch, and the imperial bodyguard, the German Guard.

In AD 6, Augustus set up a military treasury in Rome, initially using his own funds, which were given in his name and that of Tiberius, his ultimate successor. To administer the military treasury he appointed three former praetors, allocating two secretaries to each. The ongoing shortfall in the military treasury's funds was covered by a death duty of 5 per cent on all inheritances, except where the recipient was immediate family or demonstrably poor.

## III. ENLISTING AND RETIRING

Some volunteers served in Rome's imperial legions - 'the needy and the homeless, who adopt by their own choice a soldier's life', according to Tacitus. [Tac., A, IV, 4] But most legionaries were conscripted. The selection criteria established by Augustus required men in their physical prime. A recruit's civilian skills would be put to use by the legion, so that blacksmiths became armourers, and tailors and cobblers made and repaired legionaries' uniforms and footwear. Unskilled recruits found

themselves assigned to duties such as the surveyor's party or the artillery. When it was time for battle, however, all took their places in the ranks.

A slave attempting to join the legions could expect to be executed if discovered, as happened in a case raised with the emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger when he was governor of Bithynia-Pontus. Conversely, during the early part of Augustus' reign it was not uncommon for free men to pose as slaves to avoid being drafted into the legions or the Praetorian Guard when the *conquistors*, or recruitment officers, periodically did the rounds of the recruitment grounds. This became such a problem that Augustus' stepson Tiberius was given the task of conducting an inquiry into slave barracks throughout Italy, whose owners were accepting bribes from free men to harbour them in the barracks when the conquistors sought to fill their quotas. [Suet., III, 8]

Once Tiberius became emperor the task of filling empty places in the legions became even more difficult. Velleius Paterculus, who served under Tiberius, made a sycophantic yet revealing statement about legion recruitment in around AD 30: 'As for the recruiting of the army, a thing ordinarily looked upon with great and constant dread, with what calm on the part of the people does he [Tiberius] provide for it, without any of the usual panic attending conscription!' [Velle., II, CXXX] Tiberius, who followed Augustus' policy of recruiting no legionaries in Italy south of the River Po, broadly extended the draft throughout the provinces.

Legionaries were not permitted to marry. Recruits who were married at the time of enrolment had their marriages annulled and had to wait until their enlistment expired to take a wife officially, alt...

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