



Good day Worthy Knights,

In this part 95, the Praetorian Guard (*cohortes praetoriae*)

Wikipedia

### **Under the Republic**

Praetorians originated as guards of Roman generals during the Republic. They are first recorded as bodyguards of the Scipio family around 275 BC. Generals with *imperium* (the right to command an army) were magistrates or promagistrates, accompanied at all times by their lictors, who would act as close protection.

There was no permanent bodyguard formation, so some military officers began to surround themselves with temporary units of hand-picked soldiers to ensure their security during battle. This practice became more widespread in the army of the late Republic, as generals remained on campaign for longer periods.

In camp, the bodyguard would sleep close to the commander, whose tent was known as the *praetorium*. Accordingly, the selected guards became known as *cohors praetoria*. In battle, these cohorts would act as a final reserve.

### **Under the Empire**

The legionaries known as the Praetorian Guards were first hand-picked veterans of the Roman army who served as bodyguards to the emperor. First established by Augustus, members of the Guard accompanied him on active campaign and served as secret police protecting the civic administrations and rule of law imposed by the senate and the emperor.

They benefited from several advantages due to their close proximity with the emperor: the Praetorians were the only ones admitted while bearing arms in the centre of sacred Rome – the *Pomerium*.

Their mandatory service was shorter in duration, for instance: 12 years with the Praetorians instead of 16 years in the legions starting year 13 BC, then carried to, respectively, 16 to 20 years in 5 BC according to Tacitus.

Their pay was higher than that of a legionary. Under Nero, the pay of a Praetorian was three and a half times that of a legionary, augmented by prime additions of *donativum*, granted by each new emperor. This additional pay was the equivalent of several years of pay and was often repeated at important events of the empire, or events that touched the imperial family: birthdays, births and marriages.

Feared and dreaded by the population and by the Roman Senate, the Praetorians received no sympathy from the Roman people.

Originally, the Praetorian Guard was recruited from the populations of central Italy (Etruria, Umbria and Latium according to Tacitus). Recruits were between 15 and 32 years of age, compared to legionary recruits who ranged from 18 to 23 years of age. According to Cassius Dio, during the first two centuries AD and before the reform of Septimius Severus, the Praetorians were exclusively limited to Italy, Spain, Macedonia and Noricum (current Austria).

To be admitted to the Guard, a man had to be in good physical condition, have a good moral character, and come from a respectable family. In addition, he had to make use of all sorts of patronages available to him to obtain letters of recommendations from important leading figures in society.

## Political role

Praetorian Cohorts intervened on numerous occasions in the struggle for the imperial succession. Lacking troops of its own, the Senate had no choice each time but to accept the choice of the Praetorians as well as that of the various legions. The new emperor was always proclaimed by the Praetorians before being ratified by the Senate and the legions stationed in the various provinces.

While the guard had the power to make or break emperors, it had no formal role in government administration, unlike the personnel of the palace, the Senate, and the bureaucracy.

## Praetorian Cavalry

Initially each cohort included, as for a Roman legion, a cavalry detachment; this should not be confused with the *equites singulares Augusti* who appeared under the emperor Trajan.

The Praetorian could become a cavalryman (*Eques*) after almost five years' service in the infantry. These Praetorians remained listed in their Centuries of origin, but operated in a *turma* of 30 men each commanded by an *Optio equitum*.

There was probably one *turma* of cavalry for two centuries of infantry with their own flag (*vexillum*) as emblem.

## Equipment and traditions

The Praetorian Guards, like all legionnaires, disposed of various equipment to execute different missions. More particularly as bodyguard, escort, or reserve military force, they housed adaptable equipment for each function.

For heavy packed combat infantry lines, they mounted helmets and armor (*lorica*) either with metal strips (*segmentata*) or chains (*hamata*) or scales (*squamata*) and specially in the second and third centuries, heavy colorful shields (*scutum*), heavy javelins (*pila*), and later even long spears and lighter javelins (*hastas, lancea*).

Praetorian Guard helmets included tall crest holder with elaborate detail worked into the metal. Shields were ovoid and more robust compared with the regular rectangular shape used by the legions.

Each legion had its own emblem displayed on its *scutum* and the Praetorian Guards were probably the only unit to include additional insignia on their shields. Each cohort had their own version of Praetorian insignia with some units wearing lion skin capes. Their colours were so decorated with awards, that the men had difficulty in carrying them on long marches.

## Dissolution

During the early fourth century, Caesar Flavius Valerius Severus attempted to disband the Praetorian Guard on the orders of Galerius. In response, the Praetorians turned to Maxentius, the son of the retired emperor Maximian, and proclaimed him their emperor on 28 October 306.

By 312, as we know, Constantine the Great marched on Rome with an army in order to eliminate Maxentius and gain control of the Western Roman Empire, resulting in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Ultimately, Constantine's army achieved a decisive victory against the Praetorians, whose emperor was killed during the fighting.

With the death of Maxentius, Constantine definitively disbanded the remnants of the Praetorian Guard. The remaining soldiers were sent out to various corners of the empire, and the *Castra Praetoria* was dismantled in a grand gesture inaugurating a new age in Roman history and ending that of the Praetorians.



Emperor Trajan and the Praetorian Guards showing the different type of armor (lorica) either with metal strips (*segmentata*) or chains (*hamata*) or scales (*squamata*).