The dating of military buttons: second interim report based on artefacts recovered from the 18th-century wreck Invincible, between 1979 and 1990

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Introduction
In 1758, the 74-gun ship of the line Invincible sank in the Solent when about to carry army personnel to Canada and elsewhere. Research over the last 16 years into buttons found in the wreck establish that numbered military buttons were in regular use prior to 1767, the year most military historians believe they were first introduced. W. Y. Carman, former Deputy Director of the National Army Museum and considered a top living authority on uniforms, when referring to numbered buttons recovered from the Invincible wreck, wrote:

‘If actually of 1758 period then many known sources would be wrong and it would be electrifying.’

This paper presents the evidence of early datings of numbered buttons from the Invincible historic wreck-site together with evidence from four independent sources elsewhere. While evidence from one or two sources might be considered inconclusive, that from five separate sources can no longer be discounted.

Source 1—Invincible
Buttons from the 6th, 13th, 14th, 24th, 30th, 39th, 43rd, 57th, 59th, and 64th Regiments of Foot and other military buttons were recovered from the wreck of the Royal Navy’s first Invincible wrecked in the East Solent on Sunday, 19 February 1758 (Bingeman, 1985: 206). The wreck was re-discovered in 1979 by Arthur Mack and was excavated between 1981 and 1990 under a Government licence held by John Bingeman. After the vessel went aground, she fell over onto her port side beam ends and the hull sank into the seabed to a depth of 3 m. The structure above the seabed broke off and can be found scattered to the North-East. Some of the buttons were found close to the surface, others buried up to 2 m. Suggestions that so many buttons could have become associated with the wreck at some later date are discounted. Details of the Invincible buttons are listed in Appendix A and in Figs 1 and 2.

Source 2—Louisbourg 1745 siege lines
A single 65th Regiment of Foot button (Fig. 3) was among the 5 million artefacts recovered by Parks Canada during the recent excavation of the 1745 siege lines around the Fortress of Louisbourg. The button was dated by the Canadian authorities as: ‘after 1784 and before 1850’, with no explanation as to how the button came to be in the context of the 1745 artefacts. The fortress was razed to the ground by British mining engineers in 1760 and the area remained undisturbed until the recent excavation. However, it is known that the 65th (and 66th) Regiments were raised from New Englanders in 1744 by Colonels William Shirley and William Pepperell and that their uniforms, which would have included buttons for the
Figure 1. *Invincible* (1758) buttons. Identification numbers refer to Appendix A and button diameter. (Photos: Peter Hales & Tony Cullen.)
officers’ uniforms, were supplied from England. Commodore Peter Warren, Commander in Chief North America, embarked Shirley and Pepperell’s regiments as an expedition to attack Louisbourg.

Troops were landed with ordnance to lay...
The most likely source of the 65th button was one of Shirley’s officers during the 1745 siege. Further, the Louisbourg 65th button has a completely different style of 65 from buttons shown by Parkyn when the Regiment was re-raised in 1758 and subsequently had their own buttons (Parkyn, 1956: 279).

Source 3—Crown Point, New York State
At the Light Infantry Redoubt, Crown Point State Historic Site, two numbered pewter regimental buttons were excavated in 1963 with the numbers L and 51 (Fig. 4).

The 65th and 66th were disbanded after the return of the Fortress of Louisbourg to the French under the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. Peace did not last long with an increasing number of Anglo-French disputes in North America. In 1754 the same colonels, William Shirley, and now Sir William Pepperell, were approved to raise two new line regiments numbered 50th and 51st.

Confirmation that uniforms were received from England comes from Sergeant James Grey, who wrote in July 1755 that he had received

‘two Holland shirts . . . two pairs of shoes and two pairs of worsted stockings; a good silver laced hat (the lace I could sell for four dollars); and my clothes in as fine scarlet broadcloth as you ever did see.’ (Parkman, 1899: II, 6)

The two regiments had only a brief existence. While garrisoning Oswego in August 1756, the French forced the provisionals to surrender and over a thousand officers and men where shipped back to France for exchange. The regiments were formally disbanded on 7 March 1757.

Both the L and 51 buttons found at Crown Point were different in style from that shown in Parkyn (1956: 243–50). The English fort at Crown Point was used as a base on Lake Champlain during the Anglo-French and Indian wars.

Source 4—Publications dated 1757
General Richard Kane’s analyses of ‘every Battle won or lost, from 1689 to 1712’ are included by ‘A Gentleman of the Army’ in a book entitled A System of Camp Discipline published in London in 1757 for the sum of seven shillings and sixpence (Anon., 1757). On page 47 it refers to ‘white buttons and L’ when describing the uniforms of the 50th and 51st regiments. This confirms that numbered buttons were in circulation ten years before they were officially introduced. The description ‘L’ identifies the button found at Crown Point; later regimental 50th buttons all bore ‘50’ and there is no record of the Roman numeral ‘L’ being used. ‘White buttons’ refers to pewter used for button making.

Source 5—A ‘15’ button c. 1759 (Fig. 5)
The Regimental Headquarters of the Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire possesses a ‘15’ button which is believed to have been recovered from the Heights of Abraham, the scene of General Wolfe’s epic assault against the French at Quebec in 1759. It bears a design of J5. In the 18th century, ‘1’ was often written as a
‘J’. The button is similar to that shown in Parkyn (1956: 118).

**Historical background to buttons found on Invincible**

Why were there so many different regimental numbered buttons found on the wreck-site from regiments that were not serving in North America?

Between November 1757 and April 1758 requests were made from Barrington, the Secretary of War, to Cleveland, the Secretary to the Admiralty, for individual officers of the 6th, 13th, 14th, and 57th to take passage to Gibraltar (PRO, 1758a). Although Invincible was destined for Halifax in Canada, the voyage at that time of year would be southwards, with possible calls at Vigo and the Canaries where these officers could disembark. They would then make their way to Gibraltar; such arrangements were regularly authorised. Passages for officers going to North America, India and Jamaica were also requested which, with the others, may explain the number of different regimental buttons found.

Another letter (PRO, 1758a) from Barrington to Admiral Boscawen dated 13 February 1758, informs Boscawen that two companies of the second battalion of the 34th and 37th, and 15 unattached officers were to go onboard the Fleet, as reinforcements. A further letter of March 1758 (PRO, 1758b) states that the mattresses of the 34th and 37th were to be removed from the wreck of Invincible. This confirms the presence of the troops on board Invincible, and the 15 unattached officers may have been the 15 supernumeraries on her muster list. Were they the staff of General
Amherst, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of North America, who was to have taken passage but was late arriving from Germany? He later sailed on 16 March in the Dublin, which replaced Invincible following her stranding.

Another entry in Invincible’s log for 10 February 1758 reads:

‘Rec’d from the Royall Arms 2 Liet’s; a Sarg: & Corps 42 soldiers part of Corn’: Wallises Regiment’. (PRO, 1758c)

Cornwallis’s Regiment was the 24th and a single 24th button (Button 5) was among those recovered.

Other buttons
A gold seal (Fig. 6) bearing the crest of the Howe Family has been found. Brigadier General George Augustus, 3rd Viscount Howe, was already in North America and this could have been amongst further baggage in transit; or perhaps, in the baggage of his younger brother, Lieutenant Colonel William, 5th Viscount Howe, Commanding Officer of Anstruther’s 58th Regiment, who was on his way to North America. The Howe connection may explain the finding of the ‘H’ button (Appendix A, Button 14). The Howe brothers were ‘dandys’ in their day, and wearing their own ‘H’ buttons would have been in character.

Two of the buttons found were for the ‘8th Armagh’ and ‘RWM’ (Fig. 2, nos: 24 & 26). What were their origins? In 1756, Prime Minister Pitt ordered ‘Militia’ and ‘Volunteer’ regiments to be raised. It is known that militia officers often volunteered to serve with line regiments on the outbreak of war as ‘reinforcement officers’. The ‘RWM’ button is thought to stand for Royal Westminster Militia.

Fouled anchor buttons
Fouled anchor buttons were worn by maritime regiment and marine officers. One of those found was silver but the majority were pewter with a thin layer of copper, a copper wash, that gave a gold appearance. One cast fouled anchor button still had the yellow twine wrapped round the boss of the button.

Another anchor button is different (Appendix A, button 22). It is dome-shaped, made of thin brass embossed with the fouled anchor and traces of gilding; the back is missing, but there are traces of glue where the back would have been fixed. This type was known during the early and mid-18th century as a composite ‘shell button’ and is further proof that the anchor emblem was worn in 1758. This button may have belonged to a naval officer rather than a marine, thus predating the official introduction of the fouled anchor on naval officers’ uniforms in 1774.

Button trade marks pre-1758
Some Invincible buttons were marked on the back with the names and addresses of the makers—‘I Nutting Covent Garden’, ‘I McGowan Kings Square Soho London’, and a single button with the initials ‘ISI’. At this period ‘I’ and ‘J’ were interchangeable and ‘I Nutting’ almost certainly refers to Joseph Nutting—for family details see Appendix B. Experts question makers’ names on buttons in the 1750s, and hitherto it has been accepted that they were not introduced until the 1800s.

Trade marks were found on other artefacts such as pewter plates, spoons, shoe buckles, and pursers’ weights. Another wreck, the Ramillies (1760) has shoe buckles with various makers’ names including ‘I Turner’, similar to an Invincible buckle. It would be fair to say that the practice was not uncommon in the mid-18th century; buttons would have been no exception.

Button styles
Of great interest are the style and construction of Invincible’s buttons. Most
Figure 6. The Howe family crest recovered from *Invincible* (1758) wreck-site—13 × 15 mm. (Photo: Tony Cullen.)
authorities say that in the first half of the 18th century, buttons were dome-shaped, with a bone or wooden back or former, and fastened with catgut (Barker, 1977: 376; Houart, 1977: 18; Parkyn, 1956: 3–4; Squire, 1972: 3). Around 1760, they became flat with a long metal shank and were cast in pewter for rank and file, and silver or gold for officers. Buttons were generally small but became larger in the 1770s.

This belief is not supported by Invincible’s buttons. There is a whole range of types: domed with wooden and bone backs, one-piece semi-domed cast pewter, flat cast pewter, three-piece brass ‘shell type’, and large 29 mm diameter brass flat buttons. Some of the cast buttons had the maker’s name on the back. Many of the regimental buttons have a thin layer of copper covering the pewter, giving the appearance of ‘gilding’ and may well be officers’ buttons. It seems that there was no transition period from domed, semi-domed to flat in the 1750s but that many styles were in use at the same time.

The recovery of many types of shoe similarly establishes beyond doubt that many different styles were being worn at the same time and dispels another clothing myth.

A 1758 War Office document
A War Office document (PRO, 1758d) entitled: ‘Facings Linings Buttons & Lace proposed by Rg Colonels of the New Regiments . . . with the Rank of the Regiment in the Center within a Wreath of Roses and Thistles’. While the document is ambiguous as to whether: ‘. . . Rank of the Regiment in the Center . . . ’ refers to buttons, it does confirm that colonels were designing their own buttons and needed War Office approval. This particular document refers to the raising of Regiments 61 to 80. Certainly, numbered buttons were not the only parts of military dress that were unofficial. It is known that in 1755 the 30th Grenadiers were wearing fur instead of the standard cloth mitre caps; their button with the Roman numeral XXX and crown, was one of the buttons recovered (Button 6). A 1765 Supplementary Royal Warrant directed the Grenadiers of the 14th Regiment to wear tall caps of black bearskin with their regimental number; a 14th button is also among those recovered (Button 4).

Conclusions
Research shows that the mid-18th century was a transitional period in naval and military development, including dress. The clothing warrant of 1767 would have standardized dress for the whole Army, and made official some of the innovations sponsored by regimental colonels. Colonels vied with each other over the appearance of their respective regiments, and the introduction of numbered buttons was part of this development.

Closed archaeological contexts, notably wreck-sites, provide an invaluable check on the interpretation of limited documentary evidence. The value of the Invincible site is that it constitutes a precisely dated time capsule. All buttons listed in Appendix A were in existence on that fateful Sunday morning in February 1758.

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References
Public Records Office, 1758c, Adm 51/471.

Appendix A

1. 1st Footguards Button in domed cast pewter, shank missing. 21 mm diameter.
   Interlaced ‘GR’ inside garter with *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense* and a Queen’s crown above.
   Backmark: *I Nutting and Son, Covent Garden*.
   Possibly from baggage of Captain William Amherst, 1st Footguards and ADC to General Jeffrey Amherst.
   In an order of 1771, the 1st Footguards were to wear flat gilt buttons; previous buttons were domed. The Footguards of the Hanoverian Regiments had the Royal Coat of Arms on their buttons.
   [Inv/80/183]

2. 6th Regiment of Foot Flat cast pewter button, 23 mm diameter, with rope rim and French circle design with dot, and bird cage fastening.
   Guise’s Officers requesting passage to Gibraltar.
   [Inv/81/066]

3. 13th Regiment of Foot Flat cast pewter button, 16 mm diameter, with 13 within an eight point star. Iron shanks missing on all three buttons.
   Pulteney’s Officers requesting passage to Gibraltar.
   [Inv/80/145, 147 & 227]

4. 14th Regiment of Foot Flat cast pewter button, 24 mm diameter, copper washed. French circle design with dot.
   Jeffrey’s Officers requesting passage to Gibraltar.
   [Inv/80/270]

5. 24th Regiment of Foot Flat cast pewter button, 17 mm diameter, copper washed. The 24 within a continuous wreath circle.
   Cornwallis’s Marines—a sergeant and 45 men were onboard.
   [No ‘Inv’ number—recovered by J. Broomhead pre-survey]

6. 30th Regiment of Foot Flat cast pewter button, 16·5 mm diameter, iron shank missing.
   Motif: xxx with Queen’s crown above.
   Loudoun’s reinforcement officers. Two buttons.
   [No ‘Inv’ number—recovered by J. Broomhead pre-survey; Inv/811147]

7. 39th Regiment of Foot Domed cast pewter button, 14·8 mm diameter, floral wreaths design on the outer rim.
   Small size
   Adlercron’s Regiment from the Portsmouth Area embarking for East Indies, an additional company raised in 1755.
   [Inv/831122]
8. **Large size** Domed cast pewter button, 20.5 mm diameter, floral wreath design as on the smaller 14.8 mm diameter button.  
[Inv/87/84]

9. **43rd Regiment of Foot** Flat cast pewter button, 16 mm diameter, copper washed. 43 inside a laurel wreath design. Iron shank missing.  
Backmark: *I Nutting and Son, Covent Garden*.  
Kennedy’s Regiment known to be in North America.  
[Inv/81/222]

10. **57th Regiment of Foot** Slightly domed cast pewter button, 16 mm diameter, 57 with rope edge. Iron shank missing.  
Cunningham’s Regiment was serving at Gibraltar; Robin Readon, Ensign of the 57th, requested passage to Gibraltar on the 9 February 1758.  
[Inv/81/162]

11. **59th Regiment of Foot** Flat cast pewter button, 23 mm diameter, copper washed, shank missing. Queen’s crown above 59.  
Large size Montague’s Regiment was in Ireland; possibly an officer on secondment.  
[Inv/80/255; Inv/83/113, 114, 116, 118 & 125]

12. **Small size** Diameter 17 mm. Details as for 23 mm diameter button.  
[Inv/83/126]

13. **64th Regiment** Semi-domed cast pewter button, 23 mm diameter, copper washed.  
Iron shank missing.  
At the beginning of the Seven Years War the 11th Regiment of Foot raised a second battalion which was formed into a separate company designated the 64th Regiment of Foot.  
[Inv/80/251]

14. **‘H’ button** Flat cast pewter button, 16 mm diameter.  
Possible ‘Howe’ family connection.  
Backmark: *I McGowan, King Sq, Soho, London*.  
[Inv/88/183]

15. **‘ISI’ Button** Semi-domed cast pewter button, 20 mm diameter, plain face.  
Backmarked *ISI*. Unfortunately crushed when trapped between timbers in the wreck.  
[Inv/84/202]

16. **Fouled Anchor** Flat cast pewter button, 17 mm, iron shank missing. Fouled anchor with rope edge.  
Backmark: *I Nutting, Covent Garden* (reading round the outside, not reversed)  
[Inv/83/182]

17. **Fouled Anchor** Flat cast pewter button, 17 mm diameter. Fouled anchor with plain edge.  
Backmark: *I Nutting & Son, Kings St, Covent Garden*  
[Inv/83/124]

18. **Fouled Anchor** Semi-domed cast pewter button, copper washed. Fouled anchor with rope edge, 17 mm diameter. The anchor stock is smaller and at a more pronounced angle.  
[Inv/85/6 & 7; Inv/87/40]

19. **Fouled Anchor** Large fouled anchor button, 23 mm, rope-rimmed, & copper washed.  
[Inv/85/5; Inv/80/7]

20. **Fouled Anchor** Semi-domed cast pewter button, 18 mm diameter. Stock of fouled anchor at a pronounced angle.  
[Inv/80/252]

21. **Fouled Anchor** Semi-domed cast pewter button, 18 mm diameter. Fouled anchor with rope edge. Worn and scratched face.  
[Inv/87/209]

22. **Fouled Anchor** Brass composite shell type button with fouled anchor and traces of gilding. Wooden back missing, 25 mm diameter. Typical button construction of the period.
23. Union Jack Pattern
Button made of leather, 21 mm diameter. Two examples.
[Inv/83/91; 84/322]

24. 8th Armagh
Semi-domed cast pewter button, 15.5 mm diameter. An 8 in a circle surmounted by a Queen’s Crown and the word Armagh underneath. Possibly a reinforcement officer or volunteer for line service with a regiment. The 8th Armagh Militia was previously thought to have been raised in 1760.
[Inv/84/280]

25. Tudor Rose Motif
Brass composite shell-type button with Tudor Rose motif, wooden back missing, 16 mm diameter.
Worn by naval lieutenants from early to mid-18th century.
[Inv/80/157]

26. RWM Button
Flat cast pewter button, 16 mm diameter. Eastern crown above shields depicting, on the left a portcullis and on the right three sabres; below RWM, thought to stand for: ‘Royal Westminster Militia’, a most unusual design.
Militia officers are known to have volunteered during the Napoleonic Wars for service in line regiments; perhaps this happened in earlier wars.
[Inv/80/182]

27. Death Head Button
Flat button with silk twine woven around bone former, known as a death head button, 22 mm diameter. Fawn coloured, in good condition. Similarly styled black buttons were worn by 19th-century naval chaplains.
[Inv/87/99]

Appendix B

NUTTING Family Tree:

Joseph (1) Nutting (1660–1722) Engraver. Married Ellen and had six children all born at Sandon, Hertfordshire. Their eldest son was:

Joseph (2) Nutting (1702–?) Occupation unknown. Married Ann Shelton in 1733 and had two children. The eldest was named John (1734) and the youngest was:

Joseph (3) Nutting (1736–?) Button maker. Married Elizabeth in 1778 and their two children were both born in King Street, Covent Garden. Their eldest being:

John George Nutting (1779–1864) Apprentice button maker on 2 October 1793 and gained his freedom (i.e. qualified) on 6 January 1801. He registered his mark (I. Nutting & Son) with his Father, Joseph 3, on 18 March 1803. Married Grace Henderson in 1804.

Supposition
Since Joseph (1) was an engraver and Joseph (3) was known to be a button maker, it is not inconceivable that Joseph (2) could also have been in the button business as the two trades are very akin to each other. There is a gap in documentary evidence but it seems likely that father and son (Josephs 2 and 3), could have been in partnership making buttons in the ‘mid-1750s’ and the source of the military buttons found in Invincible.

Trademarks
The trademarks: I Nutting and Son, King Street, Covent Garden and I Nutting and Son, Covent Garden would seem appropriate. The latter was easier to use as the former was cramped on the back of a 17 mm button and was found only on one fouled anchor button [Inv/83/124] with a plain edge; this appears to be an early attempt at making an ‘anchor’ button.
The use of 'I' and 'J' were synonymous in writing of this period, and discounts any confusion over the initials.

**Trade Directories**

A question often posed is why the Nutting button business in King Street, Covent Garden was not mentioned in Trade Directories before 1784/5. These directories were quite small in the mid-1750s and covered a relatively small number of firms. It seems reasonable to suppose that as the directories expanded, the Nutting family should have an entry from 1784, when they were better established.