

The Napoleon Series

The Welsh in the British Army

By: [Richard Tennant](#)

During the Napoleonic Wars, the Welsh had a deep presence in the British Army. All there were only two infantry regiments, the two were some of the most famous regiments of the era: the 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers and the 43rd Monmouthshire Light Infantry (although at this time Monmouthshire was more English than Welsh.)¹ Although the population of Wales was only 4% of Great Britain's population,² 17% of the militia regiments in Great Britain were Welsh.³ These were:

- 4th Royal Denbigh Rifle Corps ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1809, Rifle Corps from 1813)
- 16th Royal Carnarvon Rifle Corps ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810, Rifle Corps from 1812)
- 18th Royal Monmouth & Brecon ('Royal' from 1804)
- 19th Royal Flint Rifle Corps ('Royal' from 1804, Fusiliers 1805, Light Infantry 1806, Rifle Corps from 1812)
- 23rd Royal Radnor Light Infantry ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810)
- 26th Royal Montgomery Light Infantry ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810)
- 27th Royal Cardigan Rifle Corps ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810, Rifle Corps from 1812)
- 39th Royal Carmarthen Fusiliers (Fusiliers from 1803)
- 42nd Royal Glamorgan Light Infantry ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810)
- 54th Royal Pembroke Rifle Corps ('Royal' from 1804, Fusiliers 1808, Light Infantry 1810, Rifle Corps from 1811)
- 65th Royal Merioneth Light Infantry ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810)
- 69th Royal Anglesey Light Infantry ('Royal' from 1804, Light Infantry from 1810)

Observations

According to Philip Haythornthwaite

Recruiters had greater difficulties in some areas than others, for reasons sometimes removed from the normal constraints of local prosperity; as late as 1805 it was reported that Carmarthenshire was especially barren, as the inhabitants had not forgotten the

¹ "The Laws in Wales Act 1542 again enumerated the counties of Wales and omitted Monmouthshire, implying that the county was no longer to be treated as part of Wales. However, for all purposes Wales had become part of the Kingdom of England, and the difference had little practical effect. For several centuries, acts of the Parliament of England (in which Wales was represented) often referred to "Wales and Monmouthshire". It was only with the Local Government Act 1972, which came into effect in April 1974, confirmed the county as part of Wales, with the administrative county of Monmouthshire and its associated lieutenancy being abolished." [Monmouthshire](#)

² The Population Demographics per 1801 census

Wales	587,000	4%
Scotland	1,608,420	10%
England	8,304,580	
Great Britain	10,500,000	
Ireland	+/- 5,000,000	
United Kingdom	15,500,000	

³ There were 71 militia regiments: 44 were English, 15 were Scottish, and 12 were Welsh.

formation of a battalion there some three decades before, which had been sent to Goree⁴ from where not one private soldier returned.⁵

From 1782 almost all regiments received a 'county' designation intended to increase the *esprit de corps* by associating the regiments with the area from which it drew many of its recruits; nevertheless the actual composition of units frequently bore little resemblance to country title.⁶

Territorial identity was even more distorted by the very large drafts of volunteers from county militia regiments; for example, in the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers at Waterloo, only about 29 percent were actually Welshmen (and but 13 percent of NCO's), more than one-tenth were Lancastrians (and 25 percent of the NCO's), and almost one-tenth were Irish (and more than 17 percent of the NCO's).⁷

Dr. Edward Coss wrote in *All for the King's Shilling*

There are no reliable records of the Welsh in the British Army of this period. In the British regimental record keeping, Welshmen were included under the category 'English' in the general returns.

The BSC sample for all years 1790-1815 offers a precise look at the enlistment in general.

For the years leading to and including the Peninsular War, Englishmen constitute slightly less than 53 percent of the total sample. The Irish make up nearly 30 percent of volunteers, whilst the Scots represent almost 16 percent; foreigners constitute the remaining 2 percent of recruits.⁸

Wellington's Welsh at Waterloo

The Waterloo 200 Organisation created a website as part of the anniversary celebrations: [Waterloo 200](#). It is based on the 1815 Medal Roll and contains a list of the names of all the soldiers present. Since the basic input data was collected on an Excel spreadsheet, it was thought that by extracting all those soldiers with Welsh surnames might give an interesting insight. It was accepted that simply having a Welsh surname would not be indicative that the soldier was actually a Welshman, born and bred.

Schedule 1

The extracted list of 16 Welsh surnames was a total of 1,094 men.⁹ The 'Battalions Total' was calculated taking the total of 73,200 men in Wellington's Army multiplied by 36%. This was taken as the 'British' percent of the army, as stated in Mark Adkin's book *The Waterloo Companion*. The 1,094 'Welshmen' therefore calculated out to 4% of the British contingent. When one examines the demographic numbers from the 1801 census, it is interesting to note that the population of Wales was 4% of that of the total United Kingdom's population.

Schedule 2

⁴ Gorée is a small island off the coast of Senegal. It was occasionally occupied by the British Army in the 18th Century. [Gorée](#)

⁵ Haythornthwaite, Philip. *The Armies of Wellington*. London: Arms and Armour, 1996. page 51

⁶ Ibid; page 75

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Coss, Edward. *All for the King's Shilling*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2010. page 53

⁹ The 16 family names are: Jones, Thomas, Morgan, Jenkins, Williams, Roberts, Griffiths, Owen, Davies, Lewis, Edwards, Price, Evans, Hughes, Rees, and Phillips.

The re-sorting of the list of names according to the regiments, rather than the surnames, one could have expected that a high proportion of these 'Welshmen' would have been in the 23rd Regiment of Foot - The Royal Welch Fusiliers. However this was not the case.

3 rd Battalion 1st Foot Guards	167	<i>20% of battalion</i>
23rd (Royal Welch Fusiliers) Foot	131	<i>17% of battalion</i>
Royal Horse and Foot Artillery	93	
95th (Rifles) Foot	67	
2 nd Battalion 3rd Foot Guards	54	
52nd (Oxford Light Infantry) Foot	52	
2 nd Battalion Coldstream Guards	44	
40th (2nd Somerset) Foot	33	
51st (2nd Yorkshire Light Infantry) Foot	33	
4th (King's Own) Foot	32	
92nd Highlanders	2	
8th King's German Legion Line Battalion	2	

For further reading:

On Recruiting in Wales by Fluellyn in [Colburn's United Service Magazine](#) 1845, vol.III, pages 282 – 284, and 451 – 452 An observation on the article by Philip Haythornthwaite

The author makes some very interesting comments. I do not know his identity but, from other pieces he has had published, he was clearly a Peninsula veteran and one whose opinions I think are worth consideration.

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