

## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Laidlaw, Elizabeth. *The Making of a Rifles Officer: the Life and Letters of Colonel George Miller CB FRS (1786 – 1843)*. Edinburgh (UK): Burngrange, 2019. 472 pages. £35. ISBN# 97819916477100



The literature of the Napoleonic Wars is rich with accounts from the British 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles. I know of 17 sets of published memoirs, letters, and diaries and this does not count the numerous accounts in compilations such as Herbert Siborne's *Waterloo Letters* and Gareth Glover's *Waterloo Archives*. I know of no other British regiment that has produced such a volume of primary sources and they come not only from officers, but also non-commissioned officers, privates, and even a musician. And it seems like more are being discovered every year. *The Making of a Rifles Officer* is the most recent addition.

George Miller purchased his commission in the 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles in 1804 and retired in 1826. During that time he fought in the 1807 Buenos Aires Campaign, the 1808 – 1809 expedition to Spain, Walcheren in 1809, with Spanish guerillas in 1810 – 1811, in Spain with Wellington's Army in 1813 – 1814, and at Waterloo. While not on active service, he attended the Royal Military Academy. During those 11 years he was captured once and wounded twice.

*Making of a Rifles Officer* contains 162 letters written by George Miller to his brother John from 1804 to 1824. Of these 147 cover the years 1804 – 1815, for an average of 12 per year. This yearly number may be a bit misleading, because some years there would be only a handful of letters, while in other years he wrote every other week. Some of the items that are discussed in his letters are:

- Expenses: outfitting himself as an officer including uniforms, accoutrements, items for daily use such as brushes, servant, mess bill, etc. This was an ongoing theme and it appeared that George as a young officer was living beyond his means.
- This is one of the few books that discuss the training a new officer received when he first reported to his regiment. He writes about needing to learn drill, marksmanship, and among other things the different bugle calls, of which he had difficulty distinguishing them. (He was told to learn to play the flute, which would make it easier.)
- Duties of an officer
- How he filled his day when he was not the duty officer
- Recruiting from the militia and the problems he had

The letters make it very clear that George was very ambitious and was anxious to get promoted. He decided that attending the newly formed Royal Military College would be beneficial. And keeping with the theme of how expensive it would be, and in an effort to get his brother to cover his expenses while there, he wrote extensively on what the estimated yearly cost of going to Royal Military College would be -- £600 per year!

Because the letters were written in real time, they are filled with rumors about possible deployments and news about the units which were going. In late 1806 he thought they would be going to Sicily, but actually went to South Africa and then to South America, where he was captured along with the rest of the force. He purchased his captaincy in 1808 and deployed to Spain in the autumn of 1808. However, instead of remaining with his battalion, he volunteered to serve as an exploring officer conducting reconnaissance far in advance of the army. His letters chronicle his adventures in the mountains of northern Spain. Six months after George returned from Spain he went with his battalion to Walcheren and there are several letters about his time there. He was part of the attack on the island of South Beveland and once it was taken he stayed on it for the rest of the campaign. He also wrote about Walcheren Fever, which devastated the British Army.

In early 1810 Captain Miller was finally selected to attend the Royal Military College but he remained at the school less than five months. About this time, the British government had decided to send officers to southern Spain and have them join the Spanish Army, similar to what it did with the Portuguese Army. Any officer who volunteered would be advanced one rank while in the Spanish Army. George saw this as opportunity to obtain his majority without having to purchase the rank. Temporarily abandoning his goal of attending the Royal Military College, he went to Gibraltar and then to Cadiz. The Spanish declined to accept these British volunteers and George was left without a job. However this did not stop him. Over the next year he roamed the Spanish countryside, linking up with guerrillas wherever he could find them. During that time he narrowly avoids capture by the French and misses the battle of Barossa (5 March 1811) by a day. Eventually he goes to Portugal, not to join his regiment there, but as a battlefield tourist. He ends up at Badajoz during its second siege (June 1811) and watched the siege, but does not have any duties. There are eleven letters that cover his time in southern Spain.

Captain Miller returned to England during the summer of 1811, went on leave and by April 1812 resumed his studies at the Royal Military College. However it was likely that his regimental colonel had noticed that he had not served with his company in three years. In August 1812, George was ordered to return to the regiment. A year later he was sent to Spain and joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the Pyrenees. For the first time in four years he was with his company. Unlike many of his previous letters which focus on his personal life, these letters are about his battalion and the fighting he took part in. There are lengthy descriptions of the battles of Vera (31 August 1813), Bidassoa (7 October 1813), and Nive (December 1813). He was promoted to brevet major on 3 March and was seriously wounded at Tarbes (20 March 1814). So his account of the battle is quite brief. The war ends in April 1814 and Major Miller went to Paris to see the sights. By March 1815 he is

back with his company and leads them at Waterloo in June 1815. Despite being wounded, by the end of the battle, he was its senior officer still with the battalion. He wrote a long account of his battalion's part in the battle.

Major Miller served in the Army of Occupation of France and in the 1820s was part of the garrison in Ireland. He went on half-pay in 1826. *The Making of a Rifles Officer* includes several letters and articles from this period, including a reply to William Siborne's circular letter about his battalion in the Waterloo Campaign. There is also a lengthy biography that he wrote of Rifleman Tom Plunket in the Buenos Aires Campaign in 1807. Until this biography was published in the *United Services Magazine* in 1842 Rifleman Plunket was best known for shooting French General Auguste Colbert at an extreme range.

George Miller was an avid reader and mentioned numerous books . . . usually he was asking his brother to send a copy to him. The author includes a list of these books, most of which were of a professional nature. This listing provides the reader with an idea of scope of the topics that an officer was supposed to be knowledgeable of. *The Making of a Rifles Officer* closes with a list of all the letters in the book with a short description of each one. It also has 148 short biographies of individuals mentioned in the letters.

*The Making of a Rifles Officer* is a labor love of two people – the late Professor Elizabeth Laidlaw and her husband Jim. Elizabeth inherited the letters in the early 1970s and she spent years transcribing and editing them. Unfortunately she died before the book was finished. Jim took up the mantle and the result is *The Making of a Rifles Officer*. When I received my copy I was amazed at the physical layout of the book. The letters are divided into chronological sections which are preceded by an overview of the events that were discussed in the letters. Each letter is numbered and no two letters are on the same page. This makes it very easy to find one. After thumbing through the book and hoping that the letters were equal to the physical qualities of the book I started reading. I was not disappointed!

The letters in *The Making of a Rifles Officer* are rich in detail and provide an intimate portrait of the life of a company officer. Many of the letters were written with two weeks of the previous letter, so they provide an almost continuous narration about George Miller's life. Since they were not meant for public consumption they are candid in their criticism of public figures and events of the day. Because the letters were written shortly after the events he writes about, there is an immediacy about them you do not get with memoirs. The letters covering the time he spent in southern Spain are the only ones that I have seen written by an officer serving with the Spanish guerrillas. They in themselves are worth the cost of the book! Highly recommended.

At this time you can only order the book from [Burngrange Press](#). Shipping is £4 within the U.K.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: July 2019