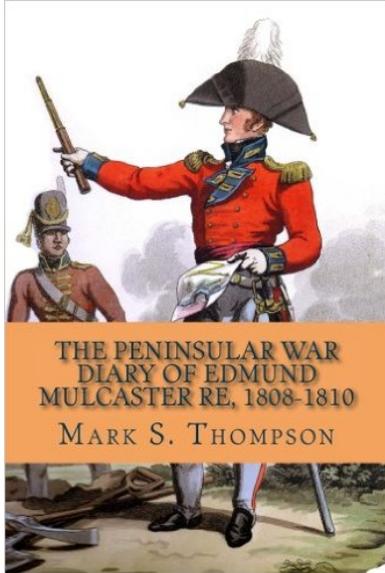


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Thompson, Mark S. (editor). *The Peninsular War Diary of Edmund Mulcaster RE, 1808 - 1810*. Privately published, 2015. ISBN# 9781615310792. Paperback. \$15.



The Royal Engineers of the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars was a small organization. Consisting solely of officers, at its peak, its strength was 262 men. Of those, only 100 served in the Peninsular War. Although they were the best educated officers in the army, very few of them left records of their service. The most famous account is John Jones' three volume *Journal of Sieges Carried on by the Army under the Duke of Wellington in Spain, during the Years 1811 to 1814*. It is the definitive work on the topic, yet it reads like an official document with no personal information on the author. Another classic is *The Life and Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir John Burgoyne*. The British Army fought in the Peninsular War from August 1808 to April 1814. Sir John Burgoyne served 66 of those 69 months with it!¹ The book is a bit of a misnomer, since the vast majority is his diary from his time

in the Peninsula. Other Peninsular memoirs include Charles Boothby's *Under England's Flag from 1804 to 1809*, Rice Jones' *An Engineer Officer under Wellington in the Peninsula*, and George Landman's *Recollections of My Military Life*. Unfortunately these three sets do not cover much of the Peninsular War. Captain Boothby lost his leg at Talavera in July 1809 and was captured by the French. Lieutenant Jones was only in the Peninsula from April 1809 to February 1812, while Captain Landmann was "a military tourist", who was assigned to the Gibraltar, yet somehow was at Roliça and Vimeiro.

The editor of *The Peninsular War Diary of Edmund Mulcaster*, is Mark Thompson who specializes in the Royal Engineers in the Peninsular War. He is best known for his books [Wellington's Engineers](#) and [The Services of General Sir George Madden 1789 – 1814](#). He was generously given a copy of this previously unknown Royal Engineer diary by Vernon Merritt.

Captain Mulcaster's father was Major General Frederick Mulcaster, the Colonel Commandant in the Royal Corps of Engineers. Supposedly his father was the half-brother of King George III. His mother was the daughter of Major General Sir Samuel Auchmuty. Captain Mulcaster attended the Royal Military Academy and was commissioned in the Royal Engineers in 1804. He was assigned to Gibraltar in 1806 and would spend four of the next six years in the Peninsula.² He landed in Portugal in

¹ He arrived in August 1808 and was evacuated from Corunna in January 1809. He returned to Portugal in May 1809 and was with Wellington's Army until Napoleon abdicated in April 1814.

² Lieutenant Mulcaster spent the other two years in Sicily.

early August 1808 along with George Landmann. He took part in the Corunna Campaign and was evacuated to England with the rest of General Moore's Army. He was not in England long, before he received orders to return to Portugal. He arrived in Lisbon on 2 April 1809 and would serve in the Peninsula until his death in March 1812.

The Peninsular War Diary of Edmund Mulcaster is of special interest because it chronicles the life of a junior engineer officer, whose experiences were different than most of the junior officers in Wellington's Army. Captain Mulcaster had a wide variety of jobs. During his 35 months in the Peninsula, he served as the adjutant of the Royal Engineers in country, was assigned to the HQ of General Moore's Army during the Corunna Campaign, was attached to the 1st Division during the Talavera Campaign, spent most of the first half 1810 building the Lines of Torres Vedras, and was then attached to the 3rd Division through the summer of 1810. The diary does not give much technical detail of what he did but it does provide insight on the numerous duties he was assigned on campaign and building the Lines. Some of his duties he described doing on campaign included doing route surveys, inspecting bridges, preparing bridges for destruction, and the overseeing of the construction of field works. Building the Lines of Torres Vedras was a bit different. His entries for the months he spent there cover a wide range of topics from paying his workers to finding material and tools to build the various fortifications. In addition to his daily tasks, Captain Mulcaster recorded the weather conditions almost every day. It rained quite a bit. For those who are interested in the Lines of Torres Vedras, they will be able to use it to track the impact of inclement weather on its construction.

Because the Royal Engineers were so small, most of the junior officers knew each other. Captain Mulcaster was friends with Captains Boothby, Burgoyne, and Jones; and there are frequent mentions of all of them throughout the diary. Because of this friendship, the diary is full of gossip and news that he has received from or sent to them. The diary is also filled with international news that Captain Mulcaster found interesting. None of the events that he wrote about will be new to the reader, however what I found curious was how quickly the news of these events reached the army. He wrote on 6 August 1809 of the Austrian defeat at Wagram that took place on 5 – 6 July. . . 31 days before! This news had to travel from Vienna to London to Lisbon to where he was in central Spain at the time. . . a distance of over 3000 kilometers! Even news that would have only been of interest to the Royal Engineers made it fairly quickly. On 10 September 1809 Captain Mulcaster was in the vicinity of Badajoz, Spain when he recorded that fellow Royal Engineer Captain Charles Pasley was seriously wounded on 15 August at the siege of Flushing. Although it took 26 days for the news to reach him, it had to travel by ship to London and then in the official mail to Lisbon then to Badajoz. . . a total distance of about 1800 kilometers!

Mr. Thompson does an outstanding job editing Captain Mulcaster's diary. He provides the full name of almost every British officer mentioned in the diary and many of the Portuguese officers. He also gives information on the towns and villages that Captain

Mulcaster wrote about and when the spelling is incorrect, he provides the modern spelling. Occasionally what Captain Mulcaster wrote is wrong or too vague for the reader to understand what is meant. Mr. Thompson goes to great lengths to correct these inconsistencies in the diary and often quotes from other Royal Engineers diaries, such as Captain Burgoyne's or Lieutenant Rice Jones, to expand on Captain Mulcaster's text.

Occasionally Captain Mulcaster wrote in his diary that he received a letter or sent a letter to another officer, usually Captain Burgoyne. Because Mr. Thompson spent so much time in the archives of the Royal Engineer Museum, he found many of these letters and placed them in the diary after the entries where they were mentioned. While this may not sound very special, I have not found any other memoirs or diaries that have done this!

Unfortunately the diary ends on 25 September 1810, the day before the battle of Busaco. However the book does not end there. Mr. Thompson fills out the rest of Captain Mulcaster's time in the Peninsula with excerpts from reports that he wrote and entries from other diaries, letters, and memoirs by those who knew him. Captain Mulcaster continued to serve in Wellington's Army and was slightly wounded at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo on 15 January 1812. He was decapitated by a cannonball during the siege of Badajoz on 25 March 1812.

The Peninsular War Diary of Edmund Mulcaster RE, 1808 – 1810 is not for someone looking for accounts of battles and skirmishes. However if you are looking for a book on the daily life of a Royal Engineer on campaigns and building fortifications, this is the book for you! The book is self-published by the editor and is available through Amazon.com.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: November 2015