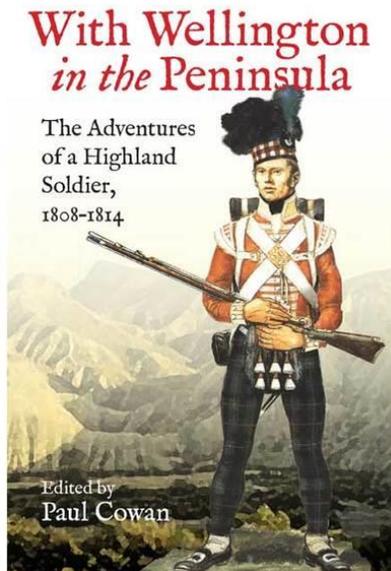


The Napoleon Series Reviews

With Wellington in the Peninsula: the Adventures of a Highland Soldier, 1808 – 1814. Paul Cowan (ed.). London: Frontline, 2015. 224 pages. ISBN# 9781848327863. £20



One of the most famous regiments that served under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular War, was the 71st Highland Light Infantry. It served through most of the Peninsular War, having landed in Portugal in 1808 in time to fight at both Roliça and Vimeiro, and then the expedition into Spain which ended in the retreat to Corunna. The regiment was not with Wellington during the 1809 Oporto and Talavera Campaigns, but instead was part of the Walcheren Expedition. It returned to the Peninsula in September 1810 and served under Wellington until Napoleon abdicated in April 1814.

Despite being such a storied regiment, few of its soldiers left a record of their time serving with it. Among officers, George Napier's reminiscences were published in 1888,¹ while William Gavin's diary was published in 2012.² In 2015, Frontline Books published *With Wellington's*

*Outposts: the Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur.*³ In 1819, the most famous memoirs by a soldier from the 71st Foot was published. This of course was the *Journal of a Soldier of the 71st, or Glasgow Regiment, Highland Light Infantry, from 1806 to 1815*. This memoir has been re-published numerous times over the past 200 years, the most recently was Frontline Book's *A Soldier of the Seventy-First: From De La Plata to Waterloo 1806-1815* which came out in 2010. Unlike the officers' accounts, *Journal* was written by an anonymous soldier.⁴

Like *Journal*, *With Wellington in the Peninsula*, was written by an anonymous soldier. It is not the same book as *Journal*, but an updated version of a very rare memoir. . . *Vicissitudes in the life of a Scottish Soldier*, which was published in 1827. *With Wellington in the Peninsula* is the first time it has been republished since its original printing! Paul Cowan, the editor of this volume, tried to figure who the author of these memoirs was, but was unable to determine his name and any other pertinent details

¹ Napier, William (ed.). *The Early Military Life of General Sir George T. Napier*. London: John Murray; 1886. Unfortunately, he was appointed the commander of the regiment after the battle of Toulouse in April 1814. Only 12 pages in the book cover his time with the regiment.

² *The Diary of William Gavin, Ensign and Quartermaster 71st Highland Regiment, 1806-1815: Being His Daily Notes of His Campaigns in South Africa, South America, Portugal, Spain, Southern France, and Flanders, under Sir David Baird, Sir William Beresford, Sir John Moore, and the Duke of Wellington.* Gareth Glover (ed.). Godmanchester: Ken Trotman: 2012.

³ Vandeleur, John. *With Wellington's Outposts: the Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur.* Andrew Bamford (ed.) Barnsley: Frontline, 2015. Like Napier, John Vandeleur only served with the regiment for a few years.

⁴ Frontline's 2010 edition of the book identifies the soldier as Joseph Sinclair.

about him, other than that he was from Glasgow. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for by “. . . adopting a cloak of anonymity the narrator could afford to be more candid and scurrilous than if he had put his name to his story.”⁵

I have to agree with the editor of *With Wellington in the Peninsula*. It is the most candid memoir of the British Army that I have ever read! The author chronicles the daily life of a soldier and does not pull any punches. He writes as if he enjoyed the life of a soldier most of the time, but at other times he questioned his decision to enlist. While in central Spain in late 1808 he said “. . . out short dream of pleasure was again disturbed by the issuing of an order to march. This word strongly reminded us that we were not travelling either for instruction or amusement, that we had no will of our own; and, in short, that we were slaves, that must kill or be killed, or starve, or perish with cold, or walk to the end of the world if commanded.”⁶ The longer he was a soldier, the more disillusion he became. At Vitoria in June 1813 he wrote that “. . . turning then to the right, we began the ascent of the heights. To have thus obtained the honour, as it were, of ‘opening the ball’, some may think ought to have made us what is called ‘burn with enthusiasm’: but I could perceive no such feeling, nor even common satisfaction: the only words uttered were invectives and murmurs at the steepness of the heights, and the slippery state of the grass. I knew that another regiment placed in our situation would have been an object of envy; but the fact is, fighting had begun to lose its novelty.”⁷

From his writings, his attitude was common in the regiment. The 71st Foot took heavy casualties⁸ after Vitoria and stated after the battalion commander was killed and “. . . an officer and twelve men had been sent to bury the body of the lamented Cadogan, who had died on the hill, and had been carried from thence to the grave across a horse. The situation of that grave is only known to the interring parties, they having dug it hastily in the most convenient field that could be found. One would have thought that Cadogan’s death should have created a greater sensation than it actually did; but when it is considered how uncertain and miserable our own lives were, our apathy will cease to be wondered at.”⁹ The next morning the men had had enough. When “. . . the word was given to fall into the line of march. Our regiment either did not hear the command, or was not willing to hear it: this negligence caused our major’s wrath to be kindled against us. He came up to the lines, and furiously along through the fires, overturning kettles, and committing a terrible devastation amongst the cooking apparatus. Having thus aroused us to a sense of duty, by the assistance of his horse’s hoofs, we moved on gloomily enough, -- not so much on account of the loss of our breakfast as of our friends; the late dreadful gap in the regiment having become more observable than before, on account of many marching side by side with strangers instead of well-known comrades; in fact, we scarcely knew our places in the ranks.”¹⁰

⁵ Page 9

⁶ Page 42

⁷ Page 157

⁸ Only one other British regiment had more casualties in the battle.

⁹ Page 163

¹⁰ Ibid

The author does not just write his feelings about being a soldier, but also a wide variety of topics, ranging from how the Guards Regiments were pampered, what the soldiers of the regiment thought of their battalion commander who was killed at Fuentes de Oñoro to how Portuguese soldiers were conscripted. Despite his callous observations, he was quite upbeat at other times. For example he described how General William Stewart was wildly popular among the soldiers and why he was so. He also provides many anecdotes of the soldiers' lives. Not going hungry was foremost in many of their minds and he gives numerous descriptions of foraging and outright theft to fill their bellies. He writes with a sense of humor often describing incidents that I have never read about before. One of the funniest is the reaction of one soldier to having his bath in the Tagus River interrupted by a French cavalry patrol.

There is some question on whether *With Wellington in the Peninsula* was actually written by the anonymous soldier or dictated by him to a ghost writer. The grammar and spelling is that of someone who was very literate and the editor of this edition explores the possibility that it was written by George Gleig, a former officer in the 85th Foot, who wrote several other memoirs. Regardless whether the book was written by the anonymous soldier or not, it definitely is the story of the 71st Foot as told by an enlisted soldier. Unfortunately the author did not want to re-tell the incidents written about in the *Journal*, so the information in either book is not always corroborated by the other. Yet the two books give the reader a very lively look at the life of a soldier in the 71st Foot.

Enlisted memoirs from the Napoleonic Wars are rare. . . only about 25% of those published in the past 200 years. *With Wellington in the Peninsula* is unlike any other I have read – either by an officer or enlisted soldier. It is highly entertaining, but also thought provoking for it tells what a soldier felt about his officers, being in the army, and being exposed to danger for years on end.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2015