
*The Adventures of Private Shadrach Byfield* was first published in 1840 and has not been republished until now. In addition to being very rare, the Byfield memoirs fall into several categories that make them unique. The first is that the book was written by a soldier in the 41st Foot. The second is that it was not written by an officer or sergeant, but by what was called an other rank – either a musician, a corporal, or a private. A quick examination of *British Memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars* shows no entries for the 41st Foot. Furthermore there are only 55 listings for other ranks. Considering there are over 600 listings -- less than 10% of the total published primary sources were written by other ranks.

That in itself makes *The Adventures of Private Shadrach Byfield* worth reading; but the fact they are an account of his time spent in North America during the War of 1812 makes them invaluable! I know of no other set of War of 1812 memoirs written by a private.

Shadrach Byfield was born in 1789 in Avon, Wiltshire, England. He enlisted in the local militia in 1807, but volunteered into the 41st Foot in 1809. His choice of regiments is surprising because it was not a well-known or popular regiment. Its only battalion had been stationed in Canada for the past nine years. The fact his older brother was in the regiment was the likely reason why he selected it. He was not in the depot long enough to be issued his uniforms,¹ when he was sent with a draft of 210 replacements to Montreal.² Private Blyfield would be in Canada for the next five years.

Private Byfield could read and write and when his company commander found out he was offered the opportunity to become a non-commissioned officer. He refused and eventually joined the battalion’s light company. Garrison duty in Canada was quiet at first but three years after his arrival the War of 1812 broke out. During the next two years he would be in almost every major campaign and battle fought in Canada, including:

- The Campaign to capture Forts Detroit and Defiance in 1812
- River Raisin: 18 – 22 January 1813
- Battle of Thames: 5 October 1813
- Battle of Buffalo: 30 December 1813

¹ Page 12
² *British Infantry Regiments and the Men Who Led Them 1793-1815: 41st Foot*
During the campaign to capture Forts Detroit and Defiance he was part of the assault that captured Fort Detroit and in the covering the force that besieged Fort Defiance. He fought at the River Raisin in January 1813, where he was wounded, and at Thames, where the 41st Foot was surrounded and had to surrender. Private Byfield was in the Light Company and was able to avoid capture with the aid of some friendly Indians. Several pages are devoted to his escape and evasion across 120 kilometers of heavily wooded countryside.

Private Byfield was in a series of battles and actions until August 1814 when his regiment went to Buffalo. In what was known as the Raid on Black Rock, he was wounded in his left forearm. The bullet shattered the bone and his arm was amputated below the elbow. He was discharged in 1815 and given a pension of 9 pence a day. In 1847 the Military General Service Medal (MSGM) was authorized for any soldier who fought in one of twenty-nine battles between 1801 and 1814. To receive the medal, the soldier had to still be alive in 1814. Participation in the battle was recognized with a clasp on the medal ribbon. One of the rarest of these was for Fort Detroit. Shadrach Byfield was one of the sixty-two individuals from the 41st Foot who received the MSGM with the Fort Detroit clasp.³

As a light infantryman Private Byfield often worked with friendly Indians on campaign, especially those in the early days of the war in western Ontario. He left numerous descriptions of them and how they operated against the Americans, many of whom were afraid of being taken prisoners by the Indians. Interestingly, he never showed any prejudice or distaste from having to work with the Indians and generally treated them as he would any other soldier.

The Adventures of Private Shadrach Byfield is well written that gives the reader the feeling that he is sitting in a tavern listening to an old soldier telling stories about his life. Private Byfield usually stuck to what he witnessed. This gives the book an authenticity that is missing in others. However often the big picture is missing. To remedy this, Gareth Glover has heavily footnoted the book. In addition to doing his normal superb job of identifying remote places and obscure individuals, he also expands on the events mentioned in the text that are not covered in detail by Private Byfield.

Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Robert Burnham