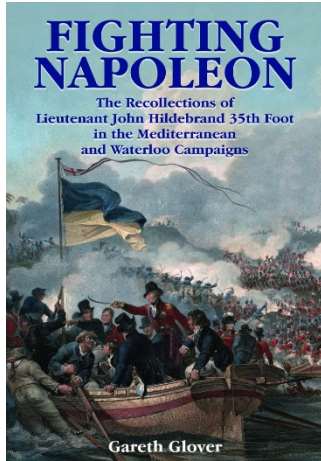


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Hildebrand, John. *Fighting Napoleon: the Recollections of Lieutenant John Hildebrand 35th Foot in the Mediterranean and Waterloo Campaigns*. Gareth Glover (ed.) Barnsley: Frontline, 2016. 224 pages. ISBN: 9781473886841 £20 / \$40



One of the forgotten theaters of the Napoleonic Wars is the fighting in the Mediterranean Sea. For the British it is overshadowed by the Peninsular War and for other combatants the numerous wars between the French, Austrians, Prussians, and Russians on the European continent. Most readers of the Napoleon Series will have at least a passing knowledge of Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and possibly the 1806 battle of Maida. Beyond that, they will know little about the conflict in the Mediterranean. But it was a very active theater, just not on the scale of the battles and campaigns in central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, for the British, the units involved were usually either foreign regiments in British service or was one of the lesser known regiments. So not surprisingly it has not generated much notice.

One British line regiment that served there though was the 35th Foot. Its 1st Battalion spent 17 years in the Mediterranean, while its 2nd Battalion was there for a few years until 1807. The 2nd Battalion took part in other campaigns including in the Walcheren Expedition in 1809 and then the expedition to the Low Countries in late 1813. It was also part of Wellington's Army during the Waterloo Campaign. Possibly because they were not with the main British army in the Peninsula, very few officers or other ranks from the regiment left any account of their service with it during the Napoleonic Wars. Until recently only two had been published. These were excerpts Major Thomas Austin's diary from the 1813 – 1814 expedition to the Low Countries that were published in the late 1940s¹ and part of Major John Slessor's diary which was published in 1993.²

Fighting Napoleon is the first new primary source from the 35th Foot in the Napoleonic Wars in 24 years. *Fighting Napoleon* are the memoirs of John Hildebrand, who was a junior officer in the 35th Foot. He was born in 1794 and appointed an ensign in the regiment at the age of 15 in 1809. The following year he went to the Mediterranean and served there for the next four years. He was initially part of the garrison on Malta, while the majority of his battalion was in the Greek Islands, but after a few months he joined

¹ Austin, Thomas. "Old Stick-Leg" Extracts from the Diaries of Major Thomas Austin. New York: Dial Press; date unknown but at least 1947.

² Hayter, Alethea (ed.). *The Backbone: Diaries of a Military Family in the Napoleonic Wars*. Edinburgh: Pentland Press; 1993.

them in Sicily where they became part of the garrison on alert to repel a possible assault by Marshal Murat and the Neapolitan Army. During this time the British Army and the Royal Navy were conducting raids in the Ionian Islands to disrupt French rule there and to capture local merchant ships. The 35th Regiment took an active part in these operations and Ensign Hildebrand was in the thick of things. He was part of the assault and capture of the Island of Lissa in 1812 and Lagosta in 1813. Despite his youth, after Lagosta was captured, the 19 year-old ensign was appointed the military governor of the island. Life on a small island was not enough for him, and soon he was leading the insurgent blockade of Ragusa and when Austrian forces arrived was part of the formal siege of the city. After Ragusa fell in January 1814, he returned to his regiment which was in Italy, just in time for peace to be declared. John went back to England in 1814 on sick leave, but after Napoleon escaped from Elba in March 1815, he joined his regiment's 2nd Battalion and fought in the Waterloo Campaign.

By 1810, British Army operations in the Mediterranean rarely saw more than three or four companies deployed at one time. The 35th Foot was no exception. Most of the time it was split into small company detachments led by a junior officer. John Hildebrand was involved in these operations and *Fighting Napoleon* is the story of the many adventures and misadventures he got in to. Because he was often on detached duty with little guidance from his commander, he operated with the attitude that it was easier to obtain forgiveness than permission. When he heard that the city of Ragusa (modern day Dubrovnik) had risen in rebellion against the French military garrison, he abandoned his post on Lagosta and led his detachment to the assistance of the insurgents. They were happy to receive his help and although still only an ensign, he became the commander of the several thousand strong blockading forces! While there he would be promoted to lieutenant.

This was not the only case of Lieutenant Hildebrand acting without thinking through the implications of his actions if they went wrong. During the early days of his time in Ragusa, he decided to make a reconnaissance of the French fortress while in civilian clothes. He was spotted by the French and came very close to being captured. After the siege he met the French commandant of the fortress who told him that he would have hung him as a spy if he had been captured in civilian clothes. Lieutenant Hildebrand was shocked to learn this but did not learn his lesson about thinking before acting. A year later, while on sick leave, he learned that England was at war again with France. He decided he did want to be part of the army being formed by the Duke of Wellington that would fight Napoleon at Waterloo. He travelled to Belgium at his own expense and joined his regiment's 2nd Battalion. He was not authorized to do this and could have been court-martialed. Fortunately for him, the battalion commander was

happy to see him, but placed him under arrest, until the army decided what to do with him.³

Luckily for our hero, Lieutenant Hildebrand was allowed to stay with the 2nd Battalion and fought with it during the Waterloo Campaign. He was appointed he temporary commander of the Light Company and then the battalion's temporary adjutant. The battalion was assigned to Major General George Johnstone's 6th Brigade in 4th Division. When Lieutenant Hildebrand joined it, the battalion was guarding the border with France but was at Hal on the right flank of the army at Waterloo. Because of this he missed Waterloo, but was at siege and storming of Cambrai, the capitulation of Péronne, and then the initial moves to besiege Paris.

John Hildebrand returned to England in January 1816. Serving in the peacetime army was not for him. He went on half pay in 1817. He studied theology at Trinity College in Dublin and became clergyman. He died in 1868.

John Hildebrand was a vivid story teller and although *Fighting Napoleon* often reads like a novel, his stories can be verified by other sources. Readers should be cautious about accepting everything he says as the truth. The memoirs were written in 1868 over 50 years after the events took place. There are a few minor historical discrepancies, especially with dates. However Gareth Glover, the editor, does point out and correct where Lieutenant Hildebrand's memory betrayed him. This however does not detract from what is otherwise a fine set of memoirs. I highly recommend the book for those who are interested in the Mediterranean Theater or for someone looking for a quick read on something other than the Peninsular War of Waterloo.

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series; March 2017

³ Lieutenant Hildebrand was not the only officer to join Wellington's Army without permission. The most famous was Ensign Rees Howell Gronow, of the 1st Foot Guards, who wrote about his adventures in *Reminiscences of Captain Gronow*.