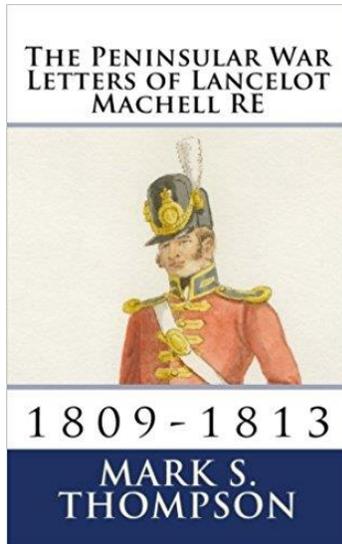


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Machell, Lancelot. *The Peninsular War Letters of Lancelot Machell RE*. Mark S. Thompson (ed.). Published by Mark S. Thompson, 2017. 132 pages. Paperback. ISBN# 9781517647308. \$12



Considering the pivotal role that the Royal Engineers played in the Peninsular War, there are relatively few memoirs, diaries, and letters published in the past 200 years by them. Mark Thompson, who has written extensively on the Royal Engineers in the Peninsular War, including the definitive book on them: [Wellington's Engineers: Military Engineering in the Peninsular War 1808 - 1814](#). He also published [The Peninsular War Diary of Edmund Mulcaster RE, 1808 - 1810](#). His latest book is also about the Royal Engineers, but contains the letters of an officer who was in the Royal Corps of Sappers and Miners. This is the only primary source I know of written by an officer who was in that Corps during the Napoleonic Wars.

Lancelot Machell was born in 1792 and was a cadet at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich when the first letter was written. He was commissioned on 21 July 1810 and by 1811 was assigned to Plymouth Dock. While there he was under the command of Captain Charles Pasley, an innovative Royal Engineer, who served as his mentor. In October 1812 he was ordered to the Peninsula. He was killed in action on 25 July 1813 at the siege of San Sebastian. During these years he wrote many letters home describing his daily life, both at school, in garrison, and on campaign.

There are several things that makes this book stand out:

- The author goes into detail on his studies at the Royal Military Academy in preparation of becoming a Royal Engineer.
- By chance, Lieutenant Machell was assigned to work for Captain Pasley, who was drawing up plans for the reorganization and training of the Military Artificers, which became the Royal Corps of Miners and Sappers in 1811.
- Lieutenant Machell spent the next 18 months training the two companies that would go out to the Peninsula in 1812. Because his father had been a Royal Engineer, many of his letters have information about the training of the new Corps.

- When the two companies were sent to the Peninsula in the autumn of 1812, Lieutenant Machell was one of the officers assigned to them. Although much of what he writes about is life on campaign, they are also filled with tidbits about how the Corps was initially received by the Royal Engineers who had been in the Peninsula for several years. Surprisingly, they were not very welcomed and met with open disdain.
- Lieutenant Machell's company was assigned to escort the pontoon bridge train in the opening stages of the Vitoria Campaign. His are the only descriptions of moving the train through the mountains I have ever seen. He best summed up the problems they had with "We are now looking out anxiously for a siege in order that we may have a little rest."¹
- The only action Lieutenant Machell saw was during the siege of San Sebastian. He wrote a long letter about the siege in July, but was killed leading an assault the next day.

As a bonus, Mr. Thompson included two letters not by Lieutenant Machell, but ones that mention his brother Richard, a lieutenant in the 30th Foot, who was severely wounded at Badajoz. The first was by Captain Charles Barnard a company commander in the 2nd Battalion 38th Foot. This letter goes into great detail on his company's role in the assault on Badajoz and he talks about how his company saved Richard from being bayoneted. The other letter is from Mr. H. Wray, the paymaster of the 2nd Battalion 30th Foot. It is addressed to Lieutenant Machell and covers the disposition of his brother's money and debts that were handled by him.

The Peninsular War Letters are a quick and enjoyable read. Mr. Thompson does a great job editing them and providing background information on individuals mentioned in the letters. It is a great addition to the primary sources by Royal Engineers. I highly recommend the book, especially for those interested in siege warfare, the Royal Engineers, and the Royal Corps of Sappers and Miners.

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: May 2017

¹ Page 114