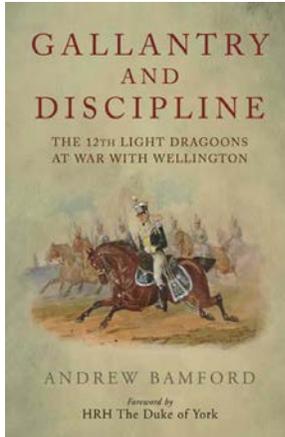


## Napoleon Series Reviews

Bamford, Andrew. *Gallantry and Discipline: the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons at War with Wellington*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2014. 310 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84832-743-6. \$40



I was a bit surprised when I heard that Mr. Bamford was writing a regimental history of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons. It was not well known for its service during the Peninsular War – whether good or bad. It didn't have the reputation of 23<sup>rd</sup> Light Dragoons, which effectively destroyed itself through a poorly executed charge at Talavera in 1809 or the fame of the 16<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons which is mentioned in so many memoirs and is immortalized in Captain William Tomkinson's *The Diary of a Cavalry Officer in the Peninsular War and Waterloo: 1809-1815*. Perhaps it is because until recently only one set of memoirs from someone in the regiment was still in print.<sup>1</sup>

The author admits all of this, but in the introduction of the book explains why he did choose it. Mr. Bamford worked as a volunteer at the Derby Central Museum which hosts the regimental museum of the regiment that was once the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons. In its archives is a large collection of material on the regiment. These include the correspondence of Sir James Steuart who was the colonel of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons. There were also a volume of Colonel Steuart's standing orders for the regiment and other books containing “. . . details of orders received, regimental postings, and details of rank and file service.”<sup>2</sup> In effect the mother lode for information on the regiment!

Many regimental histories only cover the time when the regiment was on campaign, for garrison duty is often considered too boring to write about. Yet what happened in garrison laid the foundation of the success of a regiment in war. It was where the soldiers were trained, bonds were made between them and their officers, and standards and expectations were reinforced. Fortunately Mr. Bamford understands this and *Gallantry and Discipline* covers the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment at home and abroad.

The first half of *Gallantry and Discipline* looks at a wide variety of topics on the internal composition of the regiment. There is a chapter on the officers, their family backgrounds, how they came to be in the regiment, their training, and their strengths and weaknesses. Another chapter does the same for the enlisted soldiers. Where they were from, how they were recruited, their physique (for as light cavalrymen they could not be too tall or weigh too much), and their training. A very important chapter provides details on the horses, not just what kind of horses, but the constant battle to find the right ones, and once they were found, their training. Acquiring proper mounts was

---

<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant William Hay's *Reminiscences 1808 - 1815 Under Wellington*. According to my sources however, *With Wellington's Outposts: The Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur* which is edited by Andrew Bamford and will be published sometime in 2015. John Vandeleur served in the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons.

<sup>2</sup> Page 4

essential and they had to do so in anticipation of future losses. Although the regiment only fielded an average of 350 mounted troopers in the three years it fought in the Peninsular War, the number of horses lost through combat or for other reasons is unimaginable to the modern reader “. . . 614 dead and a further 66 cast as unserviceable, which, when added to the 399 troop horses still on the strength at the war’s end, meant that a total of 1,079 animals had been needed to mount a regiment whose strength in horses at any one time averaged a third of that number.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most interesting chapters was about the regimental colonel. Very little information is available on exactly what they did. In the British Army at the time, the regimental colonel was a senior general who often viewed it as an honorary position that provided him with a nice sinecure. The yearly pay for a regimental colonel of light dragoons was £600!<sup>4</sup> Fortunately for the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons and future historians, Colonel Steuart took his duties quite seriously. His letter book is filled with correspondence detailing the standards he expected in his regiment, from officering it with scions of the best families whenever possible to ensuring only the highest quality horses were bought to where recruiting parties were sent out to fill the ranks. Colonel Steuart took great pride in his regiment and it seems like he was in a constant battle with the Army hierarchy over quality of equipment they received. Yet like a stern patriarch, his letters show that he would take his field commanders and officers to task when they did not live up to his expectations.

The second half of the book covers the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons in the Peninsular War and at Waterloo. The author draws heavily on the correspondence of the Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Ponsonby and Lieutenant Vandeleur, and the memoirs of Lieutenant Hay to bring to life the regiment on campaign. It had not been on active service in ten years when they arrived in Portugal in June 1811. Needless to say it had problems. However by the end of the Peninsular War three years later, they were one of the Wellington’s best light cavalry regiments. As one young officer wrote to his mother in 1814 “We can boast of what no regt. in the army can, except the ones that came out the other day, that we never lost a single man by surprise, not a picquet or patrol has ever been taken, nor a man deserted or even tried by a Genl. Court Martial.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the most fascinating chapters is Chapter X, which covers the Waterloo Campaign. Mr. Bamford goes into great detail on the charge by General Vandeleur’s Brigade, of which the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoon was part of. This charge was critical for it permitted the few survivors of the Union Brigade’s charge that decimated D’Erlon’s Corps to escape overwhelming numbers of French cavalry that surrounded it. The author takes the reader step-by-step through the charge, from the time General Vandeleur ordered it, the confusion among the regiments on where they were supposed to charge, where they actually charged, and the results of the charge. The regiment

---

<sup>3</sup> Page 227

<sup>4</sup> Burnham and McGuigan; *The British Army against Napoleon*, page 144

<sup>5</sup> Page 227

achieved its objective, but at great cost.<sup>6</sup> In addition to describing the charge, Mr. Bamford writes about the aftermath of the battle; how Lieutenant Hay was sent to the rear to look for skulkers, while Lieutenant Vandeleur volunteered to look for Colonel Ponsonby's body, who fell during the charge. Both lieutenants were successful for Colonel Ponsonby was found badly wounded, while Captain Sandys, a troop commander, was found dying in Brussels.

Although the 80% of the second half of the book covers the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons on campaign and its various battles and skirmishes, it also examines such important activities as the care of the horses both in winter quarters and on campaign; how the regiment managed the replacement of mounts once the horses arrived in Portugal; and since horses also became casualties or unfit for service due to illness or exhaustion, what happened to the horses while they were recovering. The 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons had leadership problems when it first arrived in the Peninsula, because it was commanded by a junior major. Many of these problems were solved when Colonel Ponsonby took command, however since he was the senior regimental commander in the brigade, he was often in temporary command of the brigade. Mr. Bamford looks at these problems and how they affected the regiment both in quarters and campaign.

*Gallantry and Discipline* is a superb regimental history and Frontline Books should be praised for publishing it! What Mr. Bamford did for the British Army in [Sickness, Suffering and the Sword: the British Regiment on Campaign, 1808-1815](#), he does again for a single cavalry regiment. By the end of the book the reader will have a very good grasp of how a British cavalry regiment functioned in garrison and on campaign. It is a must read for the serious student of the Napoleonic Era!

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 2015

---

<sup>6</sup> The regiment could only muster 94 rank and file after the charge. It started the day with 310 . . . a staggering 70% casualties in less than an hour.