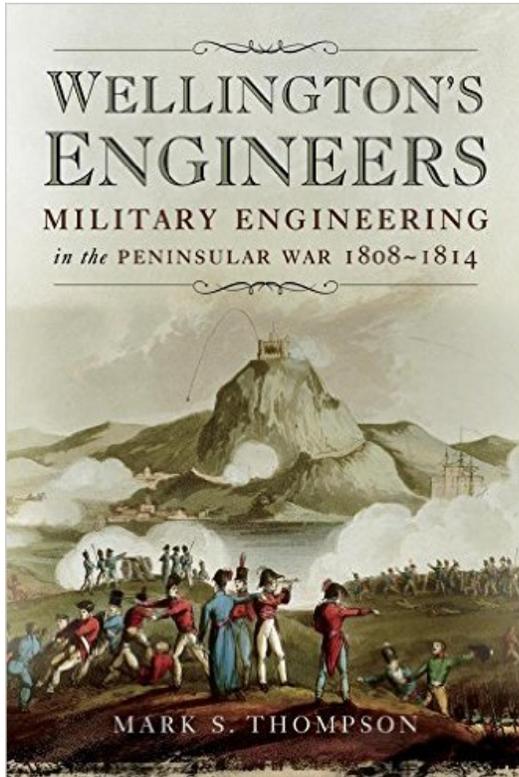


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Thompson, Mark S. *Wellington's Engineers: Military Engineering in the Peninsular War 1808 – 1814*. Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2015. 286 pages. ISBN# 9781783463633. £25/\$50



Mark Thompson ends *Wellington's Engineers* with some thought provoking words:

“When you read a book that says General X advanced to Y, think again. Before General X could make that decision, someone had prepared a map and someone else had probably made a reconnaissance up the road to town Y. When the book says General X threw a bridge across the river, think about the planning to get the bridge there, the surveying of the selected location, the consideration of the weather conditions and the building of the bridge. When General X starts his siege with numerous siege guns, who has done the planning to move hundreds of tons of equipment to the selected location? Behind every great general there is a great backroom team.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course he was talking about the role of military engineers in any army. At the start of British involvement in the Peninsular War, the British Royal Engineers numbered only 172 officers, with no enlisted soldiers. By 1813, they had expanded to 262 officers. By the end of the war in April 1814, 100 of those 262 officers had

served. Many of them were killed or wounded, including the senior engineer with the army, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Fletcher, who was killed at the siege of San Sebastian in 1813.

*Wellington's Engineers* tells the story of the Peninsular War as seen through the contributions of the Royal Engineers. The book is a survey of their achievements and failures, from conducting route surveys to building and destroying bridges to creating fortifications to improving roads and waterways, and of course besieging some of the great fortresses in Spain. Each chapter of *Wellington's Engineers* focuses on one year of the war. . . what the Royal Engineers did during those months and how it impacted the army. Because the Royal Engineers were involved in almost every aspect of the war, the author provides some detail to illustrate the breadth and scope of their efforts, but does not bog the narrative down with the nuts and bolts of the individual operations. You will find information why a bridge or gun emplacement was built, but only some detail on how they were built.

Siege work was one of the tasks that the Royal Engineers are best remembered for. So Mr. Thompson also examines the numerous sieges the British Army conducted. He analyses each one, explaining what was done right and what was done wrong. He apportions blame for failures appropriately, for at times it was the Royal Engineers fault, while at other times the cause can be laid with the artillery, the assaulting

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<sup>1</sup> Page 205

troops, and even Wellington! He also looks at the role of the senior engineer. During the six years of the Peninsular War five officers held the office of Commanding Royal Engineers (CRE). The CRE was the senior engineer in the army and reported directly to Wellington. Unlike the Commanding Royal Artillery (CRA) which was a general officer, the CRE was never more than a lieutenant colonel while at times he was only a captain. Mr. Thompson examines the relationship between the CRE and Wellington, plus between the CRE and his subordinates. He also looks at their strengths and weaknesses and how it impacted their ability to advise Wellington in engineering matters.

I fully admit that I am a primary source geek. When I pick up a new book, I want to see what sources the author used. I am particularly pleased when I see the author has drawn on sources I have not heard of before. Mr. Thompson had access to the archives in the National Army Museum, the Royal Engineer Museum, and the British Library. What he found there was pure gold. He brings to life the daily activities of the engineers with their own words drawing on letters, diaries, and notebooks that have gathering dust for many decades. One impressive find was *The Military Autobiography of Major-General John T. Jones*. It is possibly the rarest of all military memoirs of the era. It was privately published in 1853 and only 12 copies were printed!<sup>2</sup>

Although the chapters do not go into great detail on any specific operation, the author does expand some of the topics in the appendices. There you can find lists of CREs and all Royal Engineers who served in the Peninsula with the date of their service in country, information on military reconnaissance and surveying, military bridging, and military education. *Wellington's Engineers* also contains numerous contemporary illustrations of the Royal Engineers who were mentioned so prominently in the text, plus various bridges that were constructed and even the telegraph system. There are also photographs of the various fortresses they repaired or besieged. One thing it is lacking is maps. Having a plan of the siege that was being discussed would have been useful.

The Royal Engineers were one of the smallest units assigned to British Army in the Peninsula. Yet their impact on the success of that army was indirectly proportional to their size. Wellington may have still have won without them, but it would at a far greater price in the blood of his men. Mr. Thompson does a superb job in telling their story and it will leave the reader with a far greater appreciation for their efforts than they had before. Perhaps when the reader picks up other books on Napoleonic campaigns, perhaps he will think of the contributions made by that army's engineers, regardless of their nationality, that led to their general's success.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: August 2015

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<sup>2</sup> John Jones was one of the senior engineers in the Peninsula and served there for forty months. He is best known for writing the three volume *Journal of the Sieges Carried on by the Army under the Duke of Wellington in Spain between the Years 1811 to 1814*.