



BCMh AUTUMN CONFERENCE

“Peninsular Preliminaries”

15 November 2008

Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

The Autumn Conference was held in the Faraday Hall at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. We are very grateful to Sean McKnight, Director of Studies RMA Sandhurst for sponsoring the event which allowed the BCMh to return to its original home after many years' absence. A record audience of over 80 attended and many felt that there was a particular 'buzz' to the day.

The conference is the first of a series which the Commission is holding to commemorate the Peninsula War and as part of the preparations for the bi-centenary of the Battle of Waterloo in 2015. This Conference programme was designed to study some background aspects of these events. The speakers and their subjects were:

Professor Richard Holmes – *“In the Footsteps of Wellington”*

Dr Paddy Griffith – *“The French Army from Dumouriez to Bonaparte”*

Mr Mark Thompson - *"The Royal Engineers on the Eve of the Peninsula War: The Rise of the Scientific Soldier"*

Major Gordon Corrigan – *“Commissions & Promotion in George III's Army”*

During the breaks for lunch and tea there were opportunities to visit the RMA Sandhurst Central Library and to see examples of the Haig Relief Maps.



In the Footsteps of Wellington

Richard Holmes

Report by Andy Grainger

Richard began by saying that he did not think that Wellington was necessarily the greatest general in British history but, having written biographies¹ both of the Iron Duke and John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough he did feel that both would surely be in the top ten. He also felt that both would be ahead of Haig and Montgomery. Why? Largely because of time in command.

Both were generals for a long time, through good times and bad. Both had had to conduct alliance warfare not only as military commanders but in the political and diplomatic spheres as well.

He also explained that he was happier writing about battles once he had been to the places where they had been fought. This was not simply an attempt to gain an empathy with those who had participated in the events but one also obtained a degree of intellectual satisfaction and, indeed, confidence in being able both to place and to understand manoeuvres and decisions from a reading of the ground.

He also felt that a study of the formative years was essential to the understanding of any biographical subject – or indeed the lives of any of us.

Born in 1769, Arthur Wesley was the third son of a minor family in Ireland. His father, the Earl of Mornington, was Professor of Music at Trinity College Dublin and Arthur became a proficient violinist. The family appeared to be well off with houses in both town and country, some political influence in the small world of Georgian Dublin but, as with many similar families, relatively little in the way of hard cash to underpin the façade of wealth and prosperity.

Arthur attended the diocesan school in Trim. Richard felt that Wesley was shaped by his experience as a Protestant fish in a very large Roman Catholic pond. Both Wesley and some of his contemporaries felt something of a sense of impending social upheaval (like Grattan's '*mist creeping in at the heels of the countryman...*'²) and this concern for social order certainly marked Arthur for the rest of his life.

Arthur's parents put all their efforts behind his elder brother Richard. He would inherit whatever assets and reputation that the family possessed. Arthur's parents, particularly his mother, became concerned at what they might do with Arthur. "*He is food for powder and*

¹ *Marlborough: England's Fragile Genius*, Harper Collins pp564 2008; *Wellington, The Iron Duke*, Harper Collins pp336 2002.

² From Grattan's '*Letter to the Citizens of Dublin*' published in May 1797; he was applauding the spread of what he called the democratic principle in Europe and opposed the policy of repression by the British Government, particularly in Ireland since he felt it would only store up trouble for the future. The full text can be found at pp40-64 of *The Miscellaneous Works of Henry Grattan* published by Longman etc and A R Milliken, Dublin in 1822 available as a Google e-book.



nothing more” said his mother, and Richard took the opportunity to speculate briefly about the impact of those words on her younger son or indeed any of us in that position.

As it turned out, Richard Wesley acquired his earldom more swiftly than had been expected following his father’s untimely death though this also revealed the flimsy nature of the family’s financial foundations. Whilst Richard went to the Irish House of Lords, Arthur went off to Angers where he learned to ride and to speak French. He also acquired a liking for the finer things in life that Ancien Regime France was particularly well-suited to provide for that small proportion of society in a position to benefit from them.

Back in Ireland Arthur purchased an ensigncy and eventually a captaincy. He became MP for Trim and was appointed ADC to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. His brother Richard, in contrast, was much better placed for networking and positioning himself in the game of finding remunerative posts for family and relatives. Arthur came to realise that everything depended on Richard. Like Marlborough one hundred years before, young Wesley liked neither poverty nor the concomitant dependence on others. Much later in life one senses a note of, at the very least, quiet satisfaction in the postscript appended to a letter to his elder brother *“Forgot to tell you; was made Duke last week.”*

But his fortunes in 1793 Ireland were not progressing. He had fallen in love with Kitty Pakenham but his suit was rejected – he was, after all, a mere major without prospects. Was this rejection the event that finally caused him to turn away from his fruitless search for sinecures in the Civil Service and take his military profession more seriously?

He had purchased the colonelcy of the 33rd Foot in 1793 and took the Regiment to Flanders in 1794. He found, perhaps to his surprise, that his battalion manoeuvred, drilled and fired volleys in some sort of approximation to its practice on the parade ground. The campaign may not have been a success but his battalion seems to have performed with credit. In later life Wellington referred to the type of incident experienced by many a regimental soldier across time – a visit from his battalion in the dreary winter fields of the southern Netherlands to Div HQ in a chateau where he could find no-one either able or interested in dealing with his enquiries.

Returning from the campaign he resumed his search for civil service sinecures albeit from a stronger position. Having acquired a lieutenant colonelcy he would eventually receive promotion to general by seniority even if he was unemployed and so remained on half-pay. When it was clear that nothing suitable would turn up, Arthur followed his regiment to India. There he now benefited from some strokes of luck. Brother Richard (who had now changed the spelling of the family name to Wellesley) was appointed Governor-General and Arthur obtained command of a brigade after the incumbent commander was killed in a duel. In the campaign against Tippoo Sultan he found that his battalions would march and manoeuvre together given reasonable ground and a satisfactory level of training. But he also found that disaster attended night marches or poorly reconnoitred attacks. He retained an aversion to both for the rest of his life.

His brigade was in reserve when the British stormed Seringapatam. He gained a good share of prize money and effectively became governor of Mysore. At this time we can clearly see an officer driven by the highest standards of duty. Richard argued that duty was fundamental



to Arthur's world view, and summed it up as *“doing something without fear of punishment or hope of reward.”*

In 1802 he was given command of the campaign against the Mahrattas as a major general. The French always found it profitable to encourage any Indian nation or faction against the British and they had expended considerable effort in arming and training the Mahrattas, particularly in infantry and artillery to augment their swirling clouds of light horsemen.

Wellesley (as he now was) planned the logistics of the future campaign in person. He felt that logistics were the essential underpinning to the conduct of any successful campaign just as an early victory was vital in order to win a moral ascendancy. The opportunity arose at Assaye which he always regarded as one of his most difficult battles. The Mahrattas were drawn up behind a gun line on the other side of an uncrossable river. Observing two villages further downstream Wellesley overrode the advice of his guides, deduced that there must be a means of communication between them and led his army across the ford which was in fact there.

The Mahrattas did manage to turn front to flank but most of their artillery was difficult to move. It was a hard-fought engagement and although Wellesley had two horses shot from under him the flank march proved decisive. All the Mahratta guns were taken and blown up – remnants litter the field and Richard remarked that some of those fragments proffered to visitors by small boys might even be genuine.

Assaye got him a knighthood and return to England after a ten year absence. Renewing his suit to Kitty by letter he was, this time, accepted only to find that when he met her again she had aged less well than he and possessed not only an unfortunate dress sense but also an inability to deal with tradesmen. Although Kitty bore him two sons, the marriage was never really a success.

Wellesley was given command of an expedition to Portugal in 1808. He won a defensive battle at Vimiero where he used the ground well to conceal his main body behind a crest to confuse the French skirmishers and artillery. This simply reflected a tactical preference on his part rather than any official army-wide doctrine.

He thereafter managed to extricate himself from blame for the Convention of Cintra signed by himself and his two superiors and so, unlike them, was re-employed. Returning to Portugal following Moore's death and evacuation from Corunna he led his army deep into Spain towards Madrid when he was brought to battle by converging French armies at Talavera. The battle – or perhaps his despatch - got him a peerage but he was obliged to abandon the field and his wounded. It was all very well to gain an ascendancy by defeating one of the French armies in Spain but it was also extremely risky to be around when the others marched to reinforce it. He never forgot that his army was an expeditionary force and so could not afford to be defeated.

Wellesley's energy and decisiveness was that of a man whose personality was outwardly cool, if not actually cold. His staff were in the habit of referring to him as 'The Peer' even before notification of the title came through. But behind the façade there is no doubt that losses began to have an increasing effect upon him whether the sight of the mangled bodies in the



breach at Badajoz or individuals like Somers Cocks at Burgos – when he would speak to no-one – or de Lancey dying in his bed at Mont St Jean.

Salamanca was perhaps his finest battle. Not only was it an attacking battle in which Wellington spotted and acted upon his opportunity in a moment - "*Marmont est perdu*" - but the battlefield itself is virtually unchanged so that one can identify the points from which the decisions were made and where the respective formations were located.

Nevertheless, he was not a flawless commander. He botched the siege of Burgos, completely underestimating the time and effort needed to take it. When he commanded of the Allied Army in Belgium in 1815 he was certainly surprised and outmanoeuvred by Napoleon's initial assault, and was not wholly frank in subsequently acknowledging the fact.

He became Prime Minister in 1828 and Richard felt that even if he had never won a battle his determination to push forward Catholic Emancipation would represent a truly great achievement. His own sense of isolation as a Protestant in Ireland forty years before must surely have played a part in shaping his views on this subject in the 1820's.

Wellington died in 1852, having seen great changes in his life – from rural Ireland to first industrial superpower. He became the grandfather of the nation, loaded with titles and honours and paying more attention to other people's children than he had his own. At his first dinner in Queen Victoria's reign his place card read 'Chancellor of Oxford University,' but soon the young queen came to regard him as something of a father figure.

But he is best known as a soldier and he was popular with his men. He was never comfortable with their affection, however, and deprecated their habit of cheering his appearance on the field on the grounds that if they cheered on one occasion they might boo on another. And as he had feared social upheaval back in 1790's Ireland so the Great Man must have felt entirely vindicated in his distrust of the common man when the mob broke his windows on Waterloo Day.

Questions

Richard's talk prompted discussion – or as he emphasised – speculation as to the fate of the Peninsular War if Moore had commanded rather than Wellington. Richard stressed that we could not measure Moore's performance based on his track record to Corunna. He felt that Moore was a stronger organiser and trainer of troops than he was a commander and he certainly did not enjoy the political support that Wellington had. But we will never know and we cannot tell.

For what it is worth Wellington had always said "*We could never have done the business without Moore*" by which he meant as the trainer of the army.



The French Army from Dumouriez to Bonaparte

Paddy Griffith

Report by Andy Grainger

Paddy opened his talk by agreeing that Salamanca is perhaps the most rewarding Peninsular War battlefield to visit. Indeed, a visit in his schooldays had inspired his interest in the campaign.

He also agreed that looking at the formative years of the commanders was critical to understanding their careers.

Dumouriez

Paddy presented a fuzzy picture of General Dumouriez (1739-1823) a metaphor, he explained, for our fuzzy knowledge of him. His main claim to fame was as the victor of the Battle of Valmy in 1792 when the hosts of the Revolution had barred the Austro-Prussian army from Paris. Shortly afterwards he had emigrated to Britain at the age of 53.

The career of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), on the other hand, had been shorter but much more dramatic. He had been head of state by the age of 30 but yet predeceased Dumouriez.

Dumouriez had been born at Cambrai, the son of a logistics officer. During the Seven Years War he had served on the staff of the Duke de Broglie, a centre for discussion regarding military affairs. Dumouriez had not remained behind a desk, however; Broglie being keen to get staff officers into the field. Dumouriez acquired a good deal of varied experience and was wounded several times.

Following the war he had become involved in the diplomatic and political arenas including missions in, until 1768, independent Corsica and in Ireland. At one point he became sufficiently unpopular to spend some time in the Bastille but managed to extricate himself. He certainly acquired a good deal of experience in the political arena.

In 1778 he was involved in the Army Manoeuvres at the Camp of Vaussieux in Normandy when the proponents of various tactical theories including combinations of line and column had tried them out on the ground with real soldiers. The results, however, were not conclusive.

French Revolution

By the time of the Revolution Dumouriez was seen as France's second best General. The first was held to be Lafayette but unfortunately he emigrated to the USA very quickly. Apart from being personally ambitious Dumouriez was also seen as more reliable politically since he had been a member of one of the Jacobin clubs. Following a very brief spell as Foreign Minister, he was appointed Minister of War in 1792 and played a significant role in the decision to declare war on Austria and, indeed, a number of other countries. He certainly believed in exporting the revolution to neighbouring countries but it was also true that the only way that France could fight a war was to get other countries to pay for it as she was completely broke.



Following the declaration of war a large Austro-Prussian Army invaded France in September 1792 and Dumouriez managed to get command of the Armée du Nord. This Army was very large but also very inexperienced. Nevertheless he persuaded it to stand in line at Valmy and the Austro-Prussian force withdrew. Indeed, he invaded the Austrian Netherlands, defeated the Austrians at Jemappes near Mons and occupied the whole country. Although this went some way to solving the problem of feeding the Armée du Nord its pay remained largely in arrears and during the winter its soldiers deserted in droves. The Austrians regrouped and defeated his Army at Neerwinden in March 1793.

Dumouriez had sought to remain on the winning side in politics by apparently adopting a radical method of war – using a citizen army to export revolution to another country. In fact, his style of warfare was relatively conservative and indeed by permitting his undisciplined troops to live by plunder he distinctly failed to win the ideological battle in the Austrian Netherlands. His unsuccessful gamble led to difficulties with the politicians at home – who accused him of being insufficiently radical whilst he accused them of failing to keep his army supplied. Following the defeat at Neerwinden he did, in fact, seek to persuade the army to march on Paris but it declined. He therefore defected to General Mack, surviving a volley fired at his coach by the regiment commanded by Col Davout.

Dumouriez eventually settled in England and advised both the British and the Spanish guerrillas in 1808. He died and was buried in nearby Henley on Thames.

Bonaparte

Like Dumouriez, Bonaparte was a highly political officer. Much younger than Dumouriez he was commissioned, famously into the artillery, in 1785. His first active military involvement appears to have been during the suppression of a bread riot in 1789. He only rose to prominence, however, as a battalion commander during the siege of Toulon in 1793. He then remained in the Mediterranean sector and so was not involved in the major campaigns in the Austrian Netherlands of 1793-5. Rather than argue with the Government about supplies, however, he preferred to take matters into his own hands by raising his own taxes and requiring the local *departments* to support his Army.

By 1796 the country was, as ever, broke and in a display of patriotic revolutionary fervour, gold braid and bonus cheques for officers had been abolished. But on the other hand the revolutionary armies were more experienced and under the able direction of Carnot the home front was producing a more respectable stream of uniforms and weapons than it had done three years earlier. When, therefore, Bonaparte invaded Northern Italy for the same sort of reasons as Dumouriez had invaded the Austrian Netherlands he was not only able to feed them from the rich plains of Piedmont but also to pay them via church plate and artworks in an unprecedented display of looting. He created a cult of personality and the Army became loyal to him personally rather than to whichever government was in post in Paris.

His popularity even survived his disastrous Egyptian campaign of 1798 in which his supporting fleet was destroyed by Nelson at Aboukir Bay and his abandonment of the entire Army a year later. The government was weak politically as the campaigns in Europe did not seem to be going anywhere and one senses that, from the point of view of Paris, the disaster in Egypt at least had the benefit of being a long way away. By 1799 he was appointed First Consul in the Coup Brumaire and by 1804 he was Emperor.



Like Dumouriez, Bonaparte was highly political but he also had far more energy and arrogance as well as a taste for taking independent action. Again like Dumouriez, he adopted classical principles of warfare but at a faster speed and in greater numbers. He was an educated soldier and took care to build up a capable staff. By 1799 he had the luxury of more experienced troops including even some cavalry.

The Army got even better during the 1800 campaigns but the intensive training at the Camp de Boulogne in 1804 transformed it. Corps had been used before 1804 but Boulogne offered the Army the luxury of training for an extended period so that Bonaparte took the opportunity of creating permanent formations with their own commanders and staffs. Whilst the Army of England never reached its destination, therefore, its training paid off handsomely against Austria in 1805, Prussia in 1806 and Russia in 1807.

Apart from drill, however, the Camp had given commanders time to formulate and discuss ideas about command and tactics. Jomini wrote his *Traité de grande tactique* whilst serving on Marshal Ney's staff at the time and even the Marshal himself wrote a manual on the subject.

The French Army in the Peninsular

Why did the French Army in the Peninsular not perform as well as its colleagues in central Europe. There were a number of reasons:

The theatre was a sideshow for Napoleon. Consequently the units tended to be made up of less-experienced troops. They also tended to be of very mixed quality – not only French but Germans, Poles, Italians and even some Spanish found themselves on the Order of Battle. Napoleon's system was based on the Army living off the 'host' country. This was not possible in Spain because it was very poor agriculturally and there was no central government against which to direct a rapid campaign. Consequently, far from co-operating with each other the Corps had to be separated for logistic reasons and in the absence of strong leadership the Marshals squabbled.

The Grande Armée was effectively destroyed by the Russian campaign although its quality had already declined as a result of the vast numbers of soldiers recruited across Europe for the campaign. After the war there was a reaction against what critics referred to as '*corrupt gigantisme*' in favour of a small professional army – which is what most armies want to be in peacetime.

In Summary

- Dumouriez had started a policy of aggressive wars and Bonaparte had perpetuated it leading to ultimate disaster for both France and Europe.
- Bonaparte had fought far more battles than Dumouriez – at least twenty as opposed to three but he had lost the important ones.
- As for democratic credentials and personal morality, Paddy felt that Dumouriez scored quite well whilst Napoleon undoubtedly achieved the ultimate *Nul Points* score!



Questions

Was it not the case that Moreau had introduced the Corps system rather than Bonaparte?

Moreau had used Corps but only on a temporary basis in the same way that a number of other commanders were doing. Napoleon's contribution was to make them permanent formations.

Why was the Cavalry of the Revolutionary Wars so poor?

It was poor in the same way that many other technical arms suffered. Many of the officers fled – as they did in the Navy. They therefore required many years to rebuild and in the case of the Navy, never really succeeded. Lack of forage was also a factor since in a country suffering from a famine in 1789 it was difficult to find feed for cavalry horses. Further, the shortage of money in the late 1780's had caused the government to close down a number of remount depots – and hence the supply of horses – for a period of years.

On the other hand the Artillery was embraced by the Left (and the Mob) at the Revolution, on the basis that it had previously been the secret of the King's power - so now it should become the secret of the People's power. But by contrast they could not see any reason for maintaining either a Fleet or a force of Cavalry. They were seen as unnecessary & useless trappings of royal power - 'vanity arms', if you want - so they were torn apart and not rebuilt for a decade. When the revolutionaries in Toulon hung a naval officer from a lamp post, they did not see an irreplaceable technician hanging there, but only a hated aristocrat!

The case of Fortifications is perhaps similar to the Artillery. The Bastilles had been symbols of royal power, so the People had to take them over. Carnot & his brother were both Engineers, too.

Would Hoche have been a rival to Bonaparte?

Hoche died from TB in 1797. Apart from Generals like Hoche and Moreau there were a great many other capable French commanders. Napoleon did, at least in his earlier career, draw these talented officers and made use of them as a team. Only a small minority appeared to be interested in challenging Napoleon politically.

Was it the case that a lot of French commanders had to put up with the unhelpful instructions of the political commissars?

The *representatives en mission* certainly have this reputation. It is not entirely well-founded. 53 Generals were guillotined which sounds a lot but is far fewer than the number killed in action. The most noteworthy example is perhaps that of General de Flers who won a convincing defensive victory at Perpignan in April 1793 but was then despatched to the guillotine for not counterattacking the greatly larger Spanish Army.

The Art of War of Revolutionary France, 1789 - 1802 (Greenhill Books, London 1998)

A History of the Peninsular War, Vol.IX, Modern Studies of the war in Spain and Portugal, 1808 - 1814 (Essays that he edited, Greenhill, London 1999)

French Napoleonic Infantry Tactics 1792-1815 (Osprey 'Elite' #159, Oxford 2007).



The Royal Engineers on the Eve of the Peninsula War: The Rise of the Scientific Soldier³

Mark Thompson

Mark introduced his talk by explaining that the provision of a professional military education for officers was in its infancy in the 18th century. What impact did schools and the educated individuals they produced have on the conduct of operations?

The First School

In 1741 the Board of Ordnance set up the first school of its kind for the training of entrants to the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers at Woolwich. Engineer officers were trained at the Academy until it was closed on the eve of the Second World War in 1939.

Until 1764 there was no age limit and a number of the pupils were children. An Inspector was appointed to maintain standards in 1772 but it was not until 1774 that an entrance exam was instituted. Previously, there were no academic requirements. As might be expected, the syllabus was largely technical in nature concerning the study of fortifications, mathematics, geometry, guns and so on. However, it was heavily theoretical; there was no training in how actually to deploy a siege battery, for example.

Most cadets came from military and professional families and there were 40 in place in 1744 and 200 in 1807.

Nevertheless, there were not enough trained officers to meet demand. Between 1794 and 1811 commissioning exams were suspended to get more candidates through.

This was the state of play for the technical arms. What about the Infantry and Cavalry?

At this time these training establishments, even that of the Board of Ordnance, possessed a relatively poor reputation. Most of the textbooks and tutors were foreign since the British did not have a tradition of producing academic material on land warfare. The cadets were not subject to military discipline, there was a good deal of bullying and on occasions there was so much trouble that the Militia had to be summoned to restore order.

On the other hand, basic standards were maintained and commissions were only awarded when the Inspectors were satisfied as to a man's competence.

³ For those seeking further information about the Royal Engineers there is some useful material on their website. Want to know where the expressions 'talking shop' and 'snooker' came from – look here http://www.remuseum.org.uk/corps-history/rem_corps_part3.htm



Training in the Army

The new drillbooks issued by Dundas in the later 1790's also improved the Army as did the experiments at Shorncliffe camp and Le Marchant's embryonic Royal Military College at Marlow.

But there was an atmosphere of frustration amongst younger officers who, on the one hand, were aware of changes in tactical methods and training but on the other irritated by senior officers who remained in post to draw their pay so blocking their opportunities.

It should be noted that these training improvements were relatively limited in scope. They extended only to Commissioned Officers and not to NCOs or the rank and file.

The Roles of RE Officers

The result was that whilst there were trained engineer officers there were few trained RE soldiers until the formation of the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners in 1812. RE officers had to obtain skilled tradesmen such as carpenters, blacksmiths and metalworkers from soldiers in the line regiments who had practised such trades. There was never any shortage of volunteers since they were paid trade rates whilst carrying out such work and avoided fatigues such as digging trenches.

The RE officers therefore found themselves to be rather isolated individuals. As specialists they had a great deal of autonomy and tended to report directly to Wellington or the GOC they were serving. There were only a few dozen working worldwide – 79 in 1797 rising to 229 in 1815. Half of these were serving in the UK at any one time and a maximum of 43 served in the Peninsular at any one time.

They tended to attract epithets from their line colleagues such as 'earnest', 'grave' or 'pompous'. One upshot of this was the creation by the officers in the Peninsular of a correspondence society known by the not exactly catchy title of the Society for the Procuring of Useful Information. Many eminent RE officers contributed to this where they shared information on topics such as bridge-building or cartography.

In April 1812 a School of Military Engineering was formed. There was a view that this was formed in response to Wellington's complaints about the lack of Sappers but in fact it had been in planning for some time. For example, in 1811 Captain Charles Pasley who had seen service at Copenhagen, Corunna and Walcheren developed a field engineer's training course for the company of Royal Military Artificers that he commanded at Plymouth.

Measures like this ultimately led to the creation of the Corps of Royal Sappers & Miners and the School of Military Engineering.

After 1812 all engineer officers attended the School of Military Engineering for three to six months.



How Good were they?

A view has grown up that they were not very good; in particular that they could not conduct a siege properly. Indeed, the British conduct of sieges was a problem – though they were different problems from those attended by the French.

There was always a time-pressure in any British siege since a French relief army was always liable to assemble. The (much fewer) French sieges did not have this threat. The siege guns available to the British were not of great quality and not only was there limited ammunition but there were always great difficulties in finding transport to get it and the guns into position.

The RE officers always found they were under pressure. At San Sebastian the engineers were asked how long it would take to reduce the place and replied '35 days'. This time was not enough before a French relief army was due but they were told by Wellington to go ahead anyway. Mark explained that the time pressures and equipment shortages at Burgos in the autumn of 1812 were so severe that it was hardly worth their turning up at the place. He felt that Wellington should bear more of the responsibility for some of the problems that attended many of his sieges.

97 RE officers served in the Iberian Peninsula of whom 24 were killed in action. Often they had to expose themselves during sieges showing the inexperienced troops their duties and they had to personally lead troops to the breaches as they were the only people to know the ground sufficiently well.

And there were very few engineer officers to go round. RE officers were posted in Cadiz, Gibraltar and any other location with a fortress. They were responsible for road-building and maintenance, bridges, flood defences and many other aspects.

Diaries of RE officers show that they had a key responsibility for topographical reconnaissance, cartography and all aspects of communications including, in 1811-12, a project for improving the navigability of the River Douro upstream from Oporto.

RE officers were also used as Liaison Officers with Spanish Army headquarters and civil government agencies where their language skills proved valuable. An RE officer drafted the document demanding the surrender of San Sebastian in 1813. The professional education of RE officers equipped them to deal with all areas of staff work and not just engineering.

In conclusion, the professionally qualified RE officers typically carried out a variety of technical and staff officer roles. This may also have concealed the lack of a trained staff officers in the British Army at this time.

Other related organisations

The Royal Staff Corps

Contrary to its name, the Royal Staff Corps was actually a body that was primarily responsible for engineering, particularly bridges but it came under the Quartermaster-General's department rather than the Board of Ordnance. It was they who were responsible



for constructing the suspension bridge to cross the gap over the blown Roman bridge over the Tagus at Alcántara⁴.



Recent investigation has shown that the Royal Engineers were more active in river crossing activities than the Royal Staff Corps.

Corps of Royal Military Artificers

The Royal Engineers was comprised entirely of officers. The Corps of Military Artificers was a separate body formed in 1787 also controlled by the Board of Ordnance and commanded loosely by the Royal Engineers. But they were simply fixed companies of fortress troops based mostly in the UK at ports such as Plymouth although Gibraltar also had a company. Only in 1811 were companies formed with a mobile role but their skills lay mainly in the construction and maintenance of static fortifications rather than field engineering so that they played only a minor role in Wellington's operations.

Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners

The Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners was formed in 1812 to replace the Royal Military Artificers. Like the Corps of Military Artificers it was controlled by the Board of Ordnance and commanded by the Royal Engineers. It took personnel from the mobile companies of the Corps of Military Artificers and retrained them as field sappers and miners to replace the system of reliance on infantry of the line for field engineering duties.

The Royal Navy

The Royal Navy was a technical service and assisted with support for inland waterways, signalling and sometimes guns and their personnel.

⁴ Picture from and further information at http://www.napoleon-series.org/military/virtual/c_alcantara.html



Commissions & Promotion in George III's Army

Major Gordon Corrigan

Report by Andy Grainger

Gordon began by explaining that there were a great many changes in the Commissions system – and indeed the Army – during George III's long reign from 1760-1820. He was going to concentrate on the Peninsular War period from 1808-1814.

Social Background

There was of course an image that the Army during this period was officered by a mixture of inbred aristocrats and mewling children who were completely unfitted and incompetent for their posts.

He explained that:

- a) apart from the Guards and some socially élite cavalry regiments very few aristocrats served in the Army,
- b) Those who served in the Army as Peers had been elevated by virtue of military service. By 1815 most Peers in the Army were peers of the first creation.

Officers were usually sons of doctors, lawyers, clergy and small landowners. Relatively few had a public school education, this being a Victorian phenomenon. A survey in 1818 found that more officers were the sons of army officers than of any other profession. Many were sons of clergymen. 23% were Scottish, possibly because education was better in Scotland whilst opportunities may have been fewer. Then, as now, there was a disproportionately high number of Roman Catholics. While Catholics had been allowed to join the army as Other Ranks since the 1740's it was, until 1829, illegal to award a commission to a Catholic. The army, however, needed men who could do the business and did commission Catholics—An Act of Indemnity was routinely passed by Parliament every four or five years to resolve the legal contradiction.

A tradition began of The Roman Catholic gentry and Roman Catholic schools such as Ampleforth, Downside, Douai and others producing future officers. Even today 20% of officers are Roman Catholics against a proportion of 11% in the population at large.

How did one apply for a Commission?

At this time applicants wrote directly to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. They had to satisfy two criteria:

- To be certified as a gentleman by perhaps a local landowner or the Lord Lieutenant
- To be literate in English



Pay

Rank	Annual Pay (£)Cost	RPI Cost	Gold 2008	2008 Salary
2 Lt	67	4010	5353	23475
Lt	118	7081	9454	28216
Captain	172	10297	13748	36160
Major	257	15411	20561	45549
Lt Col	411	24605	32850	63927

It was difficult sensibly to compare salaries in 1808 and today but Gordon noted that the pay differentials between officers then and now was about the same. But the differential between officers and soldiers had reduced substantially:

In 1808 a Lt Col earned 22.5 times more than a Private,
In 2008 a Lt Col earns 4 times more than a Private.

Why Purchase?

The Purchase System began as a result of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. All parts of Government and society were concerned that the Army had brought in the Government in both 1660 and 1688. Parliament wanted to try to change a system whereby a monarch packed the Army with favourites. Instead they wanted the officer to have a stake in the system by purchasing his commission as an investment in the same way that a partner buys into a firm. The desire to protect his investment should make an officer think twice about changing his allegiance and so promote stability.

In the late 1790's, following the less than successful campaigns in Flanders and the West Indies, the Duke of York was appointed Commander-in-Chief. He instituted many reforms including the formation of a Light Infantry and Rifles arm and also removed many abuses which had sprung up regarding Commissions. He instituted a minimum age, of 16, and specified minimum periods of service in each rank. He also introduced rules against people paying more than the regulation price.

The cost of commissions was set officially although, as with any investment, there were many deals carried out by individuals for reasons of personal convenience or aggrandisement. This was particularly true in wartime when commissions became very risky investments. This was because a commission reverted to the Crown on the death of the purchaser; it did not form part of his estate for the benefit of his descendants.



Rates of Commission in the Line Infantry

Rank	Approx Purchase Cost	
2 Lt	400	Commissions in the Cavalry cost approximately double those of the Infantry and those in the Guards about three times as much.
Lt	550	
Capt	1500	
Major	2600	
Lt Col	3500	

These were significant sums. How did people afford them? They borrowed money from brokers in the same way that people today borrow money to buy a house. Interest rates were low in peacetime but rose considerably in wartime because, as indicated above, the death of the officer would result in the broker losing his investment.

How did the borrower recover his outlay? After all, he needed his salary to live and he needed to pay back the interest on his loan.

A successful battle, campaign or siege was very useful. Wellington earned £5,000 in official prize money after Seringapatam which was quite enough to clear any debt on the purchase of his commission and leave change. Obviously, both officers and soldiers might acquire valuable property unofficially after a victorious engagement.

All officers sought promotion to Lt Colonel because it represented a secure investment. Officers received half-pay if they were not employed. Above the rank of Lt Col promotion was by seniority, and hence provided he lived long enough once a man got to Lt Col he would eventually become a general. He would only be paid, however, if he was actually employed.-

Strict promotion on merit was not feasible under the purchase system since it opened the door to corruption. Promotion by seniority was open and fair. It was possible for command to be given to an officer who was not the senior merely by promoting those in the way to the next rank but not employing them. For example, Wellesley was given command of the 1809 expedition to the Peninsular even though twenty eight other Major Generals were senior to him. They were all promoted to Lt Gen but only three were ever effectively employed and only one played any part in the war.

There were several other ways of getting a Commission and by 1808 less than half of the commissions in the Army had been obtained by purchase.



Type	Comments
Royal Artillery & Royal Engineers	Purchase was not possible; commissions were awarded following an exam. The problem is that no-one retires because there are no pensions so that senior officers become far too old to take the field. Wellington's senior artilleryman, Dickson, was a mere Captain but given rank as Acting Major. To give him more status he was commissioned a Lt Col in the Portuguese Army and habitually dressed in Portuguese uniform.
Deaths in Service	Since commissions were not heritable property, commanders in the field could promote individuals that they recommended but these always had to be sanctioned by Horse Guards. So whilst a CO could promote whoever he liked, if he did not promote the next senior he would have to make a strong case, which might not be accepted by the Horse Guards. In that case the promotee would revert to his substantive rank, but would at least get the pay for the period he held the higher rank
Forlorn Hope	The commander of a forlorn hope and the sergeants in it were promoted if they survived. An exceedingly risky business but there was never a shortage of volunteers.
Militia	Commissions in the Militia were granted by the Lord Lieutenant and not by purchase. Militia officers could transfer into the Regular Army without purchase and many did such as Kincaid, adjutant 1/95 th Rifles at Waterloo, from Militia in 1810, and at the other end of the scale John French in 1870.
From the Ranks	An increasing number of sergeants were awarded commissions but they tended to remain as ensigns or Lieutenants either because they could not find the money for further promotion, or because they felt out of place in a Gentlemen's Club, or, as Wellington said, because they took to drink...
Carrying Despatches	The officer who was offered the opportunity to carry despatches home was receiving a favour from his commander as he was generally promoted.
Gentlemen Volunteers	These were Gentlemen who served in the ranks but messed with the Officers and could be awarded a commission if a vacancy arose.

The idea of the Purchase System was to give the officer a stake in the system. When he left the Army (which he could at any time) he could sell his commission and, assuming he had paid off his loan, he could invest his lump sum as a pension pot. But, as indicated above, the system was by no means universal, especially in wartime. For example, when new regiments



were raised commissions were often awarded free of purchase because officers were needed. At Waterloo 50% of the officers had not purchased the rank they were in.

Strangely, there seemed to be little resentment by those who could not afford to purchase a promotion of those who could. The system did discriminate against the poor but the whole point was that the monarch's soldiers would be commanded only by those who had a stake in society and could earn a living.

The system also allowed those of high ability to rise quickly. For example, Wellington rose from Ensign to Lt Col in five years. On the other hand, what was to stop an incompetent purchasing his way to a colonelcy in five years? Who would be able to dismiss him if he became a liability in the field?

There were a number of ways. When Lt Col Manningham set up the Experimental Corps of Riflemen (later the 95th Rifles) at Shorncliff in 1800 the officers were seconded from line regiments. Many were individuals of whom their COs wanted to be rid. Manningham introduced runs from the beach to the Mess before breakfast. Within a week the fat and idle had sold out or exchanged into regiments with less emphasis on physical fitness; having run it I can assure you it is a stiff pull. Another way was to get the regimental medical officers (there were 3) to certify the officer as sick, and send him home to recuperate. In August 1813 Maj Gen Skerrett, temporarily commanding the Light Division, was considered to have behaved badly in Spain (despite numerous requests by runners he neglected to reinforce a company holding a bridge against a French division) and was sent to Coventry by the whole army. He got the message and resigned. There were occasional incidents of fragging.

The Purchase System was abolished in 1871. By then an increasing number of commissions were being awarded without purchase. It was also abolished by Royal Warrant as the House of Lords refused to pass the necessary legislation. Abolition had been considered for many years but, as with slavery, raising the funds to award the necessary financial compensation was a powerful disincentive to reform.

Today the same sort of people become Army officers but by a rigorous selection procedure and training rather than simple purchase.

Discussion

The points below were raised in discussion.

It is interesting to consider that when Income Tax was reintroduced in 1842 it was intended to apply to the rich ie to those over the rank of Major with an income over £150. In other words, a Lt Col was regarded as rich.

In 1911, when Parliament voted that MPs should be paid, a salary of £400 was selected as being that of a middle class professional man. Nowadays MPs are paid significantly more than Majors or Lt Cols.