



Edward J Coss *All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier under Wellington , 1808-1814* University of Oklahoma Press 2010. 374pp £35.95

This book, by a BCMH member, is a welcome addition to the many books written on the Peninsular War. Indeed, those who attended the Wellington Congress at Southampton University last year will remember Edward Coss's talk on the subject and the fascinating statistics on rations – it will come as no surprise that the British soldier in Spain had a worse diet than the Imperial Roman Soldier, the common English Civil War Soldier, the 16th century Spanish officer, soldier or sailor, the 14th century Venetian Galley oarsman, or the 16th century Galley slave.

The Chapter headings set out the scope: An Unjust Reputation, the Genesis of the “Scum of the Earth” Myth, Gone for a Soldier: the Realities of Enlistment, Over the Hills and Far Away, Surviving on Campaign, A Stick without a Carrot, Leadership and the Soldierly, Ordeal by Fire, The British Soldier in Combat, Banded Brothers, Combat Motivation and the British Ranker, Into Hell before Daylight: Peninsular War Sieges. The study has been based in particular on a review of a considerable number of personal accounts (notably that of Sergeant Lawrence) as well as the surviving enlistment records of some 14 Line Regiments, four Cavalry Regiments, and the Artillery. The extensive Bibliography shows a broad breadth of reading.

There are some important themes running through the book. The debunking of the ‘scum of the earth’ myth should not be new to those who know anything about Wellington's army. It has not been helped by the first Duke of Wellington's own oft-quoted remarks about the origins of his soldiers. There are interesting statistics about the backgrounds of recruits. It is also useful to have the context or background to the Napoleonic Wars: the end of the little ice age, the regular poor harvests, the effect of the Industrial Revolution on working practices, the embargo on US-UK trade.

The point is well made that an individual's lowly background does not necessarily make him a bad man; quite the contrary, the records tend to show that the majority were decent men. Court-martial records show a low proportion of offences against the person (murder, grievous bodily harm, rape) and there was a general appreciation that the British Soldier was usually (and as opposed to the French) courteous and helpful to civilians (especially women and children).

This is in contrast to the propensity to steal, mainly food and also valuables, especially from those Spaniards who declined to help. And this was, in the main, caused by the inability (indeed failure) of the authorities to supply sufficient food and pay. The Commissaries were the principal recipients of blame; no doubt some were not very good, but the real fault lay in the systemic failure of an unduly complex system and structure coupled with an unwillingness of the Spanish authorities properly to assist.

One point on which I do not wholly agree is the general assertion that the British officers did not understand their soldiers' plight. Although there were no doubt officers who were not fit to be in command of men, it is clear that there were many who did, as is clearly shown by the examples given in the book. This is not a simple topic and is one which deserves a more extensive study than could be provided in this book. What is made clear that officers of all



ranks regularly turned blind eyes to simple thieving of foodstuffs. One yardstick not covered in the book is sanitation and an article in the Winter 2010 JSAHR demonstrates the interest shown in the subject by British Army Officers serving in the American War of Independence. It is one of those mundane but important subjects which can demonstrate whether or not officers are looking after the interests of their men. In a similar vein, the role of the Senior NCO merits a considered study, although the author makes the valid point that SNCOs were lowly paid even by the standards of the day. I believe that a good proportion of them were as good and as able as their successors.

And why was the British Soldier so fearsome an enemy? Despite the horrendous logistic difficulties faced by Wellington and his commanders and staff officers, the following elements stand out: Leadership, Training, and the Camp Kettle. The Kettle? Yes, because one British Army kettle was issued between six men and six men is the smallest number to make a viable squad, the basic building brick for an effective unit. Dr Coss rightly compares the accounts of those who served under Wellington with studies of US Combat troops in the 20th Century. Soldiers fight for their mates (or buddies) and they do not want to let them down. It was as true then as it is now. It was that coupled with good training and good leadership (as the soldiers themselves acknowledged) which made the British Soldier so formidable; the silent wall followed by a devastating volley and charge left a lasting impression on the enemy.

This book emphasizes Wellington's dependence on his infantry; the insufficiency of artillery and the unreliability of the cavalry has echoes of the problems facing commanders a hundred years later. Wellington's sieges are as much a problem now as they were for him; in the absence of an effective siege train, Wellington had to rely on his infantry to do the necessarily bloody work. The aftermath of these bloody assaults has generated much debate. Our author rightly does not go along with those who talk about war crimes. It was a different era when the consequence of a successful assault was well known; Wellington was rightly critical of Napoleon's edict that surrendering Governors would be executed. The difficulty for us today is that we simply do not have accurate information; there was no doubt considerable drunkenness and plundering but was the incidence of murder and rape as much as that often depicted? The author is generous to the British soldier on the basis of the other known facts – there were clearly a small number of psychopaths in the British Army but no more than in other parts of society and, as has already been stated, there was not a significantly great amount of violent crime.

Whether you are a Peninsular War freak or just generally interested in the British Army, this should be a welcome addition to your library.

Stuart Sampson

PS Wearing my lawyer's hat there is one aside which grates: at p. 73 it is stated that the Riot Act of 1715 permitted the use of military force against crowds that refused to disperse. This is inaccurate: the significance of the Act was that, once that Act had been read (properly) and an hour had elapsed, the offence of riot, a misdemeanor and therefore not capital, became a felony and if anyone died during the riot that death became a (felony)-murder and anyone guilty of riot would then be guilty of murder. This had nothing to do with the ability to suppress crime; it has always been the common law (as now reflected in section 3 of the



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Criminal Law Act 1967 and indeed going back to the obligations of the *posse comitatus* a thousand years ago) that a person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of crime, or ... the lawful arrest of offenders or suspected offenders. It was the failure to understand this that led to serious delays by the authorities in dealing with various serious riots, such as the Gordon Riots in 1780.