

Music of Wellington's Regiments 1808 – 1815

At this time, only the drummers and fifers were on the official strength of a regiment of infantry; two drummers/fifers were allowed for each of the ten companies in a battalion. The drummers not only beat signals in camp, but transmitted orders on the battlefield when drum-beats were more audible than spoken commands.¹



The traditional image of the ‘drummer boy’ is an exaggeration, and many drummers were mature men. In this respect therefore, the drummer boys depicted in Lady Butler’s famous painting ‘Steady the Drums and Fifes’ of the 57th drummers at Albuera is fanciful as the average age of the band in 1811 was 26. Equally, of those in the 23rd (Royal Welsh Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot at Waterloo whose ages were known, only one was under 18, but two were over 50 (the oldest 62), with an average age 28. Only 42% were under 18 when enlisted, the youngest aged 12.

An order of 1805 states that boy soldiers were allowed to train as ‘drummers/fifers’. It was authorised to recruit boys from 13 to 18 years old and an inch shorter than the usual minimum of 5’ 4”. However, for the rank & file it was recognised that they were under-strength for the weight of the musket plus kit they would be required to carry. The official British drums of this period were large and heavy; they measured 18 inches x 18 inches and were made from ash.² It can therefore be assumed that ‘drummer-boys’ were initially trained as fifers.

When played in its upper register, the fife is loud and piercing, yet also extremely small and portable. According to some reports of the period, a band of fifes and drums could be heard up to 3 miles away over artillery fire.

In the Light Infantry companies & regiments and the Rifles regiments the drummers and fifers were replaced by bugles. When the men were dispersed in extended formation, the bugles were better for signalling.

However, both commissioned and non-commissioned officers wore whistles on their cross-belts, which could also be used for field signals.

The role of the pipers in Highland regiments at this time was unconventional and peculiar, bearing comparison with no other institution in the Army. They were, in a way that no ordinary regimental band could be, a link with home and an integral part of a social-economic pattern. Historically, the piper was closely leagued with his chieftain, well versed in the lore of his clan; he was more than a mere minstrel and in battle it was his duty to animate his clansmen and to be with them where the blows fell thickest, so that he assumed something of the importance of a standard bearer.³

Such status was highly valued and the officers, recognising his value to morale and esprit de corps, were prepared to pay highly for his services; Captain Duncan Campbell, recruiting for Argyll's Highlanders in 1794, wrote "*If you can meet with one or two good pipers, handsome fellows and steady, you might go as far as 30 guineas for each*", which in the highlands at that time was a massive bounty.⁴

For cavalry, one trumpeter was assigned per troop, therefore two per squadron. The British cavalry E-flat trumpets were of a higher pitch than those of the French. The Instructions & Regulations specifically state that '*signals of the trumpet are meant in aid of the voice, but are by no means to be substituted for, or prevent the ordered words of execution.*' They further note that the bugle horn could be substituted for use by detached parties.

The cavalry trumpet is difficult to play and would have been, and still are, always played by members of the band. Because of this difficulty and playing on horseback when the horse is not musical, it was decided before the end of the 18th century to drop the trumpet in favour of the bugle when mounted.

It is therefore something of an anomaly that, apart from the Light Infantry and Rifles, the person in normal heavy infantry battalions who plays the bugle is usually called a drummer and his opposite number in cavalry regiments on bugle is called a trumpeter.

The musicians of the regimental (or battalion) bands, however, did not appear on the official returns as they were paid for by the officers. Bands of this period might range from about eight players to very large assemblies, such as the 25-strong band of the 21st Regiment in 1798. Many regiments spent considerable sums upon their bands, and hired professional musicians; in 1788, for example, only two of the 29th's bandsmen were enrolled soldiers. Many of the best were foreigners, sometimes hired en masse; for example, the 2nd Foot Guards had hired their band in Hanover; in 1804 Maj-Gen Alexander Mackenzie-Frazer received permission to enlist German prisoners of war from the prison-hulk HMS Sultan, to form the band of the 2/78th Foot; and in 1795 General the Hon Chapple Norton was told that he could employ Swiss, Germans and Italians to form the band of his 56th Foot, but no Frenchmen. Whilst these were the official pronouncements, no doubt they could be ignored in the field. For instance, in 1813, when the opposing armies were encamped near Pamplona, strains of French music drifted regularly into the British camp; when two bandsmen deserted from a French regiment they were promptly incorporated into the

band of the 31st Regiment, to whom they taught a tune called ‘Bonaparte’s March’. Of the foreign bandsmen who received pensions subsequent to their service in the 10th (Prince of Wales Own) Hussars, seven were Germans, two Hungarians, two Dutchmen, one an Austrian, one a Frenchman, one an African and one a Negro from St Kitts. In the 29th Regiment there was a tradition, dating back to 1760, of having Negroes as company drummers. In cavalry regiments Negro trumpeters were highly valued.

A typical large infantry band of the period would be nine clarinets (clarionets), two French horns, two bassoons, a bugle horn, a trumpet, two triangles and a bass drum; fashion, as well as the popularity of ‘Turkish music’, also led to the addition of Negro percussionists playing cymbals, tambourines and ‘Jingling Johnnies’. The majority, often over 50%, of the instruments were woodwind, supplemented by the ‘horn sounds’. With this instrumentation the overall sound of these bands would be quite different from those of later years.

During the period of the French Wars, there were popular marches which appear to have been generally played by all bands, and others which were specific to particular regiments. Especially in the latter case, the officers and men considered it to be very much their own property – their music; after all, they were financing it. This is very apparent from a sentence in an account describing the moment of crisis in the very bloody Battle of Albuera “*Our drums crash out again, breaking into our fighting tune, our own march – Royal Windsor.*”

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1

In some papers it has been stated that drummers beat time to keep the battalion in step. In the Instructions for the Drill and the Method of Performing the Eighteen Manoeuvres, 1804 it states 'The use of music or drums, to regulate the march in movement of manoeuvre, is absolutely forbid.'

2

Only after 1810 were lighter brass-shelled drums (with snares) produced and sold privately by an ex-Drum Major of the Coldstream Guards. The French drums of the period were brass-shelled.

3

Bagpipes were not played with the Corps of Drums until later – around the 1860's

4

Equivalent to £3,780 in current value.