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978-1-108-05409-6 - A British Rifle Man: The Journals and Correspondence of Major George Simmons, Rifle Brigade, During the Peninsular War and the Campaign of Waterloo

Edited by William Willoughby Cole Verner

Excerpt

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A British Rifle Man

COMMENCEMENT OF THE PENINSULAR WAR CAMPAIGN OF 1808

THE Peninsular War commenced in the year 1808, on 1st August of which year Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley disembarked at Mondego Bay and marched on Lisbon, at that time occupied by a French army under Marshal Junot. The latter sent General Laborde with a Division to oppose Wellesley's advance, and on 15th August the first skirmish took place at Obidos. On this occasion the 95th Rifles had an officer killed (Lieut. Bunbury), the first British officer who fell in the Peninsular War. On 17th August, Wellesley defeated Laborde at the battle of Roliça, and four days later he met and defeated Junot at the battle of Vimeiro. Then followed the Convention of Cintra, under the terms of which Junot was permitted to embark his army of 25,000 men at Lisbon and the French evacuated Portugal.

The British Government now sent out strong reinforcements to the Peninsula, and appointed Sir John Moore to the chief command. Moore's forces concentrated in the vicinity of Salamanca, and then advanced to engage Soult, who was holding the line of the Carrion river. Meanwhile the Spanish armies had been defeated at all points, and the French army, commanded by Napoleon in person and numbering over 100,000 men, was set at liberty to attack Moore, whose forces only amounted to 25,000 men. In spite of these appalling odds, Moore conducted

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an admirable retreat, and at Rueda, Sahagun, Benavente, and Mayorga his cavalry obtained brilliant successes over the French.

On 1st January 1809 Napoleon entered Astorga, only to find that he was too late to destroy the English army, which had evaded his blow and was in retreat on Vigo and Coruña. Leaving Soult to continue the pursuit, the Emperor now returned to France.

Moore carried out his retirement in a masterly manner; at Caçabelos, Constantin, and Lugo he checked his pursuers and inflicted heavy losses on their advancing columns. The retreat terminated with the battle of Coruña, fought on 16th January 1809, when the gallant Moore was killed, but not before he had heavily defeated the French and thus secured the embarkation of his forces.

CAMPAIGN OF 1809

The French army in Spain was ordered by Napoleon to reoccupy Portugal, and Marshal Soult was directed to march, *via* Oporto, on Lisbon, Marshal Ney to hold Galicia, and Marshal Victor to invade Portugal south of the Tagus.

The British Government sent out Sir Arthur Wellesley to Portugal with strong reinforcements. Wellesley marched on Oporto and seized the passage of the Douro on 12th May, and drove Soult back into Galicia. Victor meanwhile had reached Talavera de la Reyna on the Tagus, and was supported by King Joseph and Marshal Jourdan.

Wellesley now advanced and joined the Spanish General Cuesta near Talavera. Victor thereupon fell back, and, Cuesta following him up alone, was severely handled by King Joseph and driven back behind the Alberche river.

The French army, under King Joseph with Jourdan and Victor, now advanced and crossed the Alberche, and, after several sharp combats, the battle of Talavera was fought on 28th July. After a desperate struggle, the French were finally driven back at all points, and early on the following morning retired across the Alberche.

On the same day, the Light Division under General Craufurd, consisting of the 43rd and 52nd Light Infantry and the 1st Battalion 95th Rifles, reached the field and immediately took

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The Campaign of 1809 3

up the outposts. This Division, after a march of 20 miles, was in bivouac at Malpartida, when Craufurd received a report that the British were hard pressed at Talavera. He at once started "with a resolution not to halt until he reached the field of battle. . . . The troops pressed on with impetuous speed, and, leaving only seventeen stragglers behind, in twenty-six hours crossed the field of battle, a strong compact body, having during that time marched 62 English miles in the hottest season of the year, each man carrying from fifty to sixty pounds weight."¹

Soult being joined by Ney, Mortier, and Kellermann, now moved against Wellesley's line of communications, and the latter, leaving Cuesta to watch King Joseph on the Alberche, marched to oppose him. Cuesta, however, abandoned his post and fell back on Wellesley, closely pursued by Victor. At the same time the English General learned that Soult, having received reinforcements, had now a force of over 53,000 as against his 17,000 British troops; and he was in consequence forced to recross the Tagus at Puente del Arzobispo and retire on Portugal.

Thus ended the campaign of 1809, during which the British losses amounted to over 3500; and, owing to the hopeless conduct of both the Spanish Government and the Spanish generals, all the advantages which should have accrued to the British, from the successful operations on the Douro in May and the victory of Talavera in July, were rendered nugatory, and the French, in the words of Napier, were left with "all the credit of the campaign."

¹ Napier's *History of the War in the Peninsula*, vol. ii. p. 407.

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CHAPTER I

LETTER No. I

*To his Parents, from Hythe and Dover, dated
21st May 1809*

Announces the embarkation of the 1st Battalion 95th Rifles—
Colonel Sibthorp endeavours to dissuade him from going
out, but fails.

Journal—25th May—17th July 1809

Embarkation at Dover, the voyage out, landing at Lisbon—The
Rifles are posted to Major-General Craufurd's Brigade, and
march to join Sir Arthur Wellesley, who is moving against
Marshal Victor on the line of the Tagus—Halt at Castello
Branco.

LETTER No. II

*To his Parents, from Castello Branco, dated
18th July 1809*

Describes landing at Lisbon—His opinion of Portuguese man-
ners and morals—Account of the advance and nature of
the country traversed—Conduct of the French to the
Portuguese.

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Under Sealed Orders 5

LETTER NO. I

HYTHE, 21st May 1809.

MY DEAR PARENTS — The long-wished-for day has come at last. I am this morning marching, with as fine a body of men as ever left England, for Dover, where we embark. I believe a very great army will accompany us. Our destination is a profound secret, and as I am not inquisitive, it gives me little concern; I daresay I shall soon enough see some diversion. The rumour goes, Austria or Portugal. Our men are in very high spirits, and we have a most excellent band of music and thirty bugle-horns, which through every country village strikes up the old tune, "Over the hills and far away." This, my dear parents, is the happiest moment of my life; and I hope, if I come where there is an opportunity of showing courage, your son will not disgrace the name of a British soldier.

Col. Sibthorp arrived here the other day, and directly sent to speak to me. I waited upon him, and told him it was impossible for me to recall what I had stated to the men who had done me the honour of preferring to be with me and the regiment I was pleased to sanction, to any others. When he found me inflexible, he then felt extremely hurt at frustrating my views; and, to make up for putting a stop to me being gazetted, he immediately wrote to the Commander-in-Chief and begged to recommend me as a very deserving young man, and stated exactly the reasons which induced him to endeavour to stop

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1809 me entering the Line ; he also hoped he would take into consideration the manner I had acted in procuring, entirely through my own exertions, the number of men for His Majesty's service, and have my commission antedated. He said I deserved great credit for my resolution in not being dissuaded from my project, as I had determined to follow the profession of a soldier ; and my conduct in his regiment hurt him exceedingly to lose me, but he hoped I should meet with friends wherever I went, and his friendship he should always be proud of showing me at all times. He sent for me to breakfast with him, and before I came away presented me with twenty-five guineas, which just came at a time when I should have been obliged to borrow to equip myself for service. The Colonel recommended me very strongly to the notice of Colonel Beckwith, whom I now have the honour to serve under, and from whom I have received every mark of esteem, with a promise to do me every kindness in his power. I felt some anxiety at leaving my brother officers, who vied with each other in showing their friendship and kindness on all occasions. My Captain gave me an elegant sabre, and another gave me a large cloak—Rifle Men being generally obliged to sleep in the fields (on service), and their cloaks are their beds upon all occasions. I never shall experience more friendship from any set of men. Some will say, pray why do you leave them when you can be so happy (this was my late Colonel's observation), but my reasons I cannot explain to every one. I am confident there would have been little chance of promoting the interests of my family as I was situated ; and as a soldier, with

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Final Arrangements

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perseverance, I must in time have promotion, which ¹⁸⁰⁹ will soon enable me to be of use to my family ; and at all times it will be my greatest pleasure and pride to take care that the boys go regularly to a good school, and I have no doubt of seeing them one day men of some experience through my interposition.

I have left two large boxes in the stores of the 1st Battalion 95th Regiment at Hythe Barracks. One, which I brought out of Yorkshire with me, is filled with clothes and linen ; the other with my bed and bedstead. If I should not return to England again, I think it would be worth your while to have them home, as they would pay the carriage and they could come by sea.

You would see by the newspapers, if you did not hear from me, you may always know where the Regiment was stationed. I deem it necessary to give this notice for fear of mistakes, as, if I happened to be popped off, in my last moments it would be a comfort to me to think I had left you all I was in possession of. Should you not procure my boxes by that means, write to Captain Platt of the Royal South Lincoln Regiment of Militia, there stationed, and you will at all times be enabled to find out ; he will soon forward them to you. Do not laugh at my giving such strict injunctions, as I like to do everything concerning myself methodically, and then I have nothing to fear.

Maud,¹ I daresay, will be in this Expedition ; if not it may be some time before we meet. As most likely you will have his address, write and tell him I am gone. As soon as I arrive at our destination I shall

¹ George Simmons' second brother in 34th Regiment.—Ed.

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1809 take the earliest opportunity of letting you have the particular occurrences which may befall me. Until then, farewell.

I have in the Navy a friend who, I expect, will soon be made Captain ; and have, if that takes place, a chance to procure a berth for my brothers. Make them good scholars, I have not the least doubt of soon taking them off your hands. I hope you will obey this command, and read this part to Joseph and John, which, if they wish one day to shine in the world, they will now strive to pay every attention.

I have left in my box some letters from Colonel Sibthorp, which I shall feel pleasure another day to read to you, as it is impossible to express the fatherly and friendly manner he has at all times condescended to address me with. Being in such a hurry to embark, it is with some difficulty I have time to address you at all, and I had almost forgotten to mention my dear Ann, who, I hope, will forgive me, and not attribute it to my neglect. My blessing to the children ; and, if it pleases God to spare my life, I hope on my return to see you all. My best wishes to uncle, aunt, and friends.—I am affectionately yours,
 GEORGE SIMMONS.

Dover, Do not mention my letters, I beg of you. It was
 May a most beautiful sight to see us embark, and the lovely
 25th creatures cheering the men as they passed.

Journal—25th May—15th July 1809

May The 1st Battalion 95th Regiment had been under
 25th orders to embark at a moment's notice for some days.

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A Sudden Order 9

The order arrived last night, and at two o'clock this 1809 morning the Battalion was formed in the Barrack Square, consisting of 1000 as fine young fellows as were ever collected to fight their country's battles. For my part, my heart was as light as a feather when we marched off; and, if I may judge from appearances, every person had the same feelings. We entered Dover about six o'clock and marched through it. The windows were crowded with inhabitants; some greeted us, but in general the women seemed sorry to see us depart, knowing well that numbers must never return to their native land again.

The Battalion embarked in three transports, *Fortune*, *Malabar*, and *Laurel*, and sailed immediately for the Downs, where we came to anchor. The 1st Battalion 43rd and 52nd Light Infantry joined us here, which with ourselves formed a Light Brigade, under the command of Major-General Robert Craufurd, who took post on board the *Nymph* frigate, 44 guns, commanded by the Honourable Captain Percy, and also the *Kangaroo* sloop of war under his command. Foul winds and sometimes very stormy until 3rd June.

June

The Commodore hoisted the signal for sailing at daylight. The fleet got under weigh towards evening and stood down the Channel.

Saw the Isle of Wight at daylight; we neared it 4th and anchored at St. Helens.

The weather very squally. The fleet weighed and 5th moved close to Cowes, where we were detained by contrary winds for six days.

The wind seeming to become favourable, the fleet 11th was put once more into motion, but proving a

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1809 false alarm, we brought up opposite Yarmouth, and
June were again detained with foul winds until the 18th.

18th Yesterday a boat upset coming to our ship, the *Fortune*, from the Commodore's, and a young midshipman and one sailor met with a watery grave. The midshipman was coming to invite Captain Pakenham to dinner. Our fleet sailed now in good earnest with a fair wind, passed the Needles, and bid adieu to the shores of Old England.

24th Saw land ahead at daybreak, which was found to be Cabo Prior, near Coruña in Spain; weathered Cape Finisterre. At noon the Commodore chased a strange sail; it proved to be a Spanish brig, and being a friend she was allowed to proceed.

25th Sailed along the coast of Portugal, passed the mouth of the Douro at 4 P.M.

26th The *Kangaroo* took her departure for England.

27th Passed through the inner passage of the Berlengas, having previously taken on board a Portuguese pilot. The Berlengas are a cluster of small rocky islands; on the largest of them the Portuguese have established a battery.

28th Saw the Rock of Lisbon at daybreak. It is a bold mountain, whose sombre front overhangs the sea. About noon we entered the Tagus, and our fleet came to anchor close to Lisbon, which from the sea appeared a most magnificent place indeed. On landing the charm ceased, as the streets are exceedingly filthy. The quays are built of stone, and very good along the river.

The Citadel is on a commanding eminence in the town, from whence in every direction you may observe churches, monasteries, convents, etc. The most