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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

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A British Rifle Man

Originally published in 1899, these writings by George Simmons (1785–1858) complement the work of other officers who served in the famous 95th Rifles between 1809 and 1815. Extremely descriptive and informative, the book covers all of the major battles and sieges of the Peninsular War and Waterloo Campaign in which Simmons' regiment was engaged during this period. Simmons himself was badly wounded at the Battle of the Côa in July 1810, but he recovered and played his part in the final years of the Peninsular War. He was also present at Waterloo in June 1815. Edited with an introduction by fellow Rifleman William Willoughby Cole Verner (1852–1922), Simmons' letters and diaries, written at the time and without the benefit of hindsight, have a tremendous immediacy. They remain of interest and relevance to military historians and students of the Napoleonic wars.

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THE JOURNALS AND
CORRESPONDENCE OF MAJOR GEORGE SIMMONS,
RIFLE BRIGADE, DURING THE PENINSULAR
WAR AND THE CAMPAIGN OF
WATERLOO

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, BY
LIEUT -COLONEL WILLOUGHBY VERNER

LATE RIFLE BRIGADE
AUTHOR OF 'SKETCHES IN THE SOUDAN,' ETC.

WITH THREE MAPS

LONDON
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1899

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To
GENERAL HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
THE DUKE OF CONNAUGHT AND STRATHEARN,
COLONEL-IN-CHIEF OF THE RIFLE BRIGADE,
FORMERLY (1803-1816) STYLED THE 95TH RIFLES AND
(1800-1802) THE RIFLE CORPS,
THIS VOLUME
IN WHICH A BRITISH RIFLE MAN RECOUNTS HIS PERSONAL
KNOWLEDGE OF MANY OF THE DEEDS THAT HAVE
MADE THE NAME OF THE REGIMENT
SO FAMOUS
IS (BY PERMISSION) DEDICATED
BY HIS MOST HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT SERVANT
WILLOUGHBY VERNER,
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL, LATE OF THE RIFLE BRIGADE.

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INTRODUCTION

GEORGE SIMMONS, the writer of the following letters and journals, was born on 2nd May 1785. His parents resided at Beverley, in Yorkshire. The family consisted of nine sons and three daughters.

Since some of their names constantly recur in Simmons's letters, a brief account of them will be useful. Maud, the second son, obtained a commission in the 34th Foot in 1809. The third, Joseph, after beginning life as an attorney's clerk, joined his eldest brother's corps, the 95th Rifles, as a Volunteer in 1812, and shortly afterwards was granted a commission in it. All three brothers served in the Peninsular War. The fourth brother, John, appears to have been a source of some trouble to his parents, and eventually ran away from home and entered the Mercantile Marine. His career at sea was a brief one. His ship was very soon attacked and captured by a French privateer, and he was killed in the engagement. The daughters, especially the second, Ann, "My dear Ann" of many a letter, were the object of constant solicitude to George, and of much good advice and many anxious forebodings. These details of the family are rendered necessary by the fact that for some cause or

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other the eldest brother appears to have constituted himself as the adviser and protector, and to some extent the supporter, of his parents. His father seems to have been in extremely straitened circumstances, and to have lacked the capability of looking after his family. George was evidently a very steady young fellow, and, realising that his father was unable to fight the battle of life, he set to work and studied medicine with a view to being able to support his parents. In 1805, when Napoleon's threatened invasion had caused all the manhood of England to enrol themselves for the defence of the country, George was given a commission as Assistant-Surgeon in the Royal South Lincolnshire Militia, commanded by Colonel Waldo-Sibthorp, M.P. In this corps he served for nearly four years, and during that time gained the friendship of his Colonel, who subsequently assisted him in various ways.

The Lincoln Militia were quartered in Hythe Barracks in the spring of 1809, as were both Battalions of the 95th Rifles. The latter were in a very shattered condition, having only recently returned from the disastrous campaign of Coruña. In order to fill up their depleted ranks, volunteers were called for from the Militia, and every Militia officer who could induce a hundred men to join the service was granted a commission. No difficulty, however, was experienced in obtaining recruits for "The Rifles," as they were styled. Although a very "young" regiment, having been raised only nine years previously, the peculiar nature of their arm—the rifle—and their exceptionally active em-

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ployment, coupled with the fact that they had already made their name at Copenhagen under Lord Nelson, at Monte Video, and only recently at Roliça, Vimeiro, and Coruña, caused many more to volunteer for service in their ranks than could be taken.

In the words of Sir William Cope, the historian of the Rifle Brigade :—

The regiment had already become so famous and popular, that not only were the deficiencies filled up in a very short time, but more than a thousand volunteers presented themselves beyond the numbers required. It was therefore resolved by the Authorities to add a 3rd Battalion to the regiment.

George Simmons, partly for reasons already given, but no doubt also owing to strong military instincts and a true British desire to “fight the French,” easily induced a number of his Militiamen to volunteer for the Rifles, and thereby became entitled to a second-lieutenant’s commission himself—there were no “ensigns” in the Rifles in those days.

It was at this juncture that his friend and benefactor, Colonel Sibthorp, unwilling to lose his Assistant-Surgeon, and doubting the wisdom of his going out to Portugal amid the circumstances, made use of influence at the Horse Guards to cause the issue of the commission to be delayed, trusting that, with time for reflection, George might be induced to abandon his project.

Our history opens with a letter from George in May 1809 to his parents at Beverley, announcing that he is about to embark at Dover for Portugal with the 1st Battalion 95th Rifles, and recounting Colonel

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Sibthorp's well-meant but inopportune efforts to retain his services in the Militia.

It will be seen that one of his chief reasons for quitting the Militia and joining the Army was "the interests of his family," to whom he hoped to be of use; he wished "to assist the boys to go to school."

There is something very touching, albeit at the same time painfully incongruous, in worthy George Simmons's unceasing efforts thus to assist his family with small remittances from his hardly-won pay as a subaltern. To us soldiers of the end of the century the idea of a young man seeking a commission with a view to supporting his parents and assisting in the education of his brothers and sisters is so supremely absurd that at first one is inclined to look upon George as a well-meaning visionary. Facts, however, disprove the suspicion. Readers of these letters will learn how throughout the six campaigns in the Peninsula between 1809 and 1814, and also during and after the Waterloo campaign, Lieutenant Simmons, although thrice very severely wounded and put to much expense, managed constantly to remit a portion of his pay, and no inconsiderable portion of good advice as well, to his parents, who were sadly in need of both.

The letters in this volume are truthful accounts, written from many a bivouac and battlefield in Portugal, Spain, France, and Belgium, of the daily experiences of a young British officer taking his part in the great wars which were the main cause of Napoleon's downfall. Only now and then, where George Simmons has alluded to family matters of an entirely private nature, has it been considered desirable

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to excise the latter. But his views, correct or the reverse, of the military situation of the moment, his opinions of his chiefs and contemporaries, his anxieties about the welfare of his parents, brothers, and sisters, and his unceasing efforts to aid them, all forming as they do an integral part of his daily work, thoughts, and aspirations, have been left absolutely untouched.

To readers unacquainted with military matters it may be explained that these letters and journals claim to possess additional interest, since they are written by an officer who happened to belong to a regiment which saw more fighting in the Peninsula than any other in the British Army.

The Rifles formed part of the famous Light Division which was perpetually in the forefront of the battle, and they were the only regiment of British soldiers armed with the then newly introduced weapon—the rifle—in contradistinction to Brown Bess, the smooth-bore musket carried by the remainder of the Infantry. It is true that certain corps, notably the 5th Battalion of the 60th Royal American Regiment¹ and the Duke of Brunswick Oels' Corps, also were armed with rifles; but, as these were composed of Germans and other foreigners, and their companies at times distributed among various Brigades, the same interest did not attach to them, nor were they able to take such a leading part in the fighting as the three Battalions of the 95th Rifles, who were present in whole or in part at every great battle in the long and bloody struggle in the Peninsula, save Albuera only.

¹ This Battalion was disbanded in 1818. The present King's Royal Rifle Corps are its representatives.

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But although the regiment was composed of three battalions, it never mustered more than seventeen companies in the Peninsula, and at Waterloo only fourteen were present. It took its share not only in the general actions, sieges, and stormings in common with the other regiments, but also was constantly engaged in innumerable “affairs,” as they are styled, which caused an unceasing drain on its strength—a drain from which regiments belonging to other Divisions were usually exempt. The reason for this was that the Light Brigade, or, as it was subsequently styled, the Light Division, was used during the campaigns in the Peninsula as a permanent covering or outpost force. Thus in 1810 it acted as a Corps of Observation on the Coa, far in advance of the rest of the army, and took part in the affairs of Barba del Puerco, Gallegos, etc., as well as in the severe fighting at the Combat of the Coa, at which no other troops were engaged. Again, in 1811, Craufurd’s Brigade formed the advanced guard in the pursuit of Massena, and hence was constantly in collision with the enemy.

These events are well described by Simmons, and it will be seen that a similar condition of affairs prevailed in the subsequent campaigns of 1812–14. The normal strength of an infantry battalion in the Peninsula was ten companies, and whilst noting that the 95th Rifles had the great advantage of having three battalions in the field, which naturally gave them a greater chance than others of seeing fighting, it is only fair to remember that there were usually only from fifteen to seventeen companies, and *not* thirty, as is commonly supposed.

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Several regiments had two battalions serving in the Peninsula, and hence were as strong numerically as the Rifles.

The "Baker" rifle, with which the regiment was armed, was in every sense an arm of precision up to 300 yards, and at ranges of 400 and 500 yards it was possible to hit a mark with it. This alone gave the Riflemen an immense advantage over their comrades armed with smooth-bore muskets, and, as proved by the experiments at Woolwich, it was greatly superior to the rifles of Continental and American manufacture in use at the time.

This rifle was invented by Ezekiel Baker, a London gunmaker, towards the close of the last century, and was the first rifle regularly adopted into the British service. It was tried at Woolwich in February 1800 by order of the Board of Ordnance, and was selected as the arm of the Rifle Corps, then in process of being raised. On this occasion eleven shots out of twelve were placed in a six-foot circular target at 300 yards' distance. The following is a description of the Baker rifle: Weight $9\frac{1}{2}$ lbs., barrel seven-grooved and 30 inches in length, rifling one quarter turn in barrel, bullet spherical, 20 to the pound, charge of powder 84 grains, flint-lock. The ball was placed in the centre of a greased leather patch and rammed home, considerable force being necessary to effect this. At first, wooden mallets were issued to the Riflemen to facilitate the process of ramming home, but these were very shortly discontinued (*circa* 1803). A supply of greased patches was carried in a small box with spring brass lid in the side of the butt of the rifle.

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As regards rapidity of fire, the maximum rate at which perfectly steady shots could be taken was reckoned to be one per minute.

This weapon was the one used by the Rifle Corps in their maiden action at Ferrol in 1800, and at the battle of Copenhagen in 1801, where the Riflemen fought under Lord Nelson and were distributed as sharpshooters among various British ships of the line. It was further used in South America in 1807-8 and throughout the Peninsula campaigns of 1808-14, and also at Waterloo. In 1838 it was supplanted by the percussion-lock Brunswick rifle, having thus been in use in the service for a longer period than has any rifled firearm.

The smooth-bore musket, commonly known as "Brown Bess," was a much heavier and longer weapon, throwing a spherical ball of 14 to the pound, and the uncertainty of its fire is well evidenced by the expression "as random as a common musket," which is to be met with in treatises on rifle-shooting at the beginning of the century. This weapon was in use up to the year 1853. It would not carry straight for 100 yards, and its effective range was barely double that distance. Such was "the musket, that queen of weapons," as it has been styled, with which the British infantry won all its great victories from the time of Marlborough until the conquest of the Punjaub in 1849.

That even greater results were not obtained from the rifle during the Peninsular War is due to the fact that the 95th Riflemen were naturally often compelled to conform to the general movements of large bodies of troops armed with smooth-bores.

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Their utility was in consequence frequently unduly circumscribed by the exigencies of the moment.

It was, however, in the affairs of outposts and advanced guards, and on occasions when individual action was both permissible and practicable, that the value of the rifle became most apparent. Thus at the action of Tarbes on March 14, 1814, the three Battalions of the 95th attacked and ousted from an exceptionally strong position a French Division. George Simmons was severely wounded in this fight. An eye-witness belonging to another corps thus describes the attack, and in words which convey a good idea of the methods of Riflemen under such circumstances: "Our Rifles were immediately sent to dislodge the French from the hills on our left, and our Battalion was ordered to support them. Nothing could exceed the manner in which the 95th set about this business. Certainly I never saw such skirmishers as the 95th, now the Rifle Brigade. They could do the work much better and with infinitely *less loss* than any other of our best Light troops. They possessed an individual boldness, a mutual understanding, and a quickness of eye in taking advantage of the ground, which, taken altogether, I never saw equalled. They were, in fact, as much superior to the French Voltigeurs as the latter were to our skirmishers in general. As our regiment was often employed in supporting them, I think I am fairly qualified to speak of their merits."¹

Unquestionably the most pressing military problem of the present day is how to conduct an attack on troops armed (as all infantry are now) with

¹ *Twelve Years' Military Adventure*, London, 1829.

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magazine rifles, which, owing to their flat trajectory and extraordinary rapidity and precision of fire, are overwhelming in their effects against favourable targets up to 2000 yards.

The object-lesson most recently before us is that of the fight at Khartoum, where the absolute impossibility of masses of men advancing under modern artillery and rifle fire, although known to students of war, was practically demonstrated again to the whole world. The unusually heavy losses experienced by our troops in the fighting on the Indian Frontier in 1897 were mostly due to the able manner in which the Afridis and other tribesmen took advantage of the ground and worked in unison (as did the Riflemen at Tarbes and on many another battlefield) to assist and support one another, and thus develop their fire so as to obtain the maximum value from it with the minimum exposure and loss to themselves. The accounts by officers who served in that campaign bear a striking resemblance to some of the instances narrated by George Simmons of the methods of fighting of the Riflemen during the Peninsular War. Thus the French captain's description in Chapter V. of the attack of the British Riflemen at Vimeiro, and the heavy losses he sustained, especially in officers, is almost an exact repetition of some of the accounts of the fights in the Tirah Campaign of 1897.

Sir John Kincaid, who served throughout the Peninsular War, and was adjutant of the 1st Battalion 95th Rifles at Waterloo, says truly that his corps, as "the Light regiment of the Light Division, fired the first and last shot in almost every battle, siege, or skirmish, in which the army was engaged during the

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war.” But he hastens to add that he considered the 43rd and 52nd Light Infantry *as a part of the Rifles*, “for they bore a share in everything, and although the nature of our arm generally gave us more employment in the way of skirmishing, yet, whenever it came to a pinch, independent of a suitable mixture of them among us, we had only to look behind to see a line in which we might place *a degree of confidence almost equal to our hopes in heaven*; nor were we ever disappointed. There never was a corps of Riflemen in the hands of such supporters.”

It is notoriously dangerous to prophesy, but I am presumptuous enough to believe that the difficult problem of the conduct of attacks in the future will in all probability be solved by adopting some system based on the methods originated and carried out so successfully by the first regiment of Riflemen in the British service during the Peninsular War, of which the account of their attack on the French position at Tarbes, given by the author of *Twelve Years' Military Adventure*, is a good example. It is, of course, an integral part of the system that the firing line should be intelligently and effectively supported, so as to give those committed to the forefront of the battle that superb *confidence*, both in themselves and in their comrades behind, so admirably described by Kincaid.

Such confidence can only come from careful training and fellowship in peace time, followed by experience on active service under fire, and this is precisely what the celebrated Light Division was fortunate enough to obtain. For it was largely due to the marvellous training of the Light Brigade, consisting of these *same three regiments*, under Sir John Moore at Shorn-

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cliffe during the years 1803 to 1805 that the gallant Craufurd was able to achieve the splendid results he did, first with the “Light Brigade,” and later with his famous “Light Division.”

But there was another element which should on no account be ignored, and which unquestionably had much to do with the successful training under Moore. On the Rifle Corps being first raised in 1800, the Colonel, Coote Manningham, set to work to train the officers and men thoroughly in the duties of Riflemen in the field. In that year he issued a small book entitled *Regulations for the Rifle Corps*. The most noticeable point in this is the great importance he attached to what is known as the “Company system.” Starting with the axiom that “In a regiment of Riflemen, each company must be formed upon the principle of being separate from, and totally independent of, another,” the whole of the book is permeated with the same ideas. Thus it is laid down that transfers of officers or men from one company to another are not to be made unless absolutely necessary, since “Riflemen, being liable to act very independently of each other, and in numerous small detachments in the field, will feel the comfort and utility of their own officer, non-commissioned officers, and comrades with them, and the service will be benefited by the tie of friendship.”

Captains were held responsible for the whole training of their men, and were directed “to offer premiums” for those who became good rifle shots. These were to be styled “marksmen” and to wear “a green cockade!”

The *Regulations* are of especial interest nowadays,

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since they show that as early as the first year of this century there were soldiers, such as Coote Manningham and his second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. William Stewart (to whom no small share of their compilation is most justly ascribed), who realised the importance of educating the soldier of that day and also in treating him with consideration.

Thus a regimental school was founded and a library provided, periodical examinations were held of the scholars, and lectures on military subjects were given to officers and men. An excellent series of lectures given by Coote Manningham to the 95th Rifles at Shorncliffe in 1803 is still extant.¹

From the foregoing it will be gathered that the men of the 95th had a thoroughly sound training, based on the soundest of principles—that of the COMPANY in peace and war. This company system was introduced into the 43rd Light Infantry and into the 52nd Light Infantry about 1803. Added to this came the excellent Brigade training under Moore at Shorncliffe. It is amusing to think that the system of “Company” and “Brigade” training has only of recent years been adopted at our chief military school—Aldershot.

It was the outcome of Moore’s untiring efforts, on which was engrafted the fiery spirit of Craufurd’s remarkable personality, that caused the troops of the Light Division, after the death of their leader at the storming of Ciudad Rodrigo, to maintain their high

¹ *Military Lectures delivered to the Officers of the 95th (Rifle) Regiment at Shorncliff Barracks, Kent.* Reprinted recently, as well as Manningham’s *Regulations*, by John Bale and Sons, 87 Great Titchfield Street, London, W.

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character as skilful and intrepid warriors. So long as the English language is spoken will Napier's heart-stirring description of the storming of Badajoz by the Light Division endure: "How deadly the strife was at this point may be gathered from this; the 43rd and 52nd Regiments of the Light Division lost more men than the seven regiments of the Third Division engaged at the castle! . . . Who shall do justice to the bravery of the British soldiers? to the noble emulation of the officers? Who shall measure out the glory of . . . O'Hare of the Rifles, who perished on the breach at the head of the stormers, and with him nearly all the volunteers for that desperate service? Who shall describe . . . the martial fury of that desperate Rifleman who, in his resolution to win, thrust himself beneath the chained sword-blades, and there suffered the enemy to dash his head to pieces with the ends of their muskets? Who can sufficiently honour . . . the resolution of Ferguson of the 43rd, who, having at Rodrigo received two deep wounds, was here, with his hurts still open, leading the stormers of his regiment, the third time a volunteer, and the third time wounded?"

It is a significant fact, and not very complimentary to the intelligence of the military authorities of the period, that the 95th were not granted several so-called "Honours" (or names of battles) to wear on their appointments, albeit they were present and took an active share in them. Notable among these is "Pyrenees," in which region the Rifles lost 15 officers and 264 non-commissioned officers and men, killed and wounded. A full account of the heavy fighting at this time will be found in

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George Simmons's letters. In 1849, when the long-deferred medal for the great war was at last issued, no fewer than 294 men of the Rifle Brigade were granted the clasp for "Pyrenees," although to this day the regiment does not carry the "Honour" on its appointments.

The vast difference between a corps, for technical reasons (such, for example, as the Colonel having been granted the gold medal for having commanded his regiment in a fight), being given an "Honour," and its having been present and performed gallant service at the same engagement, is best illustrated by the remarkable fact that in 1849 no fewer than *three thousand four hundred and sixty-nine clasps* for Peninsula battles and sieges were issued to survivors of the 95th—a far greater number than were granted to any other regiment, and over *twenty-four times as many* as were issued to some which to this day carry more Peninsula Honours.

As regards the compilation of this volume, the original journals are contained in three small pocket-books, in paper covers, measuring only a few inches square and weighing $\frac{3}{4}$ oz., 1 oz., and 2 oz. respectively. These were carried by George Simmons in his head-dress throughout the wars, and hence he was always able to make notes from day to day of events as they occurred. These small books form the framework, so to speak, of the more voluminous journals, which were evidently written subsequently, when more time was available for such a purpose.

The journal which is now published is chiefly taken from the latter, but all dates, etc., have been verified from the smaller books. Concurrently with

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the journal, a series of letters to his parents from the seat of war, covering the whole period between May 1809 and September 1815, are here reproduced without alteration, save and except in the orthography of proper names and of Spanish and French towns, etc.

When possible, the signature of officers concerned, as given in the "Pay Lists and Muster Rolls" at the Record Office, has been adopted in rendering their names. Certain Spanish names, the spelling of which, although notoriously wrong, has been consecrated by usage, have been retained in the form most familiar to Englishmen.

No little difficulty was experienced in locating many of the places mentioned by Simmons, whose rendering of Spanish names was at times very erratic. This, however, is excusable when it is remembered that the whole British army, from the Duke downwards, habitually ignored the most elementary rules of orthography in the Spanish language. Sir William Napier himself was one of the greatest offenders in this way. To this day about half a dozen of the names of great battles in Spain and Portugal worn as "Honours" by regiments on their Colours are incorrectly spelt!

No two atlases agree as to Spanish spelling, but I was fortunate in obtaining a very fair Spanish map, entitled "Mapa Civil y Militar de España y Portugal," by Dauty and Malo, published in 1857, which I have taken as the basis of the rough sketch maps which illustrate these pages.

Even this, however, is at places difficult to follow nowadays, owing to changes in names of places.