

# NAPOLEON ON ST HELENA A Shropshire Regiment Stands Guard

Guy Sjögren

*The 2nd Battalion of the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot was appointed in July 1815 to begin a two-year tour of duty preventing Napoleon's escape from St Helena. The former Emperor manipulated his captors as unwitting pawns in his relentless game of divide and conquer against the island's Governor, but ultimately came to hold them in high esteem.*



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Four months after the Battle of Waterloo, guarded by the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot, Napoleon began his exile on St Helena. *Napoleon at St Helena*, L. Kratke, 1894.

## NAPOLEON ON ST HELENA



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On that 'vast mass of rock rising abruptly from the Atlantic Ocean' Napoleon occupied Longwood, the Governor's summer residence. *View and Plan of Longwood House, St. Helena, the residence of Napoleon Bonaparte, 1817.* Rudolph Ackermann (publisher).

*'How far is St Helena from the field of Waterloo?  
A near way – a clear way – the ship will take you soon  
A pleasant place for gentlemen with little left to do.  
(Morning never tries you till the afternoon!)*

from Rudyard Kipling, *A St Helena Lullaby*

**A**s dawn broke on the morning of 28 July 1815 a King's Messenger clattered into Portsmouth. Secure in the galloper's saddlebag was an order from the Commander-in-Chief addressed to Colonel Sir George Bingham, the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot, then stationed in the naval town. The order directed the 53rd to prepare for 'immediate embarkation for distant

service'. At 11 o'clock the battalion formed up for inspection, 'when every man appeared under arms and in complete marching order'.

In view of the dramatic events of the previous fortnight, there seemed little doubt that the 'distant service' was to be on the South Atlantic island of St Helena. And so it was that, some ten weeks later, the battalion disembarked from two troopships lying off Jamestown and were ferried ashore. Thus began a two-year tour of duty, the sole objective of which was to ensure that Napoleon remained secure in his remote island prison. It also marked the beginning of an unusual and fraught triangular relationship between captive, gaolers and 'higher authority' in the form of the British government and the island's Governor.

### The 'Old Five and Threepennies'

The 53rd Foot had been raised as a single battalion in 1755. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the imperial and wartime involvement of the British Army necessitated its expansion, as a result of which a second battalion of the 53rd was formed in 1803. The First Battalion deployed to India two years later, leaving the Second to fight its way through Spain during the Peninsular War. By the summer of 1815, the 2nd-53rd was back in England.

The Shropshire Regiment's archives hold a document which

states: 'The result of the Battle of Waterloo, having deprived Bonaparte of all powers, induced him to adopt the determination of delivering himself to the British government.' This is not quite true. Napoleon's original aim was to escape to the United States, one option being to smuggle him out of Rochefort hidden in a barrel aboard a Danish vessel carrying a cargo of brandy. However, the Royal Navy's blockade of the port made this impossible and, on 15 July, Napoleon boarded HMS *Bellerophon*, declaring to the captain: 'Sir, I am come to throw myself upon the protection of your Prince and of your laws.'

Protection he was certainly given, but not in the way that he wanted. Stripped of his imperial title, Napoleon was henceforth referred to as 'General Bonaparte'; and, rather than living a quiet life in England as he had hoped, he was dispatched to what the naval surgeon assigned to him described as 'a vast mass of rock rising abruptly from the Atlantic Ocean...jagged and irregular, cut and slashed, as it were, cut into pieces by the great hatchet of nature'.

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Sir Hudson Lowe, Governor of St Helena and his prisoner taunt each other. *Hudson Lowe: Oui général, c'est un bien petit royaume pour un grand homme comme vous! Napoleon: Heureusement, c'est tout le contraire pour vous, Sir Lowe! (Hudson Lowe: Yes, General, it's quite a small kingdom for a great man like you! Napoleon: I'm happy to say that it's quite the opposite for you, Sir Lowe!)*

Three days of feverish activity followed the arrival of the King's Messenger in Portsmouth, and on 1 August the battalion began to embark on the troopships *Bucephalus* and *Ceylon* anchored off Spithead. The troopships arrived in Tor Bay on 6 August where, by now, the *Bellerophon* was waiting. Napoleon was then transferred to HMS *Northumberland* and, early that evening, the *Northumberland*, the troopships and escorts, under the command of Admiral Sir George Cockburn, weighed anchor and headed out into the English Channel.

### Exile to St Helena

There is little doubt that Napoleon's departure from

Europe was met with relief in many quarters. The *Morning Post* of 3 August argued that, while he had lost physical power, he still possessed a moral power, and that 'to give him his liberty would enable him to disturb the repose of the world'. Four days later, the same newspaper was in even less conciliatory mood, referring to Napoleon as 'this wretch' and an 'inhuman tyrant'. It would take some ten weeks and a 'boisterous passage' for the squadron to reach St Helena and deliver its 'obnoxious charge' (the *Morning Post* again) ashore.

While permanent accommodation was being prepared for Napoleon at Longwood – hitherto the Governor's summer residence – Napoleon spent his first two months on the island living in a small pavilion adjacent to 'The Briars', the home of William Balcombe of the Honourable East India Company. There, and with Cockburn as Governor, he seems to have been reasonably content. All was to change, however, with his removal to Longwood in December 1815 and the arrival of General Sir Hudson Lowe as Governor the following April.

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Napoleon caricatured employing his military skills with the legions of rats to be found on St Helena. *War in the East against the Cats, by Napoleon the Great, of St. Helena.* Thomas Rowlandson and Rudolph Ackermann, February 23, 1816.

Lowe has received a bad press. He has been described as unimaginative, unbending and over-zealous in his treatment of the former Emperor; even Wellington thought him the wrong man for the job. And yet Lowe bore the almost overwhelming responsibility of applying the government's regulations, the sole objective of which was to prevent Napoleon from escaping, as he had done from Elba the previous year. But if Lowe considered Napoleon a prisoner, the former Emperor did not. Even when aboard the *Bellerophon*, Napoleon had remonstrated: 'Tell the Prince Regent that I have one thing to ask, my liberty or an executioner. I am not the prisoner of England.' Protest as he might, he was clearly treated as such.

A naval exclusion zone was thrown around the island, whilst on land Napoleon's movements were constrained. Longwood sat on a plateau 1,800 feet above sea level and his movements were restricted to an area around Longwood some twelve miles in circumference.

The 'Shropshire lads' of the 2nd-53rd were camped a mile away at Deadwood Plain. Soldiers patrolled the plateau, manned temporary outposts, or *picquets*, placed at intervals around the perimeter, and acted as sentries in the immediate vicinity of Longwood. Living at Longwood was Captain Thomas Poppleton, the senior captain of the 53rd assigned as Napoleon's orderly officer.

Napoleon sympathised with the lot of the 53rd, occupied as they were with largely passive duties. 'I have no reason to complain about them', he said, 'they treat me with respect, and even appear to feel for me.' When not on guard duty, the soldiers were constantly formed into fatigue parties.

Everything required at Longwood and Deadwood had to be laboriously manhandled up from the town – even water, as there was none on the plateau. In Napoleon's opinion, it would have been better to have dedicated resources 'in

conducting water to those poor soldiers in camp than throw up fortifications round the house, just as if an army were coming to attack it’.

### **Divide and conquer**

In view of the tight military security surrounding Napoleon, it was clearly impractical for him to consider escaping from St Helena. On the other hand, like any prisoner of war, he refused to accept his situation, and to this end he employed all his well-honed political and strategic skills: skills he had used to keep the loyalty of his army and the support of the people. If he could not make a physical escape from the island, he would find an alternative way of gaining his liberty. His strategy brought him deliberately into constant conflict with the Governor. It also involved him in playing a game of divide and conquer; a game in which he would use elements of the 53rd as unwitting pawns.

Napoleon recognised that his only hope of getting off the island was to generate sympathy from his supporters in France, as well as sympathetic liberals in England. He realised that if he submitted to Lowe and the regulations, he would be forgotten by the public – out of sight, out of mind. Thus through intermediaries, smuggled correspondence and meetings with travelling visitors, he would complain about his treatment: a lack of decent food, insufficient wine, inadequate supplies of hay for the horses, the living conditions at Longwood, and the rats. ‘The rats are in numbers almost incredible at Longwood’, wrote Barry O’Meara, Napoleon’s doctor. The 53rd’s camp at Deadwood was equally infested and, in his memoirs, O’Meara describes a rat hunt led by Captain Poppleton.

One of the restrictions that particularly irked Napoleon was the need to be accompanied by Poppleton whenever he went riding. ‘Not that I have any objection to Poppleton’, he said, ‘I love a good soldier of any nation.’ On one occasion, Napoleon suddenly turned his horse and galloped up a steep slope. Unable to follow him, Poppleton hurried off to the Governor. ‘Sir, I have lost the Emperor!’ he reported, only to be told to go back to Longwood where he found Napoleon at lunch.

Whilst the former Emperor may have had fun at Poppleton’s expense, he also appears to have regarded the officer with some affection. Nevertheless, he also used him for his own purposes. Lowe was furious on learning that Napoleon had borrowed a case or two of

claret from Poppleton, and that the latter had ‘often lent candles, as well as bread, butter, poultry and even salt’. Equally, it would not have pleased Lowe to know that Napoleon held his ‘red regiment’, as he referred to the 53rd, in high esteem. ‘They are a regiment of brave men and have fought valiantly.’ Lowe would also not have cared for Napoleon’s ‘high approbation’ to have been referred to by Lord Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, in the House of Lords.

### **‘Adieu, mon ami’**

When, in July 1817, the time came for the 53rd to be relieved as guard regiment, Napoleon asked that the officers be allowed to wait upon him. The regimental archives note that: ‘After wishing them every happiness and prosperity, he thanked them for the attention and respect he had always experienced.’ He then presented Poppleton with a gold snuff box, saying: ‘*Adieu, mon ami, voilà la seule bagatelle que me reste*’ (Farewell, my friend; this is the one trinket I have left). Lowe was not so generous and, suspecting that Poppleton was carrying home secret papers from Napoleon, set a charge against him. Bathurst, however, rejected it. This was to be the final twist in the brief triangular relationship between Lowe, Napoleon and the ‘Old Five and Threepennies’.

**Guy Sjögren** is a doctoral research student at the Centre for West Midlands History, the University of Birmingham.

### **Further reading:**

**Lucia Elizabeth Abell**, *Napoleon and Betsy: Recollections of Napoleon on St Helena*, edited by Alan Sutton (Fonthill, 2012).

**Paul F. Brunyee**, *Napoleon’s Britons and the St Helena Decision* (The History Press, 2009).

**Brian Unwin**, *Terrible Exile: The Last Days of Napoleon on St Helena* (Tauris, 2010).

La Fondation Napoléon at [www.napoleon.org](http://www.napoleon.org).

Further information on the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot can be accessed online via [www.shropshireregimentalmuseum.co.uk](http://www.shropshireregimentalmuseum.co.uk).