

THE RANK AND FILE

Andrew Bamford

Soldiering was a hard way of life in 1815. Despite this, men continued to enlist during the Napoleonic Wars in order to escape unemployment, see the world, and do their patriotic duty. Among these rank-and-file soldiers were men from the West Midlands, some as young as fifteen.



Recruiting sergeants' appeals to patriotism were hard to resist. The fluctuations of the agricultural year and economic hardship drove many to sign up. *He won't be a soldier*. Aquatint by Schutz after Rowlandson.

The names and careers of Wellington's generals are well-documented. For more junior officers, we at least have names and service histories, and not infrequently private letters as well. Trying to get a feel for the man in the ranks, however, is more complex, and not helped by misapplication of Wellington's much-quoted characterisation of them as the 'scum of the earth'. Even Wellington went on to say that service in the Army had made 'fine fellows' of unpromising material, and in fact the ranks of the British Army in 1815 contained men from a variety of walks of life, who had enlisted for all manner of reasons.

Understanding why men signed up is difficult. On the face of it, a soldier's life was hard, and military service carried an element of social stigma. Yet there were certainly those who signed up for patriotic motives, a sense of adventure, or a fancy for the military life. Of course, a recruiting sergeant's patter made the most of these elements, whilst downplaying the reality of hard marches and short rations that made up much of a soldier's life on campaign.

Military service had traditionally been a last resort for those unable to find work in civilian life, and the changes inherent in the Industrial Revolution meant that just as some trades thrived – Birmingham, for example, was a centre for the production of edged weapons, and did very well out of the increased wartime demand – others slumped.

Weavers were particularly hard hit, finding themselves replaced by mechanisation, and formed a sizeable proportion of recruits, whilst the cycles of the agricultural year helped ensure a steady stream of unemployed farm labourers seeking to don a red coat.

As the Napoleonic Wars progressed, however, more and more was also made of the militia regiments raised as a home defence force. Men were called up by ballot for militia duty, but efforts were then made to persuade those who proved to be good soldiers to transfer to the regular army. Already trained, militiamen became an increasingly important source of recruits as time went on, and almost all of the regiments that fought at Waterloo had topped up their ranks with militia drafts before embarking on campaign.

West Midlands soldiers at Waterloo

Finding West Midlanders who fought in the ranks at Waterloo is not straightforward. Many of Britain's infantry regiments – of which there were 104 in 1815 – had a county designation as well as their regimental number. Thus, the 6th and 24th

were assigned to Warwickshire, the 29th to Worcestershire, and the 38th and 64th to Staffordshire. None of these regiments fought at Waterloo, although some of them joined Wellington's command in time for the final advance on Paris.

Some of the county designations, however, had in many cases been only nominal when they were assigned back in the eighteenth century, and were even less relevant by 1815. Some counties – Derbyshire, for one – had no assigned regiment, and many regiments including the Foot Guards, the rifles, and the cavalry, had no assigned county. Almost without exception, English regiments had a large Irish contingent, as Ireland remained an excellent recruiting area.

A sample of Birmingham recruits from 1809 shows that out of 57 men who signed up, only five joined the local 6th Foot (1st Warwickshire), which in fact did most of its recruiting for that year in Manchester. On the other hand, no fewer than 31 Birmingham men joined the 32nd Foot (Cornwall), and another thirteen the 3rd Foot Guards (Scots Guards). The remainder were spread amongst the 1st Foot (Royal Scots), and the 8th Foot and 7th Hussars, neither of which had any territorial affiliation.

From this selection of regiments, only the 6th and 8th did not fight at Waterloo. Bearing in mind that this is just a single year's sample, it is inevitable that Wellington's army in 1815 contained a good proportion of men from the towns and villages of the West Midlands.

A recent study of the second battalion of the 69th Foot (South Lincolnshire), which fought at Quatre Bras and Waterloo, demonstrates this point. Amongst a rank-and-file strength drawn from across the British Isles, we find Private John Stokes of Kidderminster, aged only seventeen but already with two years' service under his belt, and Private Joseph Dale from Stone in Staffordshire. Stokes served for a further 21 years after Waterloo, but Dale was evidently not cut out for soldiering since he deserted less than year after the battle.

A young man's war

That so young a soldier as John Stokes fought at Waterloo may seem surprising, but in many ways much of Wellington's army was composed of inexperienced regiments containing many young recruits. Although

SOLDIER STORIES I - THE ANONYMOUS INFANTRY

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Little is known about many of the rank-and-file soldiers who fought at Waterloo but amongst their numbers were men from the towns and villages of the West Midlands. *Battle of Waterloo*, aquatint by W.T. Fry after Dighton.

most of the cavalry regiments were veteran units that had fought in the Peninsular War, much of Wellington's Peninsular infantry had, after the victory of 1814, been sent to help defend Canada from American invasion.

Although known as the War of 1812, the Anglo-American conflict did not end until early 1815, and many regiments were still on their way back to Europe when Waterloo was fought. The core of Wellington's infantry was drawn from an army that had been scraped together in late 1813 to help liberate the Netherlands, and which had remained in the Low Countries ever since, topped up with regiments of Peninsular veterans that had either never been sent to North America, or else had made it back to Europe in time.

Even the rawest battalions had a leavening of veterans. The third battalion of the 14th Foot (Buckinghamshire), raised only in 1814, was described by one general as a set of boys, and disparaged by more seasoned comrades as 'peasants' fresh from the plough. Yet in its ranks we find

veteran Private Thomas Williams from Newcastle-under-Lyme, aged 38 and a soldier for six years. Possibly the oldest man in the battalion, his experience nevertheless did not save him and he was one of fourteen men to lose their lives as the 14th helped hold the right flank of Wellington's line throughout the fighting at Waterloo.

Andrew Bamford is a military historian and the author of several books on the Napoleonic Wars, including *Sickness, Suffering and the Sword: The British Regiment on Campaign (1808-1815)* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

Further reading:

Antony Brett-James, *Life in Wellington's Army* (Donovan, 1994).

Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *Redcoats: The British Soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars* (Pen & Sword, 2012).

Richard Holmes, *Redcoat. The British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket* (Harper Collins, 2001).

Sir Charles Oman, *Wellington's Army 1809-1814* (Edward Arnold, 1913).

All of the soldiers who were awarded the campaign medal for taking part in the Battle of Waterloo, including many of the rank and file, are recorded in the Waterloo Medal Roll. More information about the document and the Medal can be found by entering 'Waterloo' into the search box of the Royal Mint's Museum website at www.royalmintmuseum.org.uk.