

VOICES FROM THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

By

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IN AUGUST 1815, the Prince Regent instituted the Order of the Guelphs, as a means of rewarding the services of His Majesty's Hanoverian subjects. There were three classes of the Order, similar to those of the recently re-organised Order of the Bath, but in addition the Guelphic Order contained a medal. This latter was to be 'for such non-commissioned officers and privates as shall have distinguished themselves by valour or prudence in the field.'

Awards of this Guelphic Medal were made from 1818 to the end of 1843 from submissions by former members of the King's German Legion and Hanoverian Army. Although the individual could himself apply for the award, his statements had to be supported wherever possible, by two officers, witnesses at the time the deed or deeds, were performed. The originals of all these applications were destroyed in 1943, but fortunately the majority of them are to be found either complete, or by extract, in a little-known book written in 1846 by Ludwig Von Wissell, a former King's German Artillery officer. Useful material is to be found too in both Beamish's and Schwertfeger's histories of the King's German Legion. Many interesting deeds and facts are related and the main value is that these statements are authenticated and thus can be taken as accurate accounts of the time. If only the Order of the Bath had had a similar Medal, we should now have been able to read the equivalent material submitted by British soldiers. However, the King's German Legion were reliable units of the British Army, and fought integrated in British formations, so that we may consider their armament, organisation and methods to be very similar, if not identical.

Among these submissions and reports are a number from the King's German Artillery (KGA) and some of these give a useful insight into the way in which the guns were fought.

A selection follows:—

1. *2 Foot Company, KGA*

'At Talavera Sergeant Bostelmann with four

gunners and four workmen was entrusted with the supply of the Battery from the ammunition waggons in its rear. The enemy's bombs had set fire to the dry heath and the flames spreading, Bostelmann was constantly obliged to change the position of the waggons, in order to keep them away from the burning heath. Just as four full limbers had been sent off to the Battery, the enemy, directing their fire upon the ammunition park, set the whole space between and around the waggons in flames. Two waggons, the limbers of which had not yet been sent off, could be immediately removed, and they reached the high road in safety; but the empty limbers of the remaining four not having yet returned from the Battery, the danger became imminent, and the quick explosion of these waggons appeared inevitable.

'Bostelmann, determined to attempt the presentation of the waggons, regardless of the personal danger with which the effort would evidently be attended. Of his assistants, the four gunners only were available, the workmen having run away; and with the aid of these four men, Luttermann, Zingreve, Warnecke and Lind, the gallant Sergeant succeeded in removing the heavily loaded ammunition waggons through the burning heath and placing them on a spot in the rear, which a little trench had preserved from the flames. Here they awaited the empty limbers, which at length arriving, enabled them to remove the waggons to the high road in safety.

'This important service of the Sergeant and gunners met with a deserved acknowledgement from Major Hartmann, who called them forward and publicly expressed to them that approbation which their spirited conduct so well merited. Bostelmann was afterwards rewarded with a commission.'

(Beamish.)

Gunner Zingreve only obtained the Guelphic Medal for this service in October 1843 after changes in the rules for the award made it easier to claim for deeds performed before 1813; the other two gunners may well

have been dead by the time the rules were altered. The men called ‘workmen’ by Beamish should more properly have been termed ‘tradesmen’, ie. saddlers, farriers etc, who considered themselves to be noncombatants. This extract from Beamish gives a clear picture of the ‘normal’ supply of ammunition by the sending forward of full limbers from the wagon line to the gun line and should be compared with the unusual procedure at Waterloo, described below:—

2. *Captain Andrew Cleeves, commanding 4 Foot Company, KGA*

‘When enemy cavalry attacks became more frequent, the battery moved into a position between the squares, where they remained, until they had expended all their ammunition. *Then they retired to the area of Mount St Jean to obtain a new supply.* However it was not until evening, when the enemy had made his last attack, that they were able to come back into action.’ (Schwertfeger.)

At Waterloo, instead of full limbers being sent forward it appears that Batteries expended their ammunition, then returned to a suitable position to refill before returning to the front line. That this particular Battery was not alone in adopting such a procedure is shown by the next extract:—

3. *Major Henry Kuhlmann, Commanding 2nd Troop, KGA*

‘Later in the afternoon . . . an enemy attack took us unexpectedly in the left flank and *made it necessary for us (both Batteries under Lieutenant Colonel Adye) to withdraw.*

‘A short distance away we found a reasonably free space, already occupied by some other Batteries, where, so far as circumstances allowed, we sorted ourselves out.

About this time Colonel Adye brought up the English Battery, which had retired further back, and ordered them to hand over some ammunition to us, as they had fired fewer rounds on the 16th. When this had taken place Colonel Adye led both Batteries forward to re-occupy our original positions, where we rejoined the battle.’ (Schwertfeger.)

(The second Battery in the 1st Division was Captain Sandham’s Brigade. It was fortunate that so many of the horse artillery troops had been re-equipped with 9 prs and so Kuhlmann was able to be re-supplied by Sandham!)

So, here we have evidence that at least

three batteries, both KGA and RA, moved out of action to replenish ammunition. Possibly the congestion, confusion and general lack of visibility on this particular battlefield made such a method the only one possible at the time.

The extracts which follow, in some cases, refer to batteries pulling back to refill, but also give an insight into action taken when enemy cavalry attacks developed:—

4. *Bombardier Henry Niemeyer, 1 Troop, KGA*

‘Before coming into action, this Battery remained for a long time in the second line and thereby suffered many losses through enemy artillery fire.

When at last they advanced to the first line, from which some batteries were going back through lack of ammunition, they came under a violent fire . . .

. . . Niemeyer himself received a case-shot wound in the left calf, nevertheless did not leave his duty and in the evening *brought up the reserve ammunition, which in the confusion had been stationed one hour from the battlefield.*’ (Von Wissell.)

5. *Bombardier Christian Nolte, 2 Troop, KGA*

‘Nolte commanded one gun of my section with distinction. The courageous enemy cavalry charged four times into the Battery; the first time they came from the left side and were for a long time mistaken for Belgians; our people threw them back, but were then menaced from the flank, and the cavalry of both sides pushed each other time and again from one side to the other, so that the Battery was prevented from firing. The gunners ran to the squares behind them and back in fine fashion to their guns, as soon as the latter were free from the enemy. Here Nolte was always the last to leave his gun and the first to get back to it. On one occasion he had to throw himself underneath, as he could no longer get to the rear.

Soon afterwards the Battery, with others, retired so as to replenish ammunition.’

(Von Wissell.)

6. *Driver Andrew Hanke, 4 Foot Company, KGA*

‘Several times the courageous enemy cavalry broke into this Battery. *Hanke was alert and quick to bring his limber up to the*

gun so that this alone of the six in the Battery was able to be taken into the squares behind.'

(Von Wissell.)

7. *Sergeant Christian Deneke, 4 Foot Company, KGA*

'Enemy cavalry approached unexpectedly from the left flank. Deneke commanded the howitzer on the right flank and had not noticed the approach of the enemy, being engaged on another target. One of the drivers, Eickmann, however did so and immediately came up with the limber and shouted to his Commander that the enemy had reached the left of the Battery. *Because of the soft muddy ground, the gun could not be limbered up quickly enough; several gunners sprang on to the limbers with the rammer and hurried to the square. During this time, Deneke fired off the loaded round and then threw himself under the gun.*

On subsequent attacks, Eickmann was equally prompt at bringing the limber up and the gun was able to be withdrawn.'

(Von Wissell.)

These last two statements, 6 and 7, once again show a departure from normal procedure. On the approach of enemy cavalry the usual practice was to remain firing until the last moment and for the gunners then to take refuge in the nearest infantry square. It would seem unnecessarily risky to move guns each time, but these two accounts by men of 4 Foot Company say that this was done and the words were endorsed by officers of the Battery present at the time. So we must accept this as the truth, but almost certainly only in respect of this one unit.

Two main points have emerged so far, first the unusual method of ammunition replenishment by both RA and KGA batteries at Waterloo and second, the withdrawal of both men and guns by one battery on the approach of enemy cavalry. Both these involve the movement of men and guns from the firing line, when such moves might not be expected. Could it possibly have been sights such as described above, that misled the Duke of Wellington to write the following most unjust criticisms of the Royal Artillery at Waterloo?

'To tell you the truth, I was not very well pleased with the Artillery in the Battle of Waterloo. . . . The French cavalry charged . . . within a few yards of our guns. In some

instances they were in actual possession of our guns. We could not expect the artillerymen to remain at their guns in such a case; but I had a right to expect that the officers and men of the Artillery would do as I did, and as all the staff did, that is, take shelter in the squares of the Infantry. . . . But they did no such thing; they ran off the field entirely, taking with them limbers, ammunition, and everything; and . . .

Mind my dear Lord, I do not mean to complain; but what I have above-mentioned is a fact known to many; and it would not do to reward a Corps under such circumstances. The Artillery like others, behaved most gallantly; when a misfortune of this kind has occurred, a Corps must not be rewarded.'

These extracts are from a letter written by the Duke of Wellington to Lord Mulgrave, Master General of the Ordnance, from Paris on 21st December 1815. It was first made public in 1872, when the 'Supplementary Despatches' were published. The criticisms came as a great surprise to the Artillery, whose conduct at Waterloo was generally considered to have been both gallant and effective. The circumstances in which the letter came to be written are as follows.

After the victory of Vittoria in 1813, special gratuities had been granted to senior officers of the Royal Artillery, including those commanding troops and Companies. The Duke of Wellington had not been consulted, since the Ordnance Corps (Artillery and Engineers) came directly under the control of the Master General, and had not approved. After Waterloo, a similar petition had been made for some such reward, but, on this occasion, Lord Mulgrave had referred the matter to the Duke. The passages quoted are from the latter's reply.

Various writers over the years have dealt with the very serious allegations made, among them Major Duncan, Lieutenant-Colonel Hime and, more recently, Sir James Marshall-Cornwall. They are able to point out the inconsistencies in the letter, and the obvious injustice done to the Royal Artillery, by quoting eye-witnesses, but they do not totally refute the Duke's statement that he saw guns and gunners leave the field. However, the Duke must have seen some movements, other than by Dutch-Belgian units, to make such positive accusations. The

extracts given may describe what he saw and, understandably, misinterpreted.

One further extract is of interest in another way. It was acknowledged during the Peninsular War that the best horsemasters were the KGL cavalry; the best units in the British Army in this respect being the RHA! Among foot batteries, the advantage again lay with the Germans in the KGA, because their drivers were an integral part of the battery and not attached from a separate Corps of Royal Artillery Drivers.

8. *Driver Sergeant Henry John Duensing, 4 Foot Company, KGA*

‘The Fourth Foot Battery, during the campaigns in the Peninsular and France, acquired a reputation not just for their artillery achievements under fire, but also because their teams were always in better condition than any others despite long marches and shortage of fodder. In the Battle of Toulouse, the artillery had to move forward out of a valley up on to a difficult height and, on the way, cross a deep ditch. The Battery crossed the latter and moved on to the hill in excellent order; not so an English battery, their horses did not have sufficient strength, and required the help of the German teams. When towards the close of the battle an English battery had to retire with their infantry, their horses were so exhausted, that they only were able to perform their duty with the assistance of the Germans. This was both a source of pride and pleasure to the Battery.

A great part of the credit, which came to the Battery through the condition of their horses, was ascribed by the officers themselves to this efficient NCO . . .’ (Von Wissell.)

The 4th Foot Company was for four years the divisional artillery of the 4th Division and much esteemed and respected by the latter. The first mention of help to an English Battery almost certainly refers to Brandreth’s Brigade.

It is hoped that these extracts will have been of general interest. They should have at least the merit of novelty, since Beamish is long out of print and the other two sources have never been translated, as far as is known.

References

1. **Major F. Duncan**; “History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery”, Volume II, Appendix A. John Murray, London 1879.
2. **Lieutenant-Colonel H W L Hime**; “History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery, 1815-1853”, Appendix D. Longmans Green and Co., London 1908.
3. **General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall**; “The Royal Regiment in the Waterloo Campaign, RA Journal, Volume XCII.
4. **B Schwertfeger**; “Geschichte der Koniglich Deutschen Legion, 1803-1816”, Hannover, 1907.
5. **L Von Wissel**; “Ruhmwürdige Thateu welche in der letzten Kriegen von Unteroffizieren und Soldaten der englisch-deutschen Legion und der hannoverschen Armee Werichtet Sind”, Hannover, 1846.
6. **N Ludlow Beamish**; “History of the King’s German Legion”, London 1832 & 1837.