

The Napoleon Series

Fops under Fire: British Drum-Majors in Action during the Napoleonic Wars

By [Eamonn O’Keeffe](#)

In the performance theatre of the early nineteenth-century British military spectacle, drum-majors took centre stage. Sporting cocked hats and silver-tipped canes, these princes of pomp and circumstance uncased and lodged the regimental colours for parade and marched at the head of the battalion during reviews and inspections.

“It should never be objected”, wrote Captain Bennet Cuthbertson, that a drum-major was “too great a coxcomb”, using a contemporary synonym for a dandy. On the contrary, a drum-major’s dress should promote vanity and self-importance, for it was “absolutely necessary for him to strut, and think himself a man of consequence” when leading his drummers on parade.¹

A drum-major’s appearance was a source of regimental pride. According to a 1782 satirical work, this foppish figure was “the *Paris*, if not the *Adonis*” of a battalion, for “every judge of discipline will estimate the goodness of the corps by the taste and splendor of [his] trappings.”² Unsurprisingly, the prestige associated with well-dressed drum-majors encouraged lavish expenditure; in 1813 the 1st Devon Militia paid the eye-watering sum of seventeen pounds, six shillings and eight pence for their “drum-major’s suit”, ceremonial baldric and “fine silver-laced hat” – more than six times the cost of an ordinary drummer’s cap and coat.³ This bill excluded the price of the drum-major’s finely engraved silver-mounted staff or cane, often almost as tall or taller than its wielder.⁴

Yet such showy extravagance sometimes caused confusion. Drum-Major Nicholas Thorpe of the 1/88th Connaught Rangers, resplendent in a silver-laced coat and weighty cocked hat, was mistaken for a general officer by the Portuguese on the battalion’s arrival in Lisbon in 1809. According to Ensign William Grattan, some locals even took the drum-major for the Earl of Moira,⁵ much to Thorpe’s gratification.⁶

¹ Bennet Cuthbertson, Cuthbertson's System for the Complete Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry (Bristol: Rouths and Nelson, 1776), p.10.

² [Francis Grose], Advice to the Officers of the British Army (London: Richardson, 1782), p.75.

³ Henry Walrond, Historical Records of the 1st Devon Militia (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897), p.292.

⁴ Susan Sibbald described 15th Regiment Drum-Major Cook wielding “a cane almost as tall as himself” while John Shipp recalled that the 22nd drum-major’s “silver-headed stick” was “some seven feet long”. Susan Sibbald, The Memoirs of Susan Sibbald, 1783-1812, ed. Francis Paget Hett (London: Lane, 1926), pp.255-56 and John Shipp, Memoirs of the Extraordinary Military Career of John Shipp, Vol. I, (London: Hurst, Chance and Co, 1829), p.38.

⁵ The Honourable Francis Rawdon, 2nd Earl of Moira, later 1st Marquess of Hastings (1754-1826).

⁶ William Grattan, Adventures of the Connaught Rangers: From 1808 to 1814, Vol. II, (London: Colburn, 1847), p.206.

But Britons too were sometimes prone to such misunderstandings; the 89th's drum-major boarded a newly-arrived Royal Navy frigate in 1799 at Messina to fetch his wife, one of the ship's passengers, only to be greeted with full military honours. The Captain and his assembled officers, accompanied by a guard of marines, bowed before their befuddled guest, whom they had mistaken for the Governor of Messina on account of his "magnificent dress".⁷



Drum Major and Pioneer of a Regiment of the Line

⁷ "The Early Life of a Sailor", ed. Lt.-Col. Wilkie, Colburn's United Service Magazine (June 1847), p.265 and Marcus Cunliffe, The Royal Irish Fusiliers, 1793-1950 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p.13.

by Charles Hamilton Smith. Courtesy of René Chartrand

Enterprising drum-majors may well have exploited such cases of mistaken identity to their own advantage, but military fashion also had its apparent hazards. One regimental history recounts the surely apocryphal tale of a drum-major whose uniform could not accommodate his growing girth; his coat eventually became so tight that “he went to hospital and died, a victim of ‘drum-major dandyism.’”⁸

But if fashion could be fatal, what about combat? While the sartorial splendour of drum-majors is well-known, what did these Napoleonic kings of bling actually do under fire? William Lawrence, that endearingly roguish sergeant of the 40th, believed he had the answer: “They used to say that the three scarcest things to be seen in an army were a dead parson, drum-major, or a woman”, as none of them were “often to be seen on a battlefield”.⁹

Another notorious Napoleonic memoirist, Sergeant Thomas Morris of the 2/73rd, echoed these sentiments when recounting an incident from the oft-forgotten 1813-14 British campaign in the Low Countries.¹⁰ A drum-major in Morris’ brigade, despite not having “been within the smell of powder” during an engagement near Antwerp early in 1814, recounted his own apparently courageous martial exploits in an “eloquent” but “purely imaginary” letter to his wife. Having “rushed on” with his regiment during a charge, he had ostensibly suffered several wounds (all of them, rest assured, trifling) and personally seized an enemy standard. Naturally, he expected to be rewarded with a commission for his bravery. Unfortunately, as Morris relates, the drum-major’s deception was revealed when his obviously delighted wife submitted the stirring letter to a newspaper, a copy of which soon reached his regiment’s officers’ mess. Word of the drum-major’s tall tales soon spread throughout the brigade, and “the poor fellow was forever afterwards pestered with inquiries as to when he expected his commission”!¹¹

Such ridicule of their battlefield truancy was not entirely unfounded, for drum-majors were not expected to risk their skins by actively participating in combat. Contrary to popular belief, drummers and bandsmen did not play patriotic tunes on the battlefield, although some of the former relayed field calls like ‘advance’ or ‘cease fire’. Most drummers and musicians instead occupied themselves with the grim task of carrying injured soldiers from the field. According to Williamson’s Elements of Military Arrangement: “In action the

⁸ James Clark, Historical Record and Regimental Memoir of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, formerly known as the 21st Royal North British Fusiliers (Edinburgh, Banks & Co., 1885), p.131.

⁹ William Lawrence, The Autobiography of Sergeant William Lawrence, ed. George Nugent Bankes, (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1886), p.146.

¹⁰ For an excellent modern account of the campaign, see Andrew Bamford, A Bold and Ambitious Enterprise: The British Army in the Low Countries, 1813-14 (Barnsley: Frontline, 2013).

¹¹ Thomas Morris, Recollections of military service in 1813, 1814, & 1815 (London: Madden and Co., 1845), p.89-90.

drum-major puts himself in the rear of the battalion, with all the drummers, except the orderly [drummer], to assist the wounded.”¹²

So goes the theory at least, but what roles did drum-majors perform on the battlefield in practice? Some insight can be gleaned from the testimony of 32nd Drum-Major Samuel Pollard, who described his experiences during the Battle of Waterloo at the general court martial of Brevet-Major Charles Hames two months later.

As Pollard recalled, at about two or three on the afternoon of 18 June 1815, the 32nd, then lying down behind a hedge to the left of La Haye Sainte, advanced about one hundred yards into a road and over another hedge. But, as Pollard testified, a man of the 95th called out, “Some of your men are not over the first hedge yet!” On hearing this, the drum-major doubled back and encountered “ten or twelve men lying down”, Brevet-Major Hames allegedly among them. Pollard challenged two of the defaulters on their failure to advance with the regiment; they claimed to have been wounded, but neither were able to show any evidence of injury, although both of their muskets had malfunctioned. Pollard fetched new weapons, but by the time he had returned to the hedge all but his two interlocutors had already decamped to join the regiment. Handing over the fresh firelocks, Pollard forced the remaining pair to accompany him towards the 32nd’s front line.¹³

This brief episode, which absorbed “about ten minutes” of Pollard’s time, reveals much about a drum-major’s duties in action. Rather than leading a stirring battlefield rendition of ‘Britons Strike Home’ as Hollywood might imagine, this drum-major was effectively acting as a supernumerary sergeant, making himself useful behind the lines as required, in this case by haranguing would-be shirkers.

Pollard gave no impression of being in any immediate danger, but nonetheless noted that “the Balls were passing very fast.” Likewise, Drum-Major William Butterworth of the 12th Regiment recalled “several balls” whizzing past him or landing at his feet during a 1794 engagement in Flanders, although, confident of divine protection, he claimed to have shown no fear of death.¹⁴

Instances of drum-majors being wounded or killed on the battlefield appear comparatively infrequent. While comprehensive data for the entire Napoleonic-era army has not yet been compiled, the nearly complete [War of 1812 Casualties Database](#) does not list any drum-majors who were killed in action during this 1812-15 Anglo-American conflict, although several died of natural causes. However, the absence of battlefield fatalities should not be surprising given that drum-majors were themselves rare creatures - just one per battalion.¹⁵

¹² John Williamson, *The Elements of Military Arrangement, and of the Discipline of War*, adapted to the *Practice of the British Infantry* (London: Egerton, 1791), p.54.

¹³ WO 71/242, The General Court Martial of Brevet-Major Charles Hames, 32nd Regiment, The National Archives (TNA) (UK).

¹⁴ William Butterworth, *The Conversion, Experience and Labours of Willm. Butterworth, Drum-Major, in the 12th Regiment of Foot...* (Lees: Nicholson, 1807), p.18.

¹⁵ Casualties amongst other staff serjeants, including serjeant-majors, during the War of 1812 were also comparatively rare. See the War of 1812 Casualty Database for further information.

Yet while Serjeant Lawrence was evidently correct in claiming that a drum-major's corpse was a scarce spectacle on the battlefield, these musical warriors were still occasionally injured or killed under fire. Knowledge of his status as a statistical anomaly must have come as small comfort to Drum-Major Thomas Vipond of the 2/30th Regiment, who lost both legs to a cannonball on 21 March 1814 when the French 74-gun *L'Anversois*, anchored on the river Scheldt, bombarded his regiment's encampment at the ruined Fort Frederick Henry northwest of Antwerp.¹⁶ Vipond, a Manchester cotton spinner, died of his injuries the same day and was buried with full military honours. As a mark of respect for their veteran drum-major, the battalion raised funds to support his widow Eliza, who soon received these contributions, along with her husband's back pay, at the 30th's regimental depot in England.¹⁷

Drum-Major William Sunderland, a cotton worker born at Wragby near Wakefield in Yorkshire, served with the 14th Foot's inexperienced 3rd Battalion at Waterloo, aged twenty-five.¹⁸ Already a ten-year veteran of the regiment, he had previously seen action with the 2nd Battalion at Corunna and Walcheren.¹⁹ Ensign George Keppel, later 6th Earl of Albemarle, fondly recalled Sunderland – a “fine man”, who was clad “in white, with a cocked hat and large silver epaulettes” at Waterloo.²⁰ Stationed on the extreme right of the Anglo-Allied line near Hougoumont, the 3/14th passed the morning of 18 June in relative safety. However, the corps was ordered to advance at about three in the afternoon, exposing the battalion, then formed in square, to an intense artillery bombardment. Drummers were typically stationed in the centre of a square, but even those so cocooned were not immune to enemy fire. For instance, as Keppel recalled, 14th Ensign Alfred Cooper, “the shortest man in the regiment”, was wounded by a French shot despite standing “in the very centre of the square”.²¹ Likewise, a 51st bugler, presumably Galway-born Stephen Quin, was decapitated by a cannon ball at the very moment of rejoicing for his safety on entering the 14th's square, spattering the entire battalion, and especially the colour party, with his brains.²² It was perhaps at this juncture that Drum-Major Sunderland received a “severe wound on the right temple”, an injury of sufficient severity to necessitate his discharge from the army in 1817.²³ Sunderland's close brush with death also left him with a scar – proof of his bona fides as a ‘Waterloo man’. But

¹⁶ WO 25/1695, 2/30th Casualty Returns, TNA and Ensign Macready's recollections in *Historical Records of the XXX [30th] Regiment* (London: Clowes and Sons, 1887), p.111. See also Carole Divall, *Redcoats Against Napoleon: The 30th Regiment During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009) and Bamford, *A Bold and Ambitious Enterprise*. Serjeant Morris may also have referred to Vipond's melancholy fate, although he provides the wrong dates. See Morris, *Recollections of Military Service*, p.105.

¹⁷ WO 25/1695, 2/30th Casualty Returns, TNA.

¹⁸ WO 97/358/111, TNA.

¹⁹ Steve Brown, “A Very Pretty Little Battalion”: The 3/14th Regiment of Foot in the Waterloo Campaign, *The Napoleon Series*. http://www.napoleon-series.org/military/organization/Britain/Infantry/c_3-14Waterloo.html

²⁰ Henry O'Donnell, *Historical Records of the 14th Regiment* (Devonport: A.H. Swiss, 1893), p.280.

²¹ George Keppel, 6th Earl of Albemarle, *Fifty Years of My Life* (New York: Holt, 1877), p.103.

²² *Ibid*, pp.102-3 and WO 25/1843, 51st Casualty Returns, TNA. See also Harriet Ward, *Recollections of an Old Soldier: A Biographical Sketch of the late Colonel Tidy* (London: Bentley, 1849), p.103.

²³ WO 97/358/111, TNA.

while recuperating during the Allied occupation, as Keppel reports, Sunderland at least enjoyed that seemingly perennial perk of drum-majoring: his magnificent uniform caused him to be “taken for an officer of high rank” in post-war Paris.²⁴

The 3/14th's square at Waterloo became an unfortunately convenient target for enemy fire, but such a formation might well have saved the skin of Glasgow-born 2/73rd Drum-Major Robert Bain, killed two days earlier at Quatre Bras.²⁵ Kellerman's French cuirassiers, their approach shielded by tall rye, caught the 2/73rd, part of Halkett's 5th Brigade, out of square late in the afternoon. The regiment was thrown into “the utmost confusion” and dashed for the safety of the nearby woods, the Bois de Bossu.²⁶ The precise circumstances of Bain's death are unknown; he may have been cut down by cuirassiers or killed in the crossfire during the closing phases of the battle.

Clearly, some Drum-Majors did indeed make the ultimate sacrifice, and undoubtedly more such examples could be found across the period. Yet while Vipond, Sunderland and Bain were all maimed or killed in the line of duty, there is no indication that any of the three were actively engaged in combat at the time. Several other drum-majors, however, refused to confine themselves to unglamorous auxiliary tasks, choosing instead to place themselves directly in harm's way on the battlefield.

The aforementioned Nicholas Thorpe of the 1/88th Connaught Rangers, apparently the son of a Lancashire gentleman, was one such dauntless drum-major. If Grattan's account may be trusted, Thorpe's experience of being mistaken for a high-ranking officer in Portugal did wonders for his ego, leading him to scorn his lowly drummers in favour of more exalted ambitions.²⁷ He sought to prove his mettle at the Battle of Bussaco on 27 September 1810. Cannon's regimental history describes how Thorpe, having been “ordered with the band and drummers to the rear”, obtained permission to join the ranks of his company and behaved with the “utmost gallantry” under fire.²⁸ Grattan claimed that Thorpe placed himself at the head of the regiment, plumed hat in hand, crying “The Connaught Rangers forever!”²⁹ The regiment's sergeant-major having been killed alongside him, the daring drum-major was promoted to the dead man's post.

Thorpe, clearly a larger than life character, also eloped with Jacintha Cherito, the daughter of a wealthy Portuguese magistrate, while still serving as drum-major. He concealed his bride-to-be from her irate father by dressing her up as a black-faced cymbalist in the band.³⁰ Thorpe's bravery at the Battle of Orthez earned him a commission, but his luck ran out at Toulouse on 10 April 1814, when, in Grattan's eyes, the valorous sergeant-major took one risk too many and was sliced in half by a cannon

²⁴ O'Donnell, Historical Records of the 14th Regiment, p.280.

²⁵ WO 12/8062, 2/73rd Pay Lists, TNA and Alan Lagden and John Sly, The 2/73rd at Waterloo (1998), p.10.

²⁶ Morris, Recollections of Military Service, p.197.

²⁷ Grattan, Adventures of the Connaught Rangers, p.206.

²⁸ Richard Cannon, Historical Record of the Eighty-Eighth Regiment of Foot (London: Clowes and Sons, 1838), p.55.

²⁹ Grattan, Adventures of the Connaught Rangers, pp.206-7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.204-5.

ball.³¹ The announcement of his ensigncy in the London Gazette came too late for Thorpe, but proved “a great consolation” to his Iberian widow, who was apparently able to reconcile her father to her life choices by citing her late husband’s belated pedigree as an officer.³²

Drum-majors, however, faced some competition in the valour department from bandmasters, who led and instructed regimental bands of music. The London Morning Post reported on a party hosted by the British Resident at Poonah (Pune) in India at which the musicians of the 2/1st Grenadier Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry performed a well-reviewed piece composed by the corps’ own bandmaster in celebration of the recent British victory over the Marathas at Koregaon on 1 January 1818.³³ The newspaper noted that the gifted composer had been present at the battle, “where he distinguished himself by the skill and execution of his performances on an instrument called a *musket*.”

Another instance of drum-majorly daring took place on the other side of the world on 27 April 1813 during the Battle of York when an American army attacked modern-day Toronto. Having failed to check the enemy on the beach or in the clearing at Fort Rouillé, the British fell back to the Western Battery near the site of the modern-day Prince’s Gate at Toronto’s Exhibition Place. Supported here by three artillery pieces, the defenders hoped to make a stand against the advancing American column until the accidental explosion of a portable powder magazine killed or maimed dozens of men.³⁴ The guns were abandoned as the enemy drew near, but according to an anonymous eyewitness account, in the form of an 1833 letter to the editor in the U.S. Military and Naval Magazine, the “gallant Drum Major of the 8th or King’s Regiment” returned in “full costume” to the stricken battery.³⁵ At the moment of “raising the linstock” to fire a parting shot into the advancing American column, this “brave soldier” was brought down by a skilled rifle shot from Second Lieutenant David Riddle of the 15th U.S. Infantry. The drum-major was captured but was treated with “marked attention” in hospital on account of his courage and happily made a full recovery.

Yet the drum-major in question was not William Ankers of the 8th King’s, who was also present at the battle, but Thomas Kelly of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. The American confusion is however understandable given that the two corps, both royal regiments with blue facings, had near-identical uniforms. Kelly, born at St. John’s in Newfoundland and approximately twenty-five years of age at the Battle of York, first joined the army in 1798 and had served for a dozen years as a drummer before his appointment as the regiment’s drum-major.³⁶ He was wounded and taken prisoner on 27 April, but was

³¹ Ibid, pp.207-8 and WO 12/9031, TNA.

³² See 3 May 1814, London Gazette, Issue 16894, p.933 and Grattan, Adventures of the Connaught Rangers, p.208.

³³ The Morning Post, 26 December 1818.

³⁴ See Robert Malcomson, Capital in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813 (Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2008), pp.205-6.

³⁵ Letter to the Editor from “A Yorker” in The Military and Naval Magazine of the United States, Vol. 1, No. 6, (August 1833), pp.370-71.

³⁶ WO 97/1173/103, TNA and Rodney T. Lee, A directory of officers & men of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment: 1795-1816 (2011).

quickly released in a prisoner exchange; Kelly served as drum-major until the Royal Newfoundland Regiment's disbandment in 1816.

Clearly, some drum-majors behaved courageously on the battlefield, but these instances of valour under fire serve to underscore not the frequency but the rarity of such occurrences. These acts of bravery (or recklessness) were remarked upon by observers precisely because they were remarkable. As the anonymous American correspondent claimed, "no one who witnessed the occurrence will forget" the sight of Drum-Major Kelly's fall, simply because the spectacle was so extraordinary and absurd.³⁷ The exploits of Thorpe and Kelly were certainly tales worth telling but their stories are exceptions that prove the rule. The inescapable conclusion must be that most drum-majors rather wisely stuck to their briefs and confined themselves to less perilous auxiliary activities behind the front lines.

Despite taking centre stage on parade, drum-majors were relegated to ad-hoc supporting roles on the battlefield, from aiding the wounded to haranguing would-be shirkers. By providing an extra pair of hands to grapple with these unglamorous yet essential behind-the-scenes tasks, drum-majors (as well as drummers and bandsmen) freed up sergeants and rank-and-file soldiers for service on the front line. Some drum-majors, admittedly, may have taken advantage of their freedom of movement under fire to make themselves scarce, as the sneers of Sergeants Lawrence and Morris suggest. But as the cases of Pollard, Thorpe and others demonstrate, at least some of these princes of pomp and circumstance, either through quiet diligence or conspicuous acts of bravery, proved themselves worthy of their eminent office and lavish regalia on the battlefield as well as on the parade square.³⁸

Biography: Eamonn O'Keeffe currently serves as drum major of the Fort York Guard in Toronto, Canada, having volunteered and worked in the site's fife and drum corps for a decade. He currently studies history at Merton College, Oxford. Fascinated by the Napoleonic-era British Army, his interests include military music and musicians, courts martial and soldiers' memoirs.

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³⁷ Letter to the Editor from "A Yorker" in The Military and Naval Magazine of the United States, Vol. 1, No. 6, (August 1833), pp.370-71.

³⁸ The author is grateful to Paul Edwards for bringing Drum-Major Pollard's testimony to his attention.