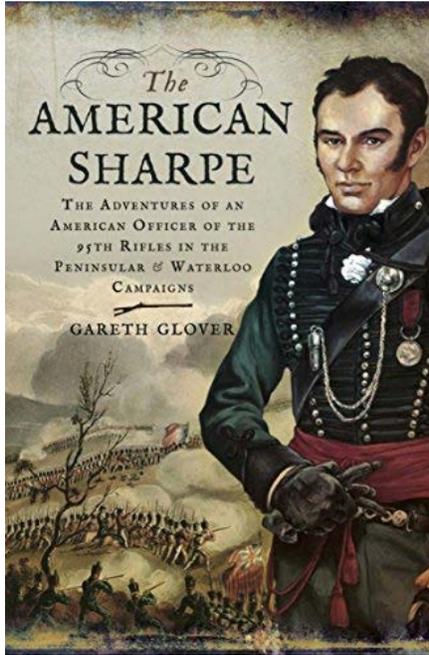


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Glover, Gareth. *The American Sharpe: the Adventures of an American Officer of the 95th Rifles in the Peninsula & Waterloo Campaigns*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2017. 270 pages. ISBN: 9781848327771 £25 / \$40



During the Napoleonic Wars, there was at least one British general who was born in America. This was Major General Frederick Robinson, who commanded a brigade in the 5th Division in Wellington's Army in the Peninsula from March 1813 to March 1814. He was born in New York in 1763, which was still a British colony at the time, and was commissioned as an ensign in the Loyal American Regiment when he was only thirteen.¹ James Penman Gairdner, the subject of this book, was another American who also served in the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars. What makes him different from General Robinson is that he was born in 1792 and was a citizen of the United States! A rarity among British officers. *American Sharpe* is his story.

James Gairdner is occasionally confused with John Gardner, both who served as lieutenants in the 1st Battalion 95th Rifles during the Peninsular War. They are two different people with similar names. James Gairdner was born in South Carolina to a Scottish merchant. He was sent to England in 1804 to further his education and probably attended Harrow. In 1810, at the age of 18, he was appointed a 2nd Lieutenant in the 95th Rifles. He spent the next fifteen months in England, but was sent out to the 1st Battalion, which was in Portugal, in mid-November 1811. He would serve in Wellington's Army until it was disbanded in June 1814.

During the thirty months Lieutenant Gairdner was in Portugal, Spain, and France he would fight in thirteen different battles including: the sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, Salamanca, San Milan, Vitoria, the Pyrenees, Vera, Biadossa, Nivelle, Nive, Orthes, Taubes, and Toulouse. When the Military General Service Medal was awarded in 1847, soldiers were given clasps for certain battles they had participated in. The most clasps awarded was 15. John Gairdner was awarded nine, including: Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vitoria, Pyrenees, Nivelle, Nive, Orthes, and Toulouse. Only 63 soldiers were awarded more clasps than him!² Lieutenant Gairdner also fought in the Waterloo

¹ McGugian, Ron and Robert Burnham. *Wellington's Brigade Commanders*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017. Pages 246 – 250.

² Burnham, Robert and Ron McGuigan. *The British Army against Napoleon: Facts, Lists, and Trivia 1805 – 1815*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2010. Page 312

Campaign and was in the Army of Occupation of France. In July 1819 he went on half pay and returned to the United States. He died in 1862.

During the Peninsular War, Lieutenant Gairdner was initially assigned to Captain John Uniacke's Company, who was killed at Ciudad Rodrigo. After his commander was killed at the assault on Ciudad Rodrigo, he joined Captain Jonathan Leach's Company³ and served under him for the rest of the war.⁴ James' diary was not written for public consumption so he was quite candid in it. He was a keen observer of life in cantonments and on campaign, of the terrain he marched through, and of the local populace he interacted with.

Although Lieutenant Gairdner fought in fourteen battles, he tended to expose himself and became a casualty. He was wounded three times at Badajoz in 1812, severely in the arm at Vitoria in 1813, and in the foot at Quatre Bras in 1815. Unfortunately these wounds caused him to spend time in the hospital recovering and because of his last wound, he missed Waterloo. However, he does give a description of what it was like to lay wounded below the breach at Badajoz unable to move, his subsequent rescue and then the medical care he was placed under for two months.

American Sharpe does provide accounts of some of the battles that Lieutenant Gairdner fought in, although understandably his accounts of Badajoz, Vitoria, and Quatre Bras tend to be shorter than others. His recording of the harrowing retreat to the Portuguese border in the autumn of 1812 is one of the best written, while his description of the danger and confusion of the skirmishing at Nive in December 1810 will leave the reader with a better understanding of what being a light infantry in combat entailed.

The real strength of *American Sharpe* lies in his stories of what life was like for an officer on active service. It seems like every week he was assigned an additional duty to perform -- those essential, but dirty little jobs that junior officers have been stuck with since armies have been formed: escorting recovered sick from the hospital back to the battalion; in charge of the battalion's baggage on the march; commanding foraging parties; being sent to rear to pick up new uniforms for the battalion; survey officer; sitting on courts-martial; and marching ahead of the battalion to arrange its billeting, among others. Throughout the book are descriptions of being on picquet duty and even tales of fraternizing with the French while doing so.

Lieutenant Gairdner also writes about the darker side of being a soldier. For example, his servant stole from his baggage and he had him court-martialed and flogged for the offense. Additionally, one of the things that one rarely reads in diaries and memoirs of the era is criticism of those directly above the writer in seniority. James' diary is an exception to this rule. He was often at odds with his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel

³ Jonathan Leach was one of the most prolific authors to come out of Wellington's Peninsular Army. He wrote two sets of memoirs: *Rough Sketches of the Life of an Old Soldier* and *Rambles along the Styx*.

⁴ Private Edward Costello, the author of *The Peninsular and Waterloo Campaigns* was also in Captain Leach's Company.

Alexander Cameron, whom he felt went out of his way to criticize him and treat him unfairly. He never alludes to why this tense relationship existed though.

One of the more interesting side stories in *American Sharpe* is after war broke out between the United States and Great Britain, where would Lieutenant Gairdner's loyalties lay. His father was concerned that he may be sent to North America to fight against his country. There are several letters to him about his options and what he should do. You will have to read the book to find out more.

Gareth Glover has once again resurrected a long lost diary. The original diary consists of three small leather bound books and are held by the British National Army Museum. Mr. Glover supplemented the diary with numerous letters written by James Gairdner and from his family to him that were provided by his descendants in the United States and Australia. In addition to these letters is an undated photograph of him in the latter stages of his life. Christa Hook, an artist who specializes in Napoleonic subjects, used this photograph to render a portrait of how Lieutenant Gairdner might have looked during the Peninsular War.

It has been a while since a new set of accounts by a member of 95th Rifles has been published. *American Sharpe* is a welcomed addition to the ranks of British primary sources! Highly recommended!

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 2017