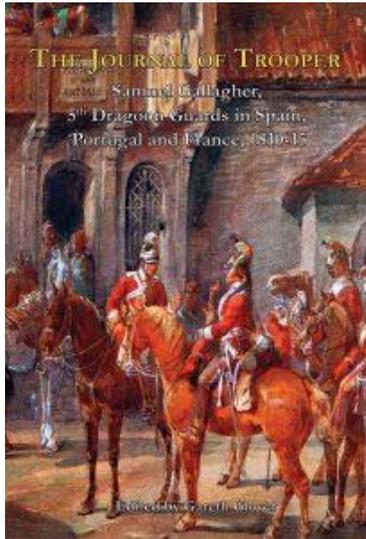


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Gallagher, Samuel. *The Journal of Trooper Samuel Gallagher, 5th Dragoon Guards in Spain, Portugal and France, 1810 – 1815*. Gareth Glover (ed.) Godmanchester: Ken Trotman, 2017. 112 pages. Hardcover. £20 / \$25



During the Napoleonic Wars the British Army had six regiments of heavy cavalry known as the Dragoon Guards. Surprisingly, except for the Waterloo Campaign, only three of these regiments served in the Peninsular War – the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Dragoon Guards. A review of primary sources from the Napoleonic Wars also reveals no set of memoirs or letters from individuals who were members of these regiments. . . until now.

Deep in the archives of the National Army Museum there is an unsigned, typed manuscript called “The Memoirs of an Unknown Dragoon”. The document is obviously a modern transcription from a long lost set of memoirs that were never published. Unfortunately there were no clues in the archives about who transcribed the document nor a name of the author. However, the author served in three different regiments over a 34 year period. Gareth Glover obtained a copy of the memoirs and spent much time in the National Archives searching through regimental muster rolls. He found only one individual who had been in all three regiments during the time covered by the memoirs: Samuel Gallagher.

Samuel Gallagher was born in 1790 and initially enlisted in the Royal Artillery in January 1808 but was discharged in July 1809. Ten months later he enlisted in the 5th Dragoon Guards and over a three year period rose through the ranks to sergeant, but for some reason, which he never revealed, he was reduced to private a year later. The regiment went to Portugal in August 1811 and had a strength of 479 troopers and 486 horses. They returned to England with only 313 troopers still in the ranks and with 324 horses. About 65% of what they deployed with three years previously.¹ In the spring of 1815 the 5th Dragoon Guards were inspected by General Henry Fane “. . . who returned the regiment unfit for active service, on account of the severe losses it had sustained on the

¹ [British Army Individual Unit Strengths: 1808-1815](#)

continent. . .”² This prevented them from being sent to Belgium to join Wellington’s Army which was being formed to oppose Napoleon, who had escaped from Elba in March. Trooper Gallagher was bored with garrison duty, and in an unusual move for the time, requested that he be allowed to extend his service by transferring into 10th Hussars, which was going to Belgium. Permission was granted, but it took so long for him to receive it he missed the Waterloo Campaign. He did serve with them for six months in France, but returned to England in December 1815. Over the next five years he was promoted to corporal but was busted to private once again. Two months later he transferred again, this time to the 11th Light Dragoons and served in India with them. Within four years he was promoted to sergeant a third time, but in 1829 he reduced to private again. He was discharged from the army in 1838 after serving 34 years.

The bulk of the *Journal* covers Samuel Gallagher’s 46 months in the Peninsular War. His regiment was part of General Le Marchant’s Heavy Cavalry Brigade and after the death of the general at Salamanca in 1812, it was led by General William Ponsonby of Waterloo fame. They were part of the covering force at the sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, and fought at Usagre, Llerena, Salamanca (where his regiment was part of General Le Marchant’s epic charge that broke the French center), Vitoria, Nive, Orthes, and Toulouse.

Although the book is supposedly a journal, it is more a memoir based on a journal he kept at the time. The reason why I say this is because each section usually begins with a description of what the army and the French were up to at the time and then is followed by what he and his regiment was doing. It is highly unlikely he would have been aware of the strategic situation that he referred to until long after the events.

Most historians of the Napoleonic Era, portrays the typical British soldier as being illiterate. Samuel Gallagher’s career reveals that he was not. To be promoted to sergeant an individual had to be able to read and write. His writing and vocabulary is one of a highly educated man. He was a talented story-teller and the book is filled with personal anecdotes of life on campaign. For example his description of the barracks they were housed in after arriving in Lisbon in September 1811 leaves little to the imagination:

“These formed a sad contrast with the stables which were provided for the horses. The latter were well paved and commodious, containing racks, mangers, cisterns to hold water, together with every requisite convenience, whereas we were obliged to shift in the best way that we could, our only bed being a kind of platform full of hoes whence issued whole squadrons of rats, which often left the marks of their teeth upon the faces of those who lay down top heavy overnight. This together with swarms of bugs, fleas, and mosquitoes, could not fail to render our quarters very uncomfortable.”³

² Page 192

³ Pages 12 - 13

Unlike many military writers of the time, he also wrote of his personal feelings on his own mortality, especially after surviving his brigade's great charge at Salamanca:

“. . . my mind had not become so familiar with bloodshed as to render me callous to the best feelings of humanity. But a few years had elapsed since I left the quiet of my humble home to mingle in the struggle of the battle field. During that period I had contracted many intimacies I the regiment but now they existed only in memory. The companions of my early career whom I had often greeted with the warmth of friendship had perished around me, whilst I only remained perhaps to fall in the next encounter. Such were my melancholy reflections, as, wounded and fatigued at the close of battle, as I threw a rapid glance over the hard earned field of our victory. The inspiring trumpet and the animating shout of our brave fellows as they advanced to the charge were no longer to be heard, but were succeeded by the groans of the dying, and the cries of the wounded for assistance.”⁴

Despite being 100+ pages long, *The Journal of Trooper Samuel Gallagher* is a quick and engaging read. It is a welcomed addition to the literature of a British heavy cavalryman on campaign! Recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: December 2016

⁴ Page 44