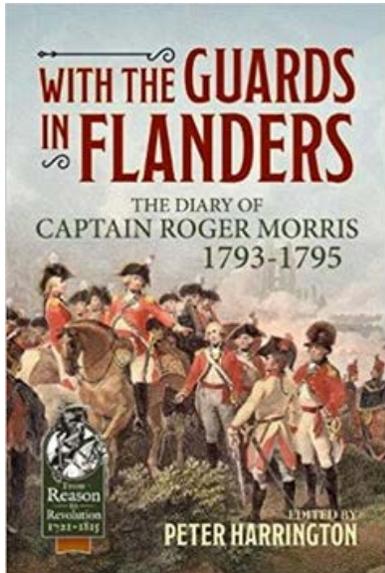


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Morris, Roger. *With the Guards in Flanders: The Diary of Captain Roger Morris, 1793-1795*. Harrington, Peter (ed.). Warwick: Helion (UK), 2019. 148 pages. ISBN# 9781911628156. Hardcover. \$29.95



The inaccurate and somewhat lazy aphorism ‘history is written by the winners’ might have been coined especially for the campaign in Flanders from 1793 to 1795, whereafter the British army, most definitely not the winners, decided to collectively turn its back on events. There are precious few first British accounts of the campaign, and most of those published in ensuing years were done so anonymously, in order to mask the criticism directed at high command – especially since the commander of the expedition, the Duke of York, had ascended to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the British army. Most military diarists and authors obviously felt that criticising the Big Boss might be a career-limiting move!

Roger Morris was born in Lambeth, London in April 1764¹ and after attending Oxford University, joined the Coldstream Guards as an ensign in October 1782. He embarked for Flanders on 5 May 1793 as a 29-year-old lieutenant and served in France, Belgium and Holland until his return to Britain on 28 February 1795, in order to resolve his financial affairs so that he could pay for his purchased promotion to captain. (The diary was written anonymously, but editor Peter Harrington has cleverly used Army Lists to determine that Roger Morris was indeed the author, by referencing dates mentioned in correspondence with gazetted promotions.)

The campaign, which lasted (from a British perspective) for almost exactly two years, was an interminable muddy slog between Dunkirk and Valenciennes, involving familiar place-names such as Mons, Ypres, Passchendaele and Fleurus. The Austrians even fought a minor battle against the French at Mont St-Jean, at which Soult was present. In that whole period the British army only fought in one ‘big battle’ – Tourcoing, on 17-18 May 1794, at which Souham and his entourage of twenty-something and thirty-something French generals made the geriatric Coalition commanders look like dazed, inept plodders – and several lesser actions, including the embarrassing failed siege of Dunkirk. The Duke of York was recalled at the end of 1794 and after holding the line of the frozen River Waal

¹ His younger brother James became Director of the Bank of England. Lieutenant Roger Morris was a nephew of another Roger Morris, the Loyalist officer Colonel Roger Morris (1727-1794) of North Yorkshire and Yonkers.

at Christmas 1794; the army found itself retreating across a frozen Hanoverian landscape for the first three months of 1795, losing 6,000 men along the way.

Lieutenant Morris loved doing two things: riding around observing the people and countryside, and finding (and playing) church organs. His entries, fairly dry and factual at the outset, gradually became more critical of the high command as the campaign entered its inevitable decline in late 1794. He referred to the commanders as 'the Big Wigs' and became scathing of their indecision, singling out Abercrombie, Fox and de Burgh in particular. Like many other junior British officers of the campaign, he was also highly critical of their wavering Dutch allies, sowing the seeds for a martial distrust that still lingered in 1815.

The book is very nicely illustrated (with material from the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection) and at 163 pages for the main text, not too onerous a length. My only criticism is that many of the place-names mentioned are unlikely to be unfamiliar to the general reader, and a few maps would not have gone astray.

Captain Morris returned to the continent with the Duke of York in 1799 as a captain & lieutenant-colonel in the Coldstream Guards, and was killed at the head of his company at the Battle of Bergen on 19 September 1799, at the age of 35. The Duke of York attended his funeral. Had he lived, one gets the feeling he would have gone far. Roger Morris seemingly never intended or attempted to publish his diary. Somehow the manuscript came into the possession of a San Francisco mining engineer in 1885, and then made its way to the California State Library, where a transcribed version was published in 1940, albeit to limited circulation.

The editor, Peter Harrington, an Englishman who has lived in the United States since 1981, is curator of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University Library in Providence, Rhode Island. His main area of research is artists and images of war, and he has written and lectured extensively on this subject. Thankfully he has exposed this valuable diary to a wider circulation and increased our knowledge of this oft-overlooked campaign.

Reviewed by [Steven Brown](#)

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