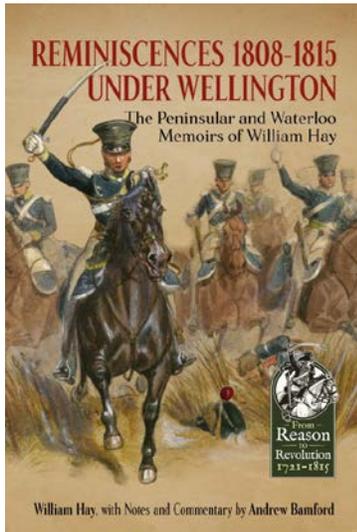


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Hay, William. *Reminiscences 1808-1815 under Wellington. The Peninsular and Waterloo Memoirs of William Hay ... with New Introduction, Notes and Commentary by Andrew Bamford.* Solihull (UK): Helion and, 2017. 161 pp, illus, index. ISBN# 9781911512325. \$59.95/£25



This is a reprint of a 1901 publication with editing and annotation by Andrew Bamford who is a frequent contributor to this site. William Hay wrote this memoir of his time in service a quarter of a century after it occurred, for the amusement of his daughter and it is now again available in a new edition.

Hay, the scion of a distinguished family was born a short three months before France declared war on Britain in early 1793. At the age of 12 he was sent to be a cadet at the Junior Department of the Royal Military College at Marlow and four years later was appointed an ensign in the 2nd Battalion, 52nd Foot. He sailed for the Peninsula in late 1811 and was present at a number of actions before being commissioned a lieutenant in the 12th Light Dragoons. Hay was with that regiment at Vittoria and was possibly unique among the British troops who fought in that engagement in that he did not engage in looting the plentiful materiel of all types abandoned by the defeated French. "I hated the idea of plundering," Hay remarks (p. 69), "and did not appropriate to myself any single thing, though I am sure I might have done so with impunity as several others were doing." He ends the war in Bordeaux, billeted in the home of a very generous Frenchman who not only provides him with a set of well-furnished rooms but insists that he dine at his table and to also invite any of his fellow officers he wishes. Not only that but this unique host provides Hay with the services of his doctor, his tailor and bootmaker before showing him his cash chest in which he says (p. 77) that there was "enough money to meet my expenses as well as his own." After returning to England in May 1815 Hay was with the 12th Dragoons when the unit travelled to Belgium to join Wellington's army.

When recounting his experiences in Portugal and Spain, Hay does not go into much detail about the various actions in which he fought. He tends more to emphasize the non-combat aspects of military life: the marches, bivouacs and billets; the civilians, the life of the subaltern on active service and, of course, the weather. In contrast, his account of the Waterloo campaign goes into very great detail about the preparation of the allied cavalry, the approach to contact, the battle and its aftermath, and the advance to Paris. Hay commanded a troop of the 12th Light Dragoons at Waterloo and participated in the charge made by that unit and the 16th Light Dragoons against the right flank of the advancing French infantry. He provides a very detailed and colourful account of that

charge and its cost and Andrew Bamford corrects Hay's errors of time and sequence of events in a series of footnotes.

On the day after the battle Hay was ordered to proceed to Brussels by way of the village of Waterloo and ascertain the location of his regiment's wounded and to round up any skulkers. He renders a graphic description of the aftermath of the great battle. "The sights I beheld on that occasion," he writes (p.112) "will never be effaced from my memory." Arriving at the scene of the heaviest fighting, he recorded,

Although prepared from what I had already beheld the evening before; to witness such a shocking sight, I was struck with horror at the actual masses of dead men and horses heaped together on a space of about a few hundred yards.

The day was extremely hot, and the dead bodies, already offensive, were shocking to look at. Many wounded were among them, so disabled as not to have the power to extricate themselves.

On gaining the road it was with difficulty my horse could pick his way or keep his footing as it was literally paved with steel, the cuirasses were so numerous, shining and glittering in the midday sun of June, making it quite dazzling to the eyesight.

The ditches on each side of the road were lined with our wounded officers and soldiers, who had been borne there to be removed in some measure from the great thoroughfare, amongst whom I recognized several acquaintances. If I had felt sad and low spirits before, this did not improve my mood.

Hay's *Reminiscences* will be of interest to any readers interested in the role of British cavalry in the Peninsular and its actions at Waterloo. This new edition has been very professionally edited by Andrew Bamford who corrects a number of the author's errors.

Reviewed by Donald E. Graves

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2017