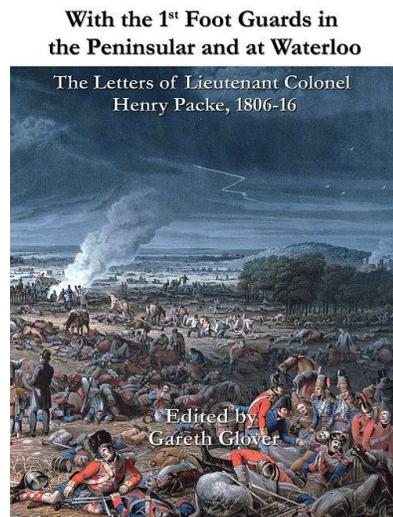


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Packe, Henry. *With the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards in the Peninsular and at Waterloo: the Letters of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pack, 1806 – 1816*. Gareth Glover (ed.) Godmanchester: Ken Trotman, 2016. 134 pages.



*With the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards in the Peninsular and at Waterloo* is the story of missed chances. Henry Packe was born in 1786 and commissioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards in 1799. His life is one of missed chances. Although he deployed with his regiment many times, he repeatedly missed the opportunity to participate in some of the major events of the Napoleonic Wars. He was in Sicily from 1806 – 1807, took part in the later stages of the British excursion into Spain in 1808, but arrived too late to do anything except join the retreat to Corunna, where his battalion saw no action. He went to Walcheren in 1809, but his battalion was among the first to be withdrawn back to England within a few months of arrival. He stayed in England until mid-autumn 1812, when once again his battalion was sent to Corunna. By the time they linked up with Wellington, the army was retreating to the Portuguese border. While in winter quarters in 1813, he was promoted to captain & lieutenant colonel and was sent back to England to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of his regiment and thus missed the 1813 Campaign that saw the French ejected from Spain. In December 1813, his battalion was part of the British expedition to Holland, but he was not present at the assault on Bergen-op-Zoom, because he was sent to Wellington's Army in southern France where he joined his regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. After returning to England in July 1814, he was assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which was the only battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards that did not fight at Waterloo. Lieutenant Colonel Packe went to Wellington's Army a few weeks after the battle as a replacement for the officers killed at Waterloo. He did march into France with the army and served in Paris until he returned to England in January 1816.

So why should you read this book, especially since Henry Packe was absent from many of the most famous episodes of the British Army? Simply because he was an excellent recorder of the events that he witnessed. His letters are one of the few accounts that exist of the life of British officers in Sicily in 1807. Garrison duty was not very strenuous and he spent much of his time exploring the country side and left a detail description of what he saw. The same goes for the few months he spent in Spain during what became the retreat to Corunna. He kept a log in which he recorded where he was each day and how far they marched that day. Apparently they were not in a great hurry to link up with the main part of the army under Sir John Moore. According to the log it took them 51 days to arrive at his headquarters and having marched about 550 kilometers or about

11 kilometers a day. His time on the Walcheren Expedition was about six weeks long and he faithfully wrote about what he saw and did. Which was not much.

Things changed in October 1812 when he went to Spain with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. They arrived too late to participate in any action and was almost immediately began retreating to the Portuguese border. Captain Packe left some vivid accounts on the difficulty of the retreat and the losses his battalion took. Once in winter quarters his writing changed from a travel narrative to one that reflected the concerns of him and his fellow officers. Foremost on their minds was being promoted. Army Regulations allowed an officer to purchase his promotion to the next rank, as long as there was a vacancy. The army also set the price for the promotions. For Captain Packe, the price for the next step was £3500. Officers were not allowed to offer more and if they were caught doing so, they could be cashiered. One of the enduring myths about officer promotions in the British Army was that it was very common for officers to pay more than the official price for their promotion. One of the reasons why I call it a myth is because I have never come across a set of memoirs or letters where the writer admits to doing so. Until now. Captain Packe states that his next promotions (to captain & lieutenant colonel) were costing between £5000 and £6000! He wrote home asking his parents for help and then explained how they would have to pay the official price to his agent, but then arrange for a go-between to handle the additional under the table payment. In April 1813, he successfully purchased his promotion, but did not say how much he paid for it.

The winter of 1813 saw the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards decimated by an unknown disease that caused almost 1000 deaths and hospitalized soldiers in two months. Captain Packe writes about the effect on his battalion and what he believes was the cause. He puts it down to the soldiers not being paid in four months and having to eat rations without being able to subsidize them with food bought locally. He supports his case with the observation that none of the officers got sick or died because they could afford to buy food.

Because of his promotion, Lieutenant Colonel Packe returned to England in April 1813 and once again missed the major operations in Spain and southern France over the next year. He was in the 1814 Flanders Campaign and but went back to the Peninsular War in time to see the evacuation of the British Army to England in 1814. His letters are one of the few that covers of life in Wellington's Army while the officers and soldiers wait to return home

As I mentioned in the introduction, Lieutenant Colonel Packe missed the Waterloo Campaign, but joined the British Army by early July 1815. His letters do not provide much detail on the advance to Paris, but once there they are filled with information about life in occupied (or some would contend liberated) Paris.

Lieutenant Colonel Packe's family were landed gentry of the Packe's of Prestwold. They were very well off and moved in the upper levels of society. His attitude towards the military was conservative, especially towards anything that would change the

established system. For example, in July 1814, the British Army decided to remove the general officers from the regiments that they still held a lieutenant colonelcy in. By doing this, it opened a greater possibility of promotion for the officers junior to them. Despite the benefits it would give him, Lieutenant Colonel Packe did not like the change because it was new.

Lieutenant Colonel Packe's letters were not meant for public consumption and thus his opinions, especially about social and financial matters, are unfiltered. To the modern reader he comes across as a bit of a snob. He is very critical of the Portuguese, Spanish, and French social scenes and is always comparing what he sees to that in England. He casually mentions how easy it is to get invitations to dine with the Duke of Wellington in Paris in 1815, and how he declines further invitations because the one he went to was "not pleasant, being an assemblage of men, with few English women and no French women."<sup>1</sup> His family was rich and his letters reflect this. They are filled with requests for his parents to pay his bills to his Army agent. He discusses buying hogshead of claret for the family in several letters and in others he complains that he is having trouble selling two of his horses in 1815 for £300.

Another interesting discussion in Lieutenant Colonel Packe's letters home in 1815 is the raising of memorials to those who were killed at Waterloo, including his own brother Robert, who was the only officer in the Horse Guards to die. His mother wanted him to reach out to the surviving officers of the regiment about having one.

Lieutenant Colonel Packe recognized in November 1815 that he has missed out on many of the great events of the Napoleonic Wars and is resentful of those who received recognition while he did not. He wrote the subsequent awards and honors that were given to ". . . men of my own standing and even younger, with rank and honours attached to them, which I must candidly confessed annoyed me, though I feel fully aware that luck alone has placed them in situations to gain those honours, and myself on the contrary in situations where no honours were to be gained."<sup>2</sup>

*With the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards* is an unusual look at the life of a high society officer in the most fashionable regiment in the British Army. Letters, memoirs, and diaries by officers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards are not uncommon.<sup>3</sup> Whether his snobbery is indicative of the attitude of his fellow officers is unknown, but his letters are the most candid!

Reviewed by Robert Burnham

Placed on the Napoleon Series: July 2016

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<sup>1</sup> Page 119

<sup>2</sup> Page 120

<sup>3</sup> For a partial list of their recollections, see [British Memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars: the Foot Guards](#).