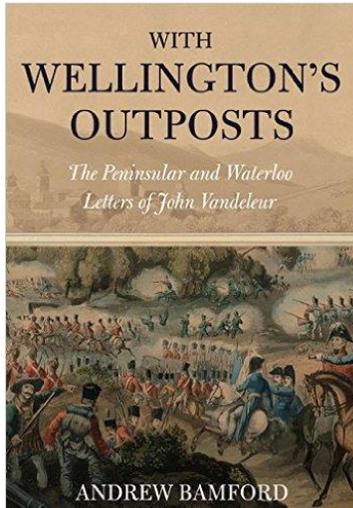


Napoleon Series Reviews

Vandeleur, John. *With Wellington's Outposts: the Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur*. Andrew Bamford (ed.) Barnsley: Frontline, 2015. 224 pages. ISBN 9781848327740. Hardcover. £20 / \$40



With Wellington's Outposts was originally titled *Letters of Colonel John Vandeleur 1810 - 1846*. It was privately printed in 1896 and the book is one of the rarest primary sources from the period. The original edition contained just the letters and did not provide any context to put the events the writer was writing about into context. The letters are edited by Andrew Bamford who often supplements them with information he discovered in the 12th Light Dragoon regimental archives while researching [*Gallantry and Discipline: the 12th Light Dragoons at War with Wellington*](#).

The vast majority of *With Wellington's Outposts* are the letters written by a young officer to his mother between 1810 and 1815. John Vandeleur was born in 1793 and attended the Royal Military College. He was commissioned as an ensign in the 71st Foot in 1809 and sailed with its 1st Battalion to Portugal in September 1810. He served with them in the Lines of Torres Vedras and was wounded at Fuentes de Oñoro in May 1811. His wounds were so severe that he was sent back to England to recuperate. Shortly after arriving home he was promoted to lieutenant. He exchanged in to the 12th Light Dragoons and returned to Portugal with them in the autumn of 1812. In August 1813 Lieutenant Vandeleur was able to convince his cousin, General John Ormsby Vandeleur, to take him on as an extra aide-de-camp. He served in that position through the invasion of France in the autumn of 1813 and the winter of 1814 on until the British Army returned to England after the abdication of Napoleon in April 1814. Lieutenant Vandeleur served at Waterloo with his regiment and was part of the Army of Occupation of France. He would eventually command the 10th Hussars and retired in 1846.

What makes these letters unique is that John Vandeleur wrote about his life, both in garrison and on campaign. He starts off as an infantry officer and then a cavalry officer. There are stories of skirmishes and battles, marches and bivouacs, and interactions with his soldiers, fellow officers, and even generals. A common theme throughout them all is that he needed money. He was given an allowance to supplement his pay by his father, but the young officer found that even with the extra money he was having trouble making ends meet. The letters are filled with information on the cost of food, clothing, and other necessities, such as buying an additional mount, and maintaining the three that he had. He was constantly asking his mother to intercede on his behalf with his father to up his allowance.

About twenty percent of the book covers his time as an ADC to his cousin, General Vandeleur. Several of the letters go in to detail on his duties as an ADC, but also discuss the general's daily schedule. His observations bring to life one of the lesser known generals of Wellington's army.

For example, when the brigade was on outpost duty, the general “gets up every morning at 4 o’clock, mounts his horse, and rides up to the picquets, which he generally reaches a little before daylight; he visits all the chain of outposts, and gets home about 8 o’clock.” Or the fact the general went to bed every night by 9 p.m.

One of the most unusual things about the letters to John Vandeleur wrote was that they were to his mother and they were uncensored. They provide detailed descriptions of the actions and battles he was in, the casualties they took, and the friends and acquaintances that were killed or wounded. Not something a parent wants to hear from their child.

John Vandeleur continued to write after Waterloo and it is mostly concerned with life in the peacetime army. Chapter Six “Two Courts Martial and a Coronation” looks at his younger brother who was court martialed for participating as a second in duel. John Vandeleur’s letter contains the transcript of the trial and provides interesting insight to the dichotomy between the official policy and officers’ attitudes towards dueling. The second court martial took place in 1845 when Lieutenant Colonel Vandeleur commanded the 10th Hussars. He referred charges against an officer for conduct unbecoming of an officer. Again official transcripts of the trial are provided in the book. In the same chapter are his observations on the regimental duties they had at Queen Victoria’s Coronation in 1837.

Mr. Bamford also included five appendices containing material related to what Lieutenant Vandeleur wrote about or documents concerning the 12th Light Dragoons. There is Major General George Anson’s semi-annual inspection report dated 24 December 1812, which was confidential and pulled no punches. For example he stated the regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Ponsonby “. . . is not well versed in the Manoeuvres, having been originally badly instructed” and “The Trumpeters are but indifferent.” Other appendices include Lieutenant Colonel Ponsonby’s “Orders and Instructions for Outpost Duty, 1815” and his account of Waterloo. All of which make fascinating reading!

With Wellington's Outposts is not a book about grand strategy or great events. Instead it tells the story of the daily life of a junior officer in the British Army in the Peninsula and at Waterloo. Because they are letters written within a few days of the events he is describing, there is a freshness about them that one does not get when reading memoirs written several decades later. The reader will be able to track his moods – from the initial homesickness and sense of despair while in the Lines of Torres Vedras, to the excitement of joining up with his new regiment to the post-combat high of surviving a battle and then the low of the realization of the casualties among his regiment and his friends.

In most cases the information in the letters is correct, but occasionally Lieutenant Vandeleur only sees part of the picture and what he writes home about is wrong. Mr. Bamford does a superb job editing the letters and often provides background information on the individual, places, and events mentioned in them. He even points out the mistakes in the events that Lieutenant Vandeleur reports on. *With Wellington's Outposts* is an enjoyable read and because it is from the perspective of a junior officer it will appeal to those interested in the life of a soldier, regardless of the era, as well those study the British Army of the Napoleonic Wars.

On a side note, John Vandeleur was a friend of Lieutenant William Hay whom he mentions frequently in the letters. Lieutenant Hay was in the 12th Light Dragoons is best known for his *Reminiscences 1808 - 1815 Under Wellington*.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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