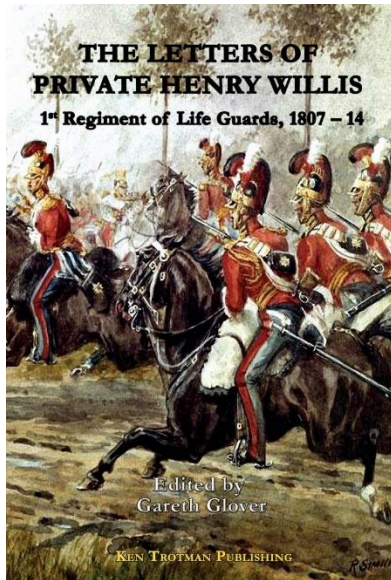


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Willis, Henry. *The Letters of Private Henry Willis: 1st Regiment of Life Guards, 1807-14*. Gareth Glover (ed.). Huntingdon (UK): Ken Trotman, 2017. 40 pages. £7.50/\$10



Letters and memoirs written by officers and troopers in the British 1st Life Guards Regiment are very scarce. The only book I know of is *Surgeon James' Journal: 1815* which was published over 50 years ago. Gareth Glover's *Waterloo Archives* also has a nice selection of letters as well as his *Letters from the Battle of Waterloo: Unpublished Correspondence by Allied Officers from the Siborne Papers*. But all of these sources are only about the Waterloo Campaign. None covered the two years the regiment spent in the latter days of the Peninsula War. Until now.

Gareth Glover spent time in the Household Cavalry Archives a few years ago and discovered a series of letters written home by a cavalry trooper of the 1st Life Guards during his time in the regiment. They cover a six year period from 1807 to 1813. The author of the letters was Private Henry Willis, the son of an attorney. He was well educated, but from the tone of his letters his family had little money, because he was very young when his father died. I was surprised that Private Willis enlisted rather than trying to become an officer, although it would have cost him £1600 to purchase a commission in the regiment.

Private Willis enlisted prior to 1800 and by the time the first letter was written in 1807 he was an old soldier. The first three letters cover family matters, but beginning with Letter #4, they began to contain anecdotes about his life in the regiment. The 1st Life Guards' mission was to guard the Royal Family and to act as a police force for London. In 1810 there was considerable political unrest in the city and the regiment was called out numerous times to quell riots. Private Willis was part of the force that arrested Sir Francis Burdett on 9 April 1810 and was alongside the coach that took him to the Tower of London. In the letter he vividly describes the violence of the mob and the re-action of the troops to it.

The 1st Life Guards were sent to the Peninsula in late 1812 and were part of the Vitoria Campaign that saw the French driven out of most of Spain. Private Willis wrote a detailed description of his role in the events that led up to the battle of Vitoria on 21 June 1813 and the subsequent pursuit of the retreating French. Unfortunately this was his last letter. On 29 June, the day after his last letter, he fell off his horse and shattered

his leg. He was evacuated to a hospital in Bilbao where the doctor wanted to amputate his leg. He refused to let them do so, but several bones were removed from his leg. He died from sepsis on 28 August.

Henry Willis was well liked and he had a few close friends serving with him. So *The Letters of Private Henry Willis* does not end with his death. It is one of the few books that has information about how a soldier's family was notified of his death. . . which was done in a letter from one of his friends in the regiment. It also has several letters from his friends about the final disposition of his personal items. (He was considerably wealthier than the average private in the British Army at that time. Among his effects was a note for £440.) Most of his belongings were stolen when he died. However the note was not and would make its way back to his family. In one of the more peculiar letters and possibly the most gruesome, is one from a family friend who had some of Private Willis' possessions, including the two bones that had been removed from his leg!

Once again Mr. Glover should be commended for resurrecting the letters from a long forgotten soldier, who liked many before him died on a foreign shore. *The Letters of Private Henry Willis* will make a nice addition for those who collect primary sources or are interested in the 1st Life Guards. Recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: November 2016