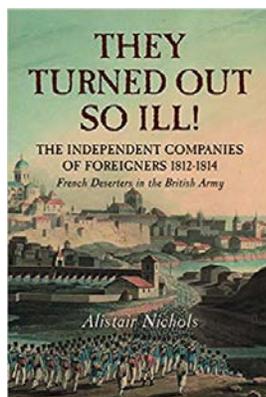


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Nichols, Alistair. *They Turned Out So Ill! The Independent Companies of Foreigners 1812 – 14: French Deserters in the British Army*. Peterborough: FastPrint, 2018. 183 pages. PB. £13 / \$20. ISBN: 9781784566166



Alistair Nichols, who is best known for studying little known units in the British Army – including the Chasseurs Britanniques<sup>1</sup> and the Watteville Regiment,<sup>2</sup> has resurrected another long forgotten one. His newest book looks not a regiment nor a battalion, but at four independent companies that were raised to ease Great Britain's manpower shortage. By late 1812, the country had been at war for almost 20 years<sup>3</sup> and no end was in sight. Compounding its problem was the fact that it was the only major European power that did not use conscription to fill the ranks of its army. It was getting hard to find replacements for the attrition that happens in every army, whether by combat casualties, disease, or desertion.<sup>4</sup>

One way of alleviating the shortage was to recruit foreigners into the ranks. In addition to the two regiments mentioned above, the British also had the King's German Legion, many other foreign regiments, and went as far as authorizing regiments in the Peninsula to recruit Spaniards into their ranks!<sup>5</sup> What they had not done was tap the large number of French soldiers sitting in British prison camps and hulks. In 1812 the decision was made to enlist deserters, both officers and other ranks, who had served in the French Army. There was some concern that once these men were close to their countrymen they would desert once again and go home. To prevent this, the plan was to send the new units to the West Indies... the graveyard of so many regiments in the past twenty years. Eventually four independent companies were formed, two of which served in North America. *They Turned Out So Ill!* is their story.

Mr. Nichols' previous books told the story of the regiments in chronological order. He does something similar in this volume but draws heavily on his research of official correspondence in the National Archives, plus existing memoirs, letters, and diaries to bring to life the officers and men of the four independent companies. It is not a pretty story. They were led by former officers in French service, who were also deserters, and not of the highest caliber. All deserted for personal reasons and bore a grudge against Napoleon or life itself. This affected how they performed their duties. Throughout the units'

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<sup>1</sup> [Wellingtons Mongrel Regiment: A History of the Chasseurs Britanniques Regiment of British Army 1801 - 1814 by Alistair Nichols \(2005-11-02\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Wellington's Switzers: the Watteville Regiment in Egypt, the Mediterranean, Spain and Canada](#)

<sup>3</sup> Except for one year from 1802 – 1803 the British had been fighting continuously since 1793.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on this see [The British Army in the Napoleonic Wars: Manpower Stretched to the Limits?](#)

<sup>5</sup> See [Spanish Recruits in the British Army 1812 - 1814](#)

existence there were allegations of corruption, theft, and other crimes. Not surprisingly, the men had little respect for them nor any loyalty to their unit. This impacted their performance when they were part of amphibious operations along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Many of them deserted to the Americans at the first opportunity. The few times they were in combat were even worst. They are best known for the actions on the attack on Hampton, Virginia on 25 June 1813. Their officers lost control of their men after the village was taken and the men went on a rampage – looting, pillaging, raping, and murdering the inhabitants. The commander of the expedition felt they were so poorly disciplined that he could not use them and eventually they were sent back to England.

*They Turned Out So Ill!* is rich in detail. There is information on:

- how the officers and men were recruited
- demographics, such as age, what units they served in before deserting, where they deserted, and what city they were recruited from.
- biographical sketches of their officers, senior non-commissioned officers, and even some of the privates!
- how the companies were organized and manned
- their training
- their active service in North America
- the discipline problems they had in England and in North America
- the disbanding of the companies in 1814
- the uniforms they wore

One of the more fascinating topics is information in the two appendices about those who deserted to the Americans. Here Mr. Nichols tells the story of those who had been captured or deserted in America and then decided to join the American Army. . . making it for some the third army they had been a member of in three years! Most were discharged by the end of the War of 1812 although many took the opportunity within a year of joining the Americans to desert a third time.

*They Turned Out So Ill!* is richly illustrated with contemporary black and white and colored images. Furthermore, in the two chapters covering their active service in the Chesapeake Bay of the United States, there are eight maps showing their operations!

Mr. Nichols should be congratulated for bringing to life the most obscure units in the British Army of the Napoleonic Wars. He tells an engrossing story of what had to be the worst disciplined unit in the army. The fast pace narration will hold the interest of both the casual reader and the dedicated scholar. Highly recommended to those interested in the British Army and the War of 1812.

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: March 2019