Peninsular Adventures of the 2/87th Foot

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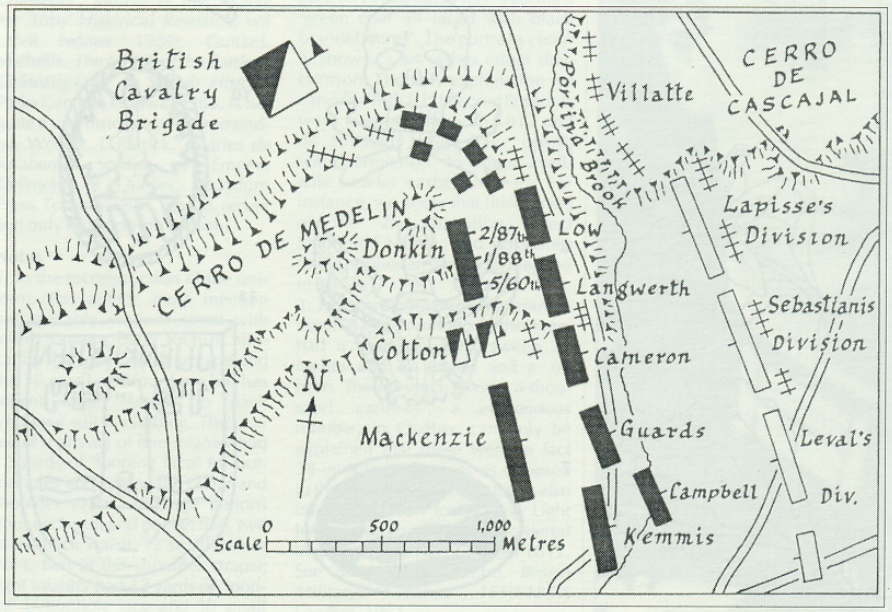
LINKING TWO themes around the battle of Barrosa in 1811, one the story of three soldiers who took part and the other the published discrepancies in casualty returns, this article shows that despite the number of books and articles on the Peninsular campaign, a great deal of original research remains to be done.

CERTAIN BATTLES of the Peninsular War will be forever connected, by military historians, with particular regiments, and the battle of Barrosa, fought on 5 March 1811, will always be associated with the 2nd Battalion of the 87th Foot. Although this regiment's capture of a French Eagle is remembered above anything else, it is obvious that the battalion did more than this to achieve fame. In his despatch written the day after the battle, Lieutenant-General Thomas Graham drew attention to the fact that the 'animated charges of the 87th Regiment were most conspicuous', and this was how the regiment's nickname of the *Faugh-a-Ballagh* ('Clear the way') originated. Paradoxically, it is almost certain that the 2/87th found itself under Graham's command in the Cadiz garrison because of indiscipline.

In May 1803 the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens led to the expansion of the army and, as a result of the Additional Forces Act, four Irish regiments of foot — the 27th, 87th, 88th and 89th — were allowed to raise second battalions. The 2/87th was raised in autumn 1804, and spent the next three months recruiting in its allotted counties of Galway, Tipperary and Clare. Assuming, therefore, that the battalion largely comprised Gaelic-speaking soldiers from the mid-west of Ireland, Richard Walsh, a Dubliner, who enlisted at the comparatively tender age of 16 on 25 June 1805; and Benjamin Brant, who was an Englishman from Bishbury, near Wolverhampton, when he joined on 25 July 1808, may have been untypical of their comrades in arms.

Brant was the older man, aged 26 on his enlistment into the 87th. He was above average height for the time, standing 5 feet 8 inches, had sandy hair and hazel eyes, and was a whitesmith by trade. He was also, unusually, a veteran by the time he joined the 2/87th Foot, having changed units twice: the reasons for these changes are obscure, as they are not recorded on his Chelsea pension papers.[1] This document purports to show that he had originally enlisted into the 1st Dragoons on 11 July 1803. On 16 July 1805 he was recorded as transferred into the 7th Royal Veteran Battalion. On 24 February 1808 Brant was shown as discharged from the 7th Veterans, but only four months later he seemed to have decided to join the 2/87th Foot.

Hugh Gough, CO of the 2/87th until wounded on 28 July 1809. An engraving dating from two years earlier.



Research shows[2] that Brant had not actually left the 1st Dragoons until 24 January 1807, when he was transferred to the 7th Veterans. The relevant paylist for that unit[3] gives no record of Ben Brant at any time in 1807 or 1808. Moving to the musters for the 2/87th for 1808[4], we find that he was recorded as having 'volunteered' from the *11th* Veterans on 25 February 1808 (this may be explained by the fact that the 11th Veteran Battalion was formed by the transfer of five companies from the 7th in April 1807). The musters for the 11th Veterans[5] confirm his transfer, but as there are no records prior to April 1807, no further light can be shed on his transfer from the 1st Dragoons. On 24 January 1809 Brant was recorded as 'Sick at Hilsea'; he remained sick there when the battalion sailed for the Peninsular, and joined at Lisbon in June.

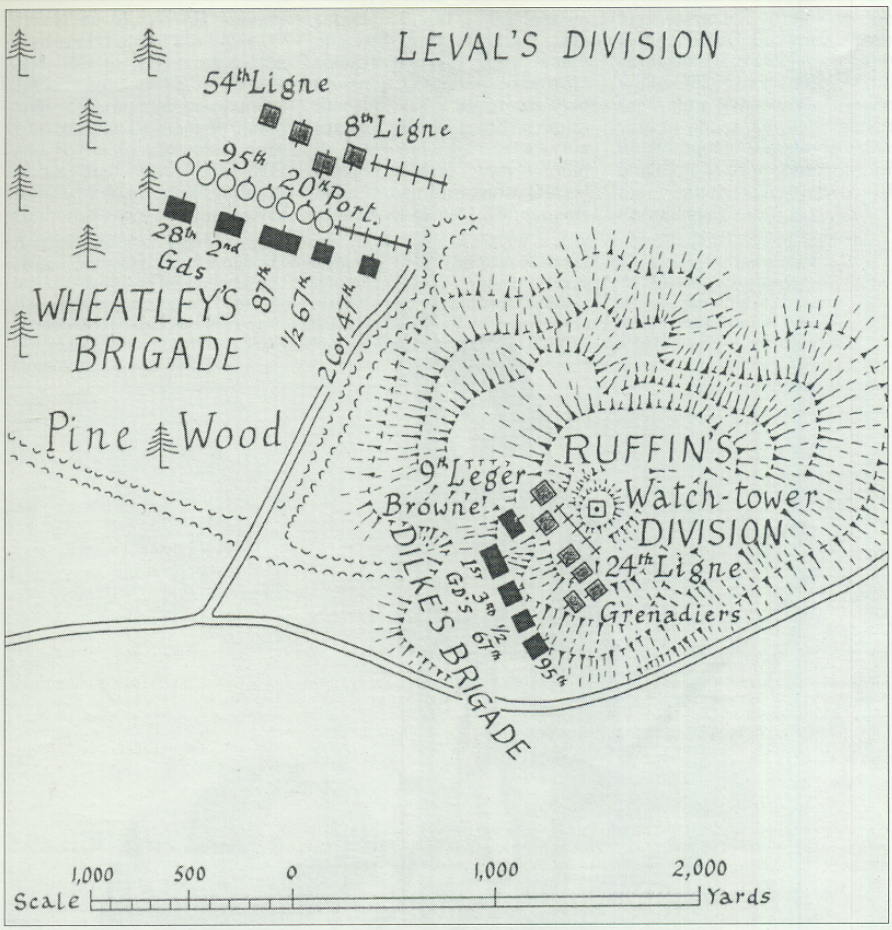
Richard Walsh, on the other hand, was a much more conventional serviceman, fitting perhaps ideally the career pattern of his time. His Chelsea

pension document[6] shows that he was a weaver by trade, and of more or less average height (5 feet 4 inches), with light-brown hair and grey eyes. He served only in the 2/87th, was promoted twice, and was discharged as a sergeant. He was, in fact, almost a model soldier.

The third member of our trio was Ralph Johnson, an enigmatic figure. He was very well connected in military circles: the letter of recommendation supporting his application for an Ensigncy[7] was written by his uncle, Henry Johnson. Ralph's commission was gazetted on 11 December 1806, at which time Uncle Henry had been a Lieutenant-General since June 1799, and Governor of Ross Castle since June 1801. By the time he wrote to support nephew Ralph's application for a Lieutenant-Colonelcy in 1829, he had become a full General, a Baronet and a GCB. With such influential backing Ralph probably had only to stay alive to have a successful career. On 18 November 1807 he was promoted Lieutenant without purchase, apparently[8] 'to make room for an officer from the Wexford Militia'. This was the rank he held when the 2/87th Foot found itself with the 1/88th and the 5/60th in Colonel Rufane Shaw Donkin's brigade of Major-General Mackenzie's 3rd Division when Wellesley set out from Abrantes on 27 June 1809 against Marshal Claude-Victor Perrin, duc de Bellune, in central Spain.

However high Wellesley's hopes may have been, the next month was a military nightmare: unreliable allies and chronic lack of provisions made any tactical decision an impossibility. Instead of joining with Wellesley to overwhelm Victor on 22 July at Talavera, Don Gregorio Garcia de la Cuesta refused to fight. When he did advance it was to meet not only Victor, but also the forces of King Joseph and General Sebastiani: 46,000 seasoned French troops concentrated near Torrijos persuaded the Spanish to retreat to Talavera and the defensive position prepared by Wellesley. Although this is not the place to discuss the details of the battle of Talavera, there are two aspects of it that intimately affect the 2/87th: the preliminary affair at the Casa de Salinas; and the location of Donkin's brigade during the main engagement.

The first incident has become notable largely because Wellesley was nearly captured,

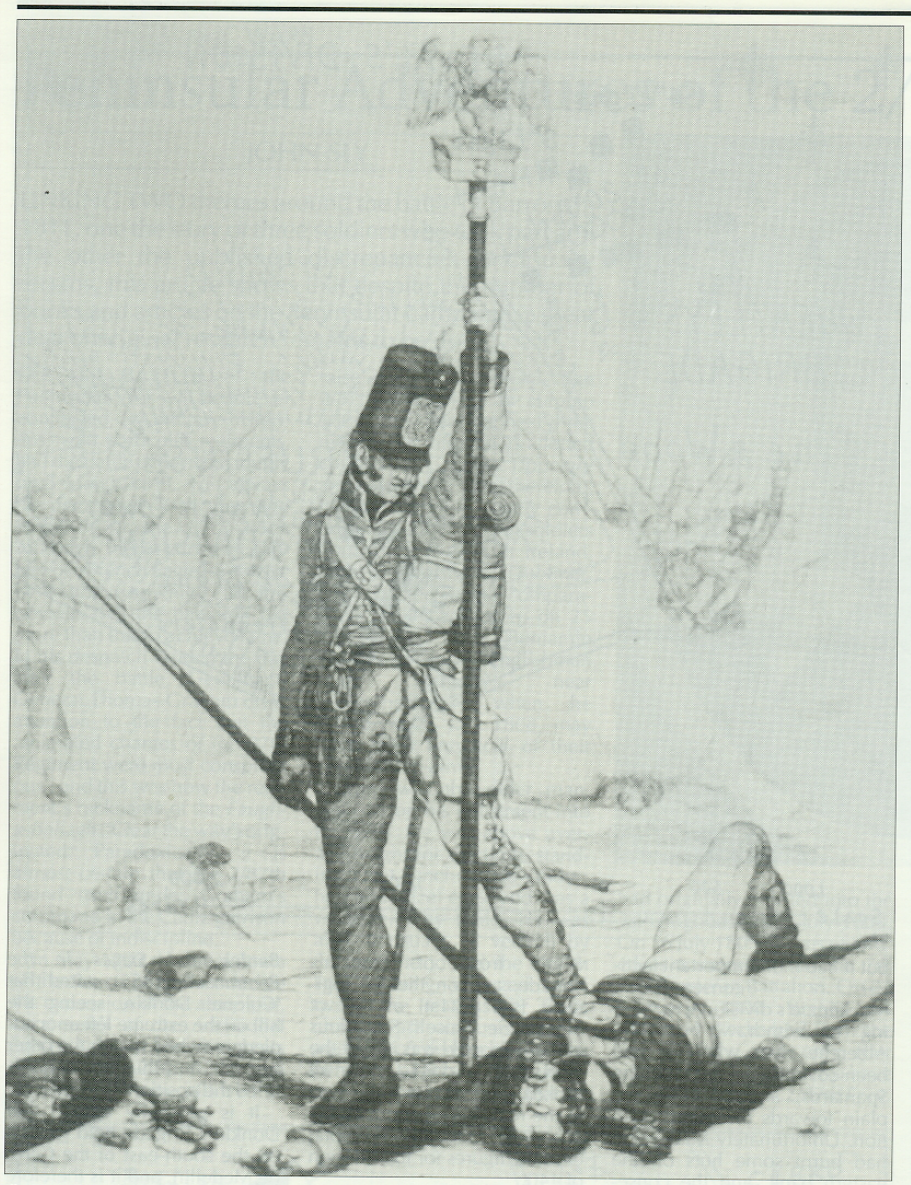


but it had more important tactical consequences. Mackenzie's division was waiting to withdraw from the Alberche river where it had been covering the retreat of the Spaniards, and to cross the plain towards the allied position. Unfortunately Mackenzie had burnt some huts on the eastern bank, and the consequential smoke acted as a screen for the advance of General Lapisse's infantry division which had forded the river and had begun to infiltrate the positions of Mackenzie's soldiers spread out among the olive groves. Unforgivably, not enough pickets had been posted to warn of a surprise attack. Where the blame for this dereliction of basic military duty should be laid is not clear, but Marcus Cunliffe, in his history of the 87th[9], puts the blame on Donkin who, 'apparently let his men lie down in the shade of the trees without having taken any adequate defence measures'.

Whoever's mistake it was, it was costly: Sir Charles Oman, in his classic work *A History of the Peninsular War*[10], stated that 'the assault fell upon the whole front of Donkin's brigade, and on the left regiment [the 2/31st] of that of Mackenzie himself. So furious and unexpected was it, that the 87th, 88th and 31st were all broken, and driven some way to the rear, losing about eighty prisoners.' He quoted total casualty figures for the division of 440.

Wellesley quickly pulled the 1/45th Foot and the 5/60th out of the wood, and rallied the division on their stand. These two battalions, together with Anson's cavalry, then covered the withdrawal of the division across the plain to the relative safety of the allied line. What happened when they reached it seems to be another point of controversy, and this is important in trying to assess the role the 2/87th played in the rest of the battle. Wellesley's despatch specified that 'Colonel Donkin [was] placed... further upon the left, in the rear of the King's German Legion'. Oman described Donkin's brigade as lying 'high up the hill [the Cerro de Medellin], directly in the rear of Low's brigade of the King's German Legion.' Sir William Napier, in his *English Battles and Sieges in the Peninsula* (1855), stated that 'Colonel Donkin, seeing the hill on the extreme left unoccupied, crowned it with the other brigade, and thus *accidentally* filled the position' (my italics).

It is generally agreed that Donkin's Brigade held ground on the south-east of the Cerro de Medellin, and it is therefore hard to understand how the brigade could not have been involved in the night attack by General Ruffin's troops. Looking briefly at the evidence, and taking into account the disposition of the troops, it is clear that Donkin's Brigade (and therefore the 2/87th) must have been in action, although Oman does not mention the brigade once in his account, writing only that Ruffin's game Légèr Regiment took Low's Brigade of the King's German Legion totally by surprise, broke the 7th Battalion and dispersed the 5th. After this, apparently, the French columns 'went straight on up the Cerro, and in a few minutes were nearing its crest'. Conversely, Napier stated that Victor ordered Lapisse 'to assail the German Legion as a diversion for Ruffin... The assault



Sergeant Masterson captures the Eagle of the 8th at Barrosa. Etching after Denis Dighton, published May 1811.

was vigorous and though Donkin beat back the French in his front, many of them turned his left and won the height in his rear.'

The 2 /87th played very little part in the events of 28 July, but it had to suffer a French cannonade for much of the day; indeed, Oman stated in his other famous work, *Wellington's Army 1809-1814*[11], that 'Donkin's Brigade, Wellington's last reserve [a description not recorded anywhere in his narrative of the battle], which was never engaged with infantry all day, lost 195 men without firing a shot...' Strangely, the casualty figures quoted by the authorities do not seem to reflect this, nor do they apparently relate to the information in the regimental musters.

Excluding the figures for wounded (because the paylists do not record these), the official despatch, written by Wellesley the day after the battle (29 July) and published in the *London Gazette* on 15 August, gave the losses for the 2/87th on 27 July as one officer and 26 other ranks killed, with 34 missing; the figures for 28 July were nine other ranks killed and five missing. The original paylist in the PRO[12] gives figures of 25 killed for 27 July, 18 for 28 July and three men died of wounds later, a discrepancy of at least eight in terms of the fatalities. However, the great discrepancy is in the figures for the missing, as the paylist records no less than *130* prisoners of war, all of them paid to 3 August, the day the army retreated from the Talavera position. To reconcile the difference it can only be suggested that, when the battalion set off on its retreat to Portugal, it left 91 wounded men in Talavera, nominally in the care of the Spanish, who later left them to become prisoners of the French. It looks as though the date in the muster was inserted very much *post hoc* to regularise a confused situation.

Trying to pin down the correct number of casualties is complicated even more by Cunliffe, who, although giving no specific source for his totals, gave figures for fatal casualties of one officer and 110 other ranks, although the official return put it at 35, and the musters recorded only 43; these two figures might be reconciled if allowances are made for the administrative confusion in an exhausted army immediately after a major battle, but Cunliffe's figure is so different that it must be treated with great suspicion.

Again, Cunliffe recorded the number of men of the 2/87th in action as 826; Oman's figure was 599, giving as his source 'the morning state of July 25, 1809'. Although the original muster roll is ambivalent in some cases, a careful count of the NCOs and men who can be assumed to have been present on 24 July 1809, excluding all men otherwise identifiably absent, is 908. Unfortunately there is no return extant in the PRO for the months between May and October 1809 for comparison.

At the individual level, Richard Walsh was wounded in the left shoulder, and Ralph Johnson was listed in Wellington's despatch as severely wounded. How or when these two returned to duty with the battalion is not known, but it is unlikely that they were among the troops who, together with the rest of Donkin's Brigade and the Light Brigade under Robert Craufurd, were sent in advance by Wellesley on 5 August to reach and hold the river crossing at Almaraz before Soult — who was threatening the British lines of communication with Portugal — could do the same thing. They succeeded and held it for two weeks, allowing the rest of the 18,000 men of the ragged and starving British army to cross the Tagus at Arzobispo and struggle into a defensive position behind them. Never did the Lord Wellington (as he became after the 'victory' of Talavera which cost him a third of his army) come as close to losing the Peninsular as he did then. On 20 August, unable to overcome his supply problem, he began to retreat into Portugal..

In September the 2/87th was not only a weak battalion with an incapacitated commanding officer (Hugh Gough had been wounded on 28 July) but also, according to an order issued by Wellington at Badajos on 24 September, with a discipline problem: 'The Commander of the Forces desires that Colonel Peacocke will pay attention to the state of discipline (meaning... habits of obedience to orders, subordination, regularity and interior economy) of the

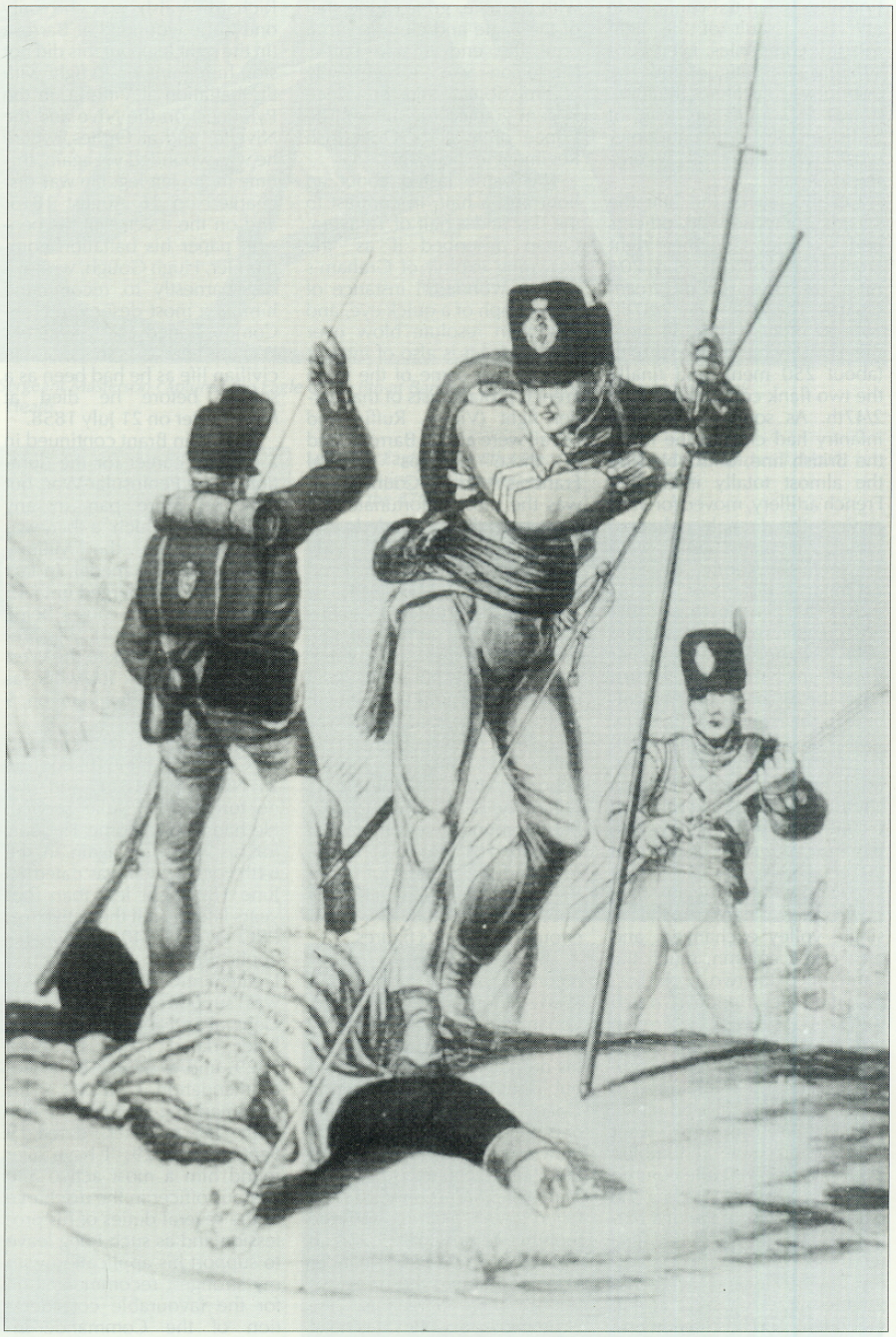
2nd Battalion 83rd Regiment and 2nd Battalion 87th Regiment, as well as to their parade discipline and drill'. As if to underline this, Arthur Bryant[13] pointed out that 'with so large a proportion of Irish militiamen in the ranks discipline was almost as much a problem on shore as it had been a decade earlier at sea'. The battalion was ordered into garrison, first in Lisbon, then, in February 1810, in Cadiz, under Thomas Graham.

Although it is unnecessary here to fight the Barrosa campaign again, an outline of the course of events is necessary in order to understand Graham's amazing victory. Soult's attempt to relieve Massena besieging Wellington on the lines of Torres Vedras included the taking of some of the troops besieging Cadiz under the command of Victor. Once it was obvious that the French were removing enough troops to give the allies numerical superiority, Graham was keen to attack. The final plan involved taking most of the garrison of Cadiz by ship to Tarifa (bad weather changed this to Algeciras) and attacking Victor's army from behind. In order to secure the speedy agreement and co-operation of the Spanish general Manuel La Pena, Graham agreed to serve under his command ('a cardinal mistake', according to Oman) and the attacking force of nearly 5,000 British, 9,500 Spanish and 300 Portuguese, finally set off for Cadiz in appaling weather on 28 February.

Exhausted by unnecessary night marches in dreadful conditions, the allied force found itself at daybreak on 5 March on the Cerro del Puerco, near the town of Barrosa. There was no sign of the enemy because Victor had planned to lure his enemy into the trap of straggling along the coast road, making relatively simple an attack on the flank and from behind from concealed positions. The Spanish advance towards the Isle de Leon was confronted by General Villatte's division, and Graham was ordered to reinforce the Spaniards. At about noon, and against his better judgment, he led his contingent into dense pine forest, leaving behind a small force on the Cerro under Colonel John Frederick Browne, consisting of the two flank companies each of the 1/9th, 1/28th and 2/82nd, making a weak 'battalion' of 536 (Oman's figures).

At about 12.30 Victor ordered Leval and Ruffin to attack. Leval and his infantry division (1/ and 2/8th Ligne, 1/ and 2/54th Ligne and the 1/45th Ligne, and a mixed battalion of Grenadier companies) was to take Graham in flank, and Ruffin to take the Cerro. About half an hour later Browne was forced to retire in Graham's wake as a division of some 2,500 Frenchmen attacked him. Graham reasoned that to continue to march towards La Pena would be even more militarily disastrous than to stand and fight, and he rapidly gave orders to attack the French before they could finalise their formation. Dilkes' brigade of some 1,300 Guards was to attack Ruffin on the Cerro, with Browne's men going ahead as a delaying force while Dilkes formed up. At the same time Wheatley's Brigade was to attack Leval, screened by Barnard's 100-strong flank battalion of four companies of the 3/95th, and two of Portuguese.

Another version of Sergeant Masterson taking the Eagle of the 8th as depicted by Charles Hamilton Smith in an aquatint by I.C. Stadler published in January 1813. This plate is something of a curiosity because it depicts Masterson wearing the 1812 uniform and shako, while the inverted chevrons are a mystery. Although the best known of the three plates — and the probable source of Lejeune's painting of the same action which duplicates the errors — this is probably not the one modellers should work from. A possible explanation is that Hamilton Smith, who specifically intended to illustrate the 1812 uniform, merely took a famous incident as his basis?



Needless to say, the attacks of Barnard's and Browne's flank battalions were suicidal, and they suffered accordingly; but at least the two brigades were given time to form up. The infantry was supported by a battery of ten guns under Major Duncan which was soon firing shrapnel into the French as they tried to manoeuvre, causing serious casualties. The bulk of Wheatley's brigade then came out of the wood to face the fire of the entire enemy division of some 4,000 men, who had by now achieved some organisation after the initial cannonade and the assault of the light infantry companies. Even considering the fatigue and the poor physical state of the men, it was an impressive array of British infantry, although somewhat low in numbers (according to Oman).

On the left of the line the 1/28th comprised 20 officers and 437 men. On their right were seven officers and 204 men of the 2/Coldstream Guards. Then came the 2/87th, with 32 officers and 334 men; the right wing of the 2/67th (about 250 men), and finally the two flank companies of the 2/47th. As soon as the light infantry had cleared the front, the British line, untroubled by the almost totally ineffective French artillery, moved forward against the French columns, which in their turn were advancing hesitantly.

Oman[14] described events thus: 'The fight, owing to the French centre being slightly advanced, began a little earlier there than on the wings, the first clash being between the column of the French 2/8th, led by Vigo-Roussillon, and the line of the 2/87th, led by that enthusiastic fighter, Major Gough... Each insists that he kept down the fire of his men till they were within a very short distance of the enemy — sixty yards, says Vigo-Roussillon, twenty-five, says Gough. There was then a single volley exchanged, and the French column, much the harder hit of the two, broke up.' Cunliffe's description is much more evocative: 'The French fire brought down some of the 87th, but this was nothing compared to the fire that poured in upon their concentrated ranks. The whole front rank went down: those behind tumbled over those in front; the column swerved sideways, jostling the parallel column of the first battalion of the 8th, who had also felt the effect of the British volley. The two locked together, a jumbled mass of dead, dying, wounded, and terrified men.' When Graham gave orders to charge, the 87th 'were already rushing forward, bayonets lowered, with wild cries of... "Faugh-a-Ballagh!".'

It was at this point in the battle that the Eagle was captured. Apparently Ensign Edward Keogh made the emblem of the 8th Regiment his target, and, enlisting the aid of Patrick Masterson, one of his Sergeants in the Grenadier Company, pushed his way towards it. Eventually grasping hold of it, he was killed; Masterson, stabbing the French standard bearer with his pike, gripped the staff of the Eagle and clung on to it until the end of the battle. Masterson was subsequently commissioned, and the Prince Regent granted the title of The Prince of Wales's Own Irish Regiment to the 87th.

The battle lasted about an hour and a half, in contrast to the day and a half of Talavera. Oman described it as 'the crowning exploit of Graham's life... a wonderful instance of the triumph of a quick eye, and a sudden resolute blow over long odds.' It is also of interest to note that some of the main French protagonists of that earlier fight (Victor, Ruffin and Leval) were also at Barrosa, and of these perhaps General Francois Amable, Count Ruffin was the most unfortunate. He was mortally wounded and taken prisoner at Barrosa, dying on board HMS *Gorgon* off Plymouth on 15 May 1811.

Once again there is controversy about the number of men present and the casualty figures. Oman put the total strength of the 2/87th at 696 all ranks. Cunliffe said that it was 722. My own count of the Other Ranks mustered on 24 February 1811, only nine days before the battle, came to 782, but the monthly return[15] for 25 February 1811 taken at Tarrifa recorded the number of Other Ranks present and fit for duty as 666, with 32 officers — near enough to Oman's figures.

The variation in the figures recorded for fatal casualties is even more problematical. Oman and Cunliffe, following the figure given by Graham in his despatch of 10 March, and published in the *London Gazette* on 25 March, recorded one officer and 44 men killed. However, the casualty return of the 2/87th[16] made out on 24 March, recorded only 30 men killed on 5 March, and the monthly return for 25 March 1811 recorded. Under 'Changes since the previous return', three Sergeants, one Drummer and 33 Privates dead (which would include men who died of wounds). The main reason for this discrepancy is probably the same as for Talavera: information compiled in the understandably confused 24 hours after the event was incorrect, and should have been revised later. Unfortunately, this revision seems not to have taken place *in print*, and the original figures have acquired the texture of tablets of stone over the years.

Finally, we can say a few words about the respective fates of our three heroes. Richard Walsh was the only one to be wounded at Barrosa (in the right leg), but this did not stop him going on to fight with the battalion at Vittoria, in the Pyrenees, on the Nive and the Nivelle, and at Orthes, where he was wounded yet again, this time in the left leg. He was discharged on 16 August 1815, and on the reverse of his pension paper his battalion commander, Hugh Gough, wrote: 'I beg earnestly to recommend him as a most deserving Non-Commissioned Officer'. Perhaps he was as successful in civilian life as he had been as a soldier before he died at Manchester on 21 July 1858.

Benjamin Brant continued in a military career for the duration of the Peninsular War, but took no more part in any actions for which a bar was authorised for the Military General Service medal. In fact he was not discharged until 15 May 1816, the cause being given as 'weak wrist'. He presumably went back to the West Midlands to look for work, as he died at Birmingham on 9 January 1855.

Ralph Johnson was promoted Captain in the 64th Foot on 21 November 1811, and saw no further Peninsular service. He had to wait some 15 years for his Majority, again in the 64th Foot, which was dated 10 June 1826, but less than four years later he left the active list. PRO WO 31/640 contains his application for an unattached Lieutenant-Colonelcy, which was supported by his uncle, General Sir Henry Johnson in a letter dated Bath, 16 April 1829, and endorsed by a recommendation from his Commanding Officer in the 64th in a letter dated 9 September 1829: 'I have ever found him a most active and zealous officer in the discharge of the several duties of his profession and as such I beg leave to support his application with my strongest recommendation for the favourable consideration of the Commander-in-Chief...'

WO 31/640 also contains intriguing correspondence on the investigation into Johnson's background. A letter dated 27 April 1829 from Lord Byng to Lord Fitzroy Somerset, says that the writer had asked Major-General Sir Thomas Arbuthnot to investigate Johnson's character while Arbuthnot was inspecting the 64th Regiment in Ireland. Arlbuthnot's reply (in a letter dated Athlone, 4 May 1829) concluded that 'Major Johnson is one of the officers of the 64th Regiment who fought some American officers belonging to a frigate of that nation some years back on which occasion he conducted himself well and gained much credit...'

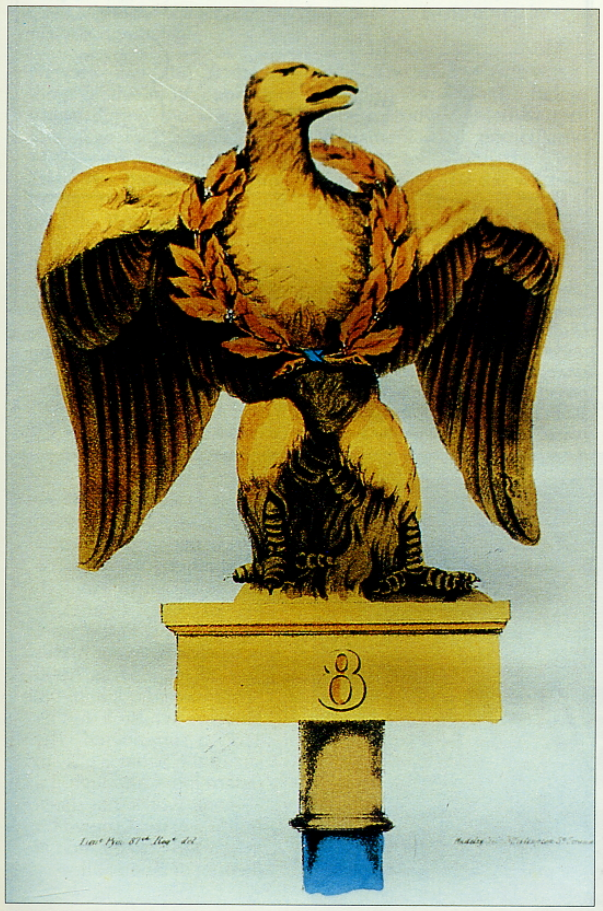
A letter to Lord Fitzroy Somerset from Byng (dated Dublin, 5 May 1829) highlighted this incident: 'The affair alluded to with some American officers at Gibraltar I have heard of. I did not know that Major Johnson was the particular officer mentioned. His conduct on that occasion as it was represented to me I consider highly creditable to him and to our profession...'

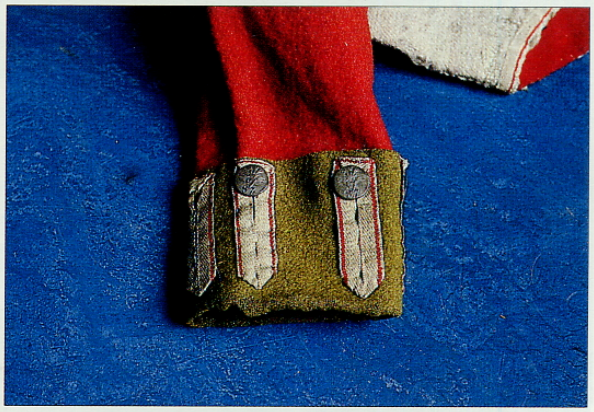
Thereafter it appears that Johnson wrote to the War Office (9 January 1837) asking whether he could be put back on full pay so that he could either return to active service, or retire. That request was granted, and there is another note in the file[17] to the effect that the vacant company in the Grenadier Guards would be filled by an officer from the Half Pay, viz the said Johnson. The note also seems to indicate that he was only 48 years old at the time, which would make him only 17 when he was commissioned Ensign in December 1806, and only [18] when he got his Lieutenancy. His date of death, is unfortunately, unknown. MI

Notes

1. Public Records Office ref WO 97/958.
2. WO 12/462-3.
3. WO 12/11169.
4. WO 12/9019.
5. WO 12/11193.
6. WO 97/966.
7. WO 31/218.
8. WO 31/241.
9. *The Royal Irish Fusiliers 1793-1968*, 2nd edn, OUP, 1970.
10. Vol II, Clarendon Press, 1903.
11. Edward Arnold, 1913.
12. WO 12/920.
13. *Years of Victory 1802-1812*, Collins, 1944.
14. *Peninsular War*, Vol IV, 1911.
15. WO 17/208.
16. WO 25/2094.
17. WO 31/756.

Another depiction of the scene when Sergeant Masterson captured the Eagle of the 8th at Barrosa: diorama modellers, take your pick... Engraving by Sutherland after William Heath.



Left: *The Eagle of the 8th Line. An engraving after Lieutenant Pym of the 87th.*

Below: *Jacket and cuff detail of the 87th.*