

The 95th Regiment of Foot, 1803-1815

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If one were to make a list of Napoleonic units which could seriously be considered corps d'elite, high up on the list would be the British 95th Foot, the Rifles. For a unit that was only formed in 1800 on an experimental basis, this is high praise, and is much akin to the renown gained by the Parachute Regiment or the Commandos of the Second World War.

The rifle itself was not unknown in the British Army prior to the French Revolution, indeed it had been used in very small numbers for sniping as far back as the English Civil War, but it was only from the middle Eighteenth Century that more general use was made of its greater accuracy and range, at a time moreover when the waging of the petite guerre was coming under increasing scrutiny. During the Seven Years War (1756-1763), these rifles were used by both the American militia and rangers in the forests of Canada and the American back-country, and by German Jagers as part of the Anglo-German army operating in support of Frederick the Great in Western Germany. Whilst some officers may have had their own private small arms, it was not until 1776 that the British army operated its own rifles, when a company equipped with the Ferguson breech-loader formed part of General William Howe's army in the advance against Philadelphia. Indeed, one of these riflemen could have changed history for he had taken aim at an American general, and was about to fire when he was ordered not to disclose his position; the American officer turned out to be Washington. When Ferguson was wounded at the Battle of Brandywine (the river in Pennsylvania, not the one in the Shire), the Company was broken up, and the rifles taken into store, from where they disappeared, leaving legends and myths behind.

The British Army entered the Great French War seriously deficient both in Light infantry doctrine, and units and troops with which to counter the skirmish tactics of the Revolutionary armies. Those officers who took an interest were impressed by the German and Austrian jagers, and in late 1799 a memorandum from Colonel William Stewart (later to be one of Wellington's banes in the Peninsula) proposing a Corps of Riflemen struck a receptive chord with the Duke of York at the Horse guards. Whilst he proposed that the 800 men should be primarily Scots Highlander and Irish (..as being less spoiled and more hardy than [other] British soldiers...), York sent a circular asking the colonels of 14 regiments to supply 34 "competent" NCOs and privates to an experimental camp at Horsham, with the express intention that they would be trained under both Stewart and Cootte Manningham, another light infantryman, and returned to their regiments to pass on their knowledge.

Unfortunately, many of the colonels indulged in the time honoured British Army pastime of taking the opportunity of getting rid of their idiots, gaolbirds and eight-balls, with the

RIFLE CORPS! COUNTRYMEN!

LOOK, BEFORE YOU LEAP:

Half the Regiments in the Service are trying to persuade you to Enlist;
But there is ONE MORE to COME YET!!!

The 95th; OR,
Rifle REGIMENT,

COMMANDED BY THE HONOURABLE
Major-General Cootte Manningham.

The only Regiment of RIFLEMEN in the Service:

THINK, then CHOOSE, Whether you will enter into a Battalion
Regiment, or prefer being a RIFLEMAN.

The first of all Services in the British Army.

In this distinguished Service, you will carry a Rifle no heavier than a
Fowling-Piece.

You will knock down your Enemy at Five Hundred Yards, instead of
missing him at Fifty. Your Clothing is Green, and needs no cleaning
but a brush. Those Men who have been in a Rifle Company, can best
tell you the comfort of a Green Jacket.

NO WHITE BELTS! NO PIPE CLAY!

On Service your Post is always the Post of Honour, and your Quarters
the best in the Army; for you have the first of everything; and at Home
you are sure of Respect because a British Rifleman always makes
himself Respectable.

The RIFLE SERJEANTS are to be found any where, and have orders to
Treat their Friends gallantly every where.

If you Enlist, and afterwards wish you had been a Rifleman, do not say
you were not asked, for you can BLAME NOBODY BUT YOURSELF.

GOD SAVE the KING! and his Rifle Regiment!

HULL, January 11th, 1808

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*The above text taken from a recruiting poster of 1808, notice that the main inducements appear
to light weapons, easy clean uniforms and friendly sergeants!
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result that it was several months before Stewart could be satisfied with his trainees. In July 1800, moreover, the Horsham training school was dissolved and part of it sent to take part in the ill-judged attack on Ferrol. On the return, the school was reconstituted, and in September 1800 permission was given for the unit to be permanent. In December 1800, the Corps was again called upon to support a naval expedition, when Sidney Beckwith was sent with his company on board Nelson's ships at Copenhagen. For their services on 2 April 1801, the Corps was awarded its first battle honour, which is still signified by the Naval Crown in the Royal Greenjackets cap badge.

Also in 1801, Manningham tried to obtain permission to recruit for the Corps, but it was not until the spring of 1802 that the Corps was allowed to send parties out to Ireland and recruit from amongst the militia and fencibles stationed there. Later that same year, the now up to strength Corps was ordered to move down to the Kent coast at Shorncliffe where it passed under the command of General Sir John Moore, and where it had greater space to practice light infantry tactics. It was whilst the unit was at Shorncliffe that, on 18 January 1803, it was taken into the Line as the 95th Regiment of Foot; a second battalion was raised in May 1805 and a third in 1809.

With the resumption of the war in 1804, the Southern coast of Britain was seen as under threat from invasion, so the 95th was now very much in the front-line. Together with the 43rd Monmouthshire and the 52nd Oxfordshire, it formed a Light Brigade that would have acted as a screen for the rest of Moore's command as it prepared to meet the French. Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, and Napoleon's march to the Danube effectively removed any such threat however, and for the next few years the 95th was called upon to furnish individual companies to take part in the various expeditions that the British Army undertook on orders from its political masters. For instance, the 1st Battalion went with Cathcart's expedition to North Germany in late 1805 in an attempt to persuade Prussia to join in the war against France, whilst three companies of the 2nd went on the first part of the expedition to the River Plate, and five companies of the 1st were with Black Bob Crauford's reinforcements that were destined to surrender during Whitelocke's bungled attack on Buenos Aires. The remaining companies were sent to Copenhagen in 1807, where they came under the command of Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley at his victory at Kioge.

In May 1808, the Peninsular War broke out, and the 95th was present from the start. Four companies of the 2nd Battalion, together with the other greenjacket unit in the British Army, the 5/60th Royal American Regiment, skirmished with the French General Delaborde's rearguard at Obidos, and were present two days later at Rolica. Two companies of the 1st Battalion landed at Maceira Bay in time for the Battle of Vimiera. When Wellesley left Portugal after being superseded, these six companies were present in Moore's advance to Salamanca in an attempt to join in the Spanish autumn campaign along the Ebro, but were then involved in the retreat to Corunna, along with another five companies of the 1st and four of the 2nd which arrived with Sir David Baird. The brigade under Crauford (1/43, 2/52 and 2/95) left the main army and was evacuated from Vigo, but the 1/95 was part of Edward Paget's Reserve and acted as

rearguard to the main army. It was Tom Plunket of this unit who killed Colbert at Cacabelos. As a reward for acting as the rearguard, the Reserve was told it could be evacuated first, but when Soult attacked on 16 January 1809, it countermarched and threw back the French flank attack. This article is too short to cover the horrors of the retreat in great detail, but interested parties are referred to Christopher Hibbert's "Corunna", or "The Recollections of Rifleman Harris".

On their return to Britain, the two existing battalions were rapidly brought up to strength, and by early summer were available for action again. The 2nd Battalion was sent to Walcheran, whilst the 1st, together with the 1/43 and 1/52 as a brigade under Crauford were ordered out to Spain where it was hoped that they could reach the army, back under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley, before he met the French. In spite of a speed march of some forty-two miles in twenty-six hours, under full packs and in the Spanish sun, they arrived too late for Talavera, although Riflemen were present as part of the battalions of detachments made up from stragglers from Moore's campaign.

In early 1810, Crauford was given two units of Portuguese Cacadores to form the Light Division, and, together with the 1st KGL Hussars, was given the job of protecting the Portuguese border from the expected advance of Massena's army. On 24 July 1810, Crauford delayed retreating to long, with the result that the division had to fight to get over the River Coa, losing close to 300 men in an unnecessary action.

Although the 95th gained sixteen battle honours during the Peninsular War, including two for the sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, their forte was not in the big set-piece actions of British lines versus massed French columns, rather it was the outpost and picket lines. There were occasions where the regiment actually crossed bayonets, such as at Sabugal on 3 March 1811 when Beckwith's brigade was supposed to be acting as a flanking force, but fog delayed its supports so it drew the full attention of Reynier's 2nd Corps d'Armee instead, or at Barrosa on 5th March the same year, where the five companies present were forced to attack to stave off the threat to their rear. At Fuentes d'Onoro, the Light Division was used to extricate the raw 7th Division from an untenable position, and at Salamanca the division was posted to a flank. During the actions in the Pyrenees, their skirmishing ability was much in evidence as they threw the French defenders out of redoubts, whilst at Tarbes, on 20 March 1814, units of all three of the battalions present advanced from tree to tree and bush to bush to force Harispe's division off of the hill.

With the completion of the Peninsular War, the units returned to Britain, although five companies of the 3rd Battalion were present during the New Orleans campaign of late 1814, early 1815. Then in the spring of 1815, the exiled Napoleon returned to France, and the British began forming an army under Wellington in the Kingdom of Holland. Companies from all three battalions were present at Quatre Bras and Waterloo, the 1st Battalion with Kempt's Brigade of 5th Division and the 2nd and 3rd Battalions with Adam's Light Infantry brigade. The 1st Battalion held the sand pit next to La Haye Sainte until it fell, whilst Adam's Brigade was instrumental in the final defeat of the Imperial Guard. For its service in the Napoleonic Wars, on 16 February 1816, the Regiment was removed from the line, and titled the Rifle

Brigade, a unique honour.

Sources:

There are several good regimental histories of the Rifle Brigade, but I used the one by Basil Harvey from the "Famous Regiments" series. In addition, David Gates' "The British Light Infantry Arm" is useful for training and doctrine. In an article of this length, it was impossible to touch on the many autobiographies written by officers and men of the regiment; listing can be found in Oman's "Wellington's Army"

Two recent publications might also be useful: Steven Petty has written an article on the technical capabilities of the 95th in Napoleonic Notes and Queries no.6, whilst there is a two part article by Neil Leonard in "Military Illustrated" Nos. 60 and 61.

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13	Stormtrooper - outstretched pistol	45	Gamorrean guard axe high
14	Stormtrooper - walking firing gun	46	Bossk
15	Stormtrooper - firing gun left	47	Bobba Fett
16	Stormtrooper - kneeling gun (relaxed)	48	IG88
17	Stormtrooper - kneeling firing gun	49	Garindan
18	Stormtrooper - running	50	Wee Quay
19	Stormtrooper - walking left	51	Tusken Raider
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