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INTERVIEW:
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Interview: The Man Behind Sharpe

This spring sees the publication of the eleventh novel in Bernard Cornwell's best-selling series of historical adventures based on the career of an ex-ranker Rifles officer named Richard Sharpe. 'MI' interviewed the author during a recent visit to England from his American home.

Cornwell was adopted at birth into a family belonging to an extremely strict non-conformist religious sect, the 'Peculiar People'. He attributes many later decisions to an urge to get as far as possible from the cramped mental surroundings of his childhood. Poor eyesight kept him out of the Army; he subsequently worked in television, rising to Head of Current Affairs for BBC TV Northern Ireland, and Editor of Thames TV's Thames at Six. Then, at the age of 35, he gave it all up to follow an American girl home across the Atlantic. Since he couldn't get a work permit, he dusted off his long-delayed dream of writing a novel about the Peninsular War — a fascination which he had pursued in his free time. That first novel won him an unprecedented ten-book contract with Collins and Fontana. All have been highly successful; and 'Richard Sharpe' has been named an Honorary Member of the Officers' Mess at the Royal Green Jackets' Regimental Depot — a unique honour for a fictional character.

MI: Your Sharpe novels clearly entail an enormous amount of research. What were the best sources for your most recent book, 'Sharpe's Waterloo'?

BC: The best has to be Jac Weller's *Wellington at Waterloo*. One does the 'Siborne Letters', but at the end of the day Jac is the best technical military historian; although for human interest there's nothing to beat Elizabeth Longford. I don't think there is a book on Waterloo that I haven't got on the shelf.

I also spent days walking the fields at Quatre Bras and Waterloo itself. Really, when I began the Sharpe series back in 1979 the one I wanted to write was Waterloo; it's been a fascination for years and years.

MI: When you were out walk-

ing the battlefields, did you get a feel from the atmosphere and the land?

BC: Much more so in Spain than in Belgium. In Cuidad Rodrigo, for instance, there's a church tower inside, just beyond the wall. You can still see where the British 12-pounder shots over-fired the breach and hit the church; the scars are still there, the size of soup plates, and that does give you a nasty feeling. Badajoz, too, is a horrible place; it's still grim and awful.

There are no ghosts at Waterloo — although there are plenty of bloody Frogs marching around in uniform pretending they won!

MI: Given that you've presumably never been in close combat yourself, have you made a point of talking to people who have?

BC: I've never been in close combat, although I've been ambushed in Rhodesia. I got shot at and shot back, but that's as close as I got. I got shot at in Beirut; and I was at work in Belfast long enough to know that if the British army ever needs an entrenching machine then I'm their man. Fire a bullet anywhere near me and I'll go down through concrete — straight down! It's been enough to make me admire the bravery of the people who have been in close combat, many of whom I've spoken to and who have given me plenty of ideas for characters.

MI: How useful are memoirs of the time as sources for your books?

BC: There are some very dull ones, but they all give you something. All the obvious ones are good, like Kincaid and Wheeler; but I particularly like a German commissary, Schaumann, who wrote *On the Road with Wellington*.

It's often the tiny things

that stick in your mind. In the 'Siborne Letters' an officer was writing to his wife trying to tell her what it was like. He said the corn on the top of the ridge had been trampled to the consistency of a woven mat. We all know what those mats look like — it was a wonderful image. Which of course I ripped off.

MI: How did you glean those little background snippets that make your novels so colourful?

BC: The best of it all comes from letters, diaries and memoirs. I am thinking of doing a series on the American Civil War at the request of an American publisher — the same idea, taking a character through nine or ten books — and I find the most valuable research sources are not the books on the Civil War itself, which are very accessible indeed, but the diaries and letters of the period which have nothing to do with the war.

I love the bit in Waterloo where they fumigate the room by throwing vinegar on to a hot shovel. That came from Madame Tour de la Pin, who was in Brussels two years before Waterloo. You don't read her for war stuff but she's fascinating on everything else. I adore all that detail.

I've always had this notion that it would be fun to write an historical novel set in the present, as if it was being written 300 years from now, where you would have a Model T Ford with electric windows — you just get everything slightly wrong. People would see people smoking and say, 'Oh my God, look, you can see he's dying of cancer', and people would keel over in the street . . .

I particularly enjoy the part after Quatre Bras where Sharpe and Harper are cooking steaks cut from a dead horse in a cuirassier's breast plate. It must have tasted so awful, cooked in axle grease; but they used to eat that sort of stuff.

MI: Do you have any particular view of the people who were

there, the professional soldiers?

BC: They were utterly admirable; I think it was a wonderful army, simply because of Wellington. It was one of those freak moments in history when the right man got the job, and then only because they thought he'd fail. In 1808-9, when they sent him out to Vimiero and Rolica, I'm sure it was a political move to send a junior general whom they were sure would fail. But of course, to my mind, he turned out to be the greatest general of all time.

I have a lot of time for most of the others even though there were some dreadful senior officers. Wellington refused to send them home because, he said, 'There's no point in sending them home because all they'll send me in return will be even worse.' But among the cowards and idiots there were also some magnificent people — like McDonnell, who commanded the Coldstreams at Hougoumont. There were some wonderful regimental officers.

MI: At one point in your book you have Sharpe threatening to shoot the Prince of Orange to try to stop him giving his troops suicidal orders. What was the incidence of men actually killing their officers?

BC: It happened. In my first book, *Sharpe's Eagle*, it happened, and an American editor told me that it was wrong, that such things didn't happen until Vietnam. I gave him the references and he shut up. Of course it went on; officers were incredibly vulnerable. The only astonishing thing is how many didn't get murdered. You read any of those memoirs — most of the officers were popular with their men; morale was terrific and, once again, it all came from Wellington. It was an incredibly efficient army. He didn't give a damn what they looked like so long as they got on a battlefield with 60 rounds of ammunition.

MI: What do you think were the

qualities the men did look for in their officers?

BC: I'm sure they wanted them to be different to themselves. Wellington disliked officers who had come up from the ranks — 'No good ever comes of them, they always take to drink' — partly because the men themselves saw these officers as upstarts from their ranks. It's interesting how in the American army, which prided itself on a more democratic system, the soldiers often liked the British officers, whom they saw as proper gentlemen. There's a curious expectation among some soldiers who want their officers to be different and special and a bit snobbish.

I like the story of the Guards major at Waterloo who tells dirty jokes to his men as the French cavalry come on. I know he existed and made those filthy jokes — and the men liked it and expected it of him.

I wrote a book called *Redcoat*, done really for the Americans. An American film-maker wanted the book written, and he wanted to have a British lord who was an officer who would be nasty to the men. I said he was wrong: they would love the British lord — the one who was nasty was the sergeant from their own ranks, and that's the one they'd hate. That's what he got — and that's why the film never got made.

MI: What about the enormous entourage that followed the army?

BC: There were huge numbers. Each company might have about 60 or 70 men out of which maybe 40 would be legally married. Only six wives could go with them, to do the laundry and so on. They were chosen by lot on the eve of departure to avoid jealousies — it must have been very hard.

You could buy a Spanish girl — not a whore but a wife — for five guineas. By the time some of the regiments that had been in Spain for four years on the trot reached Toulouse in April 1814 about 70 per cent of the men had women with them. These



were tough ladies, who had carried muskets, carried the packs when their men were sick, and had done a tremendous amount for the army. Most were Spanish or Portuguese and were not legally married to their men.

One of the worst things on the British army's record in the Peninsula was when the army refused to take them any further and they were torn from their men. A lot of men deserted to get back to their wives and many wives made it to England, but I'm sure the majority were ripped apart.

They were tough women, and remarried with an alacrity that was quite extraordinary. There is a story that after Badajoz a wife was widowed and was found in tears by an officer the next afternoon, less than 24 hours after the poor man had died. The officer sympathises and says 'It's awful, I'm sorry; he was a good mate.' 'Oh, it isn't that,' she says, 'I accepted Private Smith this morning, and an hour ago

Sergeant Jones offered me marriage and that would have been a much better match, wouldn't it? He's much richer.'

MI: Apart from the medical horrors, were there other aspects of Regency life that were dreadful?

BC: I think we forget that the army was so much better than civilian life for most of these people. Think of the common lodging houses, the open drains running down the middle — the life of the working class was horrific. I could quote an account of how an abattoir in London was run which you wouldn't enjoy. Civilian life was brutal — read Cobbett's *Rural Rides*. I don't think I ever manage to convey any of that, I fail totally.

What a relief the army was for many of them, with three square meals and a pint of rum a day. Give me that any day. Rifleman Costello had a perfectly comfortable life as a cobbler in London after the wars. He said: 'I sit at my last, banging away, and I remember that they were the

happiest days of my life. I know I shouldn't look back on the war with pleasure — but I do.'

MI: Is the Regency image of loose morals an accurate one?

BC: I don't think this reputation is wrong. I have a feeling we became very boring after 1815, really when the Victorians arrived. The classic story is after Badajoz, when Lt. Harry Smith of the 95th Rifles met 14-year-old Juanita and fell in love with her — she was one of the few who had avoided being raped by the British soldiers. He became Sir Harry Smith, Governor General of South Africa, and she Lady Smith.

In his Victorian biographies you find that, having met her, he waits until Juanita is 16 before marrying her, and thereafter she is escorted around after the army with a duenna to keep her virtue intact. It's all balls. He had her the first night he met her, when she was 14, and married her the next day.

The English had a reputation right up until the 19th century for being pirates, rogues and bastards — an awful nation to fight, we were. People like Drake and Hawkins were bastards, but they were fun bastards. I think Sharpe is an accurate picture of the times he lived in.

MI: Sharpe seems quite a moral man: is that likely?

BC: He is moral, in a funny sort of way; but he and his men were rogues. They whored and drank their way through Spain, and yet they were nice people. Wellington is always quoted as calling them 'the scum of the earth' — but he said it after the battle of Vittoria when his men got into the French baggage. He was relying on the captured coin to pay his men, but instead they cleared it out. The Spanish crown jewels have never been recovered since. He went on to say that 'it's remarkable what marvellous fine fellows we've made of them.' The infantry were remarkable; their powers of endurance and the way they would stand and fight is incredible.

MI: *The men must have known that they might well be hacked to pieces; how do you think they felt about that?*

BC: I'm quite sure that, just as current soldiers do, they fought for each other. They weren't fighting for King and country, they were fighting for their mates. In the Light Infantry there was actually a buddy system, as there is today. There was enormous morale at company and squad level. In the 95th Rifles, for instance, every officer who joined as a young lieutenant had to go and drill with the men for the first three months. We think of them as being so traditional, but they were remarkably ahead of their time.

There was a realisation, certainly in the Light Infantry, that you could no longer flog men into battle, instead you had to give them responsibility and make them think for themselves. Fuller's book on the John Moore training system is very good here.

MI: *The Rifle Brigade would have been a cut above, with their superior training. Did they think of themselves as an élite?*

BC: They definitely thought they were. But then, even the most tedious of line regiments would have thought: 'We are the 103rd, we're from Essex, we are better.' I can't believe, for instance, that the Lincolnshire 69th didn't think they were best because they were wearing Lincoln Green; and the Scots were still in clans, some of them still following their hereditary chiefs. All the men were made to feel special. There were very few really atrocious regiments — in fact I can't think of one that did really badly.

MI: *The British regiments seemed very cohesive, but isn't it true that they had little faith in, for instance, the Belgians, whom they didn't expect to stand and fight at Waterloo?*

BC: The only ones the British really liked were the Portuguese. In 1808 the Portuguese army was in disarray so what they sensibly did was to bring in British officers. All the Peninsular

veterans didn't mind having the Portuguese beside them because they reckoned they'd fight. They didn't like the Spanish much, but they were very generous to the Portuguese.

MI: *In the Peninsular War, what do you think was the most impressive achievement?*

BC: Salamanca, for Wellington. It gives the lie to the claim that he wasn't an attacking general. At Salamanca he sees his moment and takes it, chopping them to shreds; it was a brilliant piece of generalship.

Then at Vittoria there's a scrappy battle which he wins gloriously, utterly destroying the French presence. On the way there he had to march through the Galician Mountains, a very inhospitable place. He split the army up into four columns and was clearly worried about provisions, particularly for the cavalry since horses are like tanks, they're too delicate to move 100 miles over bad roads.

Accordingly he sent uniformed spies ahead to arrange fodder with the local grandees at a certain price. At one village the young aide-de-camp came back empty-handed, and when asked why by the Duke he replied: 'Because the wretched man insisted that I bow to him, and I don't bow to some dago.'

'I quite understand your position' said the Duke, who saddled up and disappeared. The next day the fodder appeared and the officer asked Wellington how he had done it. 'Oh, I just bobbed down', he said. Perfect. He didn't care, just get the job done. My admiration for him is boundless. Unlike Napoleon — who was undeniably a genius — Wellington had actually commanded everything from a company up, and he knew how the nuts and bolts worked. He knew that you're not going to win a battle unless you've got spare shoe leather.

He also knew that the people in the regions he marched through would do everything they could to stop him

unless he paid for his men's food, so he was ruthless on looters. When his army got to France in 1814 there was a worry that the population would turn and the army would suffer the way Napoleon's had in Spain from guerrilla warfare. It didn't happen because Wellington was paying for the food and the French were not. The French welcomed the British — venal French peasantry!

MI: *With your interest in the battlefields, have you ever done any of the outdoor living to get a feel for the privations?*

BC: Only on small boats, which, believe me, is sometimes a lot more uncomfortable. I should have done but I didn't — rain would get into the word processor!

MI: *Since you live in America, where black powder shooting has become a popular hobby, have you ever fired a flintlock?*

BC: Once, yes, and that was more than enough. It's got a kick like a mule, which makes one sympathise with the soldiers who tried to spit out some of the powder so it was only loaded with a half charge.

MI: *Have you ever fired a replica Baker rifle or tried sabre fighting — the principle types of man-to-man fighting in your novels?*

BC: I haven't fired a Baker, although I've handled one. I used to fence a long time ago and I've tried sabre fighting.

MI: *Do you collect militaria?*

BC: No, but I have collected a library — and I do have a heavy cavalry sword like Sharpe carries. The work can come to dominate your life and I take great pride that my living room has no sign whatsoever that the Sharpe books are written in the house; although up in the study is another matter.

MI: *It's clearly easier to build up a novel around a campaign where the participants are all dead, so have you ever been tempted to tackle a contemporary war?*

BC: Yes, it is easier — imagine trying to write one about the Falklands now. It would be fearsome. What are you going to say if you're doing Goose Green? Even at Waterloo there are gaps. I

think Wellington was right: you can as well write the history of a battle as write the history of a ball. Who was dancing with who at what point — you can't do it.

MI: *How about sources for military tactics?*

BC: I use the same sources as everyone else, really. There are a lot of good books out there; and all I bring to it, if anything, is some imagination. I'm not saying that others don't have that, it's just that they choose to write non-fiction. I was always astonished that no-one had already written this series after Hornblower and Jack Aubrey — it seemed obvious to me that there should be a series on the army. I realised later that the reason they hadn't was probably because there is so much research to do. But it had been a hobby of mine for some time so it's all there. Just collect the stuff and start plagiarising, but acknowledge in the back of the book whom you plagiarised!

MI: *How much do you think minute military detail on weapons and uniform means to your readers?*

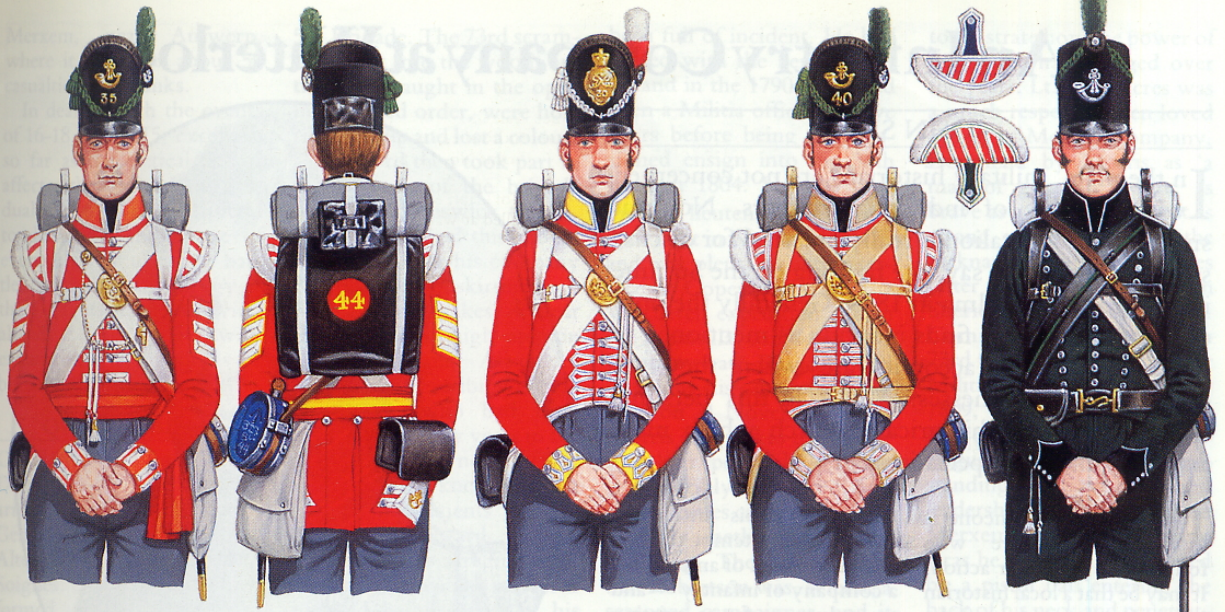
BC: I could have Napoleon win the Battle of Waterloo and they wouldn't care; but give a Rifleman black buttons instead of silver ones and you're through. People, quite rightly, get fanatical about it. It should be right.

MI: *Finally: given a time machine, is there any event or character you would like to go back to?*

BC: Oh, I'd love to meet Wellington. It would be wonderful to see Waterloo from a nice safe distance, perched over Wellington's shoulder perhaps, just to see how he got away with it. It would be great to see it from Hougoumont.

But of course it would be very uncomfortable because he was a very difficult man, very cold, who only liked you if you were an old Etonian lord, which is stupid when you think how clever he was and how well he did. He wouldn't like me at all.

MI



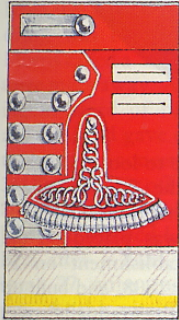
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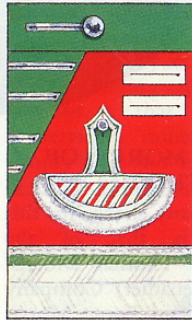
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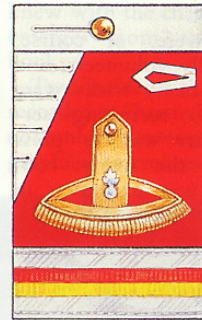
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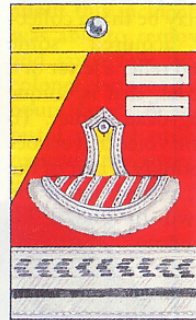
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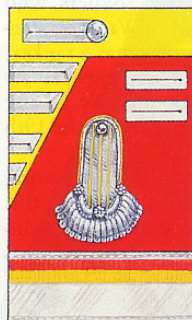
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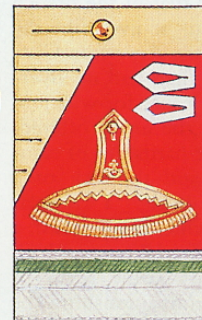
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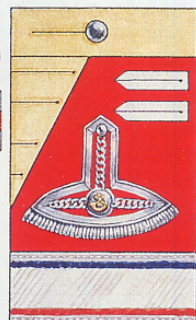
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