

James Morehead's Medal: An Enigma of the Peninsular War

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Anyone who has enjoyed the rich tapestry of military history must have wondered sometimes about the individuals who participated in these events: where they came from, what made them do what they did, and perhaps even what happened to them after their military service was finished. It is likely, however, to require an encounter with some personal relic from the past before anyone is stimulated enough to take the time and trouble to research the career of a particular soldier; and given that the passage of time makes the discovery and conservation of tangible material from previous centuries increasingly more difficult, it is probable that that stimulus will be in the form of a named medal. This is the story of the research that one such medal set in train, and of the intriguing inconsistencies in the contemporary records that make the researching of a soldier's biography so fascinating.

The medal in this case was a Military General Service medal from the Peninsular War period named for JAMES MOREHEAD 11TH FOOT. It had seven battle clasps (more commonly called bars by collectors), the maximum number found for this regiment: *Busaco, Salamanca, Pyrenees, Nive, Nivelle, Orthes, Toulouse*. Having acquired this medal, I wanted to research it firstly to confirm its authenticity (i.e. that Morehead was entitled to those bars); and secondly to find out as much as I could about this man who had been present at his first battle in 1810, and had survived at least until 1847 (when the MGS medal was authorised to be awarded to survivors of the Peninsula campaign which had ended 33 years earlier).

The key place to visit was the Public Record Office (PRO) at Kew, where the nation's War Office records are held. The War Office archive is vast; but my interest was going to be limited initially to the MGS medal roll, and the service papers of those soldiers discharged to an out-pension from the

Royal Hospital, Chelsea. I found an apparent discrepancy as soon as I looked at the medal roll (PRO reference WO 100/5, folio 187). The roll certainly confirmed Morehead's entitlement to the seven bars on the medal; but added in the margin the word *Fuentes*, clearly referring to the award of a bar for the battle of Fuentes D'Onoro. The 11th Foot as a unit had never been entitled to this bar, and so I searched through the roll to see whether any other men had a similar marginal note. I found five more examples, and although these entries did not confirm that the men were entitled to the bar, it certainly implied that they were.

I then looked to see whether there were any pension papers for Morehead. Theoretically, for every soldier who was discharged to a Chelsea pension there is on file a copy of a document detailing the man's service: places of birth, enlistment and discharge; age on enlistment and discharge; trade; and various other personal details such as a physical des-

cription (to prevent fraud in an age of overwhelming illiteracy when only the minority of the working classes could even sign their own names). These papers also record whether a man was wounded or not, and the gravity of the wound, as its incapacitating effects were a factor in assessing the rate of the man's pension. Unfortunately there are no such papers for men who did not qualify for pension.

In this case I was gratified to find that not only had papers survived for Morehead, but that their content was extremely rewarding (WO 97/329). Morehead turned out to be a weaver born at Ballinasloe who had enlisted 9 August 1809 at Strabane, Northern Ireland, and was eventually discharged to pension aged 41 on 9 May 1831 'at his own request'. On the papers it quite clearly states that he was present at 'the battles of Salamanca, Busaco, Torres Vedras, Blockade of Almeida, Fuentes D'Onoro, Forts of Salamanca, Siege of the Castle of Burgos, of Pampeluna, Nirdash, Sabugal, Pyrenees, Nivelle, Nive, Orthes and Toulouse' (my italics).

The medal roll of 1847 and the pension papers of 1832 would therefore appear to agree that James Morehead was entitled to the bar *Fuentes D'Onor* (sic). However, the medal is clearly one of seven bars only, and shows no signs of having been tampered with in any way. The problem was therefore to reconcile the apparent entitlement of this soldier to a bar for a battle — Fuentes D'Onoro, fought 3-5 May 1811 — to which his unit as a whole was not entitled, a soldier whose medal indicates that it had never been awarded to him.

CONTRADICTORY ACCOUNTS

In May 1811 the 1st Battalion of the 11th Foot was part of the 6th Division blockading

the fortress of Almeida; the battle of Fuentes D'Onoro, initiated by Massena to relieve the fortress, was centred on the eponymous village some ten miles away. According to Roger Robinson in his new history of the Devon Regiment (*The Bloody Eleventh*, vol. 1, Wyvern Barracks, Exeter 1988), Wellington placed '... 5 Division about a mile south of Fort Concepcion and 6 Division two miles south of that, overlooking the bridge across the Dos Casas on the Almeida-San Pedro road between the two rivers. Here they would prevent the enemy convoy of provisions from reaching Almeida by passing round the allied left flank'. The fight on 5 May was characterised by two crucial and dramatic episodes, both occurring at the southern, or right, flank of the Allied position. The first was Massena's attempt to outflank Wellington to the south, and the subsequent fighting retreat of the 7th Division, covered by the Light Division, across an open plain. The second was the French attack on the village itself, and the counter-attacking charge of the 88th, 74th and 45th Regiments which cleared the village and held it till the end of the day.

In no account of the battle that I have read were the 1/11th Foot in particular, or the 6th Division in general, mentioned — except one: Richard Cannon's, in his *Historical Records of the British Army* published in 1845: 'The Eleventh were in reserve during the early part of the action ... but were afterwards moved to the support of the Forty-Second Royal Highlanders, who were engaged with superior numbers; on the French seeing the advance of the regiment, they retired'.

This is an almost incredible statement. The attack by French cavalry on the 2/42nd took place virtually at the end of the Light Division's retreat

centre'. Then another complication in my research appeared: James Morehead was apparently not even with his regiment on 5 May 1811!

In order to try to resolve this enigma I had turned to the muster rolls for the 1/11th Foot for the period of 25 March-24 June 1811 (WO 12/2850). These muster rolls, or paylists, were the regimental accounting system and, at the same time, a monument to British bureaucracy and parsimony. They have the advantage, however, of allowing researchers the opportunity to follow in detail, month by month, the pay record of individual soldiers. Each man in the battalion was listed, and his presence with, or absence from, his unit each 24th day of the month was noted, because it could affect his pay and allowances. James Morehead was mustered for April, May and June as 'S. Santarem'; a glance through the rest of the roll indicated that the 'S' was almost certainly an abbreviation for 'Sick', and that this applied to a considerable number of men in the 1/11th at this time. They seem to have been spread over five main locations: Santarem, Celorico, Abrantes, Coimbra and Lisbon, with the main body of the battalion being located simply 'in Portugal' for the final (June) muster of that quarter.

It is quite clear from Roger Robinson's account why the casualty rate was so high. In March 1811 Wellington began to pursue Massena's army retreating from the lines of Torres Vedras, and this manoeuvre developed into a 340-mile chase, ending on 3 April with the action at Sabugal in which the 11th

Right:

Part of the pension record of Morehead's service now held by the Public Record Office, reference WO 97/329. Apart from other interesting details, it shows that in 21 years' service Morehead was promoted corporal no less than five times, and 'busted' again with equally monotonous regularity, on the last occasion after having worn his stripes for only 47 days. (Crown copyright; by permission of the Controller, HMSO)

D.

HIS MAJESTY'S

11th REGT. OF FOOT

Whereof Lieut. Genl Sir H. Montrepon K.C.B. is Colonel.

No. *James Morehead Private.*

BORN in the Parish of *Ballinasloe* in or near the Town of *Ballinasloe* in the County of *Galway* by Trade a *Weaver*

ATTESTED for the *11th* Regiment of *Foot*. at *Strabane* in the County of *Tyrone* on the *9th of Aug^r 1809*, at the Age of *Twenty years*

1st. SERVICE. AFTER the Age of 18 Years, which he is entitled to reckon up to the *31st of March 1831*, is *Twenty One Years and Two Hundred and Thirty Seven Days*

Regiment.	Promotions, Reductions, &c.	Rank.	Period of Service in each Rank.		Amount of Service.	
			From	To	Years.	Days.
<i>11th Foot</i>		<i>Private</i>	<i>9th Aug^r 1809</i>	<i>25th Sep^r 1812</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>48</i>
	<i>Promoted</i>	<i>Corporal</i>	<i>26th Sep^r 1812</i>	<i>9th Aug^r 1815</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>318</i>
	<i>Reduced</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>17th Sep^r 1815</i>	<i>26th Aug^r 1818</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>17</i>
	<i>Promoted</i>	<i>Corporal</i>	<i>2nd Aug^r 1818</i>	<i>22nd Oct^r 1820</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>87</i>
	<i>Reduced</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>3rd Oct^r 1820</i>	<i>8th Nov^r 1822</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>37</i>
	<i>Promoted</i>	<i>Corporal</i>	<i>4th Nov^r 1822</i>	<i>2nd March 1824</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>140</i>
	<i>Reduced</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>28th March 1824</i>	<i>7th July 1825</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>107</i>
	<i>Promoted</i>	<i>Corporal</i>	<i>13th July 1825</i>	<i>13th June 1826</i>	"	<i>336</i>
	<i>Reduced</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>14th June 1826</i>	<i>23rd Dec^r 1826</i>	"	<i>195</i>
	<i>Promoted</i>	<i>Corporal</i>	<i>26th Dec^r 1826</i>	<i>10th Feb^r 1827</i>	"	<i>47</i>
	<i>Reduced</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>11th Feb^r 1827</i>	<i>31st March 1831</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>50</i>

For Soldiers enlisted previous to the 15th March, 1818.

	From	To	Years.	Days.
INDIES	East			
	West			

* WATERLOO

Total of the foregoing Statement *21 237*

Deduct

Total Service up to the *31st March 1831* *21 237*

	Years.	Days.
A Non-commissioned Officer, enlisted after the 14th November, 1829, must have served not less than Three Years without interruption as such, immediately preceding his discharge. Vide Art. 6 of the Pensioner Regulations.	<i>7</i>	<i>148</i>

Of which, as Corporal

— Sergeant

— Sergeant-Major

* Further Service from the *1st April 1832* to the *9th May 1832* when finally discharged *39*

Total Service allowed to reckon to the day of final discharge *21 276*

* To be erased, when not required, by drawing the Pen through the Lines.

SERVED. *In the Peninsula about Four Years & a half, at Gibraltar Five Years, Portugal Fifteen Months, & Corfu Three Years. Was present at the Battles of Salamanca, Busaco, Torres Vedras, Blockade of Almeida, Fuentes D'Onor, Fights of Salamanca, Siege of the Castle of Burgos & of San Pedro, Alcazar, Alcazar, Sabugal, Pyrenees, Miraflores, Albuera & Toulouse. Wounded in the head at the attack on the Castle of Burgos, and at Toulouse. —*

2nd.
DISABILITY,
or Cause of
Discharge.
*at his own request receiving the
regulated Pension —*

3rd.
CHARACTER.

*The Regimental Board is of opinion, that his conduct has
been that of a good and efficient Soldier
trustworthy and sober —*

4th.
**PAY and
CLOTHING.**

*He has received all just Demands from his Entry into the Service, up to the
31st of March 1831. —*

*I James Morehead do acknowledge to
have received all just Demands from
my entry into the Service, up to the
31st of March 1831. — James Morehead*

Certified *John Henry Bell* *Captain.*

I CERTIFY that the foregoing Statements are correct Extracts from the
Regimental Records, and the Proceedings of the Regimental Board.

William Lamb *Capt. Major, and President.*

Confirmed by me,

W. H. M. T. T.

Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding.

Foot, in the 6th Division, played no more than a supporting rôle. However, the forced marching through difficult territory which the enemy had treated to a 'scorched earth' policy was bound to wear down the hunters as well as the hunted, and the divisions that invested Almeida at the beginning of April would obviously have been below strength.

Santarem is about 40 miles north-east of Lisbon, and Fuentes D'Onoro is some 150 miles further north-east of Santarem as the condor flies, on the modern Spanish-Portuguese border. In order to be present at Fuentes on 5 May and to have been mustered correctly at Santarem on 24 April and 24 May, Morehead would have had to cover 150 miles in a maximum of 11 days (25 April-5 May) on the outward trip, and the same distance in 19 days (6-24 May) on the return. Quite clearly, as the example of the march from Torres Vedras to Sabugal showed, it was not totally out of the question for Wellington's infantrymen to cover an average of 14 miles a day for 11 days, fight a battle, and then cover an average of eight miles a day for 19 days, even in the Iberian spring. Arthur Bryant (op.cit.) quotes the example of Sir Brent Spencer's four divisions in June 1811 marching 'twenty miles a day in heat so intense that more than one of the proud infantry of the Light Division dropped dead sooner than fall out . . .'. I would guess that Morehead could have carried out a forced march of the nature described if he were fit, but it seems to me highly doubtful that he could possibly have

Left:

The reverse of the previous sheet, with a summary of Morehead's service: 'In the Peninsula about Four Years & a half, at Gibraltar Five Years, Portugal Fifteen Months, Corfu Three Years.' Despite the migratory nature of Morehead's corporal's tapes, we have it on the authority of his officers that he was 'a good and efficient soldier, trustworthy and sober'. (Crown copyright; by permission of the Controller, HMSO)