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The Peninsular War diary of Ensign John V. Carter

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Ensign Carter's diary records events between November 1811 and March 1812 when the British 30th Regiment of Foot was in winter quarters behind the front in Portugal and western Spain. It gives a full picture of the life of a junior regimental officer on the Iberian Peninsula.

Key words: Peninsular War; 30th Regiment of Foot; Ensign John V. Carter.

Ensign John V. Carter fought with the 30th (Cambridgeshire) Regiment of Foot in Wellington's 1808 – 1814 campaign in the Iberian Peninsula. The brief and tattered remnants of his diary run only from November 1811 until March 1812. As it is the only surviving diary from the 30th of Foot in the Peninsular War, it is considered to be very significant. Accordingly, the Napoleonic Wars archivist, Gareth Glover, transcribed and published it in 2006 (Glover 2006).

Carter, from Lincolnshire, was commissioned as an ensign (today a second lieutenant) in the 2nd Battalion of the 30th Regiment on 7 March 1811. Carter carried a small notebook to record his travels. His diary does not describe any fighting. It recounts the exploits of Carter and the 30th going into winter quarters well behind the front. Its value lies in his description of the life of a junior regimental officer as Carter "was a particularly keen observer of incidents which he describes in a style full of vitality, wit and urbanity" (Glover 2006).

November – December 1811

The diary begins in western Spain: "We left Gata November 24, the order was so little expected, it came in the morning. We marched about 10 o'clock four long leagues to Vila do Touro. I took the baggage guard with Lieutenant Bailie."

In December, he describes a long march and taking a house with the Adjutant "where we met a jolly priest who sung very well and liked our grog".

On December 16 he had "the subaltern's guard at Midoes. (He) went to hear a general court martial which was sitting. An officer of the 3rd Dragoon Guards for being drunk on duty and rioting in camp."

He had trouble with his mule. It took three blacksmiths and several men to master him. The battalion had to be inspected by General Hay who maintained a military tradition – "after keeping us some time in the cold, doing nothing, we marched back again. I rode my mule and he threw me."

On Christmas Eve, the battalion "met a little before 3 o'clock in the morning to muster. Colonel Grey ordered a drum head court martial to assemble which I was a member. We tried three privates, the first a recruit for stealing his comrade's meat. He was found guilty and sentenced to receive 150 lashes every which he got. The poor fellow was so frightened that he said to the drummers. 'Don't flog me hard and I will give you some thing'. One of them made answer 'Oh no, we will not flog you hard'. The second for rioting in a wine house in Midoes and striking a corporal. He was sentenced to 300 lashes and received 250. The third was acquitted."

On Christmas Day: "We had a parade at 3 o'clock in the morning. At 10 o'clock, the brigade assembled for divine service. The parson being taken ill, instead of praying, we formed line, saluted General Walker, marched past in slow and quick time. In marching past in quick time he abused us very much indeed. Then we wheeled into line again, he found fault with the movement, the men not sloping their arms properly, called the officers 10 paces in front and told them to examine the men and put them to rights. He found fault with the supernumerary officers, in particular after advancing and retiring in line. We marched home."

"In consequence of all this palaver he ordered the whole regiment to drill at 8 o'clock every morning. In the evening we dined with Adjutant, Lieutenant Garland and Ensign Campbell. We had a famous jolly time of it, sung several songs. At 9 o'clock we adjourned to Colonel Grey's where we had an eloquent supper, a great deal of jolly rum with which I play my part pretty well."

On New Year's Eve there was a drumhead court martial on a man who had stolen a Cacadore's (a Portuguese Light Infantryman) packs. He was found guilty and received 325 lashes."

January 1812

On New Year's Day he took a long walk with the doctor. They met two ladies "who greeted us with preserved fruits. They detained us for some time. We went into the garden hard by, filled our pockets and hands with oranges and came home. We then took a walk to Midoes to call upon Lieutenant Garland but he was not at home so the lady of the house entertained

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us by singing. We dined with Ensign Smith and Lieutenant Mayne who gave us a pretty good brandy which made us rather merry. In going home my foot slipped by a hole full of dirty water. I fell down and the doctor who was behind me tumbled over me into the middle of the water and he got a pretty good soaking.”

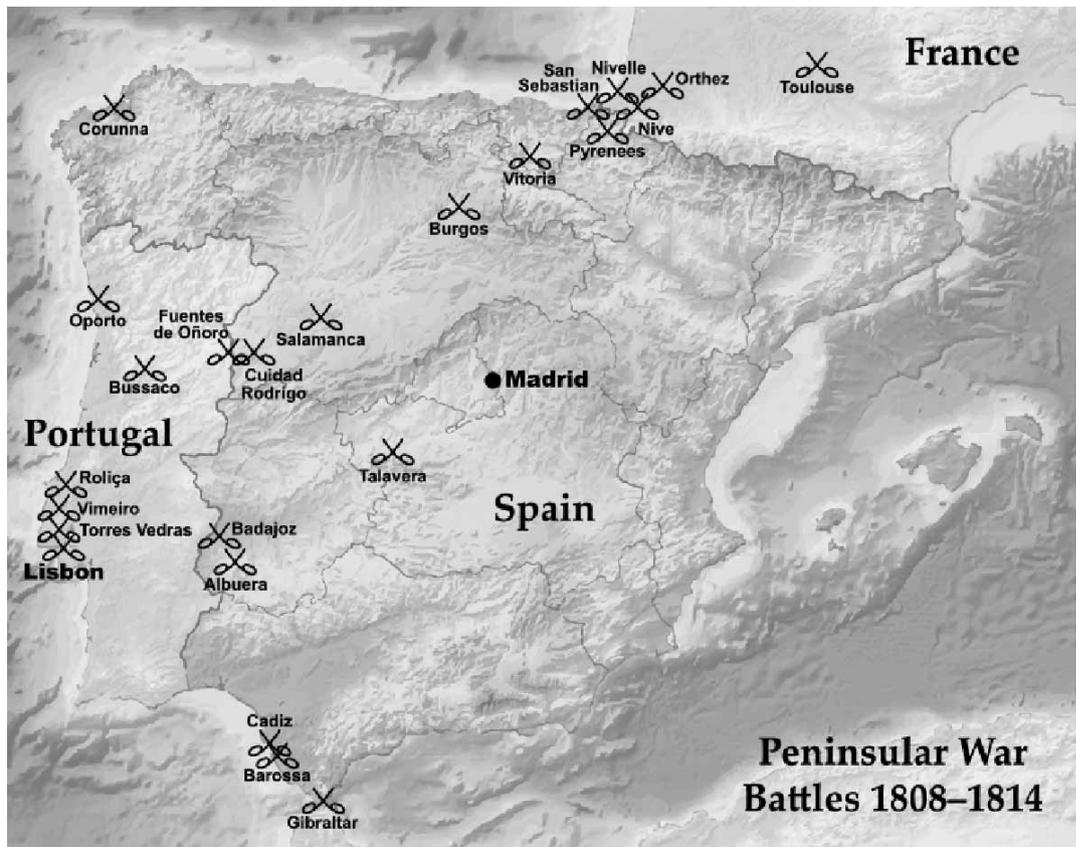
January 6: “In the afternoon we had a drum head court martial on a man for stealing flour. He was found guilty and received 200 lashes. When stripped you might perceive that he was exceptionally lousy. He had one of the toughest hides I ever saw. When he went to the hospital the doctor was under the necessity of burning all his clothing.”

On January 16 the regiment marched to Vila do Touro where a fair was in full swing. “The two girls with whom I billeted before were very glad to see me. They had several visitors. They treated the doctor and me with milk to our coffee.”

On January 18, Carter learnt from a dragoon orderly that Ciudad Rodrigo had fallen, “but we proceeded a little further we heard the report of cannon in that direction very plainly which convinced us to the contrary.”

This strategically important, fortified city occupied the top of a flat hill above the River Agueda. It had been modernised by the addition of fresh outworks. It needed to be taken swiftly as French forces under Marshal Auguste Marmont and General Jean-Marie Dorsenne were moving to relieve it. It was a hard fought assault with the British charging through two breaches. General Robert (‘Black Bob’) Craufurd, harsh leader of the Light Division, was mortally wounded. The French defence deteriorated rapidly once the British troops entered the town, where they set about drinking themselves into insubordinate intoxication. Some actually drowned in brandy casks and wine vats.

Carter never observed this. But instead “heard very clearly firing the whole of the day (January 18), and hourly expected to receive orders to march. The doctor received orders to get his medicine all ready, which he did accordingly and as we daily expected to be



Map showing the main battles of the Peninsular War, 1808–1814 [Map: Wikipedia Commons]

engaged he gave me a tor(nique) and directions how to use it.”

January 19: “The firing was still heard until about half past seven in the evening when it ceased; we were within 5 leagues of Ciudad and could not hear the least news.”

January 20: “At daybreak we got the route to march to Ciudad. We (were) supposed to take our turn of duty in the trenches but when we reached (Fuenete)guinaldo we heard from one of the artillery that the town was stormed the night before at half past seven o’clock and had surrendered. This was soon confirmed by the Light Division which we met returning from the town loaded with plunder of every description. (When) we got within two miles of the town we met about 1600 French prisoners. Our regiment was quartered in the suburbs. I took a walk into town and there beheld a most melancholy sight. The streets (were) covered with dead bodies, broken firelocks, bayonets, balls, caps *etc.* The doctor and I got an excellent billet, a good bed and clean sheets.”

January 25: “General Craufurd was buried, the procession was grand, our division opened file and rested on their arms while the funeral past betwixt us. The 52nd (and) 95th Regiments and Cacadores marched in front. In the rear came the corpse, followed by Lord Wellington, Marshal Beresford (Marshal of the Portuguese Army) and several other great men, their staff followed. He was buried at the foot of the lesser breach which he himself wanted. Something moved the

Colonel and he ordered the ensigns to the Colours on the march. This did not please me at all.”

January 26: “At six o’clock we went to the trenches (on) a very cold misty morning. Several of our men who were skulking from this work got into a small shed, and these began to light a fire. This shed was a temporary kind of magazine. Some loose powder took fire and literally blew all the clothes off two or three of them, they were sadly burnt.”

January 31: “We went to our work at 12 o’clock. Part of the men were in pulling down the remains of a beautiful chapel. General (Francesco de) Castanos and his staff came round the works. Lieutenant Smith of the 77th (East Middlesex), who came up country at the same time as myself, was shot. Another officer also whom we called ‘Old Piss Pot’ lost his hand. The soldiers chased the French into a large square. They stood at one end of it expecting to be put to the bayonet, when John Bull with his eye upon some rum casks, he immediately broached these, and got most gloriously drunk. The French again made some resistance but were soon overcome. When the officers were in the Governor’s house, the cook when the fire was lighted made his appearance from the chimney. After he had obtained money for himself, he told the officers that his friend the butler was still concealed. He brought him forward and they made (him) produce the wine and brandy.”

February 1812

February 7: James the doctor’s servant stopped a man with an ass, the very picture of the one he lost. The whole of the servants were certain that it was the same. The doctor went to the Governor of the town and reported him. But when we all had made a thorough claim upon the up, the doctor and I were walking a short distance from our quarters and met the very ass he lost coming home by himself as contended as possible. We immediately delivered the Spaniard his ass back again and very glad he was.”

February 8: “Several of the officers who had been drinking at Ensign Lockwood’s sallied forth about 2 o’clock in the morning into the street and began to throw stones at Lieutenant Maynes’ and Ensign Smith’s quarters. It enraged Smith so much he fired a fowling piece out of the window and hit Lieutenant Garland. Ensign Smith reported this to the Colonel. Ensign Lockwood was put under arrest.”

February 9: “In the evening there was a dance. We subscribed half a dollar each. I tossed up with the doctor who should pay the whole and I won. The rooms were very small and full. Half the ladies had the itch. I was very much entertained at seeing the Spanish girls play the castanets. After staying half an hour I came home very much tired. The night was very dark and I lost my way.”

February 11: “I took a ride with the Adjutant. We saw a man with his throat cut in a hole full of water with a great many stones thrown over him. About 12 o’clock at

night the doctor returned from a dance and also the people of the house. But when the doctor got into bed, we were disturbed by the people singing below the stairs. We asked them to be silent and got to bed for we wished to sleep. They made reply that it was their intention to dance and sing all night. This enraged us so that when they were in the midst of their glory we employed the contents of the chamber pot in the midst of them. They with the greatest fury laid siege to our room. The girl of the house whom I told that I was the son of a parson, called me the son of a farther and a bastard. After soaking them pretty well with water, and turning them out of doors they were quiet.”

February 14: “I was on guard at the Almeida Gate, turned out the guard to Lord Wellington and he ordered it in.”

February 29: “Thirteen deserters from the French discovered themselves from the woods. They told us that there were several hundred more in the woods who were afraid to show themselves for fear of being murdered by the peasants and guerrillas. They told us there were 14,000 men in the vicinity of Salamanca but the French army had not been paid for some time and were very discontented.”

March 1812

March 5: “During the time we were in a field a peasant came into the market with a gun in his hand, one of the guard took it out of his hand and not knowing it to be loaded, he fired it off and shot the man very much about the upper legs and in the breast – also a woman. It was very fortunate that it did not do more harm as this happened in the middle of the market place. The doctor bled them and seems to (think) that neither of them were intentionally hurt.”

Carter’s last entry was on March 7: “In the night the doctor and I were disturbed by the hospital sergeant who came to call the doctor to Ensign Brooke who when returning home from a party fell and ruptured himself. He was in great pain the whole of the night.” Ensign Brook died of natural causes on 24 March 1812.

Conclusion

The historian, Gareth Glover (Glover 2006), finds the diary a “delight and its only disappointment (is that) it is so short, for its stops on the road to Badajoz”. Carter might well have kept another diary. If so, it may have been buried with him when he succumbed to the rigours of the campaign, dying of sunstroke at Ciudad Rodrigo on 23 July 1812. At that time Napoleon was fighting the first engagement of his ill-fated Russian campaign at Vitebsk and Wellington had won the battle of Salamanca in the hills around Arapiles.

Reference:

Glover, Gareth, editor (2006). *Ensign Carter’s journal 1812: the Peninsular diary of Ensign John V. Carter, 30th (Cambridgeshire) Regiment of Foot* (Ken Trotman Publishing: Huntingdon, UK).