

## Recognising service in Wellington's army

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*In all my soldiering, 1803-1831, we never had the least notion of getting medals...<sup>1</sup>*

Honours and recognition in any army has not been a subject of wide study; to take the British experience of honours as example, there exists only a single paper in a commemorative edited volume which considers honours, generally, within the context of the army's wider history;<sup>2</sup> and mention is made, fleetingly, in the major studies of the British army during this period.<sup>3</sup> The study of honours generally, equally, is neglected somewhat in historiography, notwithstanding some recent and comprehensive studies (both, of which, fall outside of the purview of this study).<sup>4</sup>

This paper discusses three aspects to honours in the British army of the Peninsular war: the first is the state of play as regards 'official' honours (i.e., those from the crown) during the Peninsular War; next I consider regimental awards and how they filled the gap which official awards left and, finally, the decision to award a medal for the Battle of Waterloo is examined. Importantly, the Crown sought to honour officers (inevitably, very senior officers) as it was felt their distinctions represented those under their command; indeed, both Wellington and the Duke of York (the commander-in-chief), as I discuss below, were firmly against the principle of individual distinction, which explains much of the honours system, or lack of, in this period.

### **'Official' honours before Waterloo**

As far as a soldier in Wellington's army was concerned, the system of military honours (emanating from the crown) in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century was in three parts: general and particularly distinguished field officers received an appointment in the Order of

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of John Hardy, 2nd Royal Fusiliers, file H/6, Royal Fusiliers archive, quoted in Scott Myerley, *British Military Spectacle* (Harvard, 1996), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Lesley Smurthwaite, 'Glory is Priceless!: Awards to the British Army during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', in A. J. Guy (ed.), *The Road to Waterloo* (London, 1990), pp. 164-83.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Hew Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army, 1830-1854* (Manchester, 1984), especially p. 99-102; J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 222-24.

<sup>4</sup> Tobias Harper, *From Servants of the Empire to Everyday Heroes: The British Honours System In the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2020); Christian Bailey 'Honor among Peers? A Comparative History of Honor Practices in Postwar Britain and West Germany', *Journal of Modern History*, 87 (2015), pp. 809-51.

the Bath,<sup>5</sup> 'gold medals'<sup>6</sup> and, perhaps, the thanks of Parliament; subalterns and captains might receive a sword or brevet promotion. Soldiers may have received a supplement of pay or, after a particularly long career, with a distinguished record of campaign service, might receive a pension. The Order of the Bath, founded in 1725, is well known as a reward for distinguished service, but as early as 1792, even Prince George, as Prince Regent, recognised the need for a further decoration:

Art. 8th.

No officer under the degree of a Field Officer in the Land Service ... or by Master and Commander in the Navy shall be allowed to wear this Order... [awarded for]

1st. 20 years actual service at least.

2nd. Severe wounds or the loss of limbs in action.

3rd The performance of gallant exploits before an enemy; or

4th Instances of great & essential services done to their country by dint of their own skill or personal bravery.<sup>7</sup>

Although, the prince saw the need for a decoration (which was not to materialise) to reward long, gallant or distinguished service, it was still not thought suitable to reward the rank and file, or, even, subalterns and captains (although there was provision for the award to such junior officers under exceptional circumstances with special royal permission). This was a view shared by the Duke of York, but not the Duke of Wellington whose considered decorations for important actions should be open to all ranks. Both cases are discussed below.

Rather than the British crown being the 'font of honour, foreign monarchs often recognised British officers, and occasionally, soldiers with honours. Perhaps the most important of these decorations was the *Ehrenmedaille für Englische Kavalleristen* (Gold Medal of Honour for English Cavalrymen), issued by Francis II (Holy Roman Emperor, r. 1792-1806) to eight officers of the 15th Light Dragoons in recognition of his personal rescue at the engagement at Villers-en-Cauchies on 24 April 1794. Given the restrictive nature of the Austrian honours system at the time, he was unable to award them the Military Order of Maria Theresa, perhaps Europe's pre-eminent military honour, he struck large gold medals, which the British

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<sup>5</sup> See J.C. Risk, *The History of the Order of the Bath and its Insignia* (London, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> See J. Lawson Whalley, *Gold War Medals awarded to British Military and Naval Officers from Elizabeth to Victoria* (Lancaster, 1888).

<sup>7</sup> Royal Archives, GEO/MAIN/388660-62, 'Proposed regulations for the institution of a military order', n.d. [1792], also published in Arthur Aspinall, *The Correspondence of George, Prince of Wales 1770-1812*, 2 (London, 1964), pp. 322-25 (document 717).

officers were granted permission to wear in uniform. (Later, they were awarded the Order of Maria Theresa as the Emperor wished).<sup>8</sup>

The Peninsular Gold Crosses and Medals deserve some attention. As Lawson Whalley noted, the practice of presenting officers in victorious actions with a gold medal dates back to the Elizabethan era and the custom gained traction under George III. Naval gold medals had been awarded since 1794, to captains and admirals for active service, it was not until 1806 that a medal, available to majors and above, was awarded by order of the Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of York, 'in commemoration of the brilliant and decisive victory... on the Plains of Maida'. The Maida Medal was issued to some 17 officers, limited to: the Commander of the Forces (Major-General Sir John Stuart), officers commanding brigades or battalions and the Deputy Quarter Master General.<sup>9</sup> A single silver example is known (to Lieutenant Pearce Lowden of the 4th Foot), however no further information is known.<sup>10</sup> It could be as much a privately made piece as an official one. Small and large gold medals were instituted in 1810 and the Army Gold Cross followed in 1813: these were awarded to field, staff and general officers.<sup>11</sup>

Wellington's initial views on the grant of medals can be seen from his despatch to the Earl of Liverpool as Secretary of State for War"

My opinion has always been that the grant of a Medal to an individual officer ought to have been founded originally, partly on the importance of the occasion or action which it was intended to commemorate, and partly on the share which the individual officer had in the action to be commemorated; and that Medals should be granted for important actions only, and to those engaged in them in a conspicuous manner, whatever might be their rank in the service.<sup>12</sup>

Such was the conservative view he held in 1811, that medals were for individual officers to recognise a significant role in an important campaign – positively against the 'indiscriminate issue of medals,' a fact noted by his 1853 biography, but he believed that all ranks should be qualified to receive recognition for particularly conspicuous service.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zeb Micic, 'The engagement at Villers-en-Cauchies, 1794: the medal and the officers' (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> General Order of the Commander-in-Chief, 22 February 1808, in *London Gazette*, 23 February 1808.

<sup>10</sup> J.B. Hayward et al, *British Battles and Medals* (London, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> *London Gazette*, 5 Oct. 1813, p. 1985; papers on peninsular gold crosses and medals by H. Y. Usher (medal expert), c. 1930s-1970s (copies in author's possession).

<sup>12</sup> Wellington to Liverpool, 11 July 1811, quoted in John Gurwood (ed.), *Wellington's Despatches*, viii (London, 1837), pp. 89-91, quoted in J.H. Mayo, *Medals and Decorations of the British Army and Navy* (London, 1897), pp. 198-99.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Stocqueler, *The Life of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington II* (London, 1853), p. 63.

Awards for campaign service were limited to those presented by private individuals or organisations and even they were struck in different metals for different ranks. The medals for the Battle of the Nile, presented by Alexander Davison, were in gold for admirals and captains, silver for lieutenants, copper-gilt for warrant officers and copper-bronzed for the men.<sup>14</sup> A similar system was followed by the East India Company in respect of the medal for the capture of Seringapatam in 1799.<sup>15</sup>

### **Regimental awards**

In addition to the awarding of gold medals and crosses to senior officers, many commanding officers instituted private awards granted on a regimental level. These tended to be awarded for good conduct or marksmanship, but also for gallantry or devotion to duty.<sup>16</sup>

Two out of Kirke's three social structures of the Peninsula army defined Britain's honours system at this time: an officer or soldier took a place in an 'operating group' (one of the 'formal command and loyalty structures') but, to him, more important was the 'informal structure' of 'his group of friends' or, more accurately, those with whom he served.<sup>17</sup> This social structure under which Wellington's army operated determined the ways officers and men were recognised for their service.

Simply, the honours system (which I describe as such for simplicity and not because it was a coherent system) was in the control of senior army officers, officials of the War Department and, ultimately, the crown (in the person of the Prince Regent). It sought to recognise, principally, the service of fellow senior officers (for example, divisional and brigade commanders, staff officers and aide-de-camps and, exceptionally, commanders of regiments or formations of battalion level). To use Major Kirke's designation, it served Wellington's and his senior officers' 'informal structure'. This, of course, left a wide gap in the methods of recognising the services (whether campaign, gallant or long service) of non-commissioned officers and men.

Personal experience suggests that many of the surviving examples of these medals – often commissioned by a unit's officers – are forgeries, however Major Pereria described the 'collection of medals of the Scottish fencibles, volunteers and local militia' from 1794-1816

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<sup>14</sup> Mayo, *Medals and Decorations*, p. lxxiv.

<sup>15</sup> H. Biddulph, *Early Indian Campaigns and the Medals Awarded for them* (Chatham, 1899), pp. 5-13.

<sup>16</sup> See J.L. Balmer, *British and Irish Regimental and Volunteer Medals, 1745-1895: Regular Army* (Loughborough, 1987 [volumes two and three were never published but typescript copies are known to exist]).

<sup>17</sup> C. M. St. G. Kirke, 'Social structures in the Peninsular army', *JRUSI*, 133 (1988), pp. 65-71: p. 66.

in, what is now, the collection of the National War Museum in Edinburgh. From this, we can begin to draw together patterns of why such medals were issued.<sup>18</sup>

Reason awarded	Number in collection
Skill at arms/best shot	45
'For merit'	15
Long service	2
Bravery	1
Miscellaneous	4

Medals awarded by volunteer units in the collection of the Scottish United Services Museum/National War Museum (1954)

Notes: Where a duplicate medal exists (awarded to a different man but for the same reason), it is not included in the above table.

From this crude examination, we can draw together a pattern that such unit or regimental medals were awarded, primarily, for skill at arms (medals, for which, are still awarded by units today), but, also, for meritorious, long (rarely) and gallant (very rarely) service. Some foresighted commanding officers sought to fill a gap in the official 'system' for honours. Indeed, the Colonel of the 77th (Middlesex) Regiment applied to the Adjutant General for permission to award a gold or silver medal to the men of his regiment who served at El Boden, Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz and, for those who remained in the regiment, those who served at the Siege at Seringapatam. The latter three actions would not be recognised with a medal until the Military General Service Medal of 1847 and, even then, a recipient needed to be alive to claim his medal. In reply, the Adjutant General said:

the Commander-in-Chief is not aware of the expedience of individual distinction of the above nature being granted, the Prince Regent having already sanctioned the honours due to the Regiment collectively, yet H.R.H. will not offer any objection to the measure recommended.

I have his command at the same time to observe that it is presumed that the medals will only be granted to individuals having claims from merit, and particular good conduct.<sup>19</sup>

This important letter suggests that the Duke of York did not agree with the practice of granting decorations 'of individual distinction', but, at least, tolerated the issue of such

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<sup>18</sup> H. P. E. Pereira, 'The collection of medals of the Scottish fencibles, volunteers and local militia, 1794-1816, in the Scottish United Services Museum, Edinburgh Castle', *JSAHR*, 32 (1954), pp. 148-159.

<sup>19</sup> Maj-Gen. Sir George Cooke to the Adjutant General, undated, quoted in *The Die-Hards Magazine* (Aug., 1925); the only extant gold medal was sold by Dix Noonan Webb in the Jack Webb collection on 20 August 2020 (lot 382).

awards, when made by regiments. When Wellington's views, as discussed above, are considered, in so far as it can be deemed the 'official position', there was a bias among the army's command against recognising individual actions among the rank and file.

Examination, when possible, of a larger sample size (for example, the medals in the collection of the National Army Museum or a selection of regimental museums) would enable one to draw together a more conclusive pattern of regimental awards.

### **The Battle of Waterloo**

Waterloo was special; not only was it a fine victory for Wellington, but it also marked the defeat of Napoleon and the end of conflict with France. The idea of a medal, for the specific campaign of Waterloo, was first mentioned at the end of a long despatch, of 28 June 1815 from Orville, concerning appointments and promotions in the Order of the Bath, where Wellington said to the Commander-in-Chief:

I would likewise beg leave to suggest to your Royal Highness the expediency of giving to the non-commissioned officers and soldiers engaged in the battle of Waterloo, a Medal. I am convinced it would have the best effect in the army; and if that battle should settle our concerns, they will well deserve it.<sup>20</sup>

This is still a far cry from the widely issued medal, which was eventually distributed. It was less a reward, more an effort to boost morale and would only be given to 'non-commissioned officers and soldiers': officers would still had provision for appointment in the Order of the Bath or presentation of an Army Gold Cross or Medal. As it was to be for non-commissioned soldiers, it was to be in bronze.

The role of the medal as a morale boost should not be underestimated. Napoleon's views on military honours are well known, though often misunderstood.

You tell me that class distinctions are baubles used by monarchs, I defy you to show me a republic, ancient or modern, in which distinctions have not existed. You call these medals and ribbons baubles; well, it is with such baubles that men are led. I would not say this in public, but in a assembly of wise statesmen it should be said. I don't think that the French love liberty and equality: the French are not changed by ten years of revolution: they are what the Gauls were, fierce and fickle. They have one feeling: honour. We must nourish that feeling. The people clamour for distinction. See how the crowd is awed by the medals and orders worn by foreign diplomats. We must recreate these distinctions. There has been too much tearing down; we must rebuild. A

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<sup>20</sup> Wellington to the Duke of York, 28 June 1815, in Gurwood (ed.), *Wellington's despatches*, xii (London, 1838), pp. 519-20.

government exists, yes and power, but the nation itself - what is it? Scattered grains of sand.<sup>21</sup>

Armies existed on 'honour', whether, as discussed above, individual recognition or that of the regiment, who, of course, had standards and colours – such organised regimental heraldry traces its roots to the 12th Century.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as with battle honours on colours, the Waterloo Medal sought to recognise the battle itself rather than the men; it was a special case being the only action for which a medal was granted to all involved by the British army until the retrospective campaign medals (the Military and Naval General Service Medals and the Army of India Medal).

We ought not to forget the value of a medal as a *curriculum vitae* in miniature; one writer in 1842 wrote of 'the degree of interest that [a soldier's] medal produces, particularly among civilians'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Major Charles Dupin wrote twenty years earlier that medals 'served to increase the difference between soldiers and civilians,' which, of course, assisted greatly in the search for employment. The Waterloo Medal, as the first widely awarded, denoted a man as a 'class above' his fellow man (similarly, officers involved in the battle received extra seniority). This, also, had a role in the army itself: a correspondent of *The Military Register* wondered what right paymasters had to the medal, since they were not 'fighting characters'.<sup>24</sup> Returning to regimental medals, the 2nd Rifle Brigade excused their top marksmen, who had received, a battalion or company medal fatigue duties.<sup>25</sup> Not only did medals and decorations have a role to play in the morale of the army – soon, of course, to be rapidly diminished in size – but they also were important in denoting a certain status among their recipients within the army and without.

Wellington himself was awarded the ordinary silver medal,<sup>26</sup> but also received a special collar from the Prince Regent, who had commissioned it from the court jewellers.<sup>27</sup> This was one of two such distinctions, the other being presented to Viscount Beresford.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, by the time of the Army of India Medal, issued from 1851 to surviving veterans of early Indian campaigns, it was issued only in silver, but Wellington received (having, likely,

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon the Great* (London, 2014), pp. 349-50.

<sup>22</sup> See H.C.B. Rogers, 'Standards and Colours in the British Army', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, 97, pp. 206-11.

<sup>23</sup> *Naval and Military Gazette*, 547 (July 1843), quoted in Myerley, *Spectacle*, p. 244.

<sup>24</sup> *Military Register*, 5 (Aug. 1816), p. 32, quoted in Myerley, *Spectacle*, p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> Myerley, *Spectacle*, p. 244.

<sup>26</sup> They exist in the collection at Apsley House, at the Duke of Wellington's Regimental Museum (named 'Field Marshall The Duke of Wellington KG GCB') and one was sold in the MacKenzie collection of 1934.

<sup>27</sup> Mayo, *Medals and Decorations*, p. 207-10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

commissioned it personally) a special, additional medal in gold.<sup>29</sup> Even by the time of the three retrospective medals, the system of equality in honours still had some cracks! The three retrospective medals were indeed controversial and, the present writer hopes, will form the basis of a wider study of honours and recognition in the British army of the nineteenth century.

From the beginning of the Peninsular War, British officers and soldiers had very few ways in which their service could be recognised. The existing practice of honours recognised senior officers and officialdom had a strong bias against singling out individuals below field rank for special recognition: more important was the idea that officers received a decoration for their men. The widely practiced idea that regiments and corps could recognise their own soldiers for gallantry, long service or marksmanship stimulated ideas that the British army needed a way of recognising the service of all who had distinguished their selves. The Waterloo Medal not only did this but served to strengthen the battle as one of Britain's most significant victories and played a strong role in boosting morale of a soon to be diminished army. It was, however, not until the second decade of Queen Victoria's reign that general service in the Peninsular War was recognised and the Crimean War when gallant service by all ranks was recognised with a decoration.

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<sup>29</sup> Wellington's two Army of India Medals were on display at the Indian exhibition of Apsley House in the Summer of 2019.

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