

Eighteenth-Century Military Life in Olney

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Many of you will know of the references in Cowper's letters to military exercises taking place in the vicinity of Olney. In a letter to Rev. John Newton dated Sunday 18 March 1781, Cowper gives the following description of military manoeuvres in what is now Emberton Country Park, about a mile from Olney.

There are soldiers quarter'd at Newport and at Olney – these met by order of their respective officers, in Emberton Marsh, perform'd all the Manoeuvres of a deadly Battle, and the result was, that this Town was taken. Since I wrote they have again Encounter'd with the same Intention, and Mr. Raban* kept a room for me & Mrs. Unwin, that we may sit and view them at our Ease. We did so, but it did not answer our expectation; for before the Contest could be decided, the powder on both sides being expended, the Combatants were obliged to leave it an undecided Contest. – If it were possible that when two great Armies spend the Night in expectation of a Battle, a third could silently steal away their ammunition and Arms of every kind, what a Comedy would it make of that which always has such a tragical Conclusion!
[*Tom Raban's house was the last on the left as you came from the bridge: its windows overlooked the meadows.]

He does not mention which regiment was involved but in a letter dated two weeks earlier to William Unwin, he writes,

A part of the Middlesex Militia are quarter'd at this place and at Newport Pagnell. Yesterday being Sunday was distinguish'd by a Riot raised at the Bull Inn by some of the Officers, whose avowed purpose in doing it was to mortify a Town which they understood was inhabited by Methodists. They roar'd and sung and danced, sometimes in the house, sometimes in the street.

Cowper goes on to recount that one of the officers lost his sword while waving it drunkenly at a poor shoemaker and that the Bell man or town crier had to make it known the following day. He didn't know at this point if the sword was returned to the soldier. He ends this part of the letter thus, 'Oh Shame to the Name of Soldier!' On the 5 March 1781 Cowper writes to Newton,

Olney has seen this day what it never saw before, and what will serve it to talk of I suppose for years to come. At eleven o'clock this Morning a party of Soldiers enter'd the town, driving before them another party, who after obstinately defending the Bridge for some time were obliged to quit it and run. They ran in very good order, frequently faced about and fired, but were at last obliged to surrender prisoners of war. There has been much drumming and shouting, much scampering in the dirt, but not an Inch of Lace made in the town, at least at the Silver End of it.

I daresay not much lace was made at all while the gallant Middlesex lads were quartered in the area. No more is heard of the military until Saturday, 27 April 1782 when Cowper writes to William Unwin,

My dear William,

A part of Lord Harrington's new raised Corps have taken up their quarters in Olney since you left us. They have regimental music with them. The men have been drawn up this morning upon the market hill, and a concert such as we have not heard these many years, has been performed at no great distance from our window. Your mother and I both thrust out our heads into the coldest East wind that ever blew in April, that we might hear them to greater advantage. The band acquitted themselves with taste and propriety... producing gentle and elegant symphony...

Cowper's amusing, slightly ironic style hides the harsh reality of military life in the eighteenth century. The 85th Regiment of Foot was raised, at his own expense, by Charles Stanhope, 3rd Earl of Harrington (1753-1829), who was a veteran of the Quebec campaign in 1780. The regiment embarked for Jamaica.

The great mortality which prevails more or less in the West Indies, particularly in time of war, soon reduced the gallant corps sent out from England to a small number. The 85th, one of the finest ever landed on any of our tropical islands, suffered severely; and his Lordship's health, from his great military exertions, being injured, he returned to England.

Gentleman's Magazine, xcix, Oct. 1829, 366

Presumably he returned in a separate ship from the troopship carrying the remainder of the regiment, since according to the National Army Museum most of the 85th was lost at sea returning from service in Jamaica. In April of that year, Harrington was probably training recruits to replace those who had died. In November 1782 Harrington was gazetted colonel and aide-de-camp to George III. By 1783 the 85th was disbanded.

However, that is not quite the end of the 85th, which in Harrington's time was also known as The Westminster Voluntary Regiment of Foot. Between 1794 and 1808 the 85th became The Buckinghamshire Voluntary Regiment of Foot, which after 1821 was called The Buckinghamshire Volunteers King's Light Infantry Regiment. After 1827 'Buckinghamshire Volunteers' was dropped from the title. Much later the 85th became associated with other regiments and areas of the country, especially the Shropshire Regiment. It is easy to forget while reading Cowper's elegant prose that Britain was at the time involved in a series of colonial expeditions and the beginnings of what were later to be called the Napoleonic Wars, and that many of the recruits to the army came from the rural poor in areas such as Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire, as well as from the socially disadvantaged in the towns and cities. The population of Britain grew considerably in the latter part of the eighteenth century, but the Industrial Revolution was still in its early stages, and the need for labour in the factories had not yet made a significant impact. The military, however, was constantly recruiting new men to replace those killed in action, incapacitated by wounds, wiped out by tropical diseases or drowned at sea – all types of casualty experienced by the 85th Regiment of Foot between 1781 and 1783.