



Norman: University of
Oklahoma Press, 2010

392 pages

\$39.95

All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier Under Wellington, 1808-1814

By Edward J. Coss

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This volume is not another narrative history of Wellington's Peninsular War. Rather, it is an analysis of the demographics and behavior of the famed British redcoats. The gist of Coss's thesis is that these soldiers were not Britain's societal rejects. Moreover, their unmatched cohesion rested upon a loyalty and mutual trust developed within their small groups.

The book begins with the Duke of Wellington's famous quote about his army's common soldiers being the scum of the earth. Coss provides Wellington's later observation in an endnote, i.e., that the Army had made fine fellows of them. However, this oft-quoted, initial comment forms the basis for the work's thesis.

Coss has accomplished phenomenal research. He compiled a British Soldier Compendium with demographics on 7,300 soldiers, the great majority from line infantry regiments. He uses a three-tiered model of compliance theory developed by Steven Westbrook to help interpret this voluminous data for individuals and small groups. Coss places these statistics and interpretations in the larger sphere of British society, e.g., the severe stresses of industrialization and their costs, both individual and collective. No less than 78 tables accompany the text. These statistics range from the usual to analyze social origins and economic status to a fascinating, sweeping examination of soldiers' nutritional intake. He admits that he cannot verify how many of the 7,300 served in the Peninsula between 1808 and 1814. This inability does not detract from the work, which is a micro-analysis of an army's soldiery.

The work balances demographics with individual accounts, e.g., memoirs and journals. He is well aware of both their benefits and pitfalls. Coss focuses on one man in particular, William Lawrence, as a case study. His use of these primary sources is generally astute, and adds a genuinely human dimension. One caveat is that commentaries from soldiers in rifle and light infantry units do not represent "typical" soldiers.

He places his interpretation within the context of one the most concise analyses of the famed British two-deep line's battle tactics in print, indicative of his effort to dissect this force in action. He agrees that the British possessed no such light troops to support that line until 1800. Such agreement should not dismiss the major accomplishments of British light troops in the previous century, especially as they often performed as both skirmishers and shock troops. He deals frankly and honestly, as best as the extant evidence permits, with the excesses in the hellish sieges of the Peninsular War.

The work's comparative analysis states that the British Army of the Napoleonic Wars was unique with its life-long period of service for soldiers. Granted, the French term of service of 6 years became standard with the Jordan Law of 1798. The discussion omits the Russians, but they represent a stark difference. Indeed, the fatalistic farewell from

family, household, and village for a conscript was terminal in nature, given the term of service was 25 years. The Austrians conscripted for life. The reforms initiated by Archduke Charles reducing the term to 10 years in the infantry began in 1808. The Prussians, humbled and humiliated at Jena and Auerstädt in 1806, initiated necessary, but carefully and circumspectly, reforms afterwards.

The larger issue is that comparison of terms of service can skew perspective without a commensurate understanding of the effects. The allies changed recruiting practices well in the midst of prolonged conflict. There is no indication what proportion of soldiers served shorter enlistments or when. Such a study is certainly well beyond his scope, but an understanding is necessary for an effective comparison. The only release for lifers was death or incapacitation.

The British Army, conversely, went through the greatest fluctuations in strength upon the outbreak of war, only to shrink as dramatically at war's end—as it had in previous conflicts. During the American Revolution, some 27 percent of British infantry were war-duration and three-year recruits. For the unprecedented effort against Napoleon, a force of just over 150,000 in 1804 exceeded 200,000 after 1807, surpassed 250,000 in 1813, fell to 233,852 in 1815, only to drop to an authorized 150,000 after Waterloo, a decrease of 38 percent—after the cumulative losses of nearly a decade of war against just the First Empire. Coss shows that only a quarter of the men opted for the optional 7-year term for soldiers after 1808, but there is no discussion of the ramifications of the inevitable drawdown to which the British Army had become accustomed. Some life-long recruits were not. There remain questions on the wider impacts of resort to the militia as a recruiting pool for transfers, whether a substitute or not.

The work exhibits some hyperbole due to excessive focus on the demographic statistics with the small-group dynamics. Richard Holmes in *Acts of War* (1985) and Holmes with John Keegan in *Soldiers* (1986) highlighted the paramount need for multiple factors to promote cohesion, obedience, and collective aggression vice apathy among soldiers' groups. M. Snape in *The Redcoat and Religion* (2005) covers the period of “horse-and-musket” warfare. J. E. Cookson's “Regimental Worlds” in *Soldiers, Citizens, and Civilians* (2008) considered the range of experiences of British soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars. Coss may deem these interpretations excessive or flawed, but the monograph takes little account of them and none of religion as motivating, unifying, and steadying factors.

Philip Haythornthwaite in *The Armies of Wellington* (1994), Holmes in *Redcoat* (2001) and Haythornthwaite again in *Redcoats* (2012) are the latest recognitions of the social and economic qualifiers for the “lowly origin” of British rank and file. Wellington's infamous comment reflected upon the army's widespread looting when long out of action, at the expense of the wounded and follow-on operations after Vittoria. Moreover, he showcased the differences between Britain's voluntary enlistment and European conscription. The fact only one quarter of British recruits took advantage of a 7-year vice life term of service after 1807 to take a bigger bounty is a telling commentary. How many faced pre- and post-war life in the Georgian workhouse was likely significant. These realities

reinforced society's low regard for soldiers, an attitude which the British Army's internal police function merely compounded.

There is insufficient consideration of institutional contributions to positive group behavior. There is no comprehensive commentary on the role of company and battalion officers to unit cohesion. Similarly, there is no assessment of the centrality of the British regimental system or the increased identification with the infantry division after 1810, the latter as presented by Antony Brett-James in *Life in Wellington's Army* (1972). Conversely, Coss's detailed account of periods of prolonged deprivation is telling yet hardly unique among the armies of the time and their predecessors for decades. Soldiering was a hard life. An old saying about campaigning in Spain was that small armies perished and large ones starved.

All for the King's Shilling has blazed a new trail. It provides very detailed, demographic data set in a wider context. The major effort to link those statistics with the battlefield, behavioral dynamics, and small-group psychology makes it a praiseworthy contribution in multidisciplinary studies, but excessive in emphasis, at the expense of other evidence. The book is still a key monograph on the maintenance of an army during prolonged, major combat operations for a society with Anglo-Saxon political reservations on the nature of a regular, standing army—the essence behind voluntary recruitment vice conscription.