

“Incorrigible Rogues”: The Brutalisation of British Soldiers in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the behaviour of the British soldiers in the Peninsular War between 1808 and 1814. Despite being allies to Spain and Portugal, the British soldiers committed violent acts towards civilians on a regular basis. Traditionally it has been argued that the redcoat's misbehaviour was a product of their criminal backgrounds. This article will challenge this assumption and place the soldiers' behaviour in the context of their wartime experience. It will discuss the effects of war upon soldiers' mentality, and reflect upon the importance of psychological support in any theatre of war.

In 2013 the UK Ministry of Justice removed 309 penal laws from the statute book, one of these being the Vagrancy Act of 1824.¹ This Act was introduced for the punishment of ‘incorrigible rogues’ and was directed at soldiers who returned from the Napoleonic Wars and had become ‘idle and disorderly...rogues and vagabonds’.² Many veterans found it difficult to reintegrate into British society after experiencing the horrors of war at time when the effects of combat stress were not recognised.³ The need for the Act perhaps underlines the degrading effects of warfare upon the individual. The behaviour of British soldiers during the Peninsular War was far from noble and stands in stark contrast to the heroic image propagated in contemporary wartime literature. Daly has shown that low-level plunder and destruction occurred on a regular basis while British crimes escalated, on occasion, into full-scale atrocities in which civilians were raped and murdered.⁴ Such crimes were most notable during retreats and in the aftermath of successful assaults on enemy-held fortresses; Esdaile

¹ John, Grierson, ‘Sleep soundly, incorrigible rogues: you're no longer committing a criminal offence’, *The Independent*, 12 December 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sleep-soundly-incorrigible-rogues-youre-no-longer-committing-a-criminal-offence-9000162.html> [accessed 09/02/14]

² ‘Vagrancy Act 1824’, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/83> [accessed 07/02/2014]

³ David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp.279-280.

⁴ Gavin Daly, ‘Plunder on the Peninsula: British soldiers and local civilians during the Peninsular War, 1808–1813’, in Erica Charters, Eve Rosenhaft, Hannah Smith, (eds.), *Civilians and War in Europe, 1618–1815*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p.218.

argues that the retreat to Corunna in 1809 'remains a dark chapter in the history of the British army', and the sacking of Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and San Sebastian should be recognised as war crimes.⁵ Coss has defended British soldiers' behaviour in light of their privations; and given the inadequacy of food and pay, some forms of plunder were a necessity for survival.⁶ Likewise the insults occasioned by local customs are perhaps understandable for soldiers who had not previously travelled abroad. However, the plunder that exceeded necessity and the violence toward civilians are harder to justify, so what was it that drove the redcoats to commit such crimes? The Duke of Wellington famously described his men as the 'scum of the earth' and this view has become entrenched in traditional historiography and has been used to explain the men's misbehaviour. It was simply a result of their inherent criminal nature.⁷ The system of volunteering at that time ensured that the majority of recruits were from the lower orders of society and often enlisted for no better reason than to find employment. But low income backgrounds do not necessarily explain or lead to criminality. Furthermore, to explain atrocities as a product of low-class criminality is to ignore the officers who were sometimes also complicit in such crimes. In view of these circumstances, we must look at their experiences which may have formed the context of this behaviour. Firstly, the Iberians were viewed as an inferior 'other', whose superstitious and uncivilised customs offended British values.⁸ These cultural prejudices are crucial to understanding the breakdown of restraint towards inhabitants and the justification of British actions. The daily experience of campaigning further debased the soldiers' mind-set; food was scarce, pay was sporadic, sickness was rife and the men endured long marches with little shelter. Finally the physical and mental horrors of battle and sieges pushed men to extremes. All these factors combined to create behaviours lying outside the moral norms of the time. This begs the question, is there something within the experience of warfare that creates such disturbing reactions?⁹ Should these soldiers be condemned as brutes, or would anyone placed in their situation react similarly? Just as the Vagrancy Act remained in force until 2013, the behaviours of these 'incorrigible rogues' are of lasting importance in reflecting upon our own capabilities and the effects of warfare upon both men and women.

Beginning with the social composition of Britain's Peninsular soldiers, Wellington's description of his men as the 'scum of the earth' has been accepted by many

⁵ Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p.152 and p.470.

⁶ Edward Coss, *All for the King's Shilling: the British Soldier under Wellington, 1808-1810*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), p.109.

⁷ Philip Henry Stanhope (ed.), *Notes of Conversation with the Duke of Wellington, 1831-1851*, (London: John Murray, 1888), p.18.

⁸ Gavin Daly, *The British Soldier in the Peninsular War: Encounters with Spain and Portugal, 1808-1814*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.14.

⁹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, (London: Cape, 1976), p.18.

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historians as the literal truth. This provides a useful cause-and-effect explanation for British misbehaviour; if the army was composed of criminals, then their misconduct on the Peninsula was simply a 'product of their thuggish nature'.¹⁰ Whilst this explanation is convenient, it confines misconduct to one social group and explains it entirely in behavioural terms. In order to ascertain the full range of motives and understand the nature of the crimes, we must deconstruct the myth of the 'scum of the earth' and answer the question who were the British soldiers and why did they enlist?

The idea that the redcoats were drawn from the criminal classes was not without foundation. The recruitment of fugitives into the army had been practised throughout the century as an alternative to punishment by the civil courts. This may have been attractive given the severity of punishments within a Georgian England noted for its 'Bloody Code' and numerous capital offences.¹¹ Convicts could also be forcibly recruited, as seen in the enrolment of men arrested in the Edinburgh New Year's Day riots of 1812.¹² The fact that crime increased upon the demobilisation of soldiers furthered the conviction of innate soldier criminality.¹³ This consensus notwithstanding, which has been reproduced in many works of history, it has recently been suggested that the proportion of fugitives recruited into the army does not justify the widespread attention they have been accorded.¹⁴ Buckley underlines that there is little hard evidence, or a single study, which supports the view that the rankers were predominantly criminals.¹⁵ Indeed, the Royal Commission on corporal punishment in 1853 reported that only 10-20% of the army were the 'incorrigibles' described by Wellington.¹⁶ In Speed's words, then, 'The ruffians won the army a bad name, but they were only a minority'.¹⁷

If the proportion of men condemned by the courts was not so great, Wellington's description of his men as 'scum' could be seen as a broader reference to the lower classes and a reflection of his own upper class prejudice.¹⁸ His comment on the British army was made in comparison to the French, whereby 'conscription calls out

¹⁰ Coss, *All For the King's Shilling*, p.xviii.

¹¹ J.M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*, (London: Clarendon, 1986), p.220.

¹² Richard Glover, *Peninsular Preparation: the Reform of the British army, 1795-1809*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p.175.

¹³ This was more likely due to decreased employment after the decline of wartime industry and jobs, matched by an influx of working men upon demobilisation, Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England*, pp.228-235.

¹⁴ Glover, *Peninsular Preparation*, pp.174-175.

¹⁵ Cited in Coss, *All For the King's Shilling*, pp.80-81.

¹⁶ Richard Holmes, *Redcoat: the British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket*, (London: Harper Collins, 2001), p.151.

¹⁷ Peter Speed, *Then and There Series: Wellington's Army*, (Harlow: Longman, 1969), pp.18-19.

¹⁸ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, pp.37-38.

a share of every class': by contrast, the British system of volunteering drew out mostly lowly men who enlisted 'after having got bastard children – some for minor offense – many more for drink'.¹⁹ Given the poor reputation of the army, and the harsh conditions on campaign, the nature of volunteering meant that only the most desperate men would enlist. Despite a series of reforms, pay remained lower than the average labourer's wage and the promise of pensions was 'yet a more distant carrot'.²⁰ However, even if soldiering remained an unattractive profession that only attracted desperate men – lower-class backgrounds are not synonymous with criminality. As Lieutenant Sherer of the 34th Foot claimed, 'I think that we should find as much virtue, and as many amiable qualities, among ten thousand [soldiers], as among a similar number of individuals taken, without selection, from the bosom of civil society'.²¹

A closer analysis of the background and motivations of these men reveals that the majority were not criminal in nature. Considering the poor reputation of army life, one of the main reasons for enlistment was economic necessity. Upon enlistment recruits were given a bounty, which totalled two pounds twelve shillings in 1805 but could have been as much as twenty five pounds by 1815.²² More important in the long term however, was the prospect of regular pay and employment. The period had seen a huge growth in population, with a particular increase in the proportion of young men, whilst technological advances resulted in a certain loss of job opportunities. In the weaving industry for example, one man working two power looms could do the job of fifteen craftsmen, just as in agriculture the invention of the threshing machine in 1789 reduced the need for unskilled labour. A series of poor harvests resulted in rising food prices and finally, Napoleon's continental blockade led to a serious slump that can be held accountable for the rise in recruits in 1806.²³ The correlation between economic downturns and recruitment is patent. Coss contends that these men were not criminals, but desperate men searching for income at a time of great economic distress.²⁴

Although money was a powerful incentive, additional factors drew in a range of recruits. The personal situation of the recruit could heavily influence his decision. Wellington commented that many enlist 'after having bastard children', and although cynical, some certainly joined the army as an escape from a tough, dreary civilian life.

¹⁹ Cited in Stanhope (ed.) *Notes Of Conversations*, p.18.

²⁰ Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.35.

²¹ Philip Haythornthwaite, *Redcoats: the British soldier of the Napoleonic wars*, (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military: 2012), p.82.

²² Philip Haythornthwaite, *The Armies of Wellington*, (London, Brockhampton Press: 1998), p.45

²³ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.50'

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.5-6 and p.85.

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A recruiting poster for the 14th Light Dragoons encapsulated the range of legitimate motivations for enlistment; it stated, 'all you...with too little wages and a pinch-gut master – all you with too much wife, or are perplexed with obstinate and unfeeling parents...'.²⁵ As well as such push factors, many were also pulled into enlistment by the positive attractions of army life. Myerly emphasises the importance of uniform and military splendour in attracting volunteers with recruiting parties choosing the most handsome men of the regiment and dressing them in new uniforms.²⁶ The potential to gain a commission was yet another appeal for ambitious men. Colley also suggests that there was an element of patriotism in recruitment and that the period saw a growth of national identity against the French 'other'.²⁷ It is difficult to assess whether recruits were genuinely motivated by love of 'King and Country', or this was simply writing for heroic effect.²⁸ Nevertheless, even if the majority were not drawn in by the 'fine military feeling' that Wellington hoped for there were a wide range of legitimate motivations for enlistment.²⁹

Finally, to explain British misbehaviour in terms of the lowly class of recruits is to blame all misconduct upon the rank-and-file. Whilst there are few accounts of officer criminality there are indications that they were often complicit in such crimes. Oman's study of Courts Martial highlights that the largest number of officer trials were for a 'breach of discipline', which included permitting men to plunder.³⁰ Certainly officer crime was not as widespread as that in the ranks; yet equally the officers enjoyed privileges on campaign, such as better billets and pay, which gave them less reason to commit crimes of necessity. Their status also meant that officers had more to lose. Wellington recognised that the plundering of the French baggage train after Vittoria was not just carried out by 'vagabond soldiers'.³¹ Esdaile cites a more extreme case of rape by Ensign Pollen in the Pyrenees in 1813, who having 'detected his men when about to debase a poor woman, drove them out and then committed the vile act himself'.³² In this case, responsibility for misbehaviour cannot be placed upon the one class of rankers. If behaviour was not determined solely by

²⁵ Haythornthwaite, *The Armies of Wellington*, p.44.

²⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, pp.61-62.

²⁷ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging The Nation, 1707-1837*, (London: Pimlico, 2003), pp.1-6 and p.309

²⁸ Private William Windsor cited in R.Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.199.

²⁹ Cited in Stanhope (ed.) *Notes Of Conversations*, p.18.

³⁰ Charles Oman, 'Courts Martial of the Peninsular War, 1809–14', *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, 56, no. 418, (2009), p.1705.

³¹ Speed, *Then and There Series*, p.251. It should also be noted that ex-militiamen were widely thought to be better disciplined, due to their strict training in the militia, yet this did not stop them from also participating in such acts, Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army: Recruitment, Society and Tradition: 1807-15*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.20-21, and pp.32-34.

³² Charles Esdaile, *Women in the Peninsular War*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), p.201.

the background and nature of men, then, what led the British soldiers to commit brutal crimes?

Before analysing experiences in the Peninsula that may have accounted for their misbehaviour, we must assess British perceptions of the Iberians prior to their arrival. Spain had long been a natural enemy of Britain, and this rivalry increased over time through colonial and commercial competition.³³ Spain was allied with France until 1808 so the new alliance with Britain may have proved difficult to adjust to for both sides. Conversely Anglo-Portuguese relations were historically friendlier with Britain and Portugal having shared trading links since the Middle Ages but even these relations were beginning to sour; the Portuguese felt that the British were exploiting their ports, whilst a British failure to represent Portuguese interests in the Treaty of Amiens in 1801 created friction.³⁴ Diplomatic enmity meanwhile was underpinned by a generally held British view of the Iberian people and their cultures that was distinctly negative. This stemmed from sixteenth-century concepts of the 'Black Legend', with Spain in particular associated with Catholic, superstition, cruelty, tyranny and backwardness.³⁵ There were some more favourable images in circulation but to quote Daly, it was 'revulsion rather than romance' that generally prevailed.³⁶

Rather than exploding the stereotype, British experiences in the Peninsula entrenched perceptions of Iberian inferiority.³⁷ Lisbon was the entry-point for most soldiers and the first place of contact with Iberian locals and it was significant in forming their lasting opinions of the native population of the Iberian Peninsula. Unfortunately, this initial impression was one of shock and disgust and almost without exception the vision left to us by Wellington's soldiers is one of poverty, filth and disease, not to mention a city swarming with priests and ruled by superstition.³⁸ As Private William Wheeler wrote, 'what an ignorant superstitious, priest-ridden, dirty, lousy set of poor Devils are the Portuguese'.³⁹ The British army's emphasis upon drill, discipline, and appearance combined with a general sense of progress that had grown alongside industrialisation in Britain, resulted in the redcoats' view that the indolence and filth of Lisbon's population was an affront to British values.

³³ Daly, *British Soldier in the Peninsular War*, p.19.

³⁴ C.Willis, 'Wellington's and Portuguese reservations about the Old Alliance', in C.M. Woolgar (ed.), *Wellington Studies II*, (Southampton: Hartley Institute, 1999), p.124 and p.127.

³⁵ Daly, *British Soldier in the Peninsular War*, p.13

³⁶ Gavin Daly, 'A dirty, indolent, priest-ridden city: British soldiers in Lisbon during the Peninsular War, 1808–1813', *History*, 94, no. 316, (2009), p.480.

³⁷ Haythornthwaite, *Redcoats*, p.127.

³⁸ Daly, 'A dirty, indolent, priest-ridden city', p.467.

³⁹ William Wheeler, *The Letters of Private Wheeler 1809–1828*, ed. B. H. Liddell Hart (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), p.49.

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Yet perhaps most importantly, the Catholic culture was viewed with disdain.⁴⁰ Colley argues that Protestantism was crucial to the British sense of nationhood, as it helped to define them against the French atheist 'other'.⁴¹ It could easily be applied to the Iberian Catholic 'other', and although the influence of Protestantism amongst the redcoats is debatable (especially considering the lack of chaplains on campaign, and the inroads that Methodism was beginning to make) it provided a key aspect of contrast.⁴² Iberian 'superstitious' practices were viewed as backward, whilst association with the Inquisition created perceptions of the Iberians as barbaric and cruel.⁴³

The native entertainment of bull-fighting, and stories of Spanish guerrilla atrocities against the French, furthered the belief that the populace were 'positively not a degree above savages'.⁴⁴ The belief in these native characteristics is crucial to understanding the British perpetration of crimes. The treatment of women addresses this point well. In addition to being barbaric and uncivilised, Iberian women were seen as naturally lascivious and thus ripe for sexual exploitation. Esdaile underlines that these stereotypes helped to justify the sexual harassment of women.⁴⁵ For example, Schaumann stated, 'naturally as was only proper, as soon as her husband's back was turned, I used to kiss those arms a great deal', while outright cases of rape have also been recorded.⁴⁶ Not only were the Iberians seen to be inferior, but their national characteristics – be it ignorant, superstitious or lascivious – created a justification for British crimes against them.

British contempt was not helped by the responses of the locals themselves. Thus, many inhabitants were indifferent or hostile to their allies; 'Instead of a hearty welcome on our arrival', wrote Surtees in 1808, for example, 'we could with great difficulty obtain leave to land and even more to obtain the necessary supplies and provisions'.⁴⁷ The retreat to La Coruna generated particular resentment in this respect. As Schaumann remarks, for example, 'not only did these puffed-up patriots...give us no assistance, but they also took good care to remove all cattle and foodstuffs out of our way'.⁴⁸ As liberators and allies, the British also felt a sense of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.476.

⁴¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging The Nation, 1707-1837*, (London, Pimlico: 2003); Colley, *Forging The Nation*, (2003), p.6. The Catholic question had also resurfaced with the growth of evangelism, the Act of Union in 1800, and moves towards Catholic emancipation, in Daly, 'A dirty, indolent, priest-ridden city', p.478.

⁴² Holmes, *Redcoat*, pp.115-116.

⁴³ Wheeler, *The Letters of Private Wheeler*, p.50.

⁴⁴ Cited in Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, p.199.

⁴⁵ Esdaile, *Women in the Peninsular War*, pp.183-193.

⁴⁶ A.L.F. Schaumann, and A.M. Ludovici (eds), *On the Road with Wellington: the Diary of a War Commissary in the Peninsular Campaigns*, (London: Heinemann, 1924), p.54.

⁴⁷ William Surtees, *Twenty-Five Years in the Rifle Brigade*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1833), p.77.

⁴⁸ Schaumann and Ludovici (eds), *On the Road with Wellington*, p.128.

self-entitlement to resources, which made for further clashes with the populace. The Iberians came to be seen as 'ungrateful allies', and this image was strengthened by the Spanish military performance.⁴⁹ The campaign of Talavera caused particular discontent, as the British felt that, as they saw it, Spanish cowardice and incompetence, had 'thrown away the fruits of British heroism' and necessitated their retreat.⁵⁰ Following this campaign, it was believed that successful operations inside Spain were impossible without a wholesale reform of the Spanish war effort.⁵¹ Thus alongside their superiority complex, the British also felt let-down and mistreated by their allies and the consequence of this was that, as Daly says, 'a lack of respect, indeed at times *utter contempt and loathing*, for the local people, customs and religion, helped break down military and cultural restraints'.⁵²

Nevertheless, how did such prejudices and contempt towards locals escalate into full-scale violence and brutality? To understand this process, it is necessary to explore the redcoats' experiences upon campaign. To begin with, the country and climate were just as hostile for its inhabitants. Many found it difficult to acclimatise to the extreme weather; during the newly arrived Light Division's forced march to Talavera in July 1809 (covering 42 miles in 26 hours), Costello tells us that 'many men dropped by the road-side and died'.⁵³ Winter marches were equally testing, as in the case of the retreat to Corunna. Here, the snow, rain and mud made 'the roads all but impassable' for the exhausted soldiers.⁵⁴ Such conditions were not helped by inadequate clothing and the heavy baggage carried by soldiers, which amounted to approximately 60lbs.⁵⁵ Yet nothing was more lamented than the lack of food. The British supply system was unreliable and had difficulty keeping up with the men. Even when they received full rations, Coss underlines that they were completely inadequate for the men's needs. The British ration amounted to about 2466 calories, which was 19% short of the minimum calories needed for an inactive adult male, let alone a soldier marching an average of fifteen miles per day with excessive baggage.⁵⁶ Cooper noted that 'when a man entered upon a soldier's life...he should have parted with half his stomach', so the issue of food was a continual preoccupation for the

⁴⁹ Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, p.85.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.212-213.

⁵¹ Lord Wellington to William Wellesley-Pole, 29th August 1809, in Brett-James, *Wellington at War*, pp.165-166.

⁵² Daly, *British Soldier in the Peninsular War*, (2013), p.223 - Emphasis added.

⁵³ Edward Costello, *The Adventures Of A Soldier; Or, Memoirs Of Edward Costello: Comprising Narratives Of The Campaigns In The Peninsular Under The Duke Of Wellington, And The Recent Civil Wars In Spain*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1841), p.17

⁵⁴ Charles Esdaile, *Peninsular Eyewitnesses: The Experience Of War In Spain And Portugal 1808-1813*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008), p.79.

⁵⁵ Stanhope (ed.), *Notes of Conversations*, p.24.

⁵⁶ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, pp.97-100.

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men.⁵⁷ Furthermore, exposure, foreign climates, and poor diets resulted in widespread sickness that amongst other things served to expose the primitive nature of the army's medical services.⁵⁸ As Coss points out if British soldiers misbehaved it was in part a result of the misery they endured in their daily lives.⁵⁹

In light of the severe food shortages, erratic pay, and unsympathetic locals, many of the crimes can be defended as necessities for survival. Surtees described how his regiment 'would take [supplies] wherever they were to be found – for hunger is not easily borne'.⁶⁰ However, some crimes went beyond necessity. During the retreat to Corunna, Esdaile argues that 'the path of the army was marked by a trail of arson, theft, rape and murder'.⁶¹ Whilst few British accounts confess these crimes, many make broad reference to 'shameful incidents'.⁶² Similarly during the retreat from Burgos in 1812, tough winter conditions caused much indiscipline and led to Wellington's Circular Letter to commanding officers in which he complained that 'irregularities and outrages were committed'.⁶³ Even in less extreme conditions, brutalities occurred; Boutflower describes how 'a most horrid murder' of a local family was performed by British soldiers after stealing goods.⁶⁴ Whilst such violence was not as commonplace as simple food theft, it occurred on repeated occasions and to blame this on a 'small core of bad characters' is insufficient.⁶⁵ The cultural prejudices we have spoken of were simply too strong for this to be believed, whilst violence can also be seen as a deeper psychological reaction to the redcoats' situation. Firstly, the state of extreme want was not conducive to moderation: following the Battle of Vittoria in 1813, the plundering of the French baggage train highlights the lack of self-control this created.⁶⁶ Coss also underlines the psychological effects of nutritional deprivation that generated 'irritability and outbursts of anger as food becomes the sole motivating cause'.⁶⁷ Fessler's study on hunger strikes in prisons confirms that from an early stage, individuals began to show

⁵⁷ John Spencer Cooper, *Rough Notes of Seven Campaigns*, (UK Royal Collection, First published 1869), p.157.

⁵⁸ Andrew Bamford, *Sickness, Suffering and the Sword: the British Regiment on Campaign, 1808-1815*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), p.218.

⁵⁹ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.19.

⁶⁰ Surtees, *Twenty-Five years in the Rifle Brigade*, p.90.

⁶¹ Esdaile, *Peninsular Eyewitnesses*, (2008), p.65, see also pp.152-153.

⁶² Cited in Schaumann and Ludovici (eds), *On the Road with Wellington*, p.113.

⁶³ Arthur Wellesley, *The General Orders of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington ... in Portugal, Spain, and France, from 1809 to 1814: in the Low Countries and France in 1815; and in France, Army of Occupation, from 1816 to 1818*, (London: 1837), pp.63-66.

⁶⁴ Charles Boutflower, *The Journal of an Army Surgeon during the Peninsular War*, (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1997), p.50.

⁶⁵ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.115.

⁶⁶ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.250.

⁶⁷ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.106.

notable increases in impulsivity and aggression.⁶⁸ With this in mind, the erratic and excessive behaviours of the soldiers becomes more understandable as products of their situation. Whilst Coss is right in stating that we should place British behaviours in the context of their hardships, this does not pardon their crimes; rather it helps us to understand *why* they transgressed and became capable of brutality.

A study of British indiscipline is not complete without assessing the 'demon of drink'.⁶⁹ Alcohol abuse was widespread in eighteenth-century Britain and was even more so within its army. For the rankers, drinking was one of the only off-duty recreational activities available. As well as appeasing their boredom, drink also provided a means of escapism from the 'unending daily misery' of campaign.⁷⁰ Drunkenness was not just confined to the rankers, on the contrary, officers could be equally as bad; in France in 1815, fist-fighting amongst inebriated officers became a notable problem and led to firm reprimand from Wellington.⁷¹ This also highlights the detrimental effects of drink upon behaviour. Alcohol lowered men's inhibitions and led to huge slides in discipline. The village of Bembibre experienced the full effects of British drunkenness in 1809, as described by Blakeney; 'some men lay senseless, others staggered... savage roars announcing hilarity were mingled with groans issued from fevered lips disgorging the wine of yesterday: obscenity was public sport'.⁷² Drink was therefore a dangerous addition to the heightened emotions and determinations of the British soldier.

Finally, British behaviours must be placed in the wider context of the savage war. Bell described the 1790's as the coming of 'total war' in which conflict reached an unprecedented scale and intensity.⁷³ Nowhere was this more marked than in the Peninsula where atrocities were regularly committed by all sides. The French armies used a policy of 'living off the land' to feed its soldiers, and they employed destruction, pillage and rapine as part of their means of occupation.⁷⁴ As the invading enemy, and with an ideological conviction in their own superiority, French atrocities went beyond that of the British. Understandably, this provoked reaction from the populace and bands of Spanish guerrillas. Following General Massena's destructive retreat through Portugal in 1811, Hulot described the reprisals exacted upon French stragglers; 'In front of an isolated house we found... four bodies hanging from a

⁶⁸ D.M.T. Fessler, 'The implications of starvation induced psychological changes for the ethical treatment of hunger strikers', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 29, no. 4, pp.243–247.

⁶⁹ M.R. Howard, 'Red jackets and red noses: alcohol and British Napoleonic soldiers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 93, no.1, (2000), pp.38-41.

⁷⁰ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.120.

⁷¹ Holmes, *Redcoat*, p.154.

⁷² Robert Blakeney, *A Boy in the Peninsular War: the services, adventures, and experiences of Robert Blakeney, subaltern in the 28th Regiment*, (London: John Murray, 1899), pp.49-50.

⁷³ Bell, *The First Total War*, pp.279-280.

⁷⁴ Esdaile, *Women in the Peninsular War*, p.202.

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tree...on a wall was nailed up the newly flayed skin of a man'.⁷⁵ The effects of repeatedly viewing such cruelty would have desensitised men to violence. One soldier described how he came across a man who had been burnt alive and looked remarkably 'like a dried frog'; he recalled how 'the miserable fate of this poor fellow called forth from us very little sympathy, but seemed only to be the subject of mirth'.⁷⁶ The huge battle casualties further cheapened life. Even on a lower level, the practice of flogging was an awful ordeal for both the victim and the regiment who were forced to watch.⁷⁷ Living, as the men did, in this environment for many years, and cut off from civilian society, it is perhaps understandable that their behaviour began to reflect the norms around them.⁷⁸ Thus the experiences of habitual violence, coupled with the physical and mental strains of campaign, and a sense of cultural superiority; help us to understand the processes and reasoning behind British brutality towards their supposed allies.

Nowhere were these atrocities more extreme than in the aftermath of the successful siege assault of enemy-held fortresses where a long tradition existed of inflicting atrocities on the defeated defenders and city residents. Siege warfare was particularly taxing for the men concerned. It could involve weeks of misery in trenches exposed to heavy fire, and, the assaults could culminate in heavy casualties. Amongst the survivors of such attacks, a desire for revenge, the excitement of victory, their greed for plunder and alcohol, as well as cultural and religious prejudices all combined to produce appalling behaviour. Thus in analysing siege warfare, an intense microcosm of the emotions and sufferings of the wider war, we can gain a greater understanding of brutalisation as a product of experience. The 1812 siege of Badajoz was particularly brutal, in terms of the suffering experienced by the British troops and their behaviour afterwards, and this episode will be considered in greater detail.

Coss writes, in relation to siege assaults that, 'in order to appreciate fully why usual standards of behaviour were abandoned, it is necessary to understand the nature of such attacks'.⁷⁹ Starting with the preparation for sieges, Wellington's army on the Peninsula faced difficulties from the offset. The British siege train was completely inadequate and the infantry lacked an adequate engineering arm. The deficiencies at Badajoz prompted Wellington to complain to Lord Liverpool that, 'it is inconceivable with what disadvantage we undertake anything like a siege for want of assistance of this description [sappers and miners] upon the regiments of the line'.⁸⁰ With insufficient engineers, the task of digging the trenches and mines fell on the untrained

⁷⁵ Esdaile, *Peninsular Eyewitnesses*, p.89, p.153, and pp.194-195.

⁷⁶ Cited in W.H.Fitchett, *Wellington's Men*, (London: Fireship Press, 2009), p.163.

⁷⁷ Holmes, *Redcoat*, p.138.

⁷⁸ Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, p.198.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁸⁰ Lord Wellington to Lord Liverpool, 11 February 1812, in Brett-James, *Wellington at War*, p.323.

and half-starved infantry rankers. This manual labour was despised by the men who regarded it as 'navy's work', whilst the poor weather conditions made the task yet more laborious; the trench walls repeatedly collapsed and the 'spade was rendered useless by cold rain which turned soil into liquid mud'.⁸¹ Collecting the limbs of comrades injured by shells was a similarly despised undertaking. Furthermore, the physical conditions of static warfare were most uncomfortable; there were no sewage systems, even less shelter than on campaign, and a general lack of hygiene. Not surprisingly, Fletcher underlines that 'the atmosphere in the trenches soon became depressive'.⁸² Moreover, the defences at Badajoz had been strengthened after two previous British siege attempts in 1811 and General Phillippon led a skilled resistance in contrast 'to the amateurish way the British engineering arm conducted the siege'.⁸³ In terms of the men's state of mind, such tiring and unpleasant conditions would have had a degrading effect.

However, the worst was yet to come. Upon successfully creating a breach in the walls of the fortress, the soldiers had the task of advancing through it under fire. According to some observers, due to Wellington's concern that a French relief force might appear at any minute, the men were sent forward when breaches were 'barely practicable'.⁸⁴ Regardless of this, advancing through the breach was a suicidal mission. The first unit to advance was known as 'the forlorn hope', and of this party casualties often approached 100%.⁸⁵ The men had to force their way through a narrow gap in the breach that would have been lined with ingenious defences, such as the infamous *chevaux de frise* – a long beam of wood with sword blades sticking from it. Further mines and explosive barrels also filled the breach, and the French threw gunpowder from above.⁸⁶ The explosions also created dangers from falling shells and splinters, whilst their light illuminated the attacking forces and made them vulnerable to French fire. The ferocity of the French resistance is explained by the French colonel, Lamare; he claims that Wellington was keen for revenge after the two previous siege attempts at Badajoz, and so did not present 'the governor with the summons to surrender that is demanded by custom'.⁸⁷ Accordingly, the French were aware that nothing 'could save it from the terrible future that was reserved to it', when the British entered the town. Rather than causing the defenders to lose heart, Lamare

⁸¹ Ian Fletcher, *In Hell Before Daylight: the siege and storming of the fortress of Badajoz, 16 March - 6 April 1812*, (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1984), p.27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁸³ D.S. Richards, *The Peninsula Years: Britain's Redcoats In Spain And Portugal*, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002), p.135.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.235.

⁸⁵ The phrase 'forlorn hope' comes from the Dutch 'verloren hoop' and translated into lost troop, in David Andress, *The Savage Storm: Britain on the brink in the Age of Napoleon*, (London: Little, Brown, 2012), p.249.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.251.

⁸⁷ Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History*, (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p.245.

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underlines that this 'redoubled the zeal and activity that they [the French] showed in prolonging the defence by all the obstacles that courage and science alike could throw up.⁸⁸ Blakeney provides testament to this brutal defence and the horrors of the breach:

Thousands of live shells, hand-grenades, fireballs and every species of combustible were thrown down the breaches and over the walls of the ditches, which, lighting and exploding at the same time, rivalled the lightning and thunder of heaven. This at intervals was succeeded by the impenetrable darkness of the infernal regions. Gallant foes laughing at death met, fought, bled and rolled upon the earth; and from the very earth destruction burst, for the exploding mines cast friends and foes up together, who in burning torture clashed and shrieked in the air.⁸⁹

This experience assailed all of the senses and Blakeney was not alone in his comparison of the breach to the 'infernal regions'. For the men scaling the walls of the fortress, their experience was no better. Their ladders were too short or collapsed under the men's weight, whilst the French threw down obstacles from above.⁹⁰ Donaldson describes how men often fell 30 or 40 feet to their death and some were even impaled on their comrade's bayonets below. After going through such indescribable scenes, the physical and emotional state of the men entering the fortress would have been unstable to say the least.

British behaviour can be understood as a direct reaction to their prior ordeal. Firstly, fear and adrenaline has an adverse effect on anyone's reactions.⁹¹ Recent studies in Iraq underline the effect of chemical substances such as adrenaline on a combatant's behaviour; these chemicals are released in response to threat for the purpose of protection, yet they also heightened the men's emotions and increased aggression.⁹² The lack of French mercy would have furthered their anger and George Gleig reflected that, 'we cannot greatly wonder at the feelings of absolute hatred which generally prevail...against the garrison which does its duty to its country by holding out to the last extremity'.⁹³ In terms of exhilaration, O'Neill of the 28th Foot describes how 'men's passion, wound up almost to a frenzy by the exciting and

⁸⁸ C. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.246.

⁸⁹ Blakeney, *A Boy in the Peninsular*, pp.264-265.

⁹⁰ Anthony Hamilton, *Hamilton's Campaign with Moore and Wellington during the Peninsular War*, (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1998), p.123.

⁹¹ Michael Stephenson, *The Last Full Measure – how soldiers die in battle*, (New York:, Crown Publishers, 2012), p.158.

⁹² J. Skotnicka, 'Stabilisation mission in Iraq, the individual symptoms of PTSD and a comparison of the level of depression, anxiety and aggression among soldiers returning from the mission and soldiers that stayed in Poland', *Archives Of Psychiatry & Psychotherapy*, 14,4, (2012) p.15.

⁹³ Cited in Holmes, *Redcoat*, pp.378-379.

maddening scenes through which they had passed, will have a vent...’, which explains the men’s behaviour as a form of release.⁹⁴ Furthermore, after enduring such horrors, the survivors may have felt entitled to reward. This idea was supported by the unwritten ‘rules of war’, which stated that a fortress taken by storm was regarded as ‘legitimate prize’ for the victors.⁹⁵ The effects of witnessing huge bloodshed in such an intimate surrounding – with ‘body piled on body’ – would also have cheapened life and rendered atrocities the norm.⁹⁶ For the civilian, especially one distanced by 200 years of technological change which has made killing far less personal, it is difficult to comprehend the men’s state of mind.⁹⁷ However to dismiss their behaviour as irrational is to discount the norms of the time and the horrors they experienced; we cannot know what it was like to storm a fortress, and importantly we cannot predict how we would react in such circumstances.⁹⁸

In addition to the effects of personally assaulting the fortress, the loss of comrades would have affected the men’s emotional state. The Peninsular War saw the reinforcement of regimental identities, which manifested itself in battle honours, nicknames and even personalised celebrations, such as the 48th Foot’s annual Talavera day or the 57ths ‘silent toast’.⁹⁹ Given that an estimated 80% of soldiers spent their military careers with the same regiment, the result was an intense identification with the regiment. Bonds were strengthened between the men through the shared experience of campaigning.¹⁰⁰ In addition to this social construct, Coss also underlines neurophysiologic factors, for example, the anti-stress hormone Oxytocin acts to reduce fear by prompting individuals to seek emotional and physical support from those around them and at the same time give this to others in return.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, the brutal losses of comrades would have been felt deeply and a sense of revenge is often used to explain the men’s behaviour. At Badajoz, the sight of Captain Jones of the 88th ‘weltering in blood’ lead his men to lose self-control and kill every French guard nearby.¹⁰² A similar reaction was seen during the retreat from Burgos in 1812 and after the attempted siege had resulted in 2000 casualties for no apparent gain. The suffering experienced during retreat combined with the bitterness for lost comrades, and the ‘men took their anger out on the populace’.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ Cited in Coss, *All for the King’s Shilling*, p.217.

⁹⁵ Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, p.380.

⁹⁶ Cited in Richards, *The Peninsular Years*, p.144.

⁹⁷ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp.xvii-xviii.

⁹⁸ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, pp.15-18.

⁹⁹ Linch, *Britain And Wellington’s Army*, (2011), p.12 and p.136.

¹⁰⁰ Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, p.65.

¹⁰¹ Email from Edward Coss dated 07/05/14, see also H.Lee, et al., ‘Oxytocin: The Great facilitator of Life’, *Progressive Neurobiology*, 88, 2, (2009) pp. 127-51.

¹⁰² Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, pp.39-40.

¹⁰³ Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, pp.416-417.

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Furthermore, revenge supplied chivalric justification for their actions: whether this was their genuine reasoning or not, it provided yet another ingredient to the men's dangerous mentality upon entering a captured town.

Once within the town walls, the transformation of Wellington's well-disciplined troops into a rabble of 'hell-hounds' can be seen as a direct reaction to their preceding ordeal.¹⁰⁴ However, alongside the immediate influences, the motivations that drove men to commit crimes elsewhere in the Peninsula were also apparent. Captain Perceval stated that upon entering the town, 'all thought of what they owed their wounded comrades...was swallowed up in their abominable rage for drink and plunder'.¹⁰⁵ Although not every ranker reacted in this way, many men took this as an opportunity 'to fulfil their desires for alcohol, women, and loot'.¹⁰⁶ Given the British propensity for plunder and drink anyway, the supposed 'rules of war' meant that the sack of Badajoz reached new levels of excess. Old motivations also became amplified in the context of their prior ordeal. Alcohol was wholly destructive when combined with their unstable mind-set; Grattan describes how troops who were 'heated already with passions, became absolutely mad by intoxication'.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the effects of cultural discrimination can be seen to have influenced the perpetration of crimes. At Ciudad Rodrigo, one officer described how 'the actors of these excesses were attired in the habits of priests with broad-rimmed hats of monks and of nuns', which underlines their derision of Catholicism.¹⁰⁸ The belief that inhabitants were inferior helped to justify crimes against them; women particularly suffered and Blakeney describes how 'there was no safety for women even in the churches'.¹⁰⁹ Although rape may have been the product of lust, it can also be understood in terms of cultural prejudice and, in particular, the belief that Iberian women were avid for sex. Whilst the motivations of soldiers are difficult to measure empirically, the British had developed a discriminatory mind-set towards the Iberians that would not have disappeared upon entering the town; inevitably this would have contributed to the lowering of restraint.¹¹⁰ Although the soldier's behaviour upon entering the town can certainly be explained by the ferocity of the preceding assault, it is therefore clear that other issues were also present.

It has been argued by Coss that the storming of besieged towns were very specific circumstances that led to atypical behaviour. Firstly, siege warfare brought men on more intimate terms with death and the enemy than elsewhere. Although bayonet

¹⁰⁴ Blakeney, *A Boy In The Peninsular War*, p.249.

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Fletcher, *In Hell Before Daylight*, p.111.

¹⁰⁶ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, p.27 and p.225.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Holmes, *Redcoat*, p.391.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Fletcher, *In Hell Before Daylight*, p.102.

¹⁰⁹ Blakeney, *A Boy in the Peninsula*, p.273.

¹¹⁰ E-mail from Gavin Daly dated 27/03/2014.

charges were common in battle, Muir underlines that 'one side almost always broke before contact' and hand-to-hand fighting was rare.¹¹¹ Furthermore, if battle was truly horrific, with the 'smoke and noise of weapons...the screams of wounded men...and the smell of gunpowder, blood, vomit and human excreta', this would have been amplified in the claustrophobic trench and breach environment.¹¹² This had a palpable effect upon the men; Grattan described a 'savage expression in the faces of the men that I had never before witnessed. Such is the difference between the storm of a breach and the fighting of a pitched battle'.¹¹³ The confusion and disorientation of the breach was continued in the narrow streets of the town, which also made it impossible for the surviving officers to keep track of their men.¹¹⁴ At Badajoz, there were additional context-specific motivations; Lamare recognised that 'the pride of the English had been wounded by the two previous failed sieges and they wanted revenge'.¹¹⁵ In both Badajoz and San Sebastian, the British also believed the inhabitants to be collaborating with the French.¹¹⁶ This may have been an afterthought to justify their behaviour; yet for Coss, these sieges had unique factors which accounted for the men's uncharacteristic behaviour. However, whilst it is right to conclude that the ferocity of the men's behaviour was a product of the assault; their behaviours should not be dismissed as anomalies, but rather as a culmination of their entire experiences upon campaign. The testing daily conditions in the Peninsula, the repeated exposure to death and violence, the resentment towards ungrateful allies, and their cultural prejudices, all contributed to the degeneration of morals and the creation of a particular mind-set. These explosive and short-lived bouts of murder, rape and pillage, should therefore be understood as part of a brutalising process which occurred throughout the long war; as Esdaile underlines, 'a deep well of resentment in the heart of many soldiers overflowed and spent itself in a few hours of savagery'.¹¹⁷ The horrific experience of siege warfare provided the stimulus, and the opportunity, for such an explosion of atrocities. However, the men's behaviour on these occasions should not be seen in isolation any more than they should be seen as a product of inherent criminality.

The brutalising effects of warfare are best concluded by a study of the British soldiers upon demobilisation. With a decrease in wartime industry and also a rise in population, the returning soldiers found it difficult to find work. Veteran pensions

¹¹¹ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, (1998), p.88.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp.25-26.

¹¹³ William Grattan, *Adventures of the Connaught Rangers 1809-1814*, p.198 Available online at http://archive.org/stream/adventureswithco00gratuoft/adventureswithco00gratuoft_djvu.txt (Accessed 29 May 2015).

¹¹⁴ Keegan describes the effects of narrow streets on instinctive aggressive reactions, Keegan, *Face of Battle*, pp.165-172.

¹¹⁵ Jean-Baptiste Hippolyte Lamare, *Relation des Siéges et Défenses d'Oliveña*, p.245.

¹¹⁶ Esdaile, *Peninsular War*, p.468.

¹¹⁷ Esdaile, *Women on the Peninsula*, pp.215-216.

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were also insufficient to live on so many turned to crime or begging out of economic necessity and the Vagrancy Act in 1824 specifically targeted these demobilised men.¹¹⁸ However, while the economic situation at home did not help, the soldiers' difficulties reintegrating into society were arguably far more complex. During the retreat from Burgos, Browne remarked that the men, 'become daily more ferocious and less fit for return to the duties of citizens, and I sometimes apprehended that, when they should be disbanded in England after the restoration of peace, the country would be over-run with marauders and pilferers of every description'.¹¹⁹ Browne recognised that the cumulative stress of warfare, which produced regular misbehaviour, would not vanish upon demobilisation. There were also extreme cases of soldier instability upon their discharge. Although not a Peninsular War veteran, James Hadfield of the 15th Light dragoons attempted to shoot the King in 1800 and he was found not guilty by the judge on account of his derangement after military service.¹²⁰ Similar aggressive behaviour was shown by Philip Nicholson of the 12th Light Dragoons in 1812, who beat his employer and wife to death with a hot poker 'for a motive neither he nor anyone else could explain'.¹²¹ Nowadays such behaviour might be explained as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While the above cases were extreme and public, there would have been many other veterans who struggled to rehabilitate and of whose stories we are unaware. The physically maimed received little government help and had no chance of active work; upon demobilisation Harris described his return to Chelsea, where he 'met with thousands of soldiers lining the streets and lounging about before the different public houses with every description of wound'.¹²² Some found civilian life inadequate after the excitement and camaraderie of campaign and reenlisted for upcoming expeditions.¹²³ The army itself offered little recognition or psychological help, and the rankers did not receive an official General Service medal until 1847 (unless they served at Waterloo in 1815).¹²⁴

This study has attempted to show that British soldiers were not the 'scum of the earth', but were brutalised by their experiences on campaign. However, if these atrocities were a product of the brutalising process of war, it begs the question – would anyone put through their experiences react in this manner? This is not to say that misbehaviour is inevitable, or solely a product of the environment; certainly the experience of war works on men in different ways, and the Peninsular War was particularly brutal. However, it does prompt reflection on the potential effects that warfare can have upon individual mentality. In recent combat, soldier and veteran

¹¹⁸ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, pp.270-271.

¹¹⁹ Cited in Emdaile, *Women in the Peninsular War*, p.214.

¹²⁰ Haythornthwaite, *Armies of Wellington*, p.143.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.142-143.

¹²² Christopher Hibbert (ed.), *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris*, (London: Endeavour Press, 1970), p.124

¹²³ Haythornthwaite, *Armies of Wellington*, p.266.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72.

crime remains a problem. In 2006 a British Royal Marine sergeant was tried for murdering an Iraqi civilian and footage from the scene shows him displaying the same combination of revenge and bitterness towards an Afghan as was seen in the Peninsula and the sergeant was recorded saying 'Shuffle off this mortal coil...It's nothing you wouldn't do to us'. Paul Vallely reflected upon the ethical problems of trying such a man, as the judges 'have before them a killer who is far from a common criminal. War cannot be one soldier's private burden.'¹²⁵The effects of combat are now widely recognised and there are numerous charities and government programmes which offer soldiers psychological support. However, the recurrence of veteran difficulties upon reintegration into society suggests that this problem has not been fully resolved yet.¹²⁶ War changes the mentality of men, both due to the nature of the job, and their specific combat experiences. The case of the Peninsular War helps to underline that human reactions in conditions of warfare are unpredictable. The 'incorrigible rogues' described in statute were products of war, and ultimately, victims of an inadequate support system. If war is to continue to form a regular feature of modern society, the psychological care given to soldiers is of utmost importance to their safety, and that of others.

¹²⁵ Paul Vallely, 1 Dec 2013, 'Brutalised men do brutal things'

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/brutalised-men-do-brutal-things-8974999.html> [accessed 02/04/2014].

¹²⁶ Mental Health Foundation, 'Veterans Mental Health'

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy/veterans-mental-health> [accessed 16/04/14].