



The Memoirs of Sgt John Wall

Sergent John Wall served in the 9th East Norfolk Regiment between 1857 and 1878. He served a further period on the full time administrative staff of the East Norfolk Militia, also known as the 4th Battalion, Norfolk Regiment between September 1881 and January 1888.

After retirement he wrote his memoirs. As a record of service in the lower ranks of the Victorian Army it is comparatively rare. There are plenty of officers' accounts. John Wall was a good soldier; sober, trustworthy, responsible and unusually interested in the places he visited. Few Victorian N.C.O.s read books about the postings, as Wall did before going to Gibraltar.

The extracts from his memoirs have been grouped thematically for ease of use and the transcripts retain the original spellings.

Extract 1. Pay and Rations

The drill rambling about and the sharp air of the mountains made us very hungry. Our rations we re not of the best quality as regards quantity I could have eaten three times as much as I got. Our rations consisted or we resupposes to consist of lb $\frac{1}{2}$ of bread and $\frac{3}{4}$ of lb meat of which we were charged 4d. This was called the Commissariat ration. 3d was stopped for tea potatoes ingredients for soup etc which left 4d for pocket money that is if we where not under stop pages for any thing. One day our Cook whose name was Shee reported an old soldier for stealing the meat how the old soldier found him I don't know but I remember that after dinner one day that Shees coppers we re searched and several pounds of meat we re found. Shee was made a prisoner of and sent down to Limeri ck brought before the commanding officer and sentenced to 7 days cells.

Notes on Extract 1- 'Pay and Rations':

The basic or 'commissariat' ration allowance is given, consisting of bread and meat. Tea, potatoes and other ingredients for soup were extra. Note that the soldiers were charged for this out of their pay of 1/- (5p) a day. These charges of 'stoppages' were a prime source of grumbling. The soldiers were left with 4d

(2p) pocket money, from which further stoppages for laundry, breakage's, lost or stolen kit and boot polish were frequently made. At least the diet was regular and employment guaranteed, the Victorian soldier's life should be compared to the lives of other poor Victorians.

Extract 2. On the March

(i) The distance from Limerick to Woodcock hill is five Irish miles and the last three quarters of a mile up a steep hill. On our march to Woodcock we had to carry the whole of our kit and any thing extra we may have. Also sixty rounds of ball cartridge. It was the first march I did as a soldier. I have done a good many since but never had to carry so heavy a load as on that occasion. The last mile was very trying a number fell out some fainted. I well remember seeing Ned Robinson who was afterwards Srgt Major lying by the road side as though he was dying. Robinson was young not more that 18 he had been brought up as a shoemaker consequently had not much stamina. The officer in command gave a pint of ale to those recruits who did not fall out he afterwards gave the same amount to those who fell out.

I suppose he came to the conclusion that they could not help it. The officer made enquiries as to where we came from and he made the re mark that not one of the lads brought up in country districts fell out all that fell out where brought up in town.

(ii) On the 19th we started our journey about 4.30am and travelled to groot Cups (Black Hills) the distance being about 14 miles the day was very hot and the ground so hard that we had a difficulty in getting the pegs into the ground when pitching the tents onto the ground .

20th. Left encampment at about 6am felt awfully stifflying on the bare ground with only a blanket is not like being in bed crossed the Sunday river on a pont and encamped on the other side very hot and dusty very bad road for travelling. We felt this days march worse than any during the journey the heat being intense this days march was through a flat country we had several out and amongst them Colour- Sergeant Jim Reid a great boaster of what he could do in the way of marching but Jim had to succom that day Poor Jim had been dead some years.

21st. Left at 6.30am after getting break fast the day very hot and the dust suffocating camped at Cosgrove .

22nd Left at 6.30am day much cooler than yesterday.

23rd Left Reit Key at 6.30am very little dust to day arrived at the Bush River the Colonel halted for a short time to allow men to take off their shoes and stockings trousers when going through the river. I never took my shoes off when crossing any of the rivers my feet we re so tender from marching and the stones so rough and sharp that it was very difficult to cross with the shoes off. Sergt Phillip fell down Rifle and all in the water.

24th. Left Daisy Klift at 5.30am our journey to day was through a very hilly country halted at Na gar for dinner and treked 10 miles farther to Zreka where we encamped for the night.

25th. Christmas day started about 5am passing through Howson Poort all up hill and bad road was very greeably surprised on reaching the top of the hill to find the band of the 11th regiment waiting to play us in Grahams Town. We the sergeants were invited to the Sergeants Mess of the 11th to dinner at Fort England .

Notes on Extract 2 (parts *i* and *ii*) - 'On the March':

Much of a soldier's time was spent on route marches, often carrying as much as 40 or 50 kilos of equipment. In part *i* Wall is still a recruit and the marching is part of their basic toughening up. Ned Robinson, the shoemaker, and the other lads form urban backgrounds had a much harder time than country boys did. As urbanisation increased, so did the number of recruits from such backgrounds, much to the consternation of the army authorities. In part *ii* the 9th Foot was in South Africa in December 1867, marching to Grahamstown (Natal). Wall had been a soldier for ten years now, but long marches were always feats of endurance.

Extract 3. On the Troopship

(I) Now anyone that has ever been on a Troop ship knows what confusion there is on board the first day or two. You are told of to a part of the ship you get down one ladder and perhaps up another and not being acquainted with nautical phrases such as Port and Starboard when you go to look for your companies quarters the chances are that you go to the wrong side of the ship. Such was the case with me I could not for the life of me find my knapsack.

(II) The voyage from Gib to Corfu was not so bad. Nevertheless I was sick every day and the want of suitable food made me worse. Our rations consisted of hard biscuits every day for dinner one day Salt Pork and Pea soup the next day Salt Beef and Plum pudding. We had chocolate for breakfast the very smell of which would make me sick while cooking. Before leaving Gib I Birch and Tom Mullen purchased some bread called Jew Legs we hid this bread as well as we could thinking to have it to eat on our voyage to Malta. We agreed to take our turn in watching as we were not all three on duty at once. During the time I was responsible for it some one stole it so I lost my bread and got a telling of from my comrades into the bargain .

Notes on Extract 3- 'On the Troopship':

The Victorian Army was an Imperial army, so long journeys on troopships were another staple experience, particularly on the way to and from India. In the first extract Wall describes the confusion of embarkation. In the second, he describes a voyage from Gibraltar to Corfu. Poor wall was a dreadful sailor, even managing to be the only soldier to throw up on a five mile excursion voyage from Cape Town to Robin Island and his experience of troopship rations loomed large in his memory. He and his mates supplemented the ships rations, which they purchased with their own money. They bought some bread in Gibraltar that appears to have been a type known locally as "Jew Legs"

Extract 4. Sons of the Regiment: a birth and a death

(I) We left Corfu for Cephalonia that is to say the Head Quarters of the Regiment under the command of Col Ellis at about 3pm on the 9th of April 1863 on board of the Frigate Trafalgar and arrived there on the following morning Our passage to Cephalonia to Cephalonia was a very pleasant one. On the wheel of the Trafalgar On the Upper part silence and obedience On the lower half

England expects every man to do his duty. The distance being short about 80 miles we were not served out with hammocks. During the voyage down Mrs. Duke wife of Corpl Duke afterwards sergeant of the band was confined of a boy who was christened Trafalgar Duke with the consent of the captain of the vessel in honour of the ship he was born in. Traf Duke as he was always called grew up to manhood and is now and has been for some years Colour Sergeant of the 1st Bn 9th Foot .

(II) The march this day was about 18 miles. On arriving at the Great Fish River found that we could not cross on account of the swollen state of the river caused by the recent heavy rains. Encamped close to the river the name of the place was called Committees Drift. Whilst encamped here Colour Sergeant Clunan's boy died a rough stone marks the spot near a Prickly Pear Tree. An inscription on the stone cut by one of our men runs thus Sacred to the Memory of Thomas Clunanson of M. Clunan 1st Bn 9th Regt died 29 December 1867 aged 4 years.

Notes on Extract 4- 'Sons of a Regiment: two extracts, a birth and a death'

It was normal practice for a proportion of the Soldiers and N.C.O.s' families to accompany the regiment on foreign postings. The women and children had to endure the troopships rations, diseases and the dangers of active service. Births and deaths were frequent. Wall tells of the arrival of a son to Corporal and Mrs Duke, born on board H M S Trafalgar and christened accordingly. Wall's phrase "On the wheel of Trafalgar can best be translated as on the quarterdeck. Like most 'sons of the regiment', Traf joined up. He became a Colour Sergeant in the 1st Bn.

In the second extract Wall is on the march again in South Africa, continuing after Christmas 1867 (see On the March above). On 29th December, after an 18 mile march, they reached Committees Drift (ford) on the Great Fish River. There colour Sgt Clunan's 4 year old boy died and was buried.

Although life travelling with the regiment was hard wives wanted to go and were often devastated if they failed in the drawing of lots to see who would be allowed to go abroad. The regiment was an extended family for the wives and children, with mutual support in times of sickness and bereavement and joy and celebration or births and birthdays.

Extract 5. Discipline and Drinking

12th December 1867 I was Sergeant of the Regimental Guard and this was the last day and night in Cape Town no one envied me the duty. I did a good many guards during my 21 years service in the 9th as corporal and sergeant in charge of the guard at different times but not one that gave me so much trouble and anxiety as this one. Our regiment was so well known in Cape Town and so many having friends the result being that numbers were absent at night and a great number drunk several were what we call dead drunk. I had over 40 prisoners on my list. One man by name Singleton who I did not know as he only joined in the last draught from England died suffocated with drink. He was carried helpless to the guard room like some others who were in the same condition. I visited the prisoners several times and they appeared alright but about 11pm I sent the Corporal and he returned immediately and he said he thought one man was dead. I sent for Doctor Jeffcoat he came immediately examined and ordered his body to be taken to the hospital. I afterwards was told that Singleton had boasted what quantities of wine he could drink. The poor fellow paid dear for his folly.

Notes on Extract 5- 'Discipline and Drinking'

John Wall was a non-drinking, reliable and respectable individual, relied upon by the regiment's officers to keep discipline amongst the men. Soldiers have always been great boozers, the officers no less than the men. In the Victorian army it was a major discipline problem. In many places there was little else for the ordinary soldiers to do. Attempts were made to provide reading rooms and to encourage fitness through competitive sport, but drink remained an attractive refuge. In the extract, Wall is on guardroom duty at Cape Town on the Regiment's last night on the posting; an occasion for serious celebration.