

# The Story of a Tipperary Peninsular Soldier

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## Introduction

*This interesting article of a Tipperary soldier was found in the Clonmel Chronicle of Saturday 1st March, 1879. He fought in eleven battles and was 91 years old when interviewed. His death registration cannot be found.*

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In one of the infirm wards of the Clonmel workhouse hospital there lies at present an old Tipperary Peninsular soldier, named John Walsh, whose story forms part of a stirring epoch in European history. Few men now living could tell the tale that pertains to him. Serving under the Iron Duke, then Sir A. Wellesley, he took part in eleven battles; was wounded twice; was taken prisoner and escaped in a remarkable manner: and was finally pensioned off after Waterloo. He is gifted with wonderful strength, and, considering his years, possesses mental powers of an extraordinary degree. It seems a pity that the brave old warrior should end his days in a workhouse ward, but appears to be his own choice. Mr Hamilton, L.G.I. who has taken much interest in his case, we understand, proposed to interest himself in getting him into the Kilmainham Institution, but Walsh declined saying he preferred to be where he is amongst his neighbours: The old soldier, we have reason to know, is treated with the greatest kindness and consideration by the Master of the Workhouse, Mr. Boland, and by the other officers, as well as by the inmates of the ward. A few days since a reporter of the Chronicle was permitted an interview with the old man, and was favoured with the following narrative of his career, which was taken down from his own lips, and is given, almost *verbatim*, in his own words: -

"I am now 91 years of age. I was born within twelve miles of Clonmel, at Golden, near Cashel. I enlisted on the 3rd July, 1808; and I recollect the day as well as yesterday; it was a Monday, and I was then about eighteen years old. The regiment was the 45th Foot-the Nottingham Foresters we called them. In a few months we were paraded in Nottingham barracks for the purpose of taking our share in the great war which was then waging between the French and British forces in the Peninsula. An order had been received by our commanding officer for a draft of 350 men, chiefly young soldiers, to join the first battalion of our regiment at that time in Portugal. I was one of the accepted volunteers. We went direct to Portsmouth, and thence set sail for Lisbon. I joined the headquarters on the 12th June, 1809, encamped on the banks of the Tagus. Very soon after our army moved for Spain, Sir Arthur Wellesley, afterwards Duke of Wellington, and marched towards the French forces, commanded by Marabals Soult and Ney, under Bonaparte. They retreated before us, but we followed them up until they came to Talevera, on 26th July, 1809. I was engaged for the first

time on that day, and the fight lasted for three days. Neither side gave way-we kept our ground; and after a stubborn battle the French retreated on the night of 28th, and went towards Madrid to recruit their forces. They knew we had suffered as well as themselves, and they intended to come back in strength and cut us off. Sir Arthur informed of this, thought it better to make a retreat; and so it was-a good retreat is better than a bad stand. The French followed us but we made good our way into Portugal, and went into winter quarters. We were strengthening ourselves during the months that followed and took the field again on the 27th September, 1810, at Busaco. There the French, 70,000 strong, attacked us. We had a severe engagement, but we kept the field and made the enemy retire.

My next battle was on the 11th March, 1811. It was at Pomball in Portugal. The French lined the river in front, covering the town. When we came up we didn't halt for any time, but just went to the attack. General Lord Hill commanded the first diversion, and Lord Beresford the second. The French were strongly posted, to prevent our crossing the river; our artillery was ordered up double-quick, and opened a cannonade of grape and canister on the enemy's left, compelling them to give way. We turned there flank, and got an opportunity for crossing, when they found Picton's diversion had crossed, and were wheeling round on the flank to surround them; they made a hurried retreat setting fire to different buildings in the town. We had a little to do with them again on the 2nd April, at a place called Lobugall, but it was not much. The next regular engagement was on the 5th May, 1811, at Fuentes d'Onor. We had only three divisions up-about 30,000 men. Hill commanded the second diversion on the right, about three leagues from where Wellington was. Wellington engaged on that day the main body, and Hill and Beresford took up another position, to protect our army from the French at a point that would have been most dangerous if left open. After a severe engagement we kept the ground. I was with the main body at headquarters that day. We turned the enemy off the ground, and they went from that to Ciudad Rodrigo.

At the battle Rodrigo I was wounded in the leg, and taken prisoner by the French, with whom I remained six months. I traveled in that time about 700 miles with them through Spain. They had between 400 and 500 prisoners. The French were not well able to feed themselves, and we (the prisoners) fared badly. Sometimes we used to be two whole days without eating a bit, and sometimes we would get a pound of bread in the day, but nothing else. We left a place called Bruges one morning for our days march of six leagues, and went towards Vittoria, where the great battle was soon after fought on 13th June. We had got nothing to eat since the day before; we were halted near a town Bribisco, midway in our day's march, to receive a pound of bread each prisoner. During the time the bread was serving out we were turned into a field on the right-hand side of the road, and stood three deep. A loaf of 3lbs, was handed to the front rank man, to divide between himself and two comrades. I had had it settled my mind that if I could get the least opportunity I would try to make my escape. I thought I had it now. I did not wait for my share of the bread. Near us was a bridge passing over a small river which crossed the road. I whispered to my comrade prisoner - (he was a north of Ireland man, named Alick Whiteside, from Belfast, and belonged to the 74th Regiment) - 'Alick', says I to him, 'mind under the bridge, while the men are going to the river to get some water to drink'; and I gave him a wink -you know the old saying, 'a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse' - and Alick understood what I meant. We moved up towards the bridge, as if to take a drink, as many others of the men were

drinking at the river. Alick was not long in the country, and was a dummy so far as Spanish was concerned, but I knew and could speak the language very well. He was staggered, and hesitated, saying it was too dangerous, as when the body crossed the bridge the prisoners would be counted, and we would at once be missed and searched for. 'We are exposed to dangers every day', said I 'and sooner than go a prisoner into France I will fall now-so if you don't come I will go by myself'. Some of my comrades who were near at the water's edge heard me and said 'you are d-fools; do you want to throw away your lives for nothing; you have no chance at all'. 'I will go by myself', said I, 'you will?' said Alick, 'I will' said I, 'even if they shot me down', said he, 'I will go with you'. So both of us slipped under the bridge, and remained there till all the bread was served out, and the order given to fall in. They moved out on the road, and marched across the bridge. We were under, hiding in the arch. If they counted prisoners, then we were pinned at once. But in consequence of the delay, and having two leagues and a half further to march, they moved on at once. If there was any delay between the first drum beat and the second, we knew they would be counting, and our hearts were thumping to hear the second drum; but as look happened, none was heard. They went on at a quick step at the first drum.

After a while when they passed on, I tapped my companion's right shoulder, 'who is right now Alick?', says I. 'So far so good', says he; 'but what are we to do next?' We knew that there was a French detachment in Bribisco, and believed our late guard would let them know that two prisoners had gone away. They did search for us but could not make us off. There was a great clump of bushes and furze near the river, about 400 or 600 yards from the bridge. We hid there at first, and then followed the stream, when our guard disappeared, so as to leave no track; and having gone about 800 yards beyond the bridge, we saw a rising ground, with a thick hedge, on our left hand side. We took shelter there, and heard the body, on their way to the town, halting and counting. We could see them from where they were hiding sending out parties to search for us. The ground slanted down from where we were, and we saw 16 French soldiers coming back and extending themselves at both sides of the road searching for us. They thought it was near the town we had left, and did not suspect it was when the bread was serving out. They could find no trace of us in or near the town, so they went on, leaving word in the town to keep a sharp look out for us. We stopped in the hedge, cold and hungry till the night came on, soaking wet. When it was dark we traveled on through the country at a venture not knowing the right direction to take and having no one to guide or help us. Spain was not then a country like Ireland. There are no scattered houses in Spain from the time you leave a town or village till you come to another, three or four leagues away.

So, Sir, we travelled on, keeping as much as we could to the hills, and after a while we sat down to rest and consult. All we could say was that we were out of the enemies' hands at present, but did not know how soon we would fall into them again. When the morning cleared and we could see before us, we spied the steeple of a convent in front, about half a league off. Alick, said I, 'there's a town'. We could see only the steeple in the hollow from where we were, but I said 'they didn't build a steeple and a church without a town'. It was such another place as Ardfinnan; a valley surrounded by hills, 'let us go'; said I, 'towards that town'. We moved on in the direction of the steeple, and came to a road leading into the town. We dared not go straight for fear there might be a French detachment lying there. 'Alick', said I, 'we must hide where we are till we see some of the *pisanis*, or Spanish peasants;

they will give us information whether there are any French here or not'. We took shelter and were on the watch. At last I saw a peasant coming out from the outskirts of the town with a pair of oxen to work. 'Speak to him'; said Alick, 'you may depend on it I will', I said. The peasant came in front of us and I hailed him with a salutation in Spanish. He heard the voice, but seemed not to hear it, not knowing who was hid behind the ditch, thinking we might be robbers. I spoke again and told him we were British soldiers, prisoners with the French, and had made our escape. I asked him were there any French troops in the town. He shook his head, saying there were not, and that the Mayor of the town would prove a friend. 'Thanks be to God for that' said we. The poor peasant left his cattle grazing on the road-side and took us towards the Mayor's house. Going through the town we met a clergy man standing at a door in his morning dress. He saw us with the bullock guide. We were badly dressed in tattered French uniform. The priest asked the guide who we were. The guide told him. The priest said in Spanish: 'How do you know who they are? You do not speak English.' The guide said I could speak Spanish very well. His reverence called us over. I gave him the military salute, and bid him good morning in his own language. 'How long are you in Spain?' said he. I said two years and a half, and I then told him how I was wounded and taken prisoner, and how we had escaped. He put his hand in his pocket and gave a piece of money to the guide, and told him to go after his cattle. The priest then brought us into his parlour-the dear good gentleman-and ordered for us a plentiful breakfast. It was more than welcome to us in our then famished condition, and we did justice to the good things-eggs and bacon, and wine, and a fine pan loaf. 'Eat plenty,' said the priest. And we did eat plenty.

The good gentleman, while we were busy at breakfast, took stock of us and our clothing being in a bad state. We hadn't seen a hap'orth of soap while we were prisoners. We had no shirts, and you may guess how we looked and felt. The priest went to an inner room and brought out two shirts and handed one to me and the other to Alick. They were precious gifts. We put them on. He sent us then down the Mayor's quarters. There was a *cead mille falthe* before us there, for we were fighting for Spain. We conversed with the Mayor. He said he would be glad if he could detain us in the town to rest and refresh ourselves, but the French were abroad; and through the talk about us among the people (we were the gossip of the town by that time) the matter might come to the enemy's ears, and then the cure would be worse than the disease. So he said the best thing he could do for us would be to send us forward four leagues to where a colonel of brigands with 800 guerillas were posted, and that when we arrived there we would be safe.

We left that evening, and the Mayor kindly sent a guide and a mule with us to give me a lift on the road. We joined the brigands, sir, that evening. The chief was a fine comely gentleman. The brigands themselves had no pay, but preyed upon the French, and were the greatest annoyance to them-cutting off their stores and supplies for the army. They had plenty of French clothing. They dressed us completely, and befriended us very much. When we saw them dressed in French uniform we thought we were betrayed to the enemy, but our fears were groundless. We stopped 14 days with the brigands. I was intending to make my way down to Corunna, when I discovered the direction. I knew we would be able to get along well, as I could speak the native language, and we hoped to find some English ship at Cordonna which would give us a chance of getting home to our own country. Alick said it was a very good plan. We got to Corunna, and made application to the captain of a frigate, who was commanding the garrison there, to give us a pass to go aboard the first ship that

would sail for England. He said it was better for us go on board his own ship with him, as he was going on a cruise. He asked us were we badly wounded or disabled, and I said not. He asked us would we rejoin our own forces, and of course we said yes, if we could reach them. 'I will have you inspected,' said he, 'and supplied with all the necessaries you want.' He did all he could for us, and a better gentleman or a better Irishman than that officer I never met. He was afterwards General Walker, and commanded the 50th or 68th Regiment; I don't exactly know which. We remained with him till we fell in with our army again. I joined my Regiment, after all my adventures, within three leagues of the place I was wounded and taken prisoner.

The next engagement I was in was at Badajos, which commenced on the 4th January, 1812. The country was covered with snow, and Wellington took advantage of this, as the snow prevented the French troops being moved up to reinforce the garrison. He made the attack on the 14th, and the place was taken on the night of the 10th, with the loss of two of our generals-McKinnon and Crawford. That is where I was blown up. I was on the ramparts after entering the breach. The French had the place undermined, and left a powder train under where the breach was made. As they retreated into the citadel they set fire to the train of powder, and a dreadful explosion followed. I was one of those who were blown up. I was six weeks stone blind in hospital, and afterwards the flesh and skin peeled off my hands and face. I was roasted almost to death, and never expected to see the sun again. After over a month's nursing in hospital, and new skin coming on underneath the old that was peeling off, I found soon after I had sight in the left eye. I never fully recovered the sight of the other eye from that day to this. I didn't like the hospital at all, and as soon as I could move I begged the doctor to let me leave, and join my comrades. He was vexed at the idea. 'You want to go,' said he, 'to show your *baby face* (I was getting quite a new face by that time). You will be running into the hospital again to-morrow or next day, and you had better remain'. He refused me once or twice, but I was obstinate, and he was very much displeased with me. He told the sergeant of the hospital at last to discharge me. I left and rejoined my Regiment.

Salamanca was the next event. It was on the 22nd July, 1812. That was a field fight-a straight stand up "who shall" between the two armies. It lasted only one day. We conquered the enemy and kept the field. I believe Vittoria was the next event. It happened on 21st June, 1813, 160 pieces of cannon were taken from the French that day, and they left on the field after them all sorts of ammunition, and went off towards the Pyreneese Mountains. We had another affair there. Then there was the event at Nivella, on the 14th December; another at Orthes, on the 27th February, and my share of the Peninsular was concluded at the Battle of Toulouse, on 10th April, 1814. That was a stirring time. Bonaparte was taken prisoner and sent to Elba. Louis 18th was put on the throne of France, and we were sent home to Belfast. Of our Regiment, which mustard 2,500 fine fellows, only 350 remained.

After Bonaparte's escape we were under orders for the Continent again, but these were countermanded on the receipt of the news of Waterloo. A general reduction of the army followed, and I was discharged on a pension of 5d. a day. After some years, I petitioned the Duke of Wellington for a larger pension. I went with my petition to London to head - quarters, in May, 1841; I set out in it my time of service, the number of engagements I had been in; how I had been wounded and taken prisoner, and had got the Peninsular medal with eleven clasps. The Duke made me a present of 3 years and 8 months extra service, to bring

my time to fourteen years, and I was then entitled to a pension of 9d. a day. Sir Hugh Gough (afterwards Lord Gough) wrote off about me when he was here above at Rathronan, and I got another 3d. a day, making my pension 1 shilling. After that again, I got another 6d. a day out of the Queen's grant and I have been receiving 1s. and 6d. a day but only for the last 3 years. It is a great thing to have such a memory and such good health as I have still, thank God, at my age, and after all I went through. I can remember anything particular since I was 7 years old. I recollect '98, the year of the rebellion in Ireland; I was reading and writing then. I have all my faculties and senses still as well as ever I had. I have nothing to complain of, but I am sorry now, I was such a great sinner once - that's what troubles me. There is great temptation in the army in such times, and too often we had no scruple of conscience for anything like mischief, and I did fair share of it (said the old fellow with a sigh and a fit of coughing, such as had interrupted him more than once). I don't know whether you knew Attorney (Councillor) Greene, of the Wilderness (Powerstown). It was out of that house I listed, and when I came back, I returned to his employment. Afterwards I went to work in the mills and stores of Clonmel. After I came home, I got married and 4 children survived my wife; 2 went into the army, into my own Regiment. One is living yet; he is pensioned, and is living in Liverpool; he came over to see me about 2 years ago; my 2 daughters went to America about 20 years ago, and I have no account of them, I suppose they are dead; having no one outside to take care of me, I came in here on the 18th December last, I'm paying for my support; I am very kindly treated by the officers and all. Thank you, sir; I am a little tired now; take an old soldier's good-bye."