

The following text is an excerpt from the diary of James Thompsett, which he had written for those back home to read. Thompsett was a soldier serving in the 96th Foot units of the British Army during the 1808 British assistance of Spain and Portugal against Napoleonic France, which was currently invading it at the time.

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December 20th of 1808

Today was quite foggy and rather chilly, luckily the painfully long and exhausting march we did today kept us relatively warm, [Illegible] I could not find any other positive effects it had on any single one of us, as we are all extremely tired and as I write this I can [Illegible] my eyes closing, and my hands are slipping a lot too. I shall head to sleep now.

December 21st of 1808

Me and Charlie, later joined by Johnny and Tommy, went out hunting today. Also did a bunch of work fixing up the camp we so hastily and tiredly set up last night. We are still quite a long ways away from the rest of our army which we had fallen behind from when we received false words a part of the French army was trying to sneak up behind us, so our regiment was sent to check it out and found that alas, there was no such force, but while we had done so, the main army also had a battle and was now advancing further, leaving us behind. Anyhow, most of being at the camp was boring as it typically tends to be. Our officers plan a rest for today and tomorrow and then more marching unfortunately, that is unless something unfortunate comes up in the morning, in which case we would be forced to march either way. Regardless, the game today from our little hunting trip was quite good and we then had a nice time joking around with the lads while roasting our game over the campfire, overall not a bad day I must say.

December 22nd of 1808

A poor few souls decided to go out to hunt around half-past seven in the morning and they stumbled upon a massive French army headed towards us. The group luckily didn't get caught and convinced the officers, who promptly decided that we would march out to meet them. We were only a couple hours in when they spotted the army and we all quickly got into our formation. Our regiment was also accompanied by a few militia units who were on the right flank of our regiment. They had the artillery set up slightly in front of us regular infantrymen to avoid a wall of grapeshot flying into our backs of course. All in all we were quite prepared for the fight to come, most of the men were quite confident in fact. But seeing as this was going to be my first battle, I was a nervous wreck, as I am so ashamed to

admit. Charlie, being so helpful as he cheered me up and raised my confidence with his talks, Johnny helped me too, and in the end, just before the first cannons fired, I felt ready. But the first deafening blasts were fired soon after and shamefully enough, I became more worried after that, but I was still ready to perform my duty as a soldier for his Majesty's army. Then, suddenly, in came the French Cavalry, assaulting our flank. My fear for the militia there was put to rest when they were destroyed by our grapeshots and muskets. The horses then turned to run down our line, and our units all fired as they passed, we also fired, killing the last few of them in fact. Charlie promptly commented something like "Well their flag was white before the revolution, who says it won't be when we help the Spanish in their revolution against them!?" and chuckled, as did I and Johnny. He was right, after all, our country certainly is superior to France, just take a look at Nelson at Trafalgar to know that. Suddenly, a loud bang and I feel dirt slam into my face and we all get knocked onto the ground. For a moment I thought I had been killed, so as I opened my eyes, I was surprised that instead of seeing the face of our lord, I saw a fellow soldier looking down at me. He helped us up and I found it hard to stand up at first as my legs really hurt but they were still there and didn't feel broken so I was okay, although my vision was quite blurry as my head took most of the impact against the ground. Not that that was going to stop me from seeing that the French were descending down on us with haste and suddenly the officers yelled to raise our muskets and prepare to fire, so we did, and as the enemy approached we took our guns to half-cock and at the command, fired a massive volley at them. They retaliated by firing a volley of their own, taking out a few of our men. At that moment, the thoughts begin to leave my mind as, in the heat of the moment I stop thinking and simply follow orders and shouts from officers. Firing and reloading when being told to, not once did I allow myself to stop and think about what I was doing, what they were doing, and what was happening to my comrades. Again, the French decided to charge against our infantry, except this time with infantry of their own, using bayonets to stab and the infantry directly to the left of us stabbed back. Our commander, luckily had the foresight to order us into a square formation before we ourselves got charged, which is what we did and were very thankful for when it allowed us to much easier defend against the French who had just got done shredding through our militia. I cannot lie when I describe this and I shamefully admit we were all quite terrified and knew that if this was anything, it was our last stand. The French also shot at us while we were fighting back their bayonets, our formation let us shoot back while also stabbing back, and in this final fight for most of us, we managed to hold, bullets whizzing over our head and all. I should never forget the moment when I felt blood on my face and body. I returned to my senses in that moment, suddenly I could register what was going on around me. I could before but now I understood it, I heard the yelling, the gunshots, the stench of gunpowder and blood. I looked to the blood all over me which had not been there as much a mere second ago and wondered to myself in my thoughts: "If I was not dead, whose blood is this..." before I looked to my left and saw that instead of Charlie was another man, standing above my friend as he was in pain on the floor, maybe dead. The urge to help him was strong

but I knew I couldn't. I had to shoot on time and I had to be on time for the commands, but I never really could go back to the same mindless state as the one I was in before. After what felt like ages of firing and reloading, and almost getting hit by a few bullets (thank god in heaven for my luck today), the French started retreating, I don't know how, maybe it was the disparity with which we fought but we had won our 'final' stand. All of us were shocked and altered for mayhaps the rest of our pitiful lives but we had risen victorious in our fight. We quickly looked for any other approaching French forces but, somehow we really seemed to have won that battle. I'm not sure why but at that moment it really felt like we wouldn't, maybe the rest of the army would but at least my battalion. Despite our victory however, we didn't even dare cheer. We had all lost too much. I remember finding Charlie on the ground, hoping to at least get his last words after the battle had gone but he didn't speak. He was dead. Johnny was missing a leg and I thought I was fine until I realized that I found it hard to move my left hand ever since right before the French retreated. I shan't have that hand with me by tomorrow is what I can say about that ordeal. It feels so lonely without him, he was like a brother to me one could say. I wasn't the only one who had lost his friend of course. When we surrounded the campfire again tonight, two thirds of the spots we had were so tragically empty and the atmosphere so grim that we didn't even make any jokes. At least we won the glory and whatever else they would say at home when we get back. I'll be sent home due to my injuries apparently, despite the loss though, I still want to fight for my country, but I suppose they are right, you can't reload without a left hand. Regardless, I shall never forget this day.