

Tracing the Biscuit: The British Commissariat in the Peninsular War

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The year 1793 was an interesting one. The Louvre became France's national art gallery. In Washington the corner-stone of the Capitol was laid. A nine-year-old child called Nicolo Paganini made his debut as a virtuoso violinist. And Napoleon Bonaparte's declarations of war brought Spain, Portugal and Britain into a close, if sometimes uneasy alliance.

So, by the time an expeditionary force led by General Sir Arthur Wellesley, later the 1st Duke of Wellington, disembarked in Portugal in August 1808, the British Army had been at war with France for fifteen years. If the experience gained during campaigns on five continents had sharpened the efficiency of the department whose staff supplied and transported its rations Wellington might not have complained, "I have had the greatest difficulty in organising my commissariat for the march. This department needs your serious attention." He was writing to Lord Castlereagh, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, after only a week in Portugal about a service that was crucial to the success of his campaign. Yet despite his criticism, which the Commissariat had to endure throughout the Peninsular War and into the peace, much of the British Army's success in the field depended on its effectiveness.

Seven departments at Wellington's headquarters were staffed by civilians. The Medical Department was supported by an independent

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Purveyor's Department, responsible for hospitals and everything connected with them, from bandages to the cost of burying the surgeons' failures. The offices of the Paymaster-General and the Controller of Army Accounts recorded all moneys received from Britain and disbursed through regimental paymasters. The transport of field equipments, tents and heavy baggage was the duty of the Storekeeper-General, whose work was made lighter from 1809 to 1811 by a decision not to carry tents. A small travelling press printed orders, circular letters and the mass of forms that an army on campaign needed even then, forty years before the word "bureaucracy" entered the English language.

The Commissariat was directed by the Commissary General, who was the only member of the civilian staff to receive his instructions directly from His Majesty's Treasury in London. With the start of the Peninsular War, his was the most vital department of the seven, for as Wellington himself wrote, "It is very necessary to attend to detail, and to trace a biscuit from Lisbon into a man's mouth on the frontier, and to provide for its removal from place to place, by land and water, or no military operations can be carried on." The prime task of the commissaries and their clerks was to trace that biscuit; or more precisely, to procure, to transport and to issue enough food, drink, fodder and essential replacement clothing to every unit in the army. They were helped by locally-employed butchers and bakers; tailors, saddlers and shoemakers; secretaries and interpreters; guides, cart drivers and muleteers - at one time seven or eight thousand pack mules were in commissary service. Even the duties of the lower ranks demanded industry, diplomacy, ingenuity, physical and mental energy, strength of character and personality, and great stamina.

Although another useful attribute was as much courage as it would take to storm the walls of Badajoz, the story of the Commissariat's exertions in the Peninsula from 1808 to 1814 is not one of heroism on the scaling-ladder or facing a cavalry charge, for theirs was an almost private war, fought against such eterna] and universal logistic problems as poor roads, harsh climate and the frustrations of working in strange languages and dialects.

While the Commissariat was a civilian department, its officials wore a quasi-military uniform and carried arms. In 1814 Thomas Heaphy painted the thirty-three years old Deputy Assistant Commissary General William Cumming in departmental uniform. His seals of office hang at his waist. On the table lie other tools of his trade; maps, accounts forms and a writing stand. Perhaps there was also a copy of a little volume published in 1801, *The British Commissary*. The bible of the army's providers, it describes the procedures followed by Cumming and his colleagues as recorded by Havilland le Mesurier, who served as Deputy Commissary General to the Army in Flanders in 1795 and 1796.

One reason for Wellington's complaint arose from the need to recruit many new clerks as the Commissariat moved onto an active war footing

and expanded; twenty-four were employed at Wellington's headquarters alone. Infantry brigades and cavalry regiments in the field were each served by an Assistant Commissary, and a less senior official looked after smaller units. Others worked with their allies: Commissary Clerk Nathan Jackson supplied the 3rd and 4th Divisions of the 4th Spanish Army at Tarbes in 1814.

Wellington soon realised that the enemy faced serious supply difficulties. "Bonaparte", he said, "cannot carry on his operations in Spain, excepting by means of large armies; and I doubt much whether the country will afford subsistence for a large army, or if he will be able to supply his magazines from France, the roads being so bad and the communications so difficult." His opinion that "The more ground the French hold down, the weaker will they be at any given point" was no secret to the French. Early in 1812 Marshal Marmont reported to Napoleon, "Lord Wellington is quite aware that I have no stores, and is acquainted with the immensely difficult character of the country". They were both right, for although the French army was astonishingly efficient at living off the land it had to spread itself thinly to deal with Spain's implacable *guerrilleros* and her rebellious civilian populace, and was compelled to scatter across new territory searching for food, drink and fodder as it used up the resources of the old. From the first days of the campaign Wellington prohibited this form of institutionalised looting as part of his efforts to keep the Portuguese and Spanish peasantry friendly. Only his commissaries were authorised to requisition stores, and then only when a fair price was paid on the spot.

Men found guilty of robbing or cheating Portuguese or Spanish civilians were severely punished under Wellington's draconian anti-looting orders. On 3rd January 1809, an 18th Hussars trooper caught stealing from a house in Villafranca was shot by twenty of his comrades and the regiment was paraded past his bloody corpse. Thieves caught in the act by the Provost Marshal could be summarily punished by hanging or flogging, "for the sake of example". Sadly, even the harshest example did not deter some regiments from behaving shamefully when the fighting stopped at Badajoz, San Sebastián and elsewhere.

A month after the first troops arrived, more flat-bottomed boats swept through the Atlantic breakers at Maceira Bay bringing in horses, stores and sea-sick soldiers. Among the men carried ashore by naked British sailors was August Schaumann of the King's German Legion, whose memoirs of his service *On the Road With Wellington* are as amusing as they are informative. Two thirsty, mosquito-tormented days later he was enrolled in the junior grade of Commissariat Clerk at 7 shillings and sixpence a day: roughly half a cavalry captain's pay and seven times that of an infantry private. It is reasonable to presume that he was not the only recruit who brought a knowledge of business methods to his new post. Schaumann learned his at a commercial college in his native Hanover.

No sooner was he appointed than he was sent back to the beach with a newly-issued writing tablet to “bake in the sun, reckon up and calculate, weigh and measure, keep account and order fresh supplies with no assistant and no servant.” One might add, “and with little experience”. In the evening Schaumann rode miles to report to his Commissariat superior, before confiding to his diary that the weight of his duties left him “desperate at times”. His appreciation of his post’s potential appears to have been sharpened when he saw the luxury enjoyed by Commissary-General Rawlings. His tented pavilion was a model of selfindulgence, with candle-light glinting on red morocco, polished mahogany and silken furniture, and more glass and silver than it seemed justifiable to take on campaign. A “puffed up and very uncivil fellow”, Rawlings was cashiered two years later.

In *The British Commissary*, le Mesurier wrote that “Hay, Straw and Fuel, Waggons or Means of Transport are always to be found in a country if it is inhabited; but it requires judgment and dispatch to procure them and honourable treatment to prevent desertion”. That may have been true in northern Europe, but not in Spain, where some regions of Estremadura were neardeserts. Food and drink were bought locally wherever possible, but most essentials were distributed from magazines at Lisbon, Oporto and their satellite depots, where stores from as far as away as Turkey and America were delivered and stock-piled. Adequate supplies were usually available at the depots, but the difficulty of transporting them hundreds of kilometres to the front over unpaved roads that rarely went in the desired direction was a major cause of the Commissariat’s difficulties.

Staff who conducted the convoys from the magazines to the front were not always experienced managers and had little guidance in their duties. For example, Schaumann had to face this problem only a few days after his arrival, when he led a convoy of 100 loaded carts to Torres Vedras. On the journey he had to ensure that the drivers and the muleteers, who worked in fifteen-man *bregadas* each led by its elected *capataz*, covered a reasonable distance every day, did not desert, steal too much, murder each other, or fight with their escort of quarrelsome soldiers. His orders were frequently ignored by those British troops, who usually saw him as no more than a civilian in a cocked hat, without authority. They also thought, wrongly, that he never shared with them the risks of battle.

A convoy’s failure to arrive according to its schedule could leave forward brigades and even divisions unfed for days on end. Some units reached starvation-point after the Talavera campaign of 1809. Two years later, on the Alva, half the army pursuing Massena out-ran its supply column and was forced to halt for days while the convoys caught up. The reverse happened during the British retreat to Burgos. Loaded carts sent back towards Ciudad Rodrigo outstripped the fighting troops, who were left with haversack rations of 1 1/2 kilograms to see them through several supply-less days when it was accepted that each man needed a kilogram of food

each day, a quantity that had remained unchanged since Lord Dorset led an English army across the same landscape just three centuries earlier.

Schaumann's uninhibited memoirs not only tell us about his working life, but reveal a passionate, almost indecent interest in beautiful, dark-eyed señoritas —preferably innocent and about fifteen years of age. He seems never to have been happier than when in the arms of his Josepha, his Minchen, his Francisca, his Stephania or one of the many others whose names he never troubled to ask. But however much the amorous Hanoverian adored the ladies of Spain, he rarely met a Spanish man he liked. Obviously he had never heard one senior commissary's advice, "get your *mozos* (your lads) into good humour and they will be faithful to you." To him Portuguese and Spaniards alike were self-willed, suspicious, perverse and given to desertion, characteristics which some commissaries must have found utterly unbearable when compounded by the problems of conveying orders in foreign languages.

Schaumann's dislike of his allies was shared by Deputy Assistant Commissary General Thomas Joly, who was found guilty of four charges by a court-martial held on 16 November 1811. The least serious was of offensive and insulting conduct towards the inhabitants of the little medieval port of Peniche, "By roaring through the streets at a late hour of the night that all Portuguese were *burros* (donkeys) and sons of whores." Although the "forbearing and good-natured" townspeople had not pressed for his prosecution, and Wellington attributed much of Joly's conduct to thoughtlessness and levity, his offences cost him three months suspension from paid duty and a reprimand. (It seems to me that he may have suffered from a combination of frustration, overwork and too much Portuguese brandy. Today his lawyers would produce a psychiatrist as an expert witness to diagnose a case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Whatever opinion he held of his drivers' characters, Schaumann, who had been serving among the fair-haired Swedes only a few weeks earlier, found them "picturesque, with their tawny faces, their long black hair, their big old three-cornered hats, their naked brown and hairy legs." Their carts, with solid wooden wheels and rough plank bodies, appeared even stranger to him. They were so primitive that he thought the screeching of their ungreased axles had probably sounded over the Portuguese countryside unchanged for a thousand years.

Each was drawn by iron-shod bullocks harnessed to the axle by a wooden yoke and leather straps. They could pull a cart-load of 500 kilograms, that is enough food for 500 men for twenty-four hours, at the rate of 10 or 20 kilometres per day over roads that were impassable to what Schaumann rudely called "Fat General Hamilton's useless wagon corps", the army's own Royal Waggon Train. Its duties were largely limited to conveying casualties over the Peninsula's better roads.

Bullocks provided food as well as transport. Animals that could no longer haul a cart suffered the same fate as those that accompanied the

Royal Fusiliers as a source of fresh meat for every man on the march to the battle of Vitoria in 1813. What Wellington, an early master of the sound-bite, called "convenient animal food ... walking with you", were often slaughtered by their drivers who cut the spinal cord, just as the *puntillero* makes certain that a fighting bull is really dead after the torero's *estocada*.

As this is an Iberian story fighting bulls have their rightful place in it. A small herd of them was driven from Trujillo to the camp of the 14th and the 16th Light Dragoons by Spanish herdsman armed with lances and riding horses armoured like those of modern *picadores*. Until the hungry troops and their butchers attempted to catch them on the following day, they did not realise that the black charging beasts were very different in strength, speed, guile, and ferocity from the docile cows and oxen they were accustomed to slaughtering. The resultant confusion and chaos must have resembled the chaotic Running of the Bulls at Pamplona. But I digress.

Where transport by river barge was practical, as on stretches of the Tagus almost to the satellite depot at Abrantes, it helped tremendously, but rivers have a habit of not going in the desired direction. Wellington's Royal Engineers did succeed in dredging and blasting the bed of the Douro to allow boats to reach almost as far as Almeida, but neither river was of much use once the British march to Vitoria started. Henceforth stores brought by sea were unloaded at the northern ports of Pasajes and Santander.

The duties of a junior commissary were not only physically and emotionally arduous, but the procedures laid down by His Majesty's Treasury called also on deep reserves of mental stamina. The account books of officials entrusted with money or publicly-owned stores had to state exactly what they had been used for and be supported with vouchers showing the conversion of currencies and quantities from the local systems into their British equivalents. To ensure that their instructions were followed to the letter, every man was held responsible for anything he failed to account for unless he could prove that the loss was not his fault. In other words, he was guilty of peculation until he proved himself innocent. This gave commissaries the strongest personal interest in keeping clear and accurate records. It is not difficult to imagine the panic in the Commissary-General's office when two "foreigners", whose nationalities are not recorded, cracked open his strongbox and stole £2,000, or the relief when the thieves were caught and hanged; the usual punishment for men convicted of theft from a commissary's chest or an officer's tent.

The attention to detail required in those Dark Ages of accountancy, before the invention of carbon copying paper, never mind calculators and computers, meant that purely administrative tasks occupied many hours of a commissary's day. Some officials demanded more than twenty different daily, weekly, monthly and "occasional" returns from their subordinates, and no less than 36 useful examples of accounts, order forms, abstracts, returns,

orders, contracts, commissions, warrants, and equipment lists are given in le Mesurier's manual. Specimens of yet more standard forms were included in the printed instructions that Wellington's efficient and energetic Commissary-General Sir Robert Hugh Kennedy issued to his accountants. Thomas Marsden, Commissary Clerk in Charge at the important Albuquerque depot, found it so difficult to keep his records up-to-date that he was repeatedly pressed by an otherwise sympathetic superior. "Write to me often", begged Randolph Routh, adding that Marsden should get up at 4 am to prepare the reports which were as important to Routh as the stores themselves. When the inevitable reprimand arrived from the Commissary-General it took the form of a printed letter, which suggests that Marsden was not alone in his inability to complete his forms, the biggest of which was the Grand Abstract of stores he received and issued in June 1811. It measures 70 x 50 centimetres and has no less than 75 headed columns.

For the commissary, there was never any respite from paper-work. Not even on service with forward troops when he was continually searching shops, vineyards, farmhouses and villages on the line of march for any produce he could buy. Provided a price was agreed in an acceptable currency, farmers and merchants were usually prepared to sell, but when gold guineas, doubloons or dollars were short and only promissory notes were offered, the agent would be met with shouts of ¡*No se vende! No se vende!* He might not even find anything to requisition by force, for corn and cattle were often hidden deep in the woods, in remote valleys, or buried in pits and cisterns. To prevent profiteering from bargains struck between a dishonest official and a vendor who was happy to receive a share of extra dollars added fraudulently to a bill, the signatures of two local magistrates were required to certify the fairness of a price. But as temptation was in proportion to the huge gains to be made, many still cheated and some were caught and punished. In 1810, the corrupt practices of two senior commissaries took them from comfortable appointments to stinking cells in London's Newgate Gaol. Despite their example, graft remained rife but was never universal. After little more than a month's service at the Trujillo depot, Schaumann, who described himself improbably as being free of "the smallest suspicion of bribery, dishonesty or corruption", sent back to England £777; enough to pay 35 cavalry troopers for a year.

Once the commissaries had acquired the raw materials for soldiers' rations, they had to find cooks and bakers to prepare them. Late in 1808 "an enormous number of women" worked at every oven in Zamora on a baking marathon that filled a deserted monastery with biscuits made from good wheat flour. The effort was largely in vain as most of them fell into the hands of the advancing French. The fortunate few who tasted the Zamora batch must have found them infinitely more palatable than the weevil-infested ships' biscuits that Schaumann received, weighed and counted daily in bitter weather at Toro in December 1808.

They were hardly the food of the Gods, but were doubtless welcomed as better than nothing by the troops huddled together in the open without shelter while ice formed in the gutters.

A few months later, it was the turn of Talavera to bake bread and biscuits all through a midsummer night while French cavalry patrols probed the town defences. As they worked, Schaumann twice crossed the Tagus with a strong escort of dragoons in search of flour, bread or wine. The first raid was at 3 am, the other in blistering midday heat that quickly dried the ink on his pen. Like many other commissaries he already deserved the campaign medal that he would not live to collect.

In 1847, more than thirty years after the war ended, Queen Victoria at last sanctioned the award of the Military General Service Medal to every surviving officer and man who was present at certain battles of the Napoleonic Wars, including 21 fought in the Peninsula. Only eleven of the 25 men appointed in August 1811 to the ranks of Assistant or Deputy Assistant Commissaries General to the Forces were among the 85 officials of the Department who received the silver medal with engraved clasps on its ribbon naming each engagement at which he served. The highest number awarded to any man in the department was eleven to Gregory Haines, Assistant Commissary General in the Peninsular Army. His close friend and colleague, William Booth, who served the department for almost 50 years, could never accept that he had not earned clasps for the actions at La Coruña, Talavera and Busaco in addition to those he was granted for Salamanca, Vitoria, Pyrenees, Nivelles, Nive, Orthes and Toulouse. Of the other men we have met this afternoon, the handsome Cumming received the medal with seven clasps. Marsden's kindly chief, Routh had three on his ribbon.

Throughout this first great war of national liberation, Spain's *Guerra de Independencia*, the Commissariat's task was as thankless as it was exhausting, for the contribution it made to the Allied victory was never appreciated by the officers and men it fed and clothed. If the commissaries and their Portuguese and Spanish supporters had not been able to take food and drink from Lisbon "into a man's mouth on the frontier", Wellington could not have concentrated his relatively small fighting force against the larger but too frequently dispersed French army.

Their duties took some commissaries to a premature death from disease or on the point of a French sabre; others to disgrace and prison. The most fortunate enjoyed a comfortable retirement after years of war made bearable for Schaumann and his kind by more than their share of *Amor y Pesetas*.