Channelling an ancestor – Noah Key

One of objects of the British Historical Society of Portugal is the study of the shared history of Portugal and Great Britain and its diffusion, as well as the organization of visits. Since its inception in 1974, the Society has gained a reputation as a leading source of research and information on the Peninsular War, and it helped the author retrace the history of his ancestor during this war.

By John Clarke

Introduction

Anyone researching the life of a military ancestor should pray that their forefather was an officer. Dispatches in archives or weighty tomes are full of the exploits of officers: General so-and-so took this fort or Colonel what's-his-name conducted a spectacular charge, the implication being that they somehow did it single-handedly because the names of the soldiers with them are rarely mentioned. Captain this or Major that who died or was injured, invariably in heroic circumstances to enhance their legacy, but a dead private or sergeant is merely a nameless number in a column in a monthly return. My target ancestor falls into this latter category of the largely uncelebrated common soldier. My 4x Great Grandfather, Noah Key, was born in Worlingham, Suffolk, likely sometime in the late 1770s. I did not know he existed until a few years ago, when my niece in NZ started a family tree, finding a couple of much older distant relatives who had done much of the legwork in pre-internet times, in dusty archives, including Kew, London.

Noah Key

There is no physical image of Noah Key of course, nor a single surviving word in his hand in a letter or document, yet I have tried to put some flesh on the bones of the barest known information about him, reading exhaustively around him if not directly of him, to sort of

channel him and his family back into existence. A genealogist would be appalled at the liberties I mentally take in the absence of hard facts, a novelist might think me too self-limiting by trying not to stray too far from historical information and reasonable supposition, yet where there are massive gaps of personal information, I reassure myself that Noah can still be an exemplar of the common soldier in that circumstance.

Enlisting in the British Army and Ireland

Noah Key signed up for the 2 Battalion/44th Regiment of Foot (East Essex) in Carlow, Ireland in 1804, part of a huge expansion of the British military, as war with Napoleon was almost inevitable.

44th Regiment (East Essex)

Why a young Englishman from Suffolk should be in Ireland is not obvious, but a passing reference in his military papers to "the Cheshires" points to him previously serving in the Loyal Cheshire Fencibles, an English militia that helped crush the 1798 Irish rebellion. Noah stayed on after the Cheshires were disbanded, falling in love with an Irish Catholic teenager, Anne Cummins, who was from a hamlet close to Carlow town. They were married in a civil ceremony in neighbouring Kilkenny, in 1803, just before Noah joined the 2/44th. Noah was posted to Guernsey in the Channel Islands, leaving Anne and their first-born baby John in the town of Borris, Carlow, some 15 miles from Anne's parents. While this cannot be known for sure, a genealogist in Wexford and an historian in Kilkenny have both independently suggested that it was likely Anne was disowned by her Catholic parents as she had married a Protestant English soldier, something that would have been deeply frowned upon just a few years after the bloody rebellion.

Noah and the 2/44th stayed in Guernsey for more than five years, defending the island from a feared French attack that never happened. It would seem a quite comfortable posting, one in which Noah was promoted to sergeant, and was allowed to return to Ireland several times to see his wife and expand his family. In early 1810, orders came for the 2/44th to be sent to Spain, Noah returning to Ireland one more time before they departed.

The Peninsular War – Cadiz, Portugal and Ciudad Rodrigo

Noah and the 2/44th were involved in the defence of Cadiz, which was under French siege, from March to September 1810, before they were shipped to Lisbon to reinforce the Lines of Torres Vedras. They arrived as the Battle of Sobral was about to be fought, rushed into the 5th Division in a supporting role just behind the lines near the huge Fort Alqueidão at Sobral de Monte Agraço, but were not directly involved in the battle. The 5th Division was later sent to Alcoentre as part of the short-lived pursuit of the French in November - December 1810, before they gave up for the winter due to bad weather.

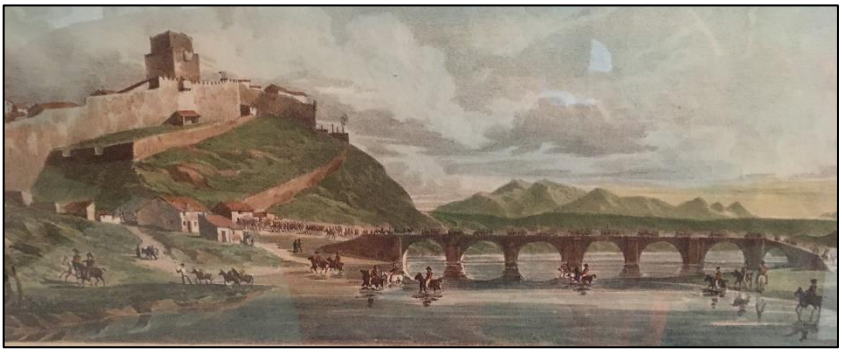
On Christmas Eve 1810, just a few weeks after arriving in Portugal, Noah was demoted to private. His exact transgression is unknown, but a tantalizing passage from one of Lord Wellington's later tirades gives a hint as to why Noah might have been busted from NCO to private:

> *"The Commander of the Forces has frequently had occasion to notice the misconduct of the soldiers in destroying the houses, and other buildings, in or near which they may be quartered, by burning, as fire-wood, the beams and other timbers of which they are built, to the great inconvenience of themselves, of the soldiers of other regiments, and of the service in general, and to the injury of the property of the inhabitants of the country. The Commander of the Forces is concerned to have to observe, that the Regiments in the Fifth Division have been frequently guilty of this practice. They burnt the town of Alcoentre in December, 1810; they destroyed the cantonments of the Third Division at Aldea de Ponte,*

when the Army were closed up in November, 1811; and they have lately burnt the timbers in the roof of the Convent of St. Francisco, to the great inconvenience of the service. … Experience has shown, that when the Non-commissioned Officers, and particularly the Officers of Regiments, do their duty, these crimes cannot be committed. It is impossible that a soldier, or any number of soldiers, can take down the large beams of the roof of a convent, or even of a house, and burn them, without the knowledge of the Non-commissioned Officers of companies, and even the Officers."

This matches so perfectly that it makes one want this to be the transgression that took my ancestor down a peg…a small crime given others much worse committed by British troops during the Peninsular War, but enough to make him human. Also proving him human, back in Borris, Anne gave him a second son, Thomas, on 30 November 1810, eight months after his departure for Spain, so nine months after his trip back to Ireland.

Noah and the 2/44th were part of Wellington's army chasing the French from Portugal through 1811, but he did not play a major role in battles such as Sabugal and Fuentes de Oñoro. As part of the 5th Division, he would have been at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo in early 1812, mentioned as forming an honour guard on the bridge into the city as drunk British looters staggered out with plunder, and also at the burial of Maj.-General 'Black Bob' Crauford in the breach of the walls.



British infantry entering Ciudad Rodrigo after the siege of January 1812

The Peninsular War – Badajoz, Salamanca and Madrid

Noah moves to centre stage a couple of months later, at the third siege of Badajoz in 1812. As the attack on the breaches fails with hundreds dying and not a man reaching the top, Noah is part of the force that escalades the San Vicente Bastion: one can easily imagine the chaos of climbing ladders in the dark, dragging comrades up and hoisting them towards the parapets more than 30 feet above the ground, as French soldiers fire down on them or drop rocks and flaming missiles. Fighting along the ramparts in hand-to-hand bayonet combat, Noah is one of those who chases the French from the top of the breaches, finally allowing the rest of the Anglo-Portuguese forces to enter. What followed of course was one of the worst atrocities in British military history – three days of looting, with civilians raped and murdered. We have no idea whether Noah Key was involved in the sacking of the city as Wellington charged no-one, and perhaps it is better not to know.

We next find Noah in July 1812 outside Salamanca, with Wellington uncertain about whether to fight or retreat. As 100,000 French and Anglo-Portuguese soldiers face one another, the decision is made. While volumes have been written about the battle, our interest is on one soldier lying in a wheat field at the back of the village of Arapiles, as French artillery fires upon him and his comrades from a low ridgeline a few hundred yards away, men dismembered by cannonballs bouncing through the grain. The order finally comes: Noah and thousands of other soldiers rise and march slowly through the wheat fields, bayonets glinting in the afternoon sun, to unleash an enormous collective volley as they mount the ridge to face the French.

As a witness to the battle, Thomas Maybank, wrote later:

> *"….the smoke was so thick that nothing to our left was distinguishable; some men of the 5th Division got intermingled with ours; the dry grass was set on fire by the numerous cartridge papers that strewed the field of battle; the air was scorching, and the smoke rolling on in huge volumes, nearly suffocated us. A loud cheering was heard in our rear – the brigade turned half*

round, supposing themselves about to be attacked by the French cavalry. A few seconds passed – the trampling of horse was heard – the smoke cleared away, and the heavy brigade of Le Marchant was seen coming forward in a line at a canter. 'Open right and left,' was an order quickly obeyed; the line opened, the cavalry passed through the intervals, and forming rapidly in our front prepared for their work. The French column, which a moment before held so imposing an attitude, became startled at this unexpected sight. A victorious and highly excited infantry pressed closely upon them; a splendid brigade of three regiments of cavalry, ready to burst through their ill-arranged and beaten column, while no appearance of succour was at hand to protect them, was enough to appall the boldest intrepidity. The plain was filled with the vast multitude; retreat was impossible, and the troopers came still pouring in, to join their comrades already prepared for the attack. It was too much for their nerves, and they sank under its influence, although they bravely made an effort to face the danger."

In the hand-to-hand fighting, soldiers of the 2/44th famously captured a French Eagle: there is no record that Noah Key was personally involved, but with the regiment down to just a few hundred men after Badajoz, he would no doubt have shared in the celebrations.

Battle of Salamanca – site of the attack by the 44th south of Los Arapiles

Noah accompanied Wellington into Madrid as thousands of cheering Spaniards welcomed them to the city. A few weeks later he was far to the north, supporting the miserable failure that was the siege of Burgos castle. After weeks of fruitless attacks and with a reinforced French army threatening, Wellington ordered a 330km retreat back to Ciudad Rodrigo.

The Peninsular War – the retreat to Portugal and death

Accounts of the retreat are horrific, with starving Anglo-Portuguese soldiers slogging through torrential rain and mud, picked off by the French, with hundreds dying of wounds, disease, even freezing to death. Private Noah Key, from Crozier's company of the 2/44th Regiment of Foot, is listed in the November 1812 returns as dying in a field hospital at Ciudad Rodrigo on the 24th November 1812, whether from wounds or disease it is not known, but after the French gave up the chase and Wellington's army was safe and heading back into Portugal. Noah would have been buried quickly in an unmarked grave somewhere near Ciudad Rodrigo, or perhaps at the nearby village of Castillejo de dos Casas, where the remnants of the 2/44th are known to have recovered after the retreat.

Subsequent generations and emigration to New Zealand

Back in Ireland, Noah's widow, Anne, was left impoverished with four young children: John (7), Sarah (5), Mary (3) and Thomas (2). Anne died during a typhus epidemic in 1817-1818, aged just 33. Both boys ended up in the Royal Military Asylum in Chelsea, London, an orphanage for children whose fathers had died in the Napoleonic Wars. Both boys eventually also joined the British army: John to serve in the Caribbean in the 19th Regiment, and Thomas joining the 57th Regiment in 1824, escorting at aged 14, Irish convicts to the penal colony of Sydney, New South Wales. After also serving in India, he returned to London, married, and in 1856, Thomas Key, my 3x great grandfather,

took his wife and seven children on a migrant ship to Wellington, NZ, starting a line of many hundreds of descendants, including me.

It is impossible to know what Thomas knew of the exploits of the father he never met, but in the summer of 2024 I was privileged to retrace some of the footsteps of Noah Key, including at Torres Vedras, Badajoz, Arapiles and Ciudad Rodrigo.

The Lines of Torres Vedras – Fort 41

Badajoz – San Vicente bastion

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Mark Crathorne from the British Historical Society of Portugal for helping me to reach back to breathe life into a largely forgotten forefather.

—— ooOOoo ——

John Clarke *lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA. In June 2024 he toured the Lines of Torres Vedras, the Battle of Salamanca and the Third Siege of Badajoz with his wife.*