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British Military Music in Battle during the Napoleonic Wars

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Received 4 August 2024 | Accepted 24 December 2024 |

Published online 3 February 2025

Abstract

This article investigates the presence and significance of British military music in action during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Based on a diverse body of sources, including contemporary military manuals, archival collections, and soldiers’ memoirs, it argues that regimental bands did not normally strike up in the heat of battle. Highland pipers, on the other hand, were celebrated for playing in combat. Bugles and trumpets were crucial for relaying tactical commands to dispersed skirmishers and cavalymen, but British drummers were less often heard under fire. The article also explores the non-musical duties of drummers and bandsmen in combat, including their contributions as stretcher-bearers. It ends by highlighting music’s importance in shaping how battles were remembered, drawing on evidence from regimental commemorations and Victorian military art.

Keywords

battle – music – tactics – bugle – drum – morale – communication – commemoration

Introduction

Conventional studies of battles and campaigns are often described as “drum and trumpet” narratives, yet military historians have traditionally paid little

attention to the role of music in war.¹ The performances of martial musicians, if mentioned at all, tend to be treated as fodder for scene-setting descriptions rather than worthwhile subjects of scrutiny in their own right.

Nonetheless, historians of war have become markedly more attuned to the auditory dimensions of armed conflict in recent years, uncovering insights into military motivation and tactics through the analysis of music and sound.² David Gates, for example, highlighted music's importance as a psychological weapon and medium of communication in a brief but perceptive section of his 2001 survey of 19th-century warfare. In a similar vein, Katrin and Sascha Möbius argued that musical instruments and hymns reinforced the religious convictions and culture of honour that underpinned Prussian fighting spirit during the Seven Years' War.³ The literary scholar Neil Ramsey, moreover, has stressed the value of examining battlefield noises of the Romantic era, contending that armies sought to inculcate obedience and prevent disorder in combat by closely regulating sound and silence.⁴

This article contributes to the study of wartime "soundscapes" by examining the presence and significance of British military music on the battlefield during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815). Its broad scope embraces not only the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns but also other contemporaneous conflicts involving British forces, including the Anglo-American War of 1812. The investigation encompasses the drummers, fifers, and buglers of infantry regiments, and the trumpeters of cavalry regiments, whose music regulated soldiers' daily routines and enhanced parade-ground pageantry. It also examines the activities of Highland pipers and regimental musicians (members of military bands). Bandsmen played wind instruments

1 Christopher Marsh, "The Pride of Noise: Drums and Their Repercussions in Early Modern England", *Early Music* 39 (2001): 207.

2 James A. Davis, "Musical Reconnaissance and Deception in the American Civil War", *Journal of Military History* 74 (2010): 79–105; Marian Füssel, "Zwischen Schlachtenlärm und Siegesklang. Zur akustischen Repräsentation von militärischer Gewalt im Siebenjährigen Krieg (1756–1763)", in *Krieg und Frieden im 18. Jahrhundert. Kulturgeschichtliche Studien*, ed. Stefanie Stockhorst (Hannover, 2015), 149–166; J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford, 2015); Gavin Williams, ed., *Hearing the Crimean War* (Oxford, 2019); Avital Hedva Rom, "Beat the Drums or Break Them: Bells and Drums as Communication Devices in Early Chinese Warfare", *Journal of Chinese Military History* 9 (2020): 125–167; Emma Hanna, *Sounds of War: Music in the British Armed Forces during the Great War* (Cambridge, 2020).

3 David Gates, *Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2001), 40–48; Katrin Möbius and Sascha Möbius, *Prussian Army Soldiers and the Seven Years' War* (London, 2020), 151–9, 171–2.

4 Neil Ramsey, "Listening to War: Sound and Noise in Romantic Era Military Writing", *Republics of Letters* 5 (2017): 1–12.

such as clarinets, horns, and bassoons alongside percussion instruments including bass drums, cymbals, and tambourines.⁵ The role of military bands in combat during this period has long been controversial. In 1965, the prolific musicologist Henry George Farmer argued that British band musicians frequently played in action to steel soldiers' resolve, a claim echoed by military historians including Richard Holmes.⁶ Although several scholars have questioned the accuracy of Farmer's assertions, they refrained from drawing firm conclusions owing to a dearth of available evidence.⁷ Other researchers have considered the British Army's reliance on musical instruments to convey orders in combat: Matthew Spring and Don Hagist assess that drums were only intermittently used to communicate battlefield commands during the American Revolutionary War.⁸

This study acknowledges the plurality of musical practices across the British military while also identifying general trends. It provides a comprehensive account of martial music in action by drawing on a diverse body of evidence, including contemporary military manuals, archival collections, and soldiers' letters. The Napoleonic Wars also produced an unprecedented crop of veterans' memoirs, written by both officers and enlisted men. Though shaped by editorial choices, hindsight, and narrative conventions, these retrospective accounts – when read critically and collectively alongside other sources – provide valuable insight into the actual experience of combat.⁹

The article begins by exploring the evidence for band performances in action. It argues that military musicians rarely struck up when British corps

5 This article mirrors contemporary British practice in reserving the term 'musician' for bandmen. For more on the numbers and duties of regimental instrumentalists, see Eamonn O'Keeffe, "Musical Warriors: British Military Music and Musicians during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars", D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2022.

6 Henry George Farmer, *British Bands in Battle* (London, [1965]), 11; Richard Holmes, *Redcoat: The British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket* (London, 2001), 124.

7 Lewis S. Winstock, *Songs & Music of the Redcoats* (London, 1970), 97–102; Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow, *Music & the British Military in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2013), 245.

8 Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775–1783* (Norman, OK, 2008), 157–160; Don N. Hagist, *Noble Volunteers: The British Soldiers who fought the American Revolution* (Yardley, PA, 2020), 209–12.

9 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (London, 1976); Rory Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven, CT, 1998); Leighton S. James, "The Soldiers' Experience of War", in *Cambridge History of the Napoleonic Wars*, eds. Alan Forrest and Peter Hicks (Cambridge, 2022), 3:9–29. For the post-war wave of memoirs, see Neil Ramsey, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780–1815* (Farnham, 2011); Matilda Greig, *Dead Men Telling Tales: Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir Industry, 1808–1914* (Oxford, 2021).

were closely engaged. Highland pipers, on the other hand, were celebrated for playing in combat. Bugles and trumpets were crucial for relaying tactical commands to dispersed skirmishers and cavalrymen, but as James Tanner has recently suggested, British drummers were less often heard under fire.¹⁰ The article also investigates the non-musical duties of drummers and bandsmen in combat, including their service as stretcher-bearers.¹¹ It concludes by analysing the role of music in shaping how battles were remembered.

The Silence of the Bands

Though audible in camp and on the march, British regimental bands did not regularly play in the heat of battle. H.G. Farmer's work on music in combat cites few sources and appears to be largely unreliable, incorporating untraceable hearsay and anecdotes shorn of proper context.¹² For example, Farmer reported that the Duke of York ordered his regimental band to play for a nervous female guest to mask the sound of gunfire during the siege of Dunkirk in 1793. Yet this was not truly an example of a band striking up in combat, as the performance occurred in the duke's tent at headquarters, so far removed from the actual fighting that Lady Webster initially mistook the "pattering" noise of distant musketry for rainfall.¹³ Lord Cathcart's supposed quip to the commanding officer of the 28th Foot during an engagement in the Low Countries in the 1790s – "Where is your band, sir? Now is the time for it to play!" – has also been cited as proof of the prevalence of band performances under fire. However, the anecdote was first reported second-hand in a memoir published in 1859 and may have been intended as bravado; there is no indication that the comment actually resulted in regimental musicians striking up a tune.¹⁴ Several officers and military commentators did advocate for the use of music on the

10 James Tanner, *Instruments of Battle: The Fighting Drummers and Buglers of the British Army from the Late 17th Century to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2017), 115, 122–9.

11 See also Eamonn O'Keeffe, "Fops under Fire: British Drum-Majors in Action during the Napoleonic Wars", *Napoleon Series* (30 June 2016), <https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/organization/Britain/Infantry/DrumMajors/FopsunderFire.pdf> (3 August 2024).

12 Farmer, *British Bands*, 11–16; Henry George Farmer, *The Rise and Development of Military Music* (London, [1912]), 88–9.

13 Lady Holland, *Journal of Elizabeth Lady Holland (1791–1811)*, ed. the Earl of Ilchester (London, 1908), 1:94–5.

14 Henry Murray, *Memoir and Correspondence of the late Captain Arthur Stormont Murray* (London, 1859), 51; Philip Haythornthwaite, "And the Band Played On", *Military Illustrated* 158 (July 2001): 14.

battlefield to enhance soldiers' combat motivation, sometimes with reference to French theorists and precedents.¹⁵ Colonel David Dundas proposed that bandsmen and drummers could be employed "at the moment of the charge" for "inspiring and directing the attack" in his *Principles of Military Movements* (1788). However, the suggestion was omitted from Dundas's revised text when it became an official army drill manual in 1792.¹⁶

Practical considerations inhibited band performances on the battlefield. The acoustic onslaught of gunpowder weaponry was considerable and sometimes overwhelming: an ensign describing the Battle of Nivelles in 1813 reported that "nothing was to be heard all the day long ... but the roaring of cannon and musketry, enough to terrify a man ... out of his senses".¹⁷ Whether the music of a band could be adequately appreciated in such conditions is open to question, and in any case their playing risked adding to the confusion by obscuring spoken orders and signals. Moreover, the requisite instruments were not always available on campaign. The headlong retreat of Sir John Moore's army through Spain entailed the destruction and capture of so much equipment that one naval observer wondered "if there could have been found a clarinet or a bassoon in the whole line" by the time it faced the French at Corunna in January 1809.¹⁸ Over the course of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, only two instances of British military bands playing in action can be corroborated by first-hand accounts and press reports.¹⁹ In May 1793,

15 Arthur Browne, *Some Few Brief Principles of Tactics, extracted from Guibert ... for the use of the College Corps* (Dublin, 1797), 25; Robert Jackson, *Systematic View of the Formation, Discipline, and Economy of Armies* (London, 1804), 224–226, 270.

16 David Dundas, *Principles of Military Movements* (London, 1788), 28–9; [David Dundas], *Rules and Regulations for the Formations, Field Exercise, and Movements, of His Majesty's Forces* (London, 1793), part III, 17–18.

17 Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 141; Ensign Patrick Bain to his brother, 21 November 1813, auctioned by Dominic Winter Auctioneers, 24 November 2022. <https://www.dominicwinter.co.uk/Auction/Lot/lot-280---battle-of-nivelles-a-good-autograph-letter-signed-1813/?lot=385544> (29 June 2024).

18 Basil Hall, *Fragments of Voyages and Travels* (Edinburgh, 1831), 2:359. See also Charles Stevens, *Reminiscences of My Military Life* (Winchester, 1878), 73; [Henry Ross-Lewin], *The Life of a Soldier* (London, 1834), 2:27.

19 Another eyewitness account which might be interpreted as proof of musicians performing in battle appears to be a red herring. In a 23 June 1815 letter about the Battle of Waterloo, Lt-Colonel Sir Andrew Barnard wrote that the band of the 1st Battalion, 95th Rifles "has as usual been playing the devil during the row, the new big drum is lost and a bassoon". However, "playing the devil" was a contemporary idiom referring to mischief-making or mismanagement; its use does not prove that regimental musicians struck up under fire. See [Francis Grose], *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1785), "play" entry, and Gareth Glover, ed., *The Waterloo Archive* (Barnsley, 2010–14), 6:195.

the 14th Foot stormed a fortified camp at Famars as their musicians performed an ironic rendition of the revolutionary anthem “Ça Ira”; the feat prompted the Duke of York, who commanded British forces in Flanders, to designate the melody as the regiment’s quick march.²⁰ Eighteen years later during the siege of Tarifa, Lieutenant-Colonel Hugh Gough sought to encourage the 2nd Battalion, 87th Foot by ordering the bandsmen to play the Irish tune of “Garryowen” just before their comrades opened fire on an advancing French column.²¹

Nonetheless, other accounts make clear that band performances in the thick of battle were exceptional rather than routine. A lieutenant stationed in Malta in 1805 reported that Lieutenant-General Sir James Craig had ordered the composition of “a piece of martial music” entitled the “British Charge” for expected confrontations with French forces in Italy, but characterised the move as highly unusual. Craig was described as “the first of modern English generals to cause music to be played during a charge”, and in the event the abortive British expedition to Naples gave him no opportunity to implement this sonic experiment.²² Another officer recalled a request from Spanish nuns to hear the music performed by the regimental band “when they went into battle”. “It would have been idle to persuade them that people had other things to think of” in combat, explained Fletcher Wilkie of the 38th Foot, so the regiment humoured the sisters by instructing their drummers to play a deafening rendition of the reveille, the beating used to wake soldiers in the morning, in the convent.²³ William Leeke, who served as an ensign in the 52nd Light Infantry at Waterloo, was even more categorical. “The story one used to hear in one’s boyhood, of the bands of regiments playing during the raging of a battle to drown the cries of the wounded, is a myth.” Instead, the “men of the band and some of the buglers generally make themselves useful in action, in attending to the wounded.”²⁴

If bands did not ordinarily play in combat, their music was still sometimes heard on and around the battlefield. Although army regulations officially forbade drummers and musicians from playing constantly to set a marching cadence, some regiments continued to rely on bass drums and other band percussion instruments to mark time on the move.²⁵ Moreover, commanders

20 National Army Museum (NAM), 1976-07-45, diary of Lieutenant Thomas Powell, 14th Foot, 23 May 1793; *Freeman’s Journal*, 15 August 1793.

21 *Anecdotes of British and Spanish Heroism at Tarifa* (London, 1812), 68–9.

22 Lees Knowles, *The British in Capri, 1806–1808* (London, 1918), 83–4.

23 W.H. Maxwell, ed., *Peninsular Sketches* (London, 1844), 2:257–8.

24 William Leeke, *History of Lord Seaton’s Regiment* (London, 1866), 1:33.

25 For proscriptions on music regulating the marching cadence, see [David Dundas], *Rules and Regulations for the Formations, Field Exercise, and Movements, of His Majesty’s Forces* (Dublin, 1815), 78, 226, 384–5; [Ronald Hamilton], *Sketch of the Present State of the Army*

frequently ordered their bandsmen to play to encourage and assuage soldiers en route to an expected engagement or storming. Occasionally these performances continued as regiments manoeuvred within range of enemy artillery.²⁶ Sir William Verner of the 7th Hussars, for example, watched the British infantry advance in line with “colours flying in the centre and the bands playing” at Orthez in 1814, only for the musicians to be ordered to the rear when French cannon began inflicting casualties.²⁷ Bands were also sometimes audible in the aftermath of battle or during lulls in the actual fighting. Musicians of the King’s German Legion took part in a sonic skirmish with their French counterparts during a day-long truce at Fuentes de Oñoro in 1811, answering enemy bands “note for note” across the field.²⁸ Following the same battle, a British brigade moved off their positions to the tune of “The British Grenadiers”, “which was a little like dunghill cock-crowing”, according to one officer present, “but the men like it”.²⁹ A handful of spontaneous solos under fire can also be documented, including singing and drumming by officers intent on rallying their men.³⁰ Soldiers of the 39th Foot were treated to “several lively airs” on a midshipman’s flute as they manned a gunboat during the Battle of Lake Champlain in 1814, while John Scott of the 42nd Highlanders, who had been left to his own devices as a ten-year-old band-boy at Waterloo, claimed to have played his triangle and excitedly shouted “Scotland forever!” amid the smoke and musketry.³¹

(London, 1796), 45; J.A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army, 1715–1795* (Oxford, 1981), 260–61, 277–9. For evidence that band percussion instruments continued to help set the pace, see Abraham Rees, ed. *The Cyclopædia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (London, 1819), 12: “bass drum” entry, under “drum”; John Cooke, *Memoirs of the Late War* (London, 1831), 1:25, 275; National Library of Wales, Chirk Castle Estate Records, F12999, W. Totty to Col. Myddelton, 31 March 1795. I owe the last reference to Mike Lomas.

26 Cooke, *Memoirs*, 1:118; David Robertson, *Journal of Sergeant D. Robertson, Late 92nd Foot* (Perth, 1842; reprinted 1982), 102; William Napier, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier*, 2nd edn (London, 1857), 1:216; William Grattan, *Adventures of the Connaught Rangers* (London, 1847), 1:192–3, 270; John Edgecombe Daniel, *Journal of an Officer in the Commissariat Department of the Army* (London, 1820), 125.

27 William Verner, *Reminiscences of William Verner*, ed. Ruth W. Verner (London, 1965), 30.

28 [John Stepney Cowell], *Leaves from the Diary of an Officer of the Guards* (London, 1854), 84.

29 Napier, *Life and Opinions*, 1:172; National Library of Scotland, MS.15369, letters of William Marshall and family, fol. 140, George Marshall to Jane Marshall, 21 May 1811.

30 *Monthly Mirror* (April 1803), 283; Robert Blakeney, *A Boy in the Peninsular War*, ed. Julian Sturgis (London, 1899), 188; [James Hope], *Military Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (Edinburgh, 1833), 426.

31 John Morris Jones, “The Old Halberdier: From the Pyrenees to Plattsburgh with a Welshman of the 39th”, ed. Eamonn O’Keeffe, *Journal of the Society for Army History Research (JSAHR)* 95 (2017): 218–19; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 June 1889.

In contrast to band musicians, pipers were expected to play alongside Highland soldiers in action; they marched at the head of their regiments while advancing and struck up to rally scattered comrades.³² Although the psychological impact of these sonic standard-bearers is difficult to quantify, myriad first-hand accounts suggest that piping reinforced battlefield morale and cohesion. Lieutenant-General Sir William Stewart was even obliged to silence the 92nd Foot's pipe-major during fighting in the Pyrenees, according to one officer of the regiment, to prevent the galvanised Highlanders from charging precipitately, so “powerful” was the “effect of our national music on the minds of the soldiers”.³³ Even non-Scottish combatants seem to have been genuinely heartened by the skirl of the pipes. An Irishman serving with the 72nd Highlanders, for example, witnessed its pipers playing during an engagement near Cape Town in 1806 and informed a cousin in County Tipperary that he could not “recollect a more glorious sight”.³⁴ The courage of George Clark, a piper of the 71st Highlanders who continued playing for his comrades at the Battle of Vimeiro after being shot in the groin, was widely acclaimed in officers' letters and diaries.³⁵ Indeed, the piper became one of the most vaunted common soldiers or sailors of the French Wars. The Highland Societies of Scotland and London honoured Clark with trophy pipes and medals while artists portrayed him in paintings and engravings (Figure 1). Newspapers even kept readers abreast of the soldier-celebrity's later deployments and combat performances.³⁶ The publicity around Clark helped set a trend for eulogising battlefield piping: Piper Munro of the 78th Highlanders, who struck up “Hey Johnnie Cope” and “Highland Laddie” while lying wounded at the First Battle of Merxem in 1814, was hailed as “another Vimiera [sic] piper” in official

32 *Peninsular Sketches*, 2:142–3; Robertson, *Journal*, 78, 122; John S. Keltie, ed., *History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments* (Edinburgh, 1875), 2:586; David Stewart, *Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1822), 2:239.

33 [James Hope], *Letters from Portugal, Spain, and France* (Edinburgh, 1819), 179–80.

34 Thomas Lucas to Joshua Fennell, 17 March 1806, scan available on The Battle of Blauwberg website, https://battle.blauwberg.net/thomas_lucas_letter.php (10 November 2022).

35 The National Archives, London (TNA), WO97/831/53, Sergeant George Clark discharge, 1815; Archibald Geikie, *Life of Sir Roderick I. Murchison* (London, 1875), 1:34; University of St Andrews Special Collections, Anstruther of Balcaskie papers, msdep121/8/2/3/4/4, field diary of General Robert Anstruther (1808), 35–36. I owe the latter reference to Rob Griffith.

36 *Caledonian Mercury*, 29 June 1809 and 31 July 1815; *Morning Herald*, 19 September 1810; *Hereford Journal*, 11 December 1811; Patrick Watt, “The Highland Society of London, Material Culture and the Development of Scottish Military Identity, 1798–1817”, *Historical Research* 94 (2021): 351–79.



FIGURE 1 “Piper Clarke, 71st Regiment playing the bagpipes at the Battle of Vimeiro, 1808”, from John Augustus Atkinson, *Incidents of British Bravery during the Late Campaigns on the Continent* (London, [1817]).

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dispatches.³⁷ The wide circulation of such reports buttressed a romanticised image of Scottish Highlanders as an ancient martial race spurred to impetuous valour by their national music.³⁸ By 1813 the Caithness magnate Sir John Sinclair felt able to boast that “there is no sound which the immortal Wellington hears with *more delight*, or the marshals of France with *more dismay*” than the notes of a Highland pibroch.³⁹

Trumpets, Bugles, and Drums

Music fulfilled several practical roles on the battlefield. In the first place, it facilitated surrender negotiations and dialogue between opposing forces.

37 TNA, War Office in-letters, WO1/199, Sir Thomas Graham to Lord Bathurst, 15 January 1814; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 7 March 1814; James Hamilton Stanhope, *Eyewitness to the Peninsular War and the Battle of Waterloo*, ed. Gareth Glover (Barnsley, 2010), 133.

38 Jackson, *Systematic View*, 110–19; *Edinburgh Magazine* (November 1817), 399–400; Donald Macdonald, *Collection of the Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia* (Edinburgh, 1822[?]), 4–5. See also Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester, 2004).

39 *Caledonian Mercury*, 31 July 1813.

Trumpeters, buglers, and drummers regularly announced the approach of officers delivering messages under flags of truce.⁴⁰ Moreover, military instrumentalists were employed in ruses. In 1813, for example, drummers were left behind to “beat the reveille at the usual places” to disguise British movements during the Battle of the Nive in southern France, while outnumbered Anglo-Canadian defenders at the Battle of Chateauguay sent buglers to scatter and sound “in all directions” before the approaching Americans, thereby creating the impression of a larger force.⁴¹

Musical instruments also transmitted commands in combat, supplementing and sometimes superseding vocal directions for light infantry and mounted forces.⁴² Cavalry officers were meant to recognise signals played by the chief commander’s trumpeter and verbalise them for their men, with trumpeters of all squadrons repeating the “charge” and “rally”.⁴³ The recollections of Private Thomas Playford, who served in the 2nd Life Guards at Waterloo, illustrate how trumpet blasts complemented officers’ words and gestures to regulate the pace of the advance, preserving order while gathering momentum as troopers progressed from the walk to the trot and ultimately the charge.⁴⁴ Buglers also shadowed light infantry officers in action, allowing commanders to control skirmishers deployed in extended order or direct remote detachments while surveying the fighting from high ground. According to a sergeant of the 95th Rifles, the bugle was the best means of “conveying orders and intelligence from distance to distance” with “precision and dispatch”.⁴⁵ Distinctive musical phrases instructed men to extend their front, retreat, or advance obliquely, among other actions, and reported sightings of enemy infantry and

40 John Vandeleur, *With Wellington's Outposts: The Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur*, ed. Andrew Bamford (London, 2015), 191; *Royal Military Panorama* (November 1813), 136; T.H. Browne, *The Napoleonic War Journal of Captain Thomas Henry Browne, 1807–1816*, ed. Roger Norman Buckley (London, 1987), 242.

41 James Anton, *Retrospect of a Military Life* (Edinburgh, 1841), 88; Eamonn O’Keeffe, “The Anatomy of a Drum Corps: Drummers and Musicians in the Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry, 1803–1816”, *JSAHR* 98 (2020): 46–7. See also *An Accurate and Impartial Narrative of the War, by an Officer of the Guards*, 3rd edition (London, 1796), 38 and [George Robert Gleig], *A Subaltern in America* (Philadelphia, PA, 1833), 174.

42 Charles James, *A New and Enlarged Military Dictionary*, 2nd edn (London, 1805), “soundings” entry; John Green, *The Vicissitudes of a Soldier's Life* (Louth, 1827), 22.

43 *Instructions and Regulations for the Formations and Movements of the Cavalry* (London, 1799), 368–74.

44 Glover, ed., *Waterloo Archive*, 4:38–40. See also *Rules and Regulations for the Cavalry* (London, 1795), 342–3.

45 William Weddeburne, *Observations on the Exercise of Riflemen* (Norwich, 1804), 35–6. According to another light infantry manual, a good bugle “may be heard at the distance of three miles”. See Thomas Henry Cooper, *Practical Guide for the Light Infantry Officer* (London, 1806), 98.

cavalry (Figure 2). Signals could be combined – “march” and “fire” sounded consecutively, for instance, instructed soldiers to fire while advancing – or annulled by playing the “halt”. The commanding officer’s bugler issued general directives, which were echoed by other buglers, and could preface commands with “distinguishing sounds” referring to specific companies and regiments or the right, left, and centre of the line.⁴⁶ Though intended as a means of communicating orders, musical signals also had a psychological effect: memoirists recalled the exhilaration prompted by buglers sounding the advance or the mortification of hearing an unexpected instruction to retreat.⁴⁷

Light infantry officers, sergeants, and even, in some cases, the rank and file were expected to familiarise themselves with bugle signals.⁴⁸ Mastering the



FIGURE 2 Bugle sounds from Neil Campbell's *Instructions for Light Infantry and Riflemen*, 2nd edn (1813). (NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND)

46 Neil Campbell, *Instructions for Light Infantry and Riflemen*, 2nd edn (London, 1813), 89–99; John Cross, *A System of Drill and Manoeuvres, as practised in the 52nd Light Infantry Regiment* (London, 1823). See also William Green, *Where Duty Calls Me: Napoleonic War Experiences of Rifleman William Green*, ed. John and Dorothea Teague (Sittingbourne, 2007), 86–7.

47 Charles Crowe, *An Eloquent Soldier: The Peninsular War Journals of Lieutenant Charles Crowe*, ed. Gareth Glover (Barnsley, 2011), 100; Thomas Austin, “Old Stick-Leg”: *Extracts from the Diaries of Major Thomas Austin*, ed. H.H. Austin (New York, NY, 1927), 128; F.A. Hayden, *Historical Record of the 76th “Hindoostan” Regiment* (Lichfield, 1909), 105.

48 John Moore, “Sir John Moore’s Light Infantry Instructions of 1798–1799”, ed. J.F.C. Fuller, *JSAHR* 30 (1952): 72. NCOs of the 2nd West India Regiment, which was instructed in light infantry tactics from 1803, were ordered to meet the bugle-major regularly during their “leisure hours” to memorise the bugle sounds. See NAM, 2007-12-1, 2nd West India Regiment order book, 1802–4, 14 January, 7 and 21 June, 18 July 1803 and 12 June 1804.

system was by no means easy: the 2nd Battalion of the 56th Foot allowed officers in the light and rifle companies up to six months to become “thoroughly acquainted” with its bugle calls, while a second lieutenant of the 95th Rifles, which employed a daunting sixty field sounds in 1804, was advised that learning the flute would expedite this “very difficult business”.⁴⁹ Song also served as a memory aid; a light infantryman in a London volunteer corps published lyrics (“We now advance”, and so on) to help comrades recall a dozen sounds.⁵⁰ Although it would be unrealistic to presume that drill-book prescriptions translated neatly into battlefield reality, first-hand accounts clearly demonstrate the light infantry’s reliance on bugle signals in action. The light company of the 1st Battalion, 9th Foot, for example, performed “all its motions by the sound of the bugle” when skirmishing ahead of the regiment, according to one of their number.⁵¹ Bugle signals appear to have been audible in all but the most intense of firefights and, as a French veteran of the Peninsular War remembered, were sufficient to unsettle raw troops from across the battlefield.⁵² By contrast, the whistle signals mentioned alongside bugle sounds in official manuals appear to have been less practical; one officer scorned them as “very fine for a field day” but “a great nonsense” in action, not least because a whistle would be “impossible to hear!”⁵³

If trumpet and bugle calls were vital for marshalling cavalry and light infantry over long distances in the fluid, fast-changing circumstances of combat, experienced officers recognised that their complexity could cause confusion.⁵⁴ The risk of misunderstandings prompted military manuals to

49 *Standing Orders, and Manoeuvres for the 2d Battalion of His Majesty's 56th Regiment* (Bombay, 1812), 54; George Miller, *The Making of a Rifles Officer: The Life and Letters of Colonel George Miller*, ed. Elizabeth Laidlaw (Edinburgh, 2019), 74; *Norfolk Chronicle*, 15 September 1804.

50 W. Wakefield, *The Call of the Bugle Horn as ordered by Lord Harrington* (London, c.1805).

51 James Hale, *Journal of James Hale* (Cirencester, 1826), 40. See also George Bell, *Rough Notes by an Old Soldier* (London, 1867), 104 and NAM, 1968-07-209-1, Edward Nevil Macready journal, chapter 12. Ensign Macready of the 2/30th Foot recalled being obliged to shout and make signals to direct the light company at Waterloo after a bugler was killed, underlining his ordinary dependence on musical commands.

52 Green, *Where Duty Calls Me*, 65; R.G.A. Levinge, *Historical Records of the Forty-Third Regiment* (London, 1868), 136–7; Marie Jean Baptiste Lemonnier-Delafosse, *Campagnes de 1810 à 1815 ou Souvenirs Militaires* (Le Havre, 1850), 67.

53 Crosby Anne Stevens, “The Rifle Brigade, 1800 to c.1870: A Study of Social, Cultural and Religious Attitudes”, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1995, 66. For contemporary whistle signals, albeit not from the regular army, see Captain Barber, *Instructions for the Formation and Exercise of Volunteer Sharpshooters* (London, 1804), plate 2.

54 Campbell, *Instructions*, 89–99; Cross, *System*, 125–6. Concern over the intelligibility of musical commands predated the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Although Brigadier-General Richard Kane claimed that drums were “much easier heard and

declare a preference for vocal commands, particularly when in close order or when issuing sub-unit instructions to cavalymen. A directive issued during the Waterloo campaign, for example, warned that a trumpet sound intended for only part of a mounted force “might set in motion the whole line”.⁵⁵ Mishaps nonetheless occurred: during an ambush in the Michigan Territory in 1812, the grenadiers of the 41st Foot snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by misinterpreting the bugle sound for charge as an order to retreat.⁵⁶ Furthermore, inexperienced and excitable men sometimes ignored signals to halt or rally after a successful charge, thereby incurring unnecessary casualties and exposing themselves to counterattacks. Lord Uxbridge attempted to reform the heavy cavalry at Waterloo by sounding the rally but explained that “neither voice nor trumpet availed”, resulting in appalling losses to French lancers.⁵⁷

Military manuals and regimental orders emphasised the need for musical commands to be uniform and distinct, exhorting trumpeters “to be exact in all their soundings” and “never vary a note on any account”.⁵⁸ The publication of officially approved signals for cavalry and light infantry in 1798 helped standardise trumpet and bugle calls across the military, although some regiments proved reluctant to abandon their traditional, idiosyncratic sounds.⁵⁹ Moreover, commanders were often tempted to modify and expand

understood” by well-trained soldiers than vocal orders, other eighteenth-century officers, including James Wolfe, believed that the noise of battle made spoken commands more practical. See Richard Kane, *Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne, from 1689 to 1712. Also, A New System of Military Discipline for a Battalion of Foot* (London, 1745), 115–116; James Wolfe, *General Wolfe’s Instructions to Young Officers* (London, [1768]), 35; Bennett Cuthbertson, *Cuthbertson’s System, for the Complete Interior Management and Economy of a Battalion of Infantry*, new edn (Bristol, 1776), 169.

55 David J. Blackmore, *So Bloody a Day: The 16th Light Dragoons in the Waterloo Campaign* (Warwick, 2019), 54; Cooper, *Practical Guide*, 97; Campbell, *Instructions*, 90.

56 T. Boucher de Boucherville, “Journal de M. Thomas Verchères de Boucherville”, *The Canadian Antiquarian and Numismatic Journal* 3 (1901): 85–6. See also *Dublin Evening Post*, 24 August 1809; *United Service Magazine* (December 1851), 490–92. A last-minute attempt to introduce new bugle sounds for the 1813 attack on Sacket’s Harbor, perhaps motivated by concern that the defending Americans were familiar with the existing signals, only added to the confusion in British ranks during the amphibious operation. See Jacques Viger, *La Guerre de 1812: Journal de Jacques Viger*, ed. Bernard Andrès and Patricia Willemin-Andrès (Laval, QC, 2012), 105, 130.

57 Muir, *Tactics*, 116–18, 163; [S. Rogers], *Historical Record of the Eighty-First Regiment* (Gibraltar, 1872), 106; William Wheeler, *Letters of Private Wheeler, 1809–1828*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (London, 1951), 122–23.

58 *Standing Orders of the Seventeenth Regiment of Light Dragoons* (Clonmel, 1804), 23.

59 *Sounds for Duty and Exercise for the Trumpet and Bugle Horns of His Majesty’s Regiments and Corps of Cavalry* (London, [1798]); [Francis de Rottenburg], *Regulations for the Exercise of Riflemen and Light Infantry* (London, 1798), plates 7–8; Campbell, *Instructions*, 99. De Rottenburg’s signals were used by light infantry regiments and companies “most generally”

on the prescribed set to account for a wider range of tactical situations: T.H. Cooper's *Practical Guide for the Light Infantry Officer* (1806) insisted that bugle sounds be "few and simple" yet included no fewer than thirty-seven for use in the field, including signals for forming square and lying down.⁶⁰

Compared to the trumpet and bugle, the drum appears to have played a more sporadic role in combat, beyond calling soldiers to arms as battle loomed.⁶¹ While earlier manuals prescribed drum signals for every movement from "right about face" to "shoulder arms", this unwieldy approach had been discarded by the French Revolutionary War in favour of spoken commands.⁶² Nonetheless, regulations of 1804 empowered commanders to control basic manoeuvring through a selection of beatings, performed by a single drummer standing behind the colours of the nearest battalion. The drummer could designate the directing battalion (which regulated the movements of the entire line) by beating a march or roll, instruct men to assemble or move off, and convey the intended cadence with "five or six strong taps".⁶³ While drum beats, like bugle calls, were discouraged during covert manoeuvres close to the enemy to preserve the element of surprise, their audibility could help coordinate attacking forces as they carried out multi-pronged operations. Brigadier-General John Moore, for example, informed another British contingent that he had overrun a French position on St. Lucia in 1796 by ordering a drummer to beat a march.⁶⁴

Military treatises and standing orders also mention drum signals to commence and cease firing, which were certainly employed by regiments during exercises.⁶⁵ Drummers of the 48th Foot are known to have performed

by 1803, according to Major-General John Moore. See British Library (BL), Supplementary Moore Papers, Add. ms. 57548, Moore to Calvert, 4 September 1803, fol. 72v.

60 Cooper, *Practical Guide*, 97 and plate 3, "Field Sounds". See also NAM, 1968-07-176, Letters and returns of the 6th and 85th Regiments of Foot, fols. 89-92, Rifle Exercise for the 85th Foot, 1 October 1803; Campbell, *Instructions*, 99 and plates 12-13.

61 Hall, *Fragments*, 2:360; Geikie, *Life of Sir Roderick I. Murchison*, 1:31; John Haddy James, *Surgeon James's Journal*, ed. Jane Vansittart (London, 1964), 31.

62 Thomas Simes, *The Regulator: or Instructions to Form the Officer, and Complete the Soldier* (London, 1780), 48-49; *General Regulations and Orders for His Majesty's Forces* (London, 1786), 60. Thomas Reide, *Treatise on the Duty of Infantry Officers* (London, 1795), 140, notes that "[a]ll signals by beat of drum are now abolished" in a discussion of the manual and platoon exercises.

63 *Rules and Regulations* (1815), 285, 386.

64 John Moore, *Diary of Sir John Moore*, ed. Sir J.F. Maurice (London, 1904), 1:204. See also *Rules and Regulations* (1815), 286; *Peninsular Sketches*, 2:13; Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Record Group 8, "C" Series, vol. 682, 236-39, Captain James Basden to Captain Stewart, 13 March 1814.

65 Samuel Potter, *The Art of Beating the Drum, with the Camp, Garrison & Street Duty by Note* (London, [1817]), 24; Reide, *Treatise*, 153, 172; *Standing Orders ... for the 2d Battalion ... 56th Regiment*, 180-85; NAM, 1993-03-218, standing orders for the island of Minorca (1800), 16.

the “cease fire” beating in advance of a charge at Albuera in 1811, but in general there is remarkably little evidence to suggest that drums controlled infantry firepower in combat.⁶⁶ Line regiments appear to have relied primarily on vocal commands; some even resorted to bugles on the battlefield, a trend which mirrored growing interest in light infantry tactics in units not formally designated as such.⁶⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel Rowland Hill of the 90th Foot, for example, used a bugle to order his men to halt and cease fire while they were formed in line at the Battle of Mandora in Egypt in 1801.⁶⁸ Nine years later, Lord Blayney dispensed with the drum for the Fuengirola expedition and taught four bugle sounds – advance, commence firing, form line, and retreat – to his multilingual force.⁶⁹

On the other hand, eyewitness reports suggest that British drummers performed “The Grenadiers’ March”, the customary signal to advance, or “The Point of War”, the beating for a bayonet charge, in several engagements between 1795 and 1814.⁷⁰ Roderick Innes, a drummer in the 78th Foot, recalled being “placed at the head of [his company] to beat the drum” during an attack on Dutch positions at the Cape of Good Hope; “The Grenadiers’ March” was also performed to encourage the wavering 33rd Foot near Seringapatam in India in

66 Guy Dempsey, *Albuera Eyewitness: Contemporary Accounts of the Battle of Albuera* (Barnsley, 2023), 39, 64. Lieutenant William Wood’s letter was first published by Timothy Cooke in *The Castle: The Journal of the Royal Anglian Regiment* 11 (3) (2000): 59–60. See also Norfolk Record Office, Meade of Earsham Papers, MEA11/61, 663X3, undated regimental order [1803?].

67 The bugle’s superior portability and durability, not to mention its ability to play distinctive melodies rather than unpitched rhythms, may have also made it more practical for signalling. For the battlefield use of bugles by line regiments, see e.g. William Windsor, “Letters of a Soldier from the Peninsula and Waterloo”, ed. George Sweetman, *Cornhill Magazine* (June 1899), 745; *Regimental Standing Orders, Royal Fusiliers* (London, 1812), 69; G.C. Swiney, *Historical Records of the 32nd (Cornwall) Light Infantry* (London, 1893), 116. For evidence of entire line infantry regiments practising light infantry drills, see TNA, Home Office Papers, H040/12, fol. 320, Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald Campbell to Major-General Sir John Byng, 23 April 1820; W. Copeland Trimble, *Historical Record of the 27th Inniskilling Regiment* (London, 1876), 60; Steevens, *Reminiscences*, 39; Garry David Wills, *Wellington at Bay: The Battle of Villamuriel, 25 October 1812* (Solihull, 2020), 52–53.

68 Alexander M. Delavoie, *Records of the 90th Regiment* (London, 1880), 40. The 90th Foot had trained as light infantry long before their official designation as such in 1815. See Delavoie, *Records*, 59–61 and Alexander M. Delavoie, *Life of Thomas Graham, Lord Lynedoch* (London, 1880), 92, 245.

69 Lord Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey through Spain and France* (London, 1814), 112–13, 481–3.

70 James, *Military Dictionary*, “point of war” and “grenadier march”; Spring, *With Zeal*, 159–60; Alistair Nichols, *Wellington’s Switzers: The Watteville Regiment* (Godmanchester, 2015), 173; George McFeely, “Chronicle of Valor: The Journal of a Pennsylvania Officer in the War of 1812”, ed. John C. Frederickson, *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 67 (1984): 276.

1799.⁷¹ Private William Wheeler even jestingly compared a British assault in the Pyrenees fourteen years later to a concert: “fifty buglers” of the 51st and 68th Light Infantry “were sounding the charge, and the drums of the 82nd [Foot] and C[hasseurs] B[ritanniques] were beating time to the music”, prompting cheers and a “general rush” by the whole brigade.⁷²

Yet no other firsthand accounts of the Peninsular War appear to mention British drummers beating while advancing, in stark contrast to their profuse descriptions of friendly bugles signalling the charge or drumbeats broadcast by approaching French columns.⁷³ Although a drummer of the 33rd Foot later claimed to have been wounded while beating his instrument at Waterloo, British drums were evidently little heard during the battle.⁷⁴ One officer present on 18 June 1815 noted that British drummers no longer rolled during the charge, in contrast to the French; another infantryman at Waterloo confirmed that neither drum nor fife “mock[ed] us with useless din” amid the groans and gunfire.⁷⁵ Indeed, both French and British descriptions of battlefield soundscapes contrasted Anglophone reserve with Gallic drumming and shouting.⁷⁶ The acoustic differences were taken to be indicative of national character, with the phlegmatic British infantry facing down a more excitable foe. A seasoned army doctor who saw service in the Low Countries, the Peninsula, and the West Indies praised “the dread silence of the troops when in presence of the enemy” as proof of their obedience and resolve. “Not a sound is then to be heard, save ... the solitary note of a bugle intelligible only

71 Roderick Innes, *The Life of Roderick Innes* (Stonehaven, 1844), 29; BL, Add. MS. 13663, “Journal of Remarks and Observations” by Colin Mackenzie, 1798–9, fols. 72–3.

72 Wheeler, *Letters*, 122.

73 [Stephen Morley], *Memoirs of a Serjeant of the 5th Regt. of Foot* (Ashford, 1842), 49, 113–14; *Peninsular Sketches*, 1:299–300. The French “pas de charge” was dubbed “Old Trousers” by British soldiers; this curious onomatopoeia derived from the drum beating’s reported resemblance to this phrase. See *United Service Journal* (June 1841), 182; Leeke, *History*, 2:332.

74 Chetham’s Library, Manchester, Manuscripts/1/371, “Recollections ... and anecdotes relating to Manchester and Lancashire ... by James Weatherley”, 34–5; TNA, WO97/512/8, James Hallowell discharge, 1816.

75 [Ross-Lewin], *Life*, 2:198; Anton, *Retrospect*, 211.

76 Maximilien Sébastien Foy, *Histoire de la Guerre de la Péninsule sous Napoléon* (Paris, 1827), 283; C.W.C. Oman, *Wellington’s Army* (London, 1913), 90–92; John Kincaid, *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* (London, 1830), 334; Rees Howell Gronow, *Recollections and Anecdotes* (London, 1863), 15; *With Napoleon at Waterloo*, ed. MacKenzie MacBride (London, 1911), 140; *Report on the Manuscripts of J.B. Fortescue* (London, 1899–1927), 6:476; Denis Le Marchant, *Memoirs of the Late Major-General Le Marchant* (London, 1841), 257. See also Hew Strachan, *From Waterloo to Balaclava: Tactics, Technology, and the British Army, 1815–1854* (Cambridge, 1985), 23.

to the light troops. The drum is hushed, and any other kind of music, at such a time, would be rejected as most unsuited to the deadly work they are about to be engaged in.”⁷⁷ In Iberia, Wellington’s regiments generally withheld their firepower and bravado until close to the enemy: the shock of a short-range infantry volley, often accompanied by three cheers, was followed by a vociferous rush with bayonets.⁷⁸ The “huzzaing, bawling, [and] yelling, ... blended with the brayings of the bugle”, according to one soldier, fortified the attackers’ nerves and intimidated adversaries.⁷⁹ This customary vocal cacophony, held in check until the moment of the charge, was mentioned far more frequently in British accounts than the hubbub of rolling drums. Cheering, which arguably deserves consideration as a potent form of battle music in its own right, was encouraged by officers for its emotional effect: some even characterised it as a psychological weapon capable of turning the tide in action.⁸⁰

Battlefield Roles

Instead of playing patriotic music or micromanaging musket drill by beat of drum, musical warriors routinely evacuated casualties from the battlefield (Figure 3). Operating in teams of two or four, drummers, buglers, and bandmen carried wounded combatants to field hospitals in the rear using stretchers fashioned from cloth and poles.⁸¹ They could also administer basic first aid: a 1798 circular from the surgeon-general to the forces directed that the non-commissioned officers, drummers, and musicians be trained to use tourniquets.⁸² Significantly, these humanitarian assignments reduced the

77 William Fergusson, *Notes and Recollections of a Professional Life*, ed. James Fergusson (London, 1846), 7–8.

78 A soldier of the 9th Foot described this tactical formula as the “English fashion” of fighting. See Hale, *Journal*, 42 and also Charles Leslie, *Military Journal of Colonel Leslie* (Aberdeen, 1887), 148; Muir, *Tactics*, 99–102; Brent Nosworthy, *Battle Tactics of Napoleon and his Enemies* (London, 1995), 220–41; Paddy Griffith, *Forward into Battle: Fighting Tactics from Waterloo to the Near Future* (revised edn, Swindon, 1990), 17–39.

79 Jones, “Old Halberdier”, 153. See also [C. Jones], *Cavalry in the Corunna Campaign*, ed. Lord Carnock (London, 1936), 17.

80 [Gleig], *Subaltern in America*, 75–6; William Maynard Gomm, *Letters and Journals of Field-Marshal Sir William Maynard Gomm*, ed. Francis Culling Carr-Gomm (London, 1881), 35; Oman, *Wellington’s Army*, 235. See also Paul Thompson, *The British Cheer: Psychological Warfare in the Napoleonic Era* (Barnsley, 2023).

81 Crowe, *Eloquent Soldier*, 124; Austin, “Old Stick-Leg”, 145–6; Antony Brett-James, *Life in Wellington’s Army* (London, 1972), 250–2.

82 *The Loyalist* (29 October 1803), 229–30; [Ross-Lewin], *Life*, 1:279; John Hennen, *Principles of Military Surgery*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1820), 27–8.



FIGURE 3 A drummer (left) is depicted assisting a dying officer. "Death of Col. Cadogan at the battle of Vittoria". from John Augustus Atkinson, *Incidents of British Bravery during the Late Campaigns on the Continent* (London, [1817]).

COURTESY OF COLONEL HENRY CADOGAN.

need for others to quit the firing line to help the injured, a practice that sapped a regiment's effective strength, facilitated shirking, and was consequently discouraged by peer pressure and military orders.⁸³ Musicians and drummers also freed up rank-and-file manpower when their regiments were expecting battle or actually engaged by performing additional ancillary tasks alongside unfit or "weakly" men: they guarded officers' horses or the regimental baggage and distributed ammunition.⁸⁴ At Waterloo, the 32nd Foot's drum-major made himself useful in the rear by haranguing skulkers until they re-joined their comrades.⁸⁵ Yet drummers and musicians were also notorious for exploiting their unusual freedom of movement on the battlefield to seek shelter or

83 LAC, Record Group 8, "C" Series, vol. 686, 14, district general order, 11 October 1814; Fergusson, *Notes and Recollections*, 8; Muir, *Tactics*, 203–4; Edward Costello, *Adventures of a Soldier* (London, 1841), 96.

84 *Standing Orders as given out and enforced by the late Major General Robert Craufurd for use of the Light Division* (Corfu, [1812]), 20; Robert Thomas Wilson, *History of the British Expedition to Egypt* (London, 1802), 273; BL, Add. MS. 33766, letters of Corporal Alexander Frederick Mueller, 11 March 1814; [Cowell], *Leaves*, 288; LAC, RG8 "C" Series, vol. 84, 168, proceedings investigating losses suffered at the Battle of York, 18 May 1813.

85 TNA, WO71/242, general court-martial of Brevet-Major Hames, 32nd Foot, 1815, Samuel Pollard testimony.

plunder, sometimes to the detriment of wounded men requiring assistance.⁸⁶ One drum-major and “all his little fry” sought refuge behind a windmill at Vimeiro, while Bugler William Green of the 95th Rifles, finding that his signalling services were not required at Busaco, sat twenty paces behind the British line and sewed himself a shirt as the battle raged.⁸⁷

The auxiliary responsibilities assigned to drummers and bandsmen on the battlefield reflected their ambiguous status within the military. An officer of the 71st Foot, for example, explained that bandsmen bore stretchers because they were not considered “fighting men.”⁸⁸ Musicians and drummers ordinarily carried swords rather than firearms and were described by some military doctors as among the regimental “non-combatants” available to act as battlefield medical orderlies.⁸⁹ Moreover, a small number of elite band musicians were civilians who had never enlisted in the army.⁹⁰ Yet the notion that musicians were “not required to go into action” conflicted with official regulations, which insisted that bandsmen be “perfectly drilled” as soldiers and “liable to serve in the ranks on any emergency.”⁹¹ A sizeable number of corps did expect musicians and even drummers to serve in the ranks on campaign, especially if the regiment was hard-pressed.⁹² “Band and drum boys ... carried arms in the [1798] Rebellion” in Ireland, according to one Londonderry Militia veteran, while seven drummers of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment shouldered firelocks to defend York, the capital of Upper Canada, from the Americans in 1813.⁹³ Several musicians insisted on entering combat even

86 Costello, *Adventures*, 95; William Lawrence, *Autobiography of Sergeant William Lawrence*, ed. George Nugent Bankes (London, 1886), 146; *Celtic Monthly* (May 1904), 153; *United Service Journal* (June 1841), 182, 190. See also *The Drummer, written & compos'd by Mr. [Charles] Dibdin, etc* (London, [1792]), a song mocking drummers for battlefield absenteeism.

87 Green, *Where Duty Calls Me*, 90–1; George Thomas Landmann, *Recollections of My Military Life* (London, 1854), 2:207–8.

88 William Gavin, *The Diary of William Gavin, Ensign and Quartermaster*, ed. Charles Oman (1921), xxiii.

89 Fergusson, *Notes and Recollections*, 8; Hennen, *Principles*, 27–28.

90 O’Keeffe, “Musical Warriors”, 112–14.

91 Green, *Where Duty Calls Me*, 99; *General Regulations and Orders for the Army* (London, 1811), 92. See also National Library of Ireland, Kilmainham Papers, MS1330, general order, 26 April 1800.

92 TNA, WO27/133, 1st Half-Year 1815 inspections, 17th Foot; Gibbes Rigaud, *Celer et Audax: A Sketch of the Services of the Fifth Battalion, Sixtieth Regiment* (Oxford, 1879), 120.

93 NAM, 2011-07-3, digest of service of the Londonderry Militia, Rowley Millar memoir; LAC, RG8 “C” Series, vol. 84, 171, proceedings investigating losses suffered at the Battle of York, 18 May 1813.

when not ordered to do so. John McCraw, a hotblooded bandsman of the 71st Foot, reportedly battered opponents with muskets and stretcher poles until he was killed at Aire in 1814.⁹⁴ Individual drummers, trumpeters, and buglers were praised for their coolness under fire: some took prisoners, hurled enemy shells out of harm's way, or rushed ahead of their companies while sounding the advance.⁹⁵ Not all such displays of intrepidity were warmly appreciated: William Green of the 95th Rifles continued to blow his bugle after being shot in the wrist and thigh during the nocturnal storming of Badajoz, only to be reprimanded by a nearby officer for drawing enemy fire.⁹⁶

Despite individual acts of mercy towards juvenile drummers, neither the British nor their enemies forswore the targeting of musical warriors.⁹⁷ A general order issued in 1811 even attributed battlefield losses among British trumpeters and buglers to their conspicuous dress, stipulating that they should henceforth wear clothing of the same colour as the privates.⁹⁸ Yet overall casualty rates among drummers and their analogues were in fact disproportionately low, likely because most were stationed behind the line or inside infantry squares and therefore enjoyed a degree of protection from enemy fire.⁹⁹ Drummers, trumpeters, and buglers constituted 2.19% of Wellington's army on 15 July 1812 but comprised only 0.44% of the British casualties incurred a week later at Salamanca, implying a casualty rate of one-fifth the all-ranks average.¹⁰⁰

94 *Vicissitudes in the Life of a Scottish Soldier* (London, 1827), 320–9; TNA, WO25/1994, 1/71st Foot casualty returns, March 1814. See also Joseph Donaldson, *Recollections of the Eventful Life of a Soldier* (London, 1856), 206; Richard Cannon, *Historical Record of the Fifth Regiment of Foot* (London, [1838]), 79.

95 North Ludlow Beamish, *History of the King's German Legion* (London, 1832–37), 2:512; Hayden, *Historical Record*, 70–1, 105; Austin, “Old Stick-Leg”, 128–9; Blakeney, *Boy in the Peninsular War*, 192.

96 Green, *Where Duty Calls Me*, 98–99.

97 Gareth Glover, *Waterloo: Myth and Reality* (Barnsley, 2014), 121; Bernard Wilkin and René Wilkin, *Fighting the British: French Eyewitness Accounts from the Napoleonic Wars* (Barnsley, 2018), 133–34; Richard Bentinck, *The Very Thing: The Memoirs of Drummer Richard Bentinck*, ed. Jonathan Crook (London, 2011), 29–30, 104–5.

98 TNA, WO123/135, general orders of 25 September and 8 October 1811, 1 July 1812.

99 Reide, *Treatise*, 175; John Williamson, *The Elements of Military Arrangement*, 3rd edn (London, 1791), 1:54; John Lowe, *Humble Address of John Lowe, Late Sergeant of His Majesty's 2nd Battalion 95th ... to ... Wellington* (London, 1827), 43. An order book of the 31st Foot (NAM, 1993-10-23, 9 May 1796) notes that the bandsmen and drummers should “attend the surgeon in the rear” when the regiment is formed in line for action. By contrast, French drummers beating the charge were “much exposed” to enemy fire. See [Ross-Lewin], *Life*, 2198.

100 TNA, WO1/255, Salamanca casualty return and 15 July 1812 weekly state. Figures include the King's German Legion and artillery but not Portuguese and Spanish contingents.

At Waterloo, a corporal or private in the eight British regiments of the Fifth Division was six times more likely to be killed or wounded than a drummer.¹⁰¹ Comparably robust statistics for musicians are impossible to compile as bandsmen were seldom enumerated separately in strength and casualty returns. Losses were probably infrequent unless musicians fought in the ranks, but even a handful of casualties could be keenly felt. An officer of the 104th Foot mourned the death of three musicians during the abortive raid on Sacket's Harbor in New York state in 1813 and wished they had been shielded from harm: "Our sweet little band was sadly cut up ... It was a folly to take them."¹⁰²

Music and Memory

Music influenced how battles were remembered. For instance, soldiers invoked musical metaphors when describing the cacophony of combat in memoirs or correspondence. Just as Private Wheeler compared a battle to a concert, George Hennell of the 43rd Foot wryly noted that clashes with the French were "not without some music".¹⁰³ The thundering of cannon and musketry was routinely likened to music in general and the rolling of drums in particular.¹⁰⁴ The use of such figurative language, as James A. Davis has argued with reference to the American Civil War, imposed a sense of order on auditory chaos, rendering disconcerting and dangerous sounds more comprehensible and "familiar, even comfortable".¹⁰⁵

Music and musical paraphernalia proved central to unit commemorations of past victories, contributing to the development of distinctive regimental

101 Compiled from Philip Haythornthwaite, *Picton's Division at Waterloo* (Barnsley, 2016), appendices.

102 John Le Couteur, *Merry Hearts Make Light Days*, 2nd edn, ed. Donald Graves (Montreal, 2012), 118; Richard Cannon, *Historical Record of the Eleventh, or North Devon Regiment of Foot* (London, 1845), 67–68. Most of the musicians of the 2/67th Foot bore arms at the Battle of Barrosa in 1811; two were wounded. See TNA, WO27/117, 1st half-year 1813 inspection returns.

103 Wheeler, *Letters*, 122; George Hennell, *A Gentleman Volunteer: The Letters of George Hennell from the Peninsular War*, ed. Michael Glover (London, 1979), 136, 152.

104 NAM, 2006-03-47, typescript of journal of Assistant Surgeon William Matthew Brookes, 34; William Billows, *Nothing Pertickler Hapned: An Autobiography of a British Soldier*, ed. E. Billows (2011), Part 1, 46–49; *United Service Magazine* (November 1844), 410.

105 James A. Davis, "Music and Gallantry in Combat During the American Civil War", *American Music* 28 (2010): 148.

identities.¹⁰⁶ Soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 30th Foot, for example, hoisted their officers aloft and romped through Limerick on the first anniversary of Waterloo, accompanied by cheering inhabitants and quicksteps performed by their band.¹⁰⁷ Musicians of the 23rd Light Dragoons were even “bound in honor not to get drunk” during Waterloo festivities in the same year, given their importance to the unit’s celebrations, in return for “liquor enough to swim in” the following day.¹⁰⁸ Captured enemy instruments were brandished on parade as trophies of prior achievements, including the drums of the French 34th Regiment, seized by their British counterparts in 1811, and the Turkish crescent or “Jingling Johnny” taken by the 88th Foot at the Battle of Salamanca.¹⁰⁹ British instruments associated with storied engagements also assumed the status of relics: in the 1870s the 1st Life Guards acquired a bugle sounded by one of their trumpeters at Waterloo, displaying the artefact in the officers’ mess and drafting a parchment document to record its provenance.¹¹⁰ The tale of the 14th Foot’s band playing at Famars, though based in fact, grew in the telling over generations and became a linchpin of the regimental history of successive corps; the Royal Yorkshire Regiment retains “Ça Ira” as its quick march in honour of the incident.¹¹¹ Finally, soldiers memorialised battlefield exploits of their regiments in song. Rankers of the 92nd Foot devised at least three new versions of the Jacobite ballad “Hey, Johnnie Cope” in honour of their surprise attack at Arroyo dos Molinos, although the laboured lyrics were, in words of a Victorian historian, more reflective of the authors’ “patriotism and pluck” than any true “poetic powers”.¹¹²

With the notable exception of piper George Clark, musical warriors were not especially conspicuous in Georgian battle paintings and engravings. Drummers were occasionally depicted carrying their instruments on their backs, aiding the wounded, or even performing on the battlefield, but such portrayals were

106 John E. Cookson, “Regimental Worlds: Interpreting the Experience of British Soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars”, in *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians*, eds. Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Jane Rendall (Basingstoke, 2009), 33–7; Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington’s Army* (Basingstoke, 2011), 137–8.

107 NAM, 1968-07-209-1, Macready journal, chapter 20.

108 NAM, 1978-05-74-1, Henry Grove autobiography, 179–81.

109 Richard Cannon, *Historical Record of the Thirty-Fourth ... Foot* (London, 1844), 52; “Trooping the French Drums”, British Pathé newsreel, 1934, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/41611/> (10 July 2024); NAM, 1973-07-24-1, history of the “Jingling Johnny” captured by the 88th Foot. See also Lawrence, *Autobiography*, 124–5.

110 Household Cavalry Museum, London, bugle blown by Trumpeter John Edwards and parchment “Record of [the] Waterloo Trumpet”, 1888.

111 Henry O’Donnell, *Historical Records of the 14th Regiment* (Devonport, 1893), 58–59; *The Regimental Handbook: The Yorkshire Regiment* (2021), 140, 168.

112 Archibald Clerk, *Memoir of Colonel John Cameron* (Glasgow, 1858), 51.

unusual and never the primary focus of the work.¹¹³ Contemporary artists nonetheless littered their battlefields with discarded drums as mute testaments to the destruction and disorder of warfare.¹¹⁴ Musical subjects enjoyed greater prominence in retrospective representations of combat: an 1879 sketch of the Battle of Vinegar Hill features a Dublin militia band playing its way across the field (Figure 4).¹¹⁵ Moreover, the “little drummer boy” emerged as a popular stock figure during the late Victorian heyday of British battle painting.¹¹⁶



FIGURE 4 “[The] Queen’s Own Royal Dublin Militia going into action at Vinegar Hill”, pen sketch by William Sadler, 1879.
REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND.

- 113 “Storming of Monte Video” and “Death of Sir John Moore”, in James Jenkins, *The Martial Achievements of Great Britain and her Allies* (London, 1815); NAM, 1971-02-33-471-1, “The Battle of Wexford in Ireland, fought June 20th, 1798”, engraving published by G. Thompson, August 1798.
- 114 See e.g. NAM, 1971-02-33-345-1, “The Battle of Salamanca”, coloured aquatint by G. Lewis after John Augustus Atkinson, 1813.
- 115 National Library of Ireland, PD 3176 TX 1, “Queen’s Own Royal Dublin Militia going into action at Vinegar Hill, the Light Company advancing and firing covering the band”, pen sketch by William Sadler, 1879. Sadler’s portrayal of the band playing the regiment into battle cannot be corroborated and is likely fanciful.
- 116 J.W.M. Hichberger, *Images of the Army: The Military in British Art, 1815–1914* (Manchester, 1988), 101.

Lady Elizabeth Butler frequently featured drummers and trumpeters in her historical art: she was particularly proud of “Steady, the Drums and Fifes!”, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1897. The canvas depicts drummers and fifers of the 1st Battalion, 57th Foot standing fast under fire at Albuera while awaiting an order to signal the advance.¹¹⁷ Butler also produced several versions of another imagined scene, “On the Morrow of Talavera”, which portrays Sir Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) saluting a dead bugler being carried away on a stretcher.¹¹⁸ Such paintings encouraged and reflected heightened public esteem for ordinary soldiers in the later nineteenth century. The propensity to represent drummers and buglers of the Napoleonic era as little boys, despite the fact that most had been older teenagers or adults, emphasised their precocious valour while inviting more solemn reflection on the loss of innocence and sacrifice of youth.¹¹⁹ Artistic tributes to historic episodes of martial heroism also provided a patriotic fillip in an era of imperial conflict.¹²⁰ Richard Caton Woodville’s “Up, Guards, and at them!”, for example, features a wide-eyed drummer boy leading doughty comrades to victory at Waterloo (Figure 5); its reproduction in a Christmas issue of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* during the Second Boer War was praised in the British press as “singularly appropriate ... just now” and well-suited to the “military ardour of the hour”.¹²¹ Newspapers likewise made connections between contemporary reports of pipers’ derring-do on colonial battlefields and precedents from the Napoleonic Wars, commending William Lockhart Bogle’s 1893 painting of Piper Kenneth Mackay playing outside the square of the 79th Highlanders at Waterloo.¹²² The prominence of military music in the cultural memory of the French Wars is in no small part a product

117 Elizabeth Butler, *An Autobiography* (London, 1922), 261–2; *The Athenaeum* (5 June 1897), 750–52.

118 Paul Usherwood and Jenny Spencer-Smith, *Lady Butler: Battle Artist, 1846–1933* (Gloucester, 1987), 110–111.

119 Usherwood and Spencer-Smith, *Lady Butler*, 67, 101, 108–10; Hichberger, *Images*, 59, 78; O’Keeffe, “Musical Warriors”, 110–112, 163–4. Other paintings featuring young drummers and buglers include “The Forlorn Hope” by Vereker M. Hamilton, reproduced in *Cassell’s History of England* (London, 1909) as the frontispiece to volume 5, and “The ‘Die Hards’ at Albuera” by Richard Caton Woodville, reproduced in Reginald Hodder, *British Regiments at the Front* (London, 1914), plate between 36–37.

120 John Springhall, “Up Guards and at them!”: British Imperialism and Popular Art, 1880–1914”, in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester, 1986), 49–72.

121 *West Surrey Times*, 25 November 1899; *Bradford Weekly Telegraph*, 2 December 1899.

122 *Illustrated London News*, 8 July 1893, 44; *South Wales Echo*, 18 November 1897. Bogle’s painting was acquired by the Cameron Highlanders (formerly the 79th Foot) in memory of the incident. See Ralph Nevill, *British Military Prints* (London, 1909), xxix.



FIGURE 5 "Up, Guards, and at them!", colour oleolithograph after Richard Caton Woodville.
(NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)

of the late Victorian imagination, which celebrated some types of musical soldiers as romantic exemplars of heroic sacrifice and pluck.

Conclusion

Although British military bands rarely played in the heat of battle, music was nonetheless a significant and recurrent feature of combat during the era of the

Napoleonic Wars. Sound shaped soldiers' emotions and loomed large in their descriptions of battle. Musical instruments influenced the course and even the outcome of fighting by transmitting orders, lifting spirits, and deceiving or intimidating enemies. The study of military music also offers valuable insights into the tactics and character of the late Georgian British Army, not least by emphasising the challenges of maintaining command and control under fire.

Some historians argue that British officers showed little concern for their soldiers' morale, contrasting this ostensible indifference with the printed propaganda, music and song employed by the French.¹²³ However, British commanders understood and often harnessed music's motivational power, seeking to inspire and encourage their troops rather than relying solely on the threat of punishment. If military bands tended to fall silent under fire, their music was frequently audible before and after combat, and Highland pipers were lauded for their psychological impact in action. Music also reinforced regimental identities, not least by commemorating past victories, and alleviated the monotony of long marches and daily routines.¹²⁴ A deeper understanding of the prevalence of music in army life, both on and off the battlefield, enriches the more nuanced interpretations of eighteenth-century military service which have emerged in recent years.¹²⁵

By scrutinising the responsibilities of drummers, buglers, and band musicians in combat, this study has also shed light on battlefield medical practices and the development of specialised light infantry forces. It has highlighted the popularity of skirmishing tactics beyond formal light infantry companies and regiments but also stressed the effort required to memorise extensive catalogues of bugle signals.¹²⁶ While the wartime army sought to standardise trumpet and bugle sounds, these initiatives were never completely successful, and the impulse to compile a comprehensive corpus

¹²³ Edward J. Coss, *All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier Under Wellington, 1808–1814* (Norman, OK, 2010), 144–50, 208; Oskar Cox Jensen, "Music to Some Consequence: Reaction, Reform, Race", *Journal of British Studies* 60 (2021): 375–9.

¹²⁴ For more on British military music away from the battlefield, including an analysis of its reception on the part of rank-and-file soldiers, see O'Keeffe, "Musical Warriors", Chapter 1.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Möbius and Möbius, *Prussian Army Soldiers*; Ilya Berkovich, *Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old-Regime Europe* (Cambridge, 2017); Kurt J.G. Baird, "Fighting for the Habsburgs: Community, Patriotism and the kaiserlich-königliche Armee, 1788–1816", PhD thesis, University of York, 2022.

¹²⁶ Strachan, *From Waterloo to Balaclava*, 20; David Gates, *The British Light Infantry Arm, c. 1790–1815* (London, 1987).

of musical commands remained in tension with the imperative of avoiding undue complexity.

This article has dispelled common misconceptions about the use of music in action but also documented the potency of myths and stories about battlefield performances. Tales of musicians performing under fire to “drown the cries of the wounded” were current even in the early 19th century, as the memoirs of Waterloo veteran William Leeke attest, while accounts of battlefield piping influenced conceptions of Scottish nationhood and military prowess that still resonate today.¹²⁷ Depictions of the Georgian British Army in film often feature fifers, drummers, and pipers playing melodies such as “The British Grenadiers” in battle, underscoring the perceived romance and gallantry – or foolhardiness – of warfare in a bygone age.¹²⁸ Music’s continued importance as a link between past conflicts and the present was laid bare during the Waterloo bicentenary ceremonies in London, which featured a rendition of “The Last Post” sounded on a battered bugle found on the battlefield.¹²⁹ This doleful fanfare, first officially published for the use of cavalry buglers in 1798, later became a haunting centrepiece of rituals honouring the fallen of the First World War; it remains instantly recognisable as a call to remember the costs of conflict.¹³⁰

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the National Army Museum and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the research which led to the publication of this article. Dr Erica Charters and Professor Bob Harris, my former doctoral supervisors, provided valuable advice and encouragement, as did Ross Flowers of The Drums Crown Forces 1812.

127 Leeke, *History*, 1:33; Watt, “Highland Society”, 375–78; Gary J. West, “Scottish Military Music”, in *A Military History of Scotland*, eds. Edward M. Spiers *et al.* (Edinburgh, 2012), 648–68.

128 *The Buccaneer* (1958); *Waterloo* (1970); *Barry Lyndon* (1975); *Revolution* (1985); *The Patriot* (2000).

129 “1815 Bugle to sound again as Waterloo remembered”, 4barsrest, 4 June 2015, <https://www.4barsrest.com/news/20407/1815-bugle-to-sound-again-as-waterloo-remembered> (31 July 2024); “Beating Retreat 2015 (Full)”, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqEwearlVZ8> (31 July 2024).

130 Alwyn W. Turner, *The Last Post: Music, Remembrance and the Great War* (London, 2014), and O’Keeffe, “Musical Warriors”, 198.

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