

The beginning of the year 1801 found the 23rd Foot in the Mediterranean as part of the 'Reserve', commanded by Major General John Moore, in the army which had been sent to recapture Egypt from the French. When the landing in Aboukir Bay began on 8th March it was the Reserve who led the way to find themselves faced with 'an almost inaccessible' sand dune on which two French battalions were stationed. This action, in which the Regiment suffered forty-six casualties, only six of them fatal, ensured the safe landing of the rest of the army and led to the surrender of Alexandria in September, the 23rd suffering few casualties but a long sick list in the rest of the campaign. The conquest of Egypt induced Bonaparte to agree to a truce in the war, the Peace of Amiens, and gained for the Regiment the Battle Honour 'Egypt' and permission to wear a badge of the Sphinx on the Colours.

Having spent most of the short peace at Gibraltar, the Regiment returned to Britain once more at war in August, 1803, and sent out parties to raise recruits to Manchester, Worcester, Wrexham and Yeovil to try to fill their new war establishment of ten companies each of one hundred privates. They were still under strength in December 1804, when they were instructed to raise a second battalion, but recruiting for the whole army was exceptionally difficult and in the following spring the 1st Battalion was only at quarter strength and the 2nd had only seventy-four in the ranks. Reform of recruiting was, however, being undertaken, two measures being notably helpful - permission to recruit Catholic Irishmen, hitherto theoretically excluded, and the permanent allocation of counties to individual regiments. The counties allotted to the 23rd Foot were Anglesey, Caernarfon, Denbigh, Flint and Merioneth and this can be seen as the first practical, as opposed to titular, affiliation with the Principality. Not that Welsh recruits were easy to find and at the end of 1806 the 2nd Battalion, then 400 strong, had ninety-seven Irish, eight Scots, 221 English and only seventy-four Welshmen.

In 1805 the 1st Battalion took part in the abortive expedition to Cuxhaven and in 1807 the successful raid which seized the Danish fleet at Copenhagen. In 1808 they embarked for Nova Scotia, being at sea for St David's Day. Lieutenant Thomas Browne, who had not been with the Regiment for the occasion previously, described the custom of how one 'of the little drum-boys' handed a dish of leeks round the Officers' Mess: Each officer is called upon to eat one, for which he pays the Drummer a shilling. The older officers of the Regiment, and those who have seen service with it in the field, are favoured with only a small one, and salt. Those who have before celebrated a St David's day with the Regiment, but have only seen garrison duty with it, are required to eat a larger one without salt, and those unfortunates, who for the first time, have sat at the Mess, on this their Saint's day, have presented to them the largest Leek that can be procured, and unless sickness prevent it, no respite is given, until the last tip of the green leaf is enclosed in the unwilling mouth; and day after day passes by before the smell and taste is fairly got rid of. This may be a nasty way of making a Welsh Fusilier - and so it is, but not much worse than making a man pass thro' a dirty horse pond in order to become a freeholder of Berwick.

In November 1808, the Battalion with some others took ship for the West Indies, a destination not viewed with much favour in view of the unfriendly climate. Browne's apprehensions on this score were heightened, when on landing in Barbados, the landlady of the principal hotel asked him what regiment he belonged to. On being told, she replied, 'Twenty Third? Twenty Third? Ah, me shew you plenty of Twenty Third in church-yard dere.' Fortunately the campaign, which aimed to capture Martinique, was expeditiously and competently conducted and within five months the Battalion was back in Halifax, Nova Scotia, having lost less than a hundred men from all causes, gained the Battle Honour 'Martinique 1809' and acquired a French eagle standard, one of four surrendered when the garrison of Fort Desaix (formerly Fort Bourbon) capitulated rather than stand an assault.

Meanwhile the 2nd Battalion was having experience of active service. They sailed from Falmouth with 671 all ranks, accompanied by forty-eight wives and twenty children, and arrived off Coruña on 13th October 1808. They formed part of a corps, 10,000 strong, which was to join the 20,000 men of Sir John Moore's army which was moving up from Lisbon to assist the Spaniards in driving the French out of their country. The Spaniards put every obstruction in their way and it was not until 22nd November that Baird could get his men as far as Astorga and by that time Napoleon had led the Grande Armee into Spain and changed the whole strategic situation. There was a fleeting chance that Moore, who had assembled his whole army at Mayorga, could fall upon an isolated French corps at Valladolid but on 20th December he heard that Napoleon with twice as many men as he had been supposed to have was marching against the British rear. There was nothing for it but to run for Coruña before the army was trapped.

**The 23rd Foot, The Royal Welsh Fusiliers  
Egypt 1801 and Coruña 1809  
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The retreat over mountain passes in the snow in the depth of winter was a desperate business, taxing the discipline of the army to its utmost. It is a tribute to the cohesion of the Battalion that they lost only seventy-eight men during the retreat and the final battle of Coruña. Since they had not been heavily engaged in that action, the brigade formed the final rearguard when, on the night of 17th/18th January 1809, the army embarked, the 23rd were the last troops to leave. Last of all was Captain Thomas Lloyd Fletcher who, with a corporal, locked the lower gate in the town walls, using a bayonet to twist the key in the lock before putting the bunch in his pocket. The keys are now in the Regimental Museum at Caernarfon.

The 2nd Battalion arrived home with 109 sick but by March were able to put 788 other ranks, of whom 438 were Welsh, on parade.

This extract is taken from *'That Astonishing Infantry'* by Michael Glover, London (1989)