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Desertion from the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars

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Abstract

Desertion was significant drain on the British Army's slender manpower resources during the Napoleonic Wars, despite severe military justice that could inflict the capital punishment for this military crime. This article explores the reasons why soldiers left the Army and it argues that there were three main wellsprings of desertion: adjustment to life as a soldier; discontent with the service; and opportunities beyond the service. These factors underlay soldiers' decision to leave the Army, but location also played a crucial aspect, either facilitating or suppressing desertion. These causes and influences explain the incidence of desertion at a macro level and also the wide variations in absence rates between individual units. Moreover, desertion demonstrates that soldiers had both a strong sense of their rights - attitudes that were transferred from their civilian lives - and continued connections with civilian society.

Deserters are often shadowy figures in military history, and the historian has to overcome the power constructions inherent in military records that, predictably, reflect the status of desertion as a military crime. The term is pejorative, usually conflated with cowardice, and often applied indiscriminately by military hierarchies so masking the motives of, and circumstances influencing, soldiers. Desertion from military service, however, is receiving more focused scholarly attention as military history has incorporated approaches from social and cultural history. Such work has highlighted that military absenteeism was often a complex phenomenon, particularly in twentieth-century wars.¹ Desertion from the British Army in the eighteenth century has also received attention, with studies of deserter advertisements in newspapers alongside work on military justice.² The value of exploring the problem has been particularly demonstrated by Joseph Cozens' work on 1803 to 1805, which challenges views that this was an era of mass patriotism.³ This article argues that desertion from the British Army stemmed from three main factors: adjustment to life as a soldier; discontent with the service; and opportunities outside the Army. Additionally, the soldier's immediate environment played a part, sometimes encouraging desertion whilst in other places suppressing its incidence.

Desertion could be a serious problem for military authorities, sapping the morale, discipline, and size of a military force that they had often done so much to assemble and maintain. In continental Europe it also became a test of state power, particularly in the Napoleonic Empire.⁴ Like its continental counterparts, desertion was a significant drain on the British Army. Between 1803 and 1815 there were 77,696 cases of desertion, a loss it could ill afford when it struggled to recruit enough men to cover total casualties (deaths, discharges, and desertions) during the Peninsular War period.⁵ The problem was not limited to the regular units, and 4,750 absconded from the militia between the years 1811 and 1813 (the years for which we have figures), and 4,278 men left the Army of Reserve in 1803,

representing the bulk of the casualties in these forces.⁶ Within these broad figures, however, there were significant variations in desertion rates by place, unit, and period.⁷ Even a cursory glance at military records demonstrates the disparity between units. For example, in the 1807 bi-annual inspect returns the 13th Foot lost 9% of its strength, whilst no soldier deserted from 1/48th Foot in the same period.⁸ What follows explores this phenomenon.

There are methodological challenges when exploring desertion. In the eighteenth century the issue was largely accepted as a facet of European military life.⁹ Overt discussions of its causes seldom appear in records and those cases that did make it to trial, and so eventually archives, are atypical. Only a tiny fraction of incidents – just fewer than 400 – were tried at general courts martial between 1807 and 1815.¹⁰ Military justice at this level was a protracted process and unable to deal with the numbers of cases, so it was used selectively and for exemplary purposes. For example, in 1807 James Thompson was considered “a fit subject to be made an example of” after he absconded from the 55th Foot and confessed to desertion from the Ayrshire Militia.¹¹ John McAnalty was also selected for a trial after he deserted “from three services in a very short space of time”,¹² and similarly Samuel Hulston faced a trial for his multiple desertions from the militia and the British Army, including fleeing from the Royal West Indian Rangers, a unit he had been sent to as punishment for his earlier desertions.¹³ Yet it is these records and the particular crime of desertion to the enemy that have received scholarly attention.¹⁴

To uncover a more rounded picture of subject we need to consider material beyond purely courts martial records and examine Army statistics and broad correspondence on the issue. In particular, this article utilises registers from 1811-1815 that detail desertions by unit to uncover patterns and motivations.¹⁵ Firstly, however, this article considers what constituted the military crime of desertion and shows the potential variability in its application. Then follows a discussion of the main causes of desertion arguing that there were three main

causes: adjustment to life as a soldier; discontent with the service; and opportunities beyond the service. These factors are then correlated against both the macro picture of desertion statistics and a detailed examination of some units, which highlights the significance of location in tempering or facilitating desertion rates.

Defining desertion

Any potential deserter faced the prospect of harsh punishment if he ran. According to military justice codes a general court martial could inflict punishments that included the death penalty, transportation for life, and branding with letter D.¹⁶ However, deserters had a fair chance of not being caught. Despite extensive descriptions being circulated, which gave details of their home, trade, age, and textual depictions that verge on biometric data (such as height, eye colour, head and nose shape) as well as other noteworthy features,¹⁷ military justice relied on other enlisted men who knew them.¹⁸ Pro-actively searching for deserters necessarily required a detachment of men and it was not always worth the effort. The author of *Jottings from my Sabretache* recalled such a mission. Attired in civilian clothes made by the regimental tailor, his only clue “was two dashing London female acquaintances”. He waited at their home and then stowed away in their carriage as they sped to Whitechapel, but once they alighted he soon lost sight of them.¹⁹ Occasionally, the peripatetic military population led to deserters being caught accidentally. Whilst in Guildford John White was accused of being a deserter yet claimed he had been discharged from the 7th Royal Veteran Battalion and that his papers were with a friend. After being confronted by a private of his old corps (the 9th Light Dragoons) stationed in the same town he confessed.²⁰ Similarly, John MacGuire, a deserter from the 1/19th Foot, had the misfortune to come across the soldier who had enlisted him two years before.²¹

Even when in custody, confirming identity could be problematic. Thomas Fitzgibbon was suspected of desertion from the 1/62nd Foot and was sent to the army depot to see if

anyone there recognised him. No-one did and so he was sent to the battalion in the Mediterranean.²² Two men arrived in a boat at Winchelsea having deserted from Guernsey, and pretended to be escaped prisoners of war from France. Whilst the War Office was investigating, they promptly deserted again.²³ It is unsurprising that military authorities relied heavily on confessions, and twelve out of nineteen cases in Guildford between 1808 and 1815 admitted their crime.²⁴

Not all absences were deemed desertion, and the definition of the crime was socially and culturally influenced. A military dictionary from 1780 simply stated that a deserter was “A soldier that runs away from the enemy, or that quits the service without leave, or runs from one regiment to another” and then goes on to outline applicable punishments.²⁵ The annual Mutiny Act was equally terse, only codifying that a soldier who enlisted in any other form of military service without a proper discharge was a deserter.²⁶ Glenn Stepler’s work on the late eighteenth century has shown that officers had considerable latitude in deciding charges for disciplinary infractions.²⁷ This discretion was articulated in Adye’s *A Treatise on courts martial*, which informed officers that soldiers on a charge of desertion could be found guilty of a lesser crime, such as absence without leave. As Adye put it:

The act and deed is the same, but the intentions that accompany it, which must be judged from circumstances, are what constitute the crime, and not the length of time that he is absent, or the distances to which he escapes. Many a man flies from his colours but for a short time, and yet gives evident proof of being a deserter in every sense of the word, whilst another, poor wretch! may absent himself much longer, through drunkenness, fear of punishment for some other offence committed, etc., and yet manifest no intention of totalling abandoning the service.²⁸

Nevertheless, a soldier leaving a unit was taking a gamble, albeit perhaps calculated, as there was always a chance that this case would be used as an example for others.

Causes

The irregular application of military law may account for some causes and recorded incidence of desertion, but does not provide a full account. Broadly, three categories of desertion can be discerned: recruits who deserted out of nostalgia or in response to the initial shock of a regimented life style; those who absconded after some service, often as a protest against conditions of service; and those who decided to leave their unit permanently because of pull factors, including the inducements of financial gain elsewhere. Like Cozens' recent exploration of desertion in the early part of Napoleonic Wars in Britain, this article challenges the stereotyping of deserters as social misfits or a reaction to a brutal regime.²⁹

Desertion from recruits was predicated on their adjustment to military life. Becoming a soldier could be a shock, especially when many were enlisted on the promise of adventure yet the reality was one of boredom, interspersed with repetitive drill to learn basic military manoeuvres, all within highly disciplined, hierarchical organisation. Charles O'Neil, a soldier memorialist, soon found that it was the excitement of desertions that enthralled him: "The very romance connected with the undertaking, and the thrilling interest that existed in listening to these adventures, strengthened in my mind my desire to share in their experience", although it was a punishment for a breach of discipline when he felt he was innocent that finally persuaded him to desert.³⁰ Other memoirs show that homesickness was common, and nostalgia was recognised as a disease that particularly affected recruits.³¹ For many soldiers these impulses were too strong and like Charles O'Neil they left with the intention of returning home.³²

It was estimated by the Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of York, that a tenth of recruits absconded,³³ and his calculation is corroborated by figure 1 where the frequency of cases was

very high in the first year of service: over 40% of incidents occurred within twelve months of enlisting, and a quarter within two months. Desertion from recruits is also substantiated in other ways: 134 cases from the sample have identical places of enlistment and disappearance (or 23% of the records that include these details). Demographic analysis also shows that many were new soldiers. The mean age of the sample was just over 23, younger than the average of 27 or 28 for all soldiers, and 471 desertions were from 18-21 year-olds, matching the typical ages for enlistment.³⁴

<Insert Figure 1 near here>

A second cause of desertion was dissatisfaction with conditions in the service, which could either result in a temporary absence, akin to withdrawing their labour, or an attempt to completely leave their unit. Although Peter Boroughs has argued that most disgruntled long serving soldiers post-1815 were likely to express their discontent through drunkenness or unruly behaviour rather than desertion,³⁵ this does not appear to be the case during the Peninsular War period. Indeed, figure 1 demonstrates a persistent but low level of desertion from longer serving soldiers, and some soldiers were very determined to leave. For example, Paget Bailey absconded from his hospital bed at Haslemere whilst recovering from a shot wound himself inflicted while he was trying to flee a party that was escorting him back to his unit.³⁶

Stephen Conway has demonstrated that eighteenth century British soldiers viewed their service as a tacit military compact,³⁷ and although this never manifested itself in the highly principled and theatrical way that Fred Anderson highlighted in his study of New England provincial soldiers in the Seven Years War,³⁸ desertion cases show that these attitudes were still prevalent in the Napoleonic Wars in spite of increasing rhetorical calls to duty and nation.³⁹ The moral economy of soldiers manifested itself particularly as temporary protests. John Carrol and George Callaghan fled from a hospital on Guernsey because it was

a “dear place” in contrast to their experience in the 2/67th Foot.⁴⁰ Some deserters made no attempt to disguise themselves or flee very far. Hugh Machiver immediately confessed to deserting from the 5th Dragoon Guards when he was confronted by a corporal of the 2nd Surrey Militia in the King’s Head public house in Guildford, a day after absconding.⁴¹ John Dunning hardly had any intent to leave the service. After four days he was detected in a public house and the sergeant who recaptured him testified that “I put my hand on his shoulders and said you are the man I want, and the prisoner said ‘I am glad you are come’ . He had his regimental jacket and breeches on and was in no ways disguised.”⁴² Protest as a cause of desertion is epitomised by the evidence from the trial of John Smith and William Langford. They left because of low pay and their treatment by two NCOs but whilst on the run wrote many letters seeking their Colonel’s forgiveness and asking for a pass so they could return safely to their regiment.⁴³

Viewing the problem as temporary withdrawal of labour explains why between a third and one half of all deserters went back to their units, and the difficulties with capture and identification discussed above mean that most would have given themselves up. For example, between 1807 and 1815 102 men deserted from the 15th Light Dragoons of whom thirty-three men returned; in the 1/36th Foot, the figures were thirty-seven out of eight-eight whilst the regiment’s second battalion recovered 105 out of 236 deserters.⁴⁴ Furthermore, some were not sent back to their unit but to specific penal corps, meaning that the number of returned deserters is likely to be higher still.⁴⁵

Reintegrating back into the regiment after deserting could be problematic. Sometimes soldiers were ostracised for their actions, rejected by the close-knit mess groups that were so important in sustaining troops on campaign.⁴⁶ Additional incentive to reoffend could come from financial pressures. If they sold their equipment whilst on the run then the cost of the new kit they needed was deducted from their pay. In such circumstances, a soldier’s mind

would inevitably turn to a new start in another regiment. Francis Morpeth of the 31st Foot was a typical case: he deserted three times in one year, each time returning without any part of his “regimental clothes or necessaries”, which resulted in him owing over £5 to the regiment.⁴⁷

A significant number of longer serving soldiers deserted to permanently leave the service, and often these were provoked by pull factors outside the Army rather than conditions within it. In other studies of soldiers in the eighteenth century, home, sweethearts and families feature in the reasons that soldiers deserted, usually evidenced in memoirs, personal correspondence, and cultural references.⁴⁸ There is little direct testimony in courts martial or confessions of private matters, although this maybe the result of soldiers knowing that it was a futile trial defence but evidence of familial ties is extant in other records. A private from the 10th Light Dragoon who deserted on June 2, 1812 was thought to have gone to his wife in Northallerton, whilst John Smith and William Langford were caught by a sergeant whilst they were at Smith’s mother in Newark.⁴⁹ From our sample of deserter returns, 122 cases, or 9%, specifically mention the soldier being on furlough, suggesting that they deserted whilst with family or friends. Illuminating details are provided in some cases, for example John Henderson and Charles McGowan (6th Dragoon Guards) deserted from furlough in Clogher (County Tyrone) and Manorhamilton (County Leitrim) respectively and were supposed to have emigrated to America, perhaps joining family and friends who were emigrating.⁵⁰ Military authorities recognised soldiers’ ties to families and home and tried to exploit this by requiring regimental officers to send details of deserters to their home parish “in order that the same may be exposed to public view in the Church, or such other conspicuous Place, as may render it impossible for Men, who have been guilty of this Crime, to return to their Friends and Home (on whom they have brought disgrace by their Misconduct) without immediate detection”.⁵¹

Further evidence of contractual attitudes towards soldiering amongst the rank and file emerged in 1814 and 1815. Napoleon's abdication in April 1814 brought the war in Europe to an end, but this resulted in a surge in desertions in some units, particularly those who went to North America after serving in the Peninsular War. The War of 1812 was seen by some soldiers who had served in Iberia as a distinct conflict, one they felt they had not signed up to fight. An anonymous soldier recorded his feelings when his discharge was refused in 1814: "I was almost tempted to desert. I lamented my becoming a soldier, ... to be so near home, and almost free, and yet to be sent across the Atlantic was very galling."⁵² John Spencer Cooper had only three weeks service left in 1814, but before he obtained the required signature for his discharge from his Colonel his regiment was sent to North America. Understandably, he described himself as "In the very worst humour".⁵³ Many men in France took the chance and fled before they were shipped across the Atlantic. The 71st Foot were said to have lost twenty men the night before they sailed for America, "chiefly, it was supposed from the attractions or enticements of French women" as one soldier memoirist put it.⁵⁴ Those without such ties acted on their resentment once they arrived in North America.

The effect of this discontent on particular corps was noticeable. The 1/6th Foot, for example, had thirty-seven cases of desertion in four months of 1815, compared to four during its campaigns in Spain during the whole of 1813.⁵⁵ The War of 1812 was a particular injustice to soldiers who had enlisted under Windham's short service scheme. From a selection of regiments, 35% of the rank and file had enlisted under these terms in 1813, and although only 6% were due for a discharge in 1813 and 1814 some units had a disproportionately high number of limited service men. For example, 173 out of 901 privates in the 1/7th Foot had a year or less to serve,⁵⁶ and 12 men deserted just before the unit left for North America in October 1814.⁵⁷ The effect of long-serving soldiers leaving in 1814 and 1815 is highlighted by the average length of service of deserters, which doubled to 784 days for the period April 1814–December 1815

compared to 341 days for the previous 3 years. Interestingly, there was a dip in this mean around the Waterloo campaign, as can be seen in figure 2, further evidence that the War of 1812 was a grievance.

<Insert Figure 2 near here>

The final major contributor to desertion was the financial draw of claiming a bounty by enlisting in another unit. Contemporaries certainly recognised bounty jumping as a problem (if not the term), and Windham's recruiting reforms of 1807 sought to address this by reducing this payment.⁵⁸ In one officer's opinion bounties had "reduced the practice of desertion to a system"⁵⁹ and some soldiers systematically engaged in bounty jumping, exploiting military law to escape justice. A Chelsea pensioner, Mr. Smith, was "in the habit of engaging himself as a recruit with different parties, and afterwards obtaining his discharge on the pretence of lameness."⁶⁰ John Cullen, a pensioner of the 87th Foot, also attempted the same, enlisting under the name Tiffen in the Royal African Corps.⁶¹ In 1814 some militiamen deserted, joined recruiting parties of regular regiments and then gave themselves up as militiamen, and so had to be sent back to their original units.⁶² The military authorities knew some repeat offenders and were so exasperated with John Wilson and Thomas Boulter that they wanted to know if there was any means of stopping them from deserting again.⁶³ In 1813, the Commander-in-Chief Duke of York warned recruiting parties about "trampers", who "gave no satisfactory account of themselves but proceed through the country, from one district to another, enlisting with whatever Party will receive them, with the sole view of getting the bounty on intermediate approval, and afterwards deserting."⁶⁴

Bounty jumping was a component of the makeshift economy of the communities that many soldiers came from, but the Army's policies were exploited more systematically by individuals and even groups, to the point that it provided another pull factor to leave. As anyone who brought a recruit to a recruiting party was paid three guineas – significantly more

than the twenty shilling reward for a deserter – there was a financial incentive for an accomplice to hide a deserter’s identity if he wanted to re-enlist.⁶⁵ James Smith persuaded John Ross of the 78th Foot to desert,⁶⁶ and Lieutenant Sharpe, a half-pay officer, induced a man of the 7th Light Dragoons to leave.⁶⁷ There were also large numbers of Chelsea pensioners who were involved in similar cases, a testament to different attitudes towards desertion,⁶⁸ which are further evidenced by the involvement of Mess. Tudor, Cannon and Sons, army agents, who persuaded William Lee of the 10th Light Dragoons to desert.⁶⁹

Organised criminals, probably former crimps (civilians who recruited men often through dubious practices) who had seen their services bypassed as the military authorities tightened up its recruiting procedures, were involved in this trade in men.⁷⁰ Most of their activity centred on ports where they encouraged desertion from the Army to the Royal Navy, a much harder crime to detect as the individual could be shipped off immediately and not return to Britain for some time. Liverpool had a particularly active group, and John McAnalty revealed their methods:

When I was quartered at Liverpool I promiscuously fell into bad company and after some drinking with them for some time they advised me to desert and quit the regiment entirely, at the same time recommending and praising the Sea Service, being young and ignorant of what I was doing, I quitted the regiment, and willing to try my fortune at Sea in the Service of the King I entered on board of the Princess vessel lying at Liverpool for the purpose of receiving Seamen for His Majesty’s Service.⁷¹

More evidence came to light after a deserter from the 89th Foot turned King’s evidence to get a pardon and a private of the 74th Foot discovered a deserter concealed in a safe house near his quarters. The gang running the enterprise felt sufficiently bold that they attempted to

murder the private of the 89th and another private who gave evidence against them.⁷² In investigating these crimes, it was again found that many of the culprits were Chelsea pensioners.⁷³ Similar cases emerged at Hull involving a publican,⁷⁴ and in Brighton.⁷⁵ Prosecuting those involved proved difficult,⁷⁶ and consequently aggravated desertion was introduced as a crime in the 1813 Mutiny Act, making it a finable offence even to advertise a service that could provide men for the Navy, Army or East India Company.⁷⁷ It is difficult to assess the extent of desertion to other regiments and the Royal Navy through these means, but 90% of deserters in other units who surrendered under pardons were either in the Navy or Royal Marines, suggesting it was a significant issue.⁷⁸

An additional factor in the decision to desert was finding a fellow soldier to leave with. 489 cases from 1289 occurred on the same day and in the same, suggesting that they left together. Usually, desertion was in pairs (132 incidences), with the occasional three (38 incidences), and the largest group in our sample was eight men who left 1/1st Foot at Queenston, Canada, on February 12, 1814. A particularly illustrative case occurred in Guernsey on July 11, 1813 when privates Elkins (a volunteer from the Dorset Militia), Richardson (recruited in Barnett), and Nunn (a native from the island) stole a boat from Vale Bay; most likely Nunn provided the expertise about the local area for such an enterprise, and three in the boat would have helped shared the workload crossing the channel. A shared desire to get back home can be inferred from deserters having the same, or similar, place of enlistment. A incident from the 2/36th Foot is indicative of this: Robert Haydon and John Perry left Blatchington barracks on September 6, 1813 - both were from Dublin and had enlisted on the same day. A more intriguing example is provided by the desertions from the 9th Light Dragoon on February 23, 1814 at Nottingham of Robert Moxham, a 21 year-old from London who had served just eighteen months, and Richard Phisby, a 23 year-old from Hounslow who was a soldier of five years.⁷⁹

All the factors discussed above prompted thoughts about desertion, but the location of the soldier and prospects this environment offered to him to escape his unit, avoid recapture and survive provided the catalyst. Interactions with communities could range from apathy, collaboration, or even exploitation, and reveal multi-lateral relationships between soldiers and society. Generally, opportunities on the run explain why soldiers left with their kit, or stole supplies or equipment, as it provided something they could sell or trade. Also, desertion was more likely to occur in the summer months in the UK,⁸⁰ reflecting prospects for work during the harvest for a man who wished to earn a little but maintain his anonymity.

Recruits often had opportunities and some means to survive whilst in the run: many had their bounty money and a considerable journey ahead of to reach their unit. Furthermore, they were likely to only have a NCO overseeing them and be billeted on their journey rather than stationed in the more controlled environment of a barrack. Recognising this, the Horse Guards (the office of the Commander-in-Chief) sought to decrease the time recruits spent travelling overland thus limiting openings to leave, and efforts were made to remove new recruits from familiar surroundings quickly. Increasingly, recruits were shipped around the UK after being sent to depots at Leith, Tilbury, and Cork. New soldiers for regiments stationed in Ireland from the north west of England were dispatched to their units via Liverpool rather than following the usual practice of going to the army depot on the Isle of Wight first.⁸¹

Deserters depended upon the sympathy of civilians if they were to avoid recapture. Charles O'Neil found someone to help when he decided to desert for the first time:

Into this shop I saw an old clothes man enter, and immediately followed him. Having ordered a pint of porter for him, I asked him if he would be willing to exchange his old and ragged clothes for my new suit. He said he would, and informed me that I might meet him under a bridge near, where we might exchange.

Observing that no one was near, I went under the bridge, and soon reappeared, dressed in his old clothes, and bearing his pack. Thus disguised, I walked bravely onwards, even passing some of my old comrades, who did not recognise me.⁸²

Later during his journey, after some trepidation, he confessed to a farmer who asked him directly if he had been a soldier. The farmer then provided him with another set of clothes and took O'Neil in his market wagon to the door of O'Neil's parental home.⁸³ James Green, a deserter from the 75th Foot, was thought to have returned to his former trade as collier and be in a coal pit near Glasgow.⁸⁴ Further evidence of protection by communities and friends comes from newspapers. William Mann, a farmer from Cold Norton in Suffolk was fined £20 for harbouring a deserter from the 10th Foot "knowing him to be such", and servants of the Duke of St. Albans tried to rescue a deserter who was employed as a coachman.⁸⁵ Perhaps the most extraordinary case was the riot at St Giles', London, in 1804 when a "mob" attempted to rescue a deserter whilst a detachment of the 23rd Foot held him in the Horse-Shoe public house, threw bricks at the windows, attempted to storm the pub and assaulted the soldiers and officer.⁸⁶

The extent and geography of desertion

St Giles' was well known for its Irish community, and taking a broader geographical focus, Ireland appears as a problem area for desertion. Seven out of the ten units that suffered the highest desertion rates in 1811 were stationed there (1/37th, 2/90th, 2/84th, 2/59th, 2/21st, 2/32nd, and 2/40th Foot). These figures confirmed the Horse Guards' view that Ireland was a problem area for desertion and it is little wonder that it ordered recruits for regiments that had a battalion in both Britain and Ireland to be sent to the former.⁸⁷ The poor situation in Ireland should be treated with some caution as the data reflects divisions in the administrative structures of the Army and there is limited information to make comparisons with other

regions in the UK. Registers from 1811 to 1814 highlight high rates of desertion in locations with a large military presence, particularly the south-east of England. Of course, this data is skewed by the stations of the regiment sampled, but nevertheless broad trends can be observed. Edinburgh and London top the list reflecting the ease of absconding in a large military community, potential anonymity offered by cities and good communication links that they offered. Similar can be said of other urban centres across the British Isles, like Dublin, Leeds, Nottingham, Birmingham and Manchester, which were also the headquarters of recruiting districts and so home to a transient military population. The list of towns and places that immediately follow London are concentrated in Hampshire, Sussex, Middlesex, and Surrey: Chichester (46); Brighton (30, including figures from the barracks); Hythe (28); and Guildford (15). These were all garrisons with frequent movement of troops. Guildford, for example, was a stopover town on the main military route between London to Portsmouth, a factor that also explains the prominence of desertion in Carlisle and York (16 and 15 desertions respectively) as they were on the main roads to and from Scotland.

Canada, specifically the Niagara region on the border between modern day Ontario and New York State, also witnessed particular high rates of desertions and there were 90 cases in the sample of deserter registers. As discussed earlier, some soldiers were peeved about the War of 1812, but there were also additional factors in operation that facilitated desertion. Firstly, weak military control and irregular pay and supplies (itself a function of the distances involved) meant that desertion was higher amongst units in Canada, particularly Canadian local defence forces.⁸⁸ This was also a problem that the US Army suffered from, and in a bid to attract recruits the US government offered lavish bounties, as much as \$124 and 320 acres of land; the cash bounty alone was equivalent to £32 at a time when the British Army was offering £6 6s,⁸⁹ introducing a significant motive to engage in bounty jumping. Even the \$50 given immediately at enlistment was still a substantial sum.⁹⁰ Stagg has calculated that 9% of the US Army was

born in the UK, and perhaps rather than assuming all these were recent immigrants some could have been British soldiers who deserted for the powerful incentive of the cash, land, and potentially a new life. The higher rate of desertion among British-born US soldiers is also suggestive of an inter-army problem.⁹¹ Generally, the environment offered opportunities to start anew, suitable cover stories could be created with the commonplace coming and goings of soldiers from a bewildering variety of units and terms of service, and it all took place within a largely English-speaking community. In this regard, areas of Canada and the US had much in common with the circumstances in the British Isles for desertion.

Given all the dynamics pushing or pulling individual soldiers to leave coupled with the influence of the locality, it is unsurprising that desertion rates varied across the period. As Table 1 shows, figures generally dropped during the 1810s with peaks at the beginning and the end of the war. The impact of desertions from recruits can be detected in the high percentage for 1805, following the Army's rapid expansion between 1803 and 1805, and whilst it continued to grow thereafter it increasingly relied on transfers from militiamen – soldiers who had already adjusted to service life. There are also spikes from Foreign and Colonial corps in 1806, 1808 and 1812-13 following significant increases in their strength. The high figures in 1814 and 1815 echo contractual attitudes towards soldiering discussed above that were particularly excited by the end of the war in Europe.

<Insert Table 1 near here>

It is worth noting that most of the foreign and colonial units served exclusively overseas, as colonial corps had geographically restricted terms of service and foreign corps were only permitted within the UK in certain circumstances.⁹² Mostly, colonial units were stationed in the territory where they were recruited. Also, as the war persisted, the British government increasingly turned to prisoners of war and foreign deserters to fill the ranks of foreign regiments. It is indicative of the distinctiveness of these units that Wellington seldom

used them on outpost duty for fear that they would desert.⁹³ With stragglers, brigandage, and an endemic lack of civil authority in some parts of Iberia, a Spanish, French, German, Italian or Polish soldier in a British foreign unit who fled in the Peninsula would probably never be captured.⁹⁴ The situation elsewhere in the Mediterranean was no better and in 1813 of the 401 men who left from the British Army based in Sicily only four were British.⁹⁵

Desertion from British corps primarily occurred in the British Isles. In 1810, 1811, and 1812 four-fifths of all incidents occurred in Britain, Ireland, and the Channel Islands,⁹⁶ reflecting the importance of opportunities and community. Calculating desertion as a proportion of total strength at different stations reinforces the scale of problem in the UK. Rates for troops stationed at home were always higher than the overall average of 3.1%, at 6.7% in 1805, dropping to around 5% for 1806 to 1808, and 4% in 1809,⁹⁷ whilst in 1811 and 1812 5.2% of troops stationed in the UK absconded. The general decline in the middle of the period correlates with a decrease in the proportion of British units stationed within the UK, as in 1813 only a third of the manpower of British corps were at home compared to two-thirds in 1804.⁹⁸ These ratios, however, were still significantly higher than those for units overseas, which equalled 0.9% and 1.4% in the 1811 and 1812 respectively.⁹⁹ The only exception to these figures was Canada.

The influence of location is exemplified by examining units where variation in desertion rates are far beyond what could be accounted for by the inconsistent application of military law, the unit's disciplinary regime, or changes in personnel. For example, whilst the 1/37th Foot was in Ireland during 1811 there were 173 cases of desertion but the unit witnessed a massive change in its level of desertion when it was sent to England and then Gibraltar in 1812, when only 36 soldiers deserted.¹⁰⁰ Variation also occurred between battalions of a regiment. The 6th Foot's first battalion lost 3.2% of its men through desertions per year when it was stationed in the UK which dropped to only 0.8% a year whilst it was overseas, whilst the

second battalion's average desertion rate was 4%, a figure that only abated when the battalion was sent to Jersey.¹⁰¹

<Insert Table 2 near here>

The fluctuating unit-level experience of desertion and its relationship to its location is reinforced by an analysis of the biannual inspections returns. Table 2 demonstrates the high degree of variability across corps, although the calculated figures should be used carefully. The 2/6th Foot transferred 1,001 men to other units (mostly its first battalion) between inspections, and so its actual desertion rate is lower than the table suggests. Nevertheless, there is a correlation between units in the UK and high levels of desertion, whilst at the other extreme relatively isolated garrisons in small territories like Gibraltar or Malta had low rates. A high turnover in manpower and intensive recruiting exacerbated desertion; 75% of the 2/50th and 90 men from the 2/25th Foot had less than one year's service. In the case of the 2/87th Foot 90 recruits had joined the unit whilst it had received 297 men and transferred 253 men to other units. Indeed, this can help explain the different experience of the 13th and 1/6th Foot, both stationed at Deal: the 13th had recruited 58 men, out of a total of 532 whilst the 1/6th only 36 out of 930.

Given the variety of reasons for leaving (or, more precisely, being classified as a deserter), it is unsurprising that the social composition of deserters listed in a War Office list from 1815 is not significantly different from the overall composition of the Army. Where a trade is given, 47 from 83 were listed as labourers and the remainder listed occupations of varying levels of skill and standing ranging from weavers and carpenters to a tailor and jeweller. These proportions are slightly skewed towards to labourers, but with the high degree of variation in trades within regiments depending on where it recruited it is sensible to be careful before concluding that labourers were more likely to leave. Desertions were almost exclusively from privates – only 23 from the total sample were non-commissioned officers;

even considering that they were a smaller proportion of the Army's personnel they are underrepresented.¹⁰² This suggests that NCOs were more institutionalised or invested in their position - certainly the military authorities were encouraging this¹⁰³ - and they may have protested in other ways.

Conclusion

Both the broad statistics and unit-level information demonstrate that desertion was mostly a problem amongst new recruits and troops stationed within the UK, a combination of new soldiers rejecting their new military identity and having a relatively good chance of escaping back into civilian society. Some soldiers were tempted to abscond to claim another bounty, a particular crime engendered by the Army's, and Navy's recruitment policies in a long war. Alongside these cases, there were a significant number of longer serving soldiers who left, either as a temporary protest or a permanent, unilateral, severing of their military contract. A mixture of push and pull factors influenced these soldiers, which were often only realised when the location facilitated desertion, and it explains the huge variations between units. This was particularly the case after peace in Europe in 1814, when the military authorities tried to keep men to fight the war in North America. Like Brumwell's findings about the British Army in the Seven Years' War, soldiers protesting through desertion provides evidence of the strong sense of rights felt by rank and file, albeit that they were less likely to express them in overt defiance and even mutiny.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, contractual attitudes towards soldiering persisted throughout the wars in spite of the increasingly nationalist rhetoric and the changing scale of the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁰⁵

Desertion, both from recruits and longer serving soldiers, testifies to the continued connection and influence of families, friends, and civilian attitudes on soldiers. Despite the military authorities' exertions to foster a "regimental world" that Cookson has explored and their orders to remove soldiers from their home communities described above,¹⁰⁶ soldiers

continued to return to, or create new, civilian lives for themselves. Given the impact it had on the Army's units, further research is required to explore why ministers and the Horse Guards did not do more to tackle the problem, particularly in comparison to the Napoleonic Empire that addressed the issue by establishing a gendarmerie and breaking collusion between deserters and communities.¹⁰⁷ Desertion from the British Army in the Napoleonic Wars exemplifies the continual dialogue between the army and society, in which soldiers had much more agency, and the military authorities had much less control, than is often supposed.

Acknowledgements

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³ Joseph Cozens, "'The Blackest Perjury': Desertion, Military Justice, and Popular Politics in England, 1803–1805," *Labour History Review* 79 (2014): 255-280.

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⁵ Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army : Recruitment, Society and Tradition, 1807-1815* (Basingstoke, 2010), 56-57.

⁶ Harry Calvert, "Return of the Number of Casualties Which Have Occurred in the British Army, During the Last Ten Years, by Deaths, Discharges, and Desertions; Distinguishing British from Foreign and Colonial Corps", *House of Commons Papers, 1813-14, XI, 261,*

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⁷ For the importance of studying the British Army at unit level, see Arthur N. Gilbert, “A Tale of Two Regiments: Manpower and Effectiveness in British Military Units During the Napoleonic Wars”, *Armed Forces & Society* 9 (1983): 275-92.

⁸ The National Archives (TNA), London, Office of the Commander-in-Chief and War Office: Adjutant General and Army Council: Inspection Returns, WO27/91, 1807.

⁹ See Agostini, “Deserted His Majesty's Service,” 960; John Childs, *Armies and Warfare in Europe 1648-1789* (Manchester, 1982), 71-73; André Corvisier, *Armies and Societies in Europe, 1494-1789* (Bloomington, 1976), 179; Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters*, 7.

¹⁰ TNA, Judge Advocate General's Office: General Courts Martial Registers, Confirmed at Home, WO92/1.

¹¹ TNA, Office of the Commander-in-Chief: Out-letters. General letters, WO3/44, Wynyard to Lt. Col. Sir James Blair (C/O Ayrshire Militia), November 30, 1807.

¹² TNA, WO3/45, Wynyard to Lt. Gen. Pigot, April 7, 1808; TNA, Judge Advocate General's Office: Courts Martial Proceedings, WO71/213, Trial of John Mcanalty, May 2, 1808.

¹³ TNA, WO3/46, Wynyard to Lt. Gen. Somerset, October 28, 1808.

¹⁴ Gilbert, “Why Men Deserted from the Eighteenth-Century British Army,” 553-567; Edward Coss, *All for the King’s Shilling: the British Soldier under Wellington, 1808-1814* (Oklahoma, 2010), 119; Charles W. C. Oman, *Wellington’s Army, 1809-1814* (London, 1913), 243.

¹⁵ TNA, War Office and predecessors: Secretary-at-War, Secretary of State for War, and Related Bodies, Registers, WO25/2906 and 2907. The sample contains 1,351 cases of desertions from the 2nd Dragoon Guards, 3rd Dragoons, 7-10th Light Dragoons, 1st Foot Guards, 1st Foot, 6th Foot, 22nd Foot, 35th Foot, 43rd Foot, 59th Foot, and 74th Foot. These regiments have been sampled from these sources to reflect the composition of the army.

¹⁶ Mutiny Act, 47 Geo. III, c32, 1807 (March 23, 1807).

¹⁷ See for example, TNA, WO25/2709, ‘A List and Description of Deserters from His Majesty’s Service’, War Office, March 4, 1815. Comments were made on their complexion and scars or marks.

¹⁸ William Tatum III, “‘The Soldiers Murmured Much on Account of This Usage’: Military Justice and Negotiated Authority in the Eighteenth-Century British Army” in *Britain’s Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society, 1715-1815*, ed. Kevin Linch and Matthew McCormack (Liverpool, 2014), 104-09.

¹⁹ Jottings from My Sabretasch, by a Chelsea Pensioner (London, 1847), 114-15.

²⁰ Surrey History Centre (SHC), Woking, Borough of Guildford Quarter Sessions and Other Courts held in the Borough, BR/QS/5/25, Oaths of John White and George Nethercott, February 5, 1808.

²¹ SHC, BR/QS/5/25, Information of Nathaniel Lening, December 21, 1808.

²² TNA, WO3/157, Wynyard to Moore, September 14, 1809.

²³ TNA, WO3/160, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, February 4, 1815.

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- ²⁴ SHC, BR/QS/5/24-31, papers on deserters, 1808 to 1815.
- ²⁵ *A Military Dictionary, Explaining and Describing, the Technical Terms, Works and Machines, Used in the Science of War. With an Introduction to Fortification. Compiled from the Best Writers on Military Affairs, ...* (Dublin, 1780).
- ²⁶ Mutiny Act, 41 Geo. III, c. 11, 1801.
- ²⁷ Stepler, "British Military Law," 862-863.
- ²⁸ Stephen Payne Adye, *A Treatise on Courts Martial. Also an Essay on Military Punishments and Rewards. The Fifth Edition, with Additions and Amendments.* By S. Payne Adye, Esq. Captain of the Royal Regiment of Artillery, Major in the Army, and Deputy Judge Advocate to His Majesty's Troops Serving in North America (London, 1799), 208.
- ²⁹ Cozens, "'The Blackest Perjury'", 269-274.
- ³⁰ Charles O'Neil, *The Military Adventures of Charles O'Neil* (Worcester, 1851), 19-20.
- ³¹ Philip Shaw, 'Longing for Home: Robert Hamilton, Nostalgia and the Emotional Life of the Eighteenth-Century Soldier', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* doi: 10.1111/1754-0208.12258.
- ³² Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 103-4.
- ³³ TNA, War Department In-Letters And Papers, WO1/637, Duke of York to Lord Castlereagh, January 22, 1808.
- ³⁴ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 96
- ³⁵ Peter Burroughs, "Crime and Punishment in the British Army, 1815-1870" *The English Historical Review* 100 (1985): 551.
- ³⁶ TNA, WO3/160, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, February 4, 1815.
- ³⁷ Stephen Conway, "The Eighteenth-Century British as a European Institution" in *Britain's Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society, 1715-1815*, ed. Kevin Linch and Matthew McCormack (Liverpool, 2014), 29-30.

³⁸ Fred Anderson, *A people's army: Massachusetts soldiers and society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill, c1984), 185-195.

³⁹ J. E. Cookson, "Service without Politics? Army, Militia and Volunteers in Britain during the American and French Revolutionary Wars" *War In History*, 10 (2003): 381-97.

⁴⁰ TNA, WO71/213, Trial of John Carrol and George Callaghan, June 1, 1808.

⁴¹ SHC, BR/QS/5/30, Oath of William Derrick, Cpl. 2nd Surrey Militia, July 6, 1813.

⁴² TNA, WO71/220, Trial of John Dunning, March 14, 1810.

⁴³ TNA, WO71/226, Trial of William Langford, April 17, 1812.

⁴⁴ 15th Light Dragoons: TNA, Office of the Commander in Chief: Monthly Returns to the Adjutant General, WO17/41, 15 Dragoons, 1800-1812; TNA, WO17/257, 15-25 Dragoons Brunswick Hussars and Wagon Train, 1813; TNA, WO17/272, 10-25 Dragoons, Brunswick Hussars, Wagon Train and Staff Corp, 1813; TNA, WO17/288, 11-25 Dragoons, Brunswick Hussars, Wagon Train and Staff Corps, 1815. 36th Foot: TNA, WO17/277, 35-47 Foot, 1814; TNA, WO1/637, Duke of York to Lord Castlereagh, 22 January 1808; TNA, WO17/277, 35-47 Foot, 1814; TNA, WO17/292, 28-41 Foot, 1815.

⁴⁵ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 145.

⁴⁶ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, 111-114; Danielle Coombs, 'Crime and the Soldier: Identifying a soldier-specific experience of Crime in the British Army' (PhD thesis, University of Leeds 2015), 54-58.

⁴⁷ TNA, WO71/217, Trial of Francis Morpeth, March 5, 1808.

⁴⁸ Danielle Coombs, 'Soldiers and women: female agency and 'domestic pull' in desertion from the British Army, c.1740-1820' (MA by Research thesis, University of Leeds 2010); Jennine Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British Army in the Long Eighteenth Century: 'The Girl I Left Behind Me'* (Oxford, 2014).

⁴⁹ TNA, WO71/226, Trial of William Langford, April 17, 1812.

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- ⁵⁰ TNA, WO25/2906, entry for 6th Dragoon Guards.
- ⁵¹ General Regulations and Orders for the Army Adjutant General's Office, Horse-Guards, 12th August, 1811, ([London], 1811).
- ⁵² "Journal of a Soldier of the Seventy-First Regiment (Highland Light Infantry) from 1806 to 1815," in *Memorials of the Late War* (Edinburgh, 1828), 129.
- ⁵³ John Spencer Cooper, *Rough Notes of Seven Campaigns in Portugal, Spain, France and America During the Years 1809-1815* (Staplehurst, 1996), 121.
- ⁵⁴ *Vicissitudes in the Life of a Scottish Soldier. Written by Himself*, (London, 1827), 340.
- ⁵⁵ TNA, WO25/2907, *Deserters: Infantry, 1811 - 1815*.
- ⁵⁶ The percentage for the army is drawn from a sample of TNA, WO27/116-118 & /121-123, *Inspection Returns for 1813*.
- ⁵⁷ TNA, WO25/2907, entry for 1/7th Foot.
- ⁵⁸ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 100.
- ⁵⁹ British Library (BL), London, Windham papers, Add. Mss. 37889, *Proposal of Capt. Drinkwater*.
- ⁶⁰ TNA, WO3/584, Calvert to Chelsea Hospital Commissioners, August 8, 1808.
- ⁶¹ TNA, WO3/584, Calvert to Chelsea Hospital Commissioners, September 24, 1807.
- ⁶² TNA, Home Office: Military Correspondence. War Office, etc. Military (all departments), HO50/429, Merry to Addington, March 5, 1814.
- ⁶³ TNA, WO3/160, Darling to Deputy Secretary at War, October 7, 1814; TNA, WO3/160, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, February 4, 1815. Thomas Bouler had been discharged in 1813.
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⁶⁵ TNA, Army Circulars, Memoranda, Orders and Regulations. Army Regulations, etc from Various Sources, WO123/117, General Orders, December 14, 1808; An Act for Punishing Mutiny and Desertion and for the Better Payment of the Army and Their Quarters. With an Index. Also, Rules and Articles for the Better Government of All His Majesty's Forces (London, 1809).

⁶⁶ TNA, WO3/160, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, February 4, 1815.

⁶⁷ TNA, WO3/154, Calvert to Moore, April 23, 1807.

⁶⁸ TNA, HO50/417, Merry to Beckett, October 2, 1810; TNA, Home Office: Military Entry Books. War Office Letter Book Miscellaneous, HO51/171, Goulburn to Merry, October 5, 1810; TNA, WO3/157, Wynyard to Merry, July 16, 1810; TNA, WO3/157, Calvert to Merry, January 16, 1810.

⁶⁹ TNA, WO3/157, Calvert to Merry, January 16, 1810.

⁷⁰ Linch, Britain and Wellington's Army, 84-87.

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⁷² TNA, HO50/417, Merry to Beckett, October 2, 1810.

⁷³ TNA, HO51/171, Goulburn to Merry, October 5, 1810.

⁷⁴ TNA, WO3/160, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, February 4, 1815. WO3/158, Calvert to Deputy Secretary at War, August 28, 1812.

⁷⁵ TNA, HO51/172, Goulburn to Torrens, October 16, 1811.

⁷⁶ TNA, WO3/157, Calvert to Palmerstone, September 13, 1810.

⁷⁷ Mutiny Act, 53 Geo III, c.17, 1813 (March 23, 1813).

⁷⁸ WO3/155, /157 & /158. The sample has 106 names in it.

⁷⁹ TNA, WO25/2907, Deserters: Infantry, 1811 - 1815; TNA, WO25/2906, Deserters. Cavalry, 1811 - 1827.

⁸⁰ Between 1805 and 1809, there were an average of 5.9 desertions per 1,000 men in August compared to 3.3 in January; Calvert, “Return of the Number of Desertions Which Have Taken Place Monthly, from the Army at Home, from the 1st January 1805; Distinguishing Great Britain from Ireland: And Specifying the Effective Strength, in Each Country, out of Which Such Desertions Have Taken Place”, HCP, 1807, IV, 315-18, August 10, 1807; ———, “Return of the Number of Desertions Which Have Taken Place Monthly, in the Army in Great Britain and Ireland, from the 1st July 1807 to the 1st January 1808; Specifying the Effective Strength of the Army During the Periods When Such Desertions Took Place; and Similar Returns for the Corresponding Periods of the Years 1805 and 1806”, HCP, 1808, VII, 127-30, February 16, 1808; Adjutant General’s Office, “Return of the Number of Desertions from the Regular Army at Home; from 1st January 1807, to the 24th December 1809”, HCP, 1810, XII, 381-82, February 16, 1810.

⁸¹ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 101.

⁸² O’Neil, *The Military Adventures of Charles O’Neil*, 20.

⁸³ ———, *The Military Adventures of Charles O’Neil*, 21.

⁸⁴ TNA, WO25/2907, Deserters: Infantry, 1811 - 1815.

⁸⁵ “Ipswich, August 10” *The Ipswich Journal*, August 10, 1805; “Public Office, Bow Street” *The Morning Post*, June 1, 1805.

⁸⁶ “Old Bailey Monday, Sept. 17” *The Morning Post*, September 18, 1804; Cozens, ““The Blackest Perjury””, 275.

⁸⁷ TNA, Office of the Commander-in-Chief: Out-letters. Letters to public departments, WO3/195, Calvert to Adjutant General of Ireland, May 31, 1808.

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⁸⁹ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, 1989), 76; an exchange rate of the dollar equalling £0.2765 has been used, http://measuringworth.com/datasets/exchangeglobal/result.php?year_source=1791&year_result=2007&countryE%5B%5D=United+Kingdom [accessed 17 August 2015].

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⁹¹ Stagg, “Enlisted Men in the United States Army, 1812-1815”: 644.

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⁹⁵ TNA, *Commander-in-Chief and War Office: Adjutant General's Department: Papers. Special and Miscellaneous Returns. Regular army and militia strengths, WO162/326, Number of Deserters from the Regular Army at Home and Abroad During 1813, April 5, 1814.*

⁹⁶ TNA, *War Office and predecessors: Secretary-at-War, Secretary of State for War, and Related Bodies, Registers. Miscellaneous Lists and Returns. Documents relating to Establishments and recruiting, WO25/3224, Casualty Return for 1810, November 15, 1811; TNA, WO25/3225, Casualty Return for 1811 to 1813, September 24, 1813.*

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⁹⁸ Fortescue, *The County Lieutenancies and the Army, 1803 - 1814*, 303; Harry Calvert, "Return of the Effective Strength of the Regular and Militia Forces, on the 25th June, and 25th December, 1813; Distinguishing, Foreign and Colonial Corps, Cavalry, Foot Guards, and Infantry; and Specifying the Number of Each Serving at Home and Abroad", HCP, 1813-14, XI, 283, April 5, 1814.

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¹⁰¹ TNA, WO17/104, 6th Foot, 1806 - 1812; TNA, WO17/259, 1st - 10th Foot, 1813; TNA, WO17/259, 1st - 10th Foot, 1813.

¹⁰² TNA, WO25/2907, Deserters: Infantry, 1811 - 1815; TNA, WO25/2906, Deserters. Cavalry, 1811 - 1827; Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 90-91, 96.

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¹⁰⁵ On Britishness and wartime patriotism see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992); for the changing scale of warfare David Bell, *The first total war: Napoleon's Europe and the birth of modern warfare* (London, 2007).

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¹⁰⁷ See in particular, Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters*.