William Jones of the Grenadier Regiment of Foot Guards

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"When [England's] Charles II was in exile on the [European] continent, he had many [military] officers in his court, and in 1656 [he] raised his Royal Regiment of Guards who returned to England with him in 1660. In 1685 [this regiment] had become known as the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards, which title it retained until 1815...."[1]

In the late 1790's the menace of war arose in Europe with the ascendancy of the French military general Napoleon Bonaparte. By 1810, Napoleon was a self-proclaimed Emperor with an Empire that stretched from the Kingdom of Portugal to the Russian Empire.[2]

For ten years the citizens of Britain had obsessed over the fear of a Napoleonic invasion of their island. Many authors of that time, including Thackeray, Austen, Hardy, and many others, reflected that obsession in their writings. Even on the little farmstead of Lletty Cadwgan in the middle of Carmarthenshire, Wales, the family of William Jones would not have been insulated from the news of Napoleon's European conquests and would surely have felt the impending threat of his possible invasion of their homeland. In The Story of Mankind, Hendrik Willem Van Loon humorously illustrates the scope of this concern. *"In short, when we study the character of the Emperor, we begin to understand those anxious British mothers who used to drive their children to bed with the threat that 'Bonaparte, who ate little boys and girls for breakfast, would come and get them if they were not very good.'"*[3]

In 1813 and 1814, Napoleon's army suffered a series of setbacks and defeats, especially at the hands of the Russian army. Napoleon was forced to retreat back to France where he abdicated his title as Emperor and ultimately ended up on the island of Elba in exile. But on March 1, 1815, Napoleon secretly returned to France, where he marshaled the support of his still loyal French army and began his conquest to reclaim what had formerly been his empire.[4]

In June of 1815, the French army was poised to attack the Allied military forces of England, Prussia, and the Netherlands, that had been assembled in Belgium under the command of England's Duke of Wellington. After the first few days of battle, the French army had claimed major victories at Ligny and Quatre Bras and held the advantage to destroy Wellington's army at Waterloo.

On the 18th of June, a massive French attack surged around the walled farm complex of La Haie Sainte, which was located at the center of the Allied line. The French eventually smashed down the gate of the complex. Inside, the garrisoned Allied troops had run out of ammunition and a desperate hand-to-hand fight ensued. Seeing the situation, the Netherlands' Prince of Orange, decided to lend a hand. He quickly formed two battalions which were caught by a body of French cavalry; one was ridden down and destroyed, the other managed to form a defensive square just in time to save itself. For the third time in as many days, the young, inept Prince had sacrificed a battalion to no purpose. It was useless anyway. The farm was lost and of the original 678 men who had been garrisoned at La Haie Sainte, only 42 managed to escape alive. Now, the center of the Allied line was completely exposed to French attack. The situation became desperate

all across the line. Commanders were calling for reinforcements. Men were so thinly spread that the issue of the battle hung severely in the balance. There were none to call on.

It was then that Wellington rallied his reserves in support. It was touch and go, but the Allies finally succeeded in pushing the French back and in the process gained some of the artillery the French had left behind. The Prince of Orange had meanwhile ordered yet another unlucky battalion into the line, but they broke and retreated before they could be overrun by the French cavalry. Luckily, the Prince was knocked from his horse by a musket ball, and carried from the field, wounded. It was then that the Allied cause had a turn for the better. The Prussians had finally arrived and came up on the left of the line. This meant that one of Wellington's cavalry brigades was now free to strengthen the center. The cavalry arrived literally in the nick of time.

Napoleon's position now became desperate. The Allied line remained intact, even though Wellington's force had shrunk to perhaps 35,000. Napoleon now gambled his last reserve, the elite infantry of the Imperial Guard, which had never once been vanquished in battle. Accordingly, he sent forward two attacks of the Imperial Guard against the Allied line. It was that part of the line that was defended by Britain's 1st Regiment of Foot Guards. The French were met with stout resistance. In column, the Imperial Guard could not reply effectively and hundreds of them died where they stood, before the remainder broke and fled leaving half its strength dead on that Waterloo ridge. That was the end, as an incredulous cry of "La Garde recule" (the Guard retreats) echoed along the French line. And then the entire French army began to disintegrate. Wellington then ordered a general advance of the whole Allied line and the French retreat became a rout as panic set in.[5]

With the triumphal return of Wellington's army to England in 1815, a special honor awaited the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards. Previous to and at the time of Waterloo, only one or two companies within certain regiments were designated as a Grenadier Company. But now the entire regiment was honorably renamed the Grenadier Guards, *"that title received in recognition of having defeated the French Imperial Guard at Waterloo."*[6] Their new regimental badge became the grenade.

Thomas J. Fleming, in his book, Now We Are Enemies, describes what a grenadier was in the British army. *"....the grenadiers were crack troops, the cream of the regiments. The grenadiers were the tallest, strongest, toughest soldiers in the army, experts with the bayonet. They had been formed over 150 years ago to hurl the crude heavy explosive grenades then in use. Though the grenades proved impractical, the idea of marshaling the finest soldiers in the regiment into picked companies proved to be a good one. They were available for special missions requiring extra reserves of courage and strength. They quickly generated their own military tradition and distinct pride in their prowess."*[7] Incidentally, that tradition and pride is very much alive in the Grenadier Guards of today.

It was into this regiment of Grenadier Guards that an underage William Jones enlisted on the 24th of February, 1816, just eight months after that unit's incredible victory over the French Imperial Guard at Waterloo. William was 17 years 6 months old when he joined the regiment. However, *"In all British battalions it was normal for there to be a small number of men, perhaps a dozen or so, who had joined the ranks underage - that is, under 18."*[8]

"The close of the Napoleonic Wars was followed by .....a period of unsettlement and distress....In every quarter of Europe the red spectre of revolution raised its head....whilst in Britain itself, deeply suffering.... grave disturbances occurred....which called for the intervention of armed force. In spite of this danger the direct effect upon the army of all this depression was a drastic reduction both in numbers and equipment, resulting from a general attack upon all military expenditure, though the Foot Guards, being Household troops, suffered less than did the rest of the service."[9]

With the downsizing of the military at that time, recruiters for the regiments would have been more selective in their choice of recruits. William apparently must have exhibited the qualities necessary to become a grenadier. New recruits were generally unmarried and William was probably no exception. Some of the information on his discharge papers would likely not have changed much from what would have been on his enlistment papers. His discharge papers give the following description of him. *"He is.... 5 feet 8 inches in Height, Brown Hair, Blue Eyes, Fair Complexion. By Trade a Labourer....his character is good."* He was probably unable to read or write, having signed his discharge papers with "his mark" which was an "X". He enlisted as a "private", and like most privates in the British army at that time, remained at that rank for the duration of his military career.[10]

The Grenadier Guards, as Household troops, were based in London. Their regimental uniforms were "scarlet with blue facings". The buttons on their jackets "were set regular or at equal intervals." The conversion of the 1st Foot Guards to Grenadier Guards in 1815 gave all ranks the fur cap or distinctive bearskin hat. As the grenadier companies of line battalions had white plumes on the left of their fur caps, these were also worn by all men of the Grenadier Guards. The regiment was divided into three battalions, with William belonging to the 1st Battalion. Besides the regimental Grenade Badge, he would have also worn the badge of the 1st Battalion, which was the Imperial or Royal Crown of Charles II. The companies of the battalion appear to be organized by the origin or location of recruitment, such as Scotland, Ireland, Wales, or various locations throughout England. Because William was Welsh and had been recruited in Wales, it is not inconceivable that he could have belonged to the 8th Company, whose badge was the Red Dragon of Wales.[11] British soldiers, during that time, were being issued the British Baker Rifle, which *"undoubtedly had its greatest period of glory during the Napoleonic Wars, but it continued as an item of issue into the 1830's"*. The *"Infantry Rifle"* as it was officially known, had a 30 ½ inch rifled barrel which shot a .625 inch ball, was full stocked and was issued *"with a brass-handled sword bayonet with a 23 inch blade."*[12]

The period following the Napoleonic Wars was a trying one for the soldiers of the Grenadier Guards, and according to Major H.L. Aubrey-Fletcher in his book, A History of the Foot Guards to 1856, *"it was with genuine relief that they greeted the prospect of active service which appeared to offer itself in the dispatch of a small expeditionary force to Portugal in 1826, to support the cause of the young queen, Donna Maria, against the pretensions of her uncle, Dom Miguel. For a year, the followers of the queen maintained themselves without calling upon their British allies, and the young soldiers of the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, which formed part of the expeditionary force, had nothing to do but visit the places around their cantonments at Santarem. But early in 1828 Dom Miguel, who had apparently recognized his niece's rule, suddenly led a force into*

Portugal from across the Spanish frontier and seized the throne, whereupon the British Government, scenting serious trouble, promptly withdrew its expeditionary force with the naïve explanation that the situation had now become a purely domestic one which the people of Portugal must settle for themselves."[13] William was deployed with the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards to Portugal from December 1826 to April 1828.[14]

The remainder of William Jones' military career with the Grenadier Guards was served at home and appears to be rather routine and fairly uneventful. After nearly twenty-two years of service, William requested and was given an honorable discharge and a pension from the British army. He had served as a private from the 23rd of February 1816 to the 24th of January 1838, a total of 21 years 336 days,[15] in arguably one of the most honored and elite regiments in the entire British army, the Grenadier Regiment of Foot Guards.

As a postscript, William's reputation and prowess as a soldier seems to have followed him, even after he was pensioned. In Fred S. Price's History of Llansawel published some sixty years after William's retirement from the military, he was still referred to as… *"An old soldier, Wm. Jones"*.[16]

[1] Uniforms of the British Army
By W.Y. Carman, Webb & Bower, Exeter, England

[2] Collier's Encyclopedia Vol. 17
P.F. Collier & Son, Now York, 1976

[3] The Story of Mankind
By Hendrik Willem Van Loon, The MacMillan Co., New York, 1923

[4] same as #2

[5] "Waterloo for the Uninitiated - June 18, 1815"
Article from internet, www.homepages.ihug.co.nz/~awoodley/regency/**waterloo**.html

[6] The Regimental Records of the British Army
By John S. Farmer, Grant Richards, London, 1901

[7] Now We Are Enemies
By Thomas J. Fleming, St. Martins Press, New York 1960

[8] "2nd Battalion 69th (South Lincolnshire) Foot During the Waterloo Campaign"
By Martin Aaron, www.napoleon-series.org/military/organization/britain/infantry/c_2-69waterloo.html

[9] A History of the Foot Guards to 1856
By Maj. H.L. Aubrey-Fletcher, Constable & Co. LTD, 1927

[10] "Discharge Papers of William Jones"
British Military Records WO/97/183

[11] same as # 1 and # 6

[12] "The American Rifleman"
March 2017, *"British Baker Rifle"* By Garry James, pg. 96

[13] same as # 9

[14] same as # 10

[15] same as # 10

[16] History of Llansawel, Carmarthenshire
By Fred S. Price, B. Trerise, Swansea, 1898