

GENERAL ROWLAND HILL OF SHROPSHIRE

Nick Lipscombe

Rowland Hill joined his first regiment in 1790 and forged his military career in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. He was Wellington’s most trusted subordinate, a consummate soldier and a compassionate leader.

Rowland Hill (1772-1842) was born to a well-established Shropshire land-owning family whose ancestors had amassed considerable wealth and property as traders during the reign of Henry VIII and had subsequently occupied senior positions under William III and Queen Anne. Rowland was the second son, and fourth child, of 16 children born to John Hill and Mary Chambre. Rowland and his brothers and sisters had an idyllic childhood; the Hill children were ‘familiar with the River Severn, the farms, the grain fields and cattle, and the numerous mines located in the region’. Educated at Chester he was earmarked for a career in law. Rowland, however, had no such plans, making clear his intention to follow his elder brother’s footsteps and pursue a military career. Somewhat bemused, but aware of Rowland’s wishes, his father purchased him an ensigncy in the 38th (Staffordshire) Foot. Hill joined his Regiment in July 1790.

French Revolutionary Wars

The following year he took up a lieutenancy in the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment. In 1793 he volunteered for action



From a wealthy Shropshire family, Rowland Hill was one of Wellington’s most trusted commanders. *Lieutenant-General Rowland, Lord Hill, 1819* by George Dawe.

at the siege of Toulon and it was here that he met Thomas Graham (later Lord Lyndoch) who became a lifelong friend. In 1794 Graham raised the 90th Foot (Perthshire Light Infantry) and invited Hill to join him, on the proviso that Hill recruited large numbers of men from his native Shropshire. In 1796 the 90th Foot deployed to Gibraltar and by 1800 Hill was in command of the Regiment, taking part in the Battle of Alexandria the following year.

Master strategist of the Peninsular War

He had to wait until the outbreak of the war in Iberia before seeing action again, by which time he was a Major General. He commanded a brigade under Wellesley (the future Duke of Wellington) at Vimeiro in August 1808 and another in Moore’s army which fought a desperate rearguard

at Coruña in January 1809 before embarking on the waiting transports. When Wellesley returned to Portugal with Britain’s expeditionary army in 1809, Hill once again received command of a brigade and during the operation to liberate Oporto from Marshal Soult’s grasp he was given the first of his many independent missions. It was an early



Rowland Hill at Wellington's side. Pictured to the right of Wellington (centre), this image also includes Henry Paget (far right), another of Wellington's distinguished generals. *Portraits of the General Officers*, pub. H. Colburn, engr. Rouse, 1816.

indication of Wellington's confidence and trust. Within months he was commanding the 2nd Division, but he underestimated French intentions on the eve of the Battle of Talavera when a surprise night attack caught him unprepared. His rapid deployment of his reserve recaptured the position and recovered the situation. Wellington's trust was repaid in 1810 when Hill, deployed in an independent position to the south, made best speed over difficult terrain to join Wellington's army at the ridge of Buçaco.

From 1811 until the end of the war, Hill was, in every sense, an independent commander of a corps-sized force. Four particular actions stand out as beacons of his military prowess. The first, in 1811, which resulted in the dispersion and capture of the French force at Arroyo dos Molinos, was masterful in the speed and surprise with which it was conducted. In 1812 his daring raid on the French-held, strategically important bridge at Almaraz, by way of a precursor to the Salamanca campaign, was equally exceptional. In 1813 at the battle of Vitoria his corps opened proceedings on the allied right flank, securing the Heights of Puebla, but his greatest achievement was at the Battle of Saint-Pierre d'Irube in December 1813 when he held off more than 30,000 French troops with fewer than half that number until reinforced. Hill exposed himself repeatedly at the most dangerous parts of the line, encouraging the defenders with his infectious resolve. At Waterloo Hill was given command of the 2nd Corps and he led the charge of Sir Frederick Adam's Brigade in the last critical stages of the battle.

A compassionate figure

Hill never married. He became a General in 1825, and was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army in 1828. He was appointed Governor of Plymouth in 1830 and became Viscount Hill of Almaraz in 1842. He died at Hardwicke Grange, Shropshire

on 10 December 1842 and is buried in the churchyard at Hadnall. A 40-metre high column was erected in his honour outside the Shirehall (the Shropshire Council offices); the first stone was laid by the Salopian Lodge of Freemasons in 1814 and it was completed on 18 June 1816, the first anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo.

Rowland Hill was, without doubt, Wellington's most trusted subordinate. He was innovative, bold and utterly trustworthy but it was his extraordinary compassion towards the rank and file which earned him the sobriquet 'Daddy Hill'. Having served the majority of his career in the shadow of the Iron Duke the opportunities to demonstrate the full extent of his martial prowess were curtailed. It is with some irony, therefore, that Hill is remembered more for his benevolence than his soldierly competence. Yet he possessed abundant quantities of the latter.

Nick Lipscombe is a Napoleonic Historian and Tour Guide. He spent 34 years in the British Army. Published work includes his award-winning *The Peninsular War Atlas* (Osprey Publishing, 2nd edn., 2014), *Wellington's Guns: The Untold Story of Wellington and his Artillery in the Peninsula and at Waterloo* (Osprey Publishing, 2013), *Wellington's Forgotten Front* (Gerrard Books, 2013), *Bayonne and Toulouse 1813-14, Wellington Invades France* (Osprey Publishing, 2014) and, most recently, *Waterloo – The Decisive Victory* (Osprey Publishing, 2014).

Further reading:

Joanna Hill, *Wellington's Right Hand: Rowland, Viscount Hill* (The History Press, 2011).

Gordon Tefeteller, *The Surpriser: Life of Rowland, Lord Hill* (University of Delaware Press, 1983).