

# LIEUTENANT JOHN VANDELEUR OF WORCESTER

Andrew Bamford

*John Vandeleur of Worcester, who fought at Waterloo with the 12th Light Dragoons, began the day of 18 June as a spectator to the battle of Waterloo. He ended it as a hero, after seeking out and rescuing his commanding officer, left for dead on the field.*



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The charge of the 12th Light Dragoons at Waterloo. John Vandeleur rescued his commanding officer, left for dead on the field, after the regiment's engagement with French infantry. Detail from watercolour by Richard Simkin.

**J**ohn Vandeleur of Worcester was in many ways typical of the sort of young man filling the junior commissioned ranks of Wellington’s army. The Vandeleur family was an Irish one, and John’s father was one of three brothers, all of whom had served as army officers. Of the three, one had fallen victim to illness and the other had been killed in action in India, whilst John’s father – also John – had risen to command a cavalry regiment before being obliged to leave the service due to the poor state of his health.

With his wife and growing family, he had retired to Barbourne, on the outskirts of Worcester. The family finances appear to have been less than robust, for although there was money enough to keep up a house and to set five sons on their way in life, there was none to spare to allow John and the two younger brothers who followed him into the Army to purchase their way through the ranks.

What is more, John’s letters home contain frequent pleas for financial assistance, often being addressed to his mother and asking her to intercede with his father in the hope of a loosening of the purse strings. Those letters, privately published in 1894, give us a useful insight into John Vandeleur’s experience of military service between 1810 and 1815, including his participation in the Battle of Waterloo.

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Lt. John Vandeleur in later life. An early photograph taken following his retirement from the Army in 1846.

### Early action

Although there was insufficient money to purchase a first commission for John Vandeleur, the fact that his father was a retired officer gave him the opportunity of a place as a Gentleman Cadet at the Royal Military College at Marlow. Upon graduation in 1809, aged sixteen, he was appointed as an ensign in the 71st Highland Light Infantry, which he joined the following year: just in time to accompany the regiment’s first battalion when it embarked for Portugal to join Wellington’s army in its defence of Lisbon.

During the coming months, Vandeleur received a practical education in soldiering to complement the theoretical instruction he had received at Marlow. His letters indicate that he took some time to get used to the hardships of campaign, and was frequently homesick, but that he quickly matured into a good officer.

In spring 1811, having successfully held Lisbon, Wellington began a series of operations designed to drive the French from Portugal. These were largely successful, but the French under Marshal Massena soon mounted a counter-attack which culminated in the three-day Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro. During the course of the fighting the 71st were heavily engaged and John Vandeleur was severely wounded and invalided home.

### A coveted commission

It took Vandeleur over a year of convalescence to become fit to return to active service. During this time he first received a promotion to lieutenant in the 71st – which he was due by seniority – and then a transfer, in his new rank, to the 12th Light Dragoons. Obtaining this posting without charge was quite a coup, for cavalry commissions were valued more highly than equivalent posts in the infantry.

## SOLDIER STORIES II – THE JUNIOR CAVALRY OFFICER WHO BECAME A HERO

Re-equipped and wearing the blue uniform of Britain's light cavalry, Vandeleur returned to the Peninsula in late summer 1812. His initial duties were as a regimental officer, in which role he fought at Vitoria in 1813, but for the last months of the Peninsular War he was assigned to the staff of a distant cousin, Major General John Ormsby Vandeleur, who commanded the brigade of which the 12th were a part.

John Vandeleur remained an aide to the general until his regiment returned to Britain in 1814, and when war broke out again the following year he again sought to serve as a staff officer. Permission was not forthcoming, however, and so his experience of the Waterloo campaign would be as a regimental officer.

### The 12th at Waterloo

The 12th were commanded in 1815 by Colonel the Hon. Frederick Ponsonby, a dashing and popular commander who had served with distinction throughout the Peninsular War. Along with the 11th and 16th Light Dragoons they formed part of the Fourth Cavalry Brigade under their old Peninsular chief, and Vandeleur's relation, Major General John Ormsby Vandeleur.

Being stationed well to the rear, west of Brussels, the Fourth Cavalry Brigade missed the earliest fighting of the campaign, arriving at Quatre Bras on the evening of 16 June just as the struggle there was coming to an end. The following day the three regiments helped cover the allied retreat. Writing home, Vandeleur reported that the French 'followed us and skirmished the whole way until we arrived at our position at Waterloo'. Upon reaching Wellington's chosen battlefield, Vandeleur and his comrades spent a wet night bivouacking amidst the standing corn and waiting the resumption of fighting.

### From spectator to hero

Posted on the allied far-left, the 12th were not initially engaged on 18 June and Vandeleur was left a spectator to the battle. In the early afternoon, however, the 12th and 16th Light Dragoons were called upon to charge in order to cover the retreat of the British heavy cavalry, which had in turn helped repulse the first major French infantry attack. Engaged with French infantry and

cavalry, the 12th were badly cut up and Colonel Ponsonby was left for dead on the field. Vandeleur survived this stage of the fighting unscathed, but later had his horse shot from under him as the survivors of the regiment moved to reinforce Wellington's right wing in the final stages of the battle.

It was dark before the 12th could stand down, but rather than sleeping Vandeleur went in search of his missing commanding officer. Ponsonby was thought dead, and Vandeleur was warned that he stood little chance of finding one body amidst the fallen, but he went anyway, and at length discovered the colonel 'desperately wounded, piked thro' the body and his arm broken by a sabre cut'. Vandeleur helped him off the field, and Ponsonby eventually made a complete recovery.

In the aftermath of the battle, Vandeleur finally got his desired appointment as aide to his relative the General, and served in that role to the end of the campaign. He remained in the peacetime army, eventually retiring in 1846 after having risen to the command of the 10th Hussars. His military career served to sever the connection with Worcester, and upon starting a family of his own he returned to his ancestral home of Ireland, but it was Worcester that he called home throughout the Napoleonic Wars, and his memories of its people and places pepper his letters throughout this dramatic episode in his life.

**Andrew Bamford** is a military historian and the author of several books on the Napoleonic Wars, including *Sickness, Suffering and the Sword: The British Regiment on Campaign 1808-1815* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

#### Further reading:

**Andrew Bamford**, *With Wellington's Outposts: The Peninsular and Waterloo Letters of John Vandeleur* (Frontline Books, 2015).

**Andrew Bamford**, *Gallantry and Discipline: The 12th Light Dragoons at War with Wellington* (Frontline Books, 2014).

**Ian Fletcher**, *Galloping at Everything. The British Cavalry in the Peninsular War and at Waterloo 1808-15. A Reappraisal* (Spelmount, 1999).

**Captain William Hay**, *Reminiscences 1808-1815 Under Wellington* (Simpkin, Marshal, Hamilton, Kent, & Co., 1901).