

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN HILL OF THE 23RD FOOT

By Major Nick Lock RWF

In November 1999 a small seaside town in Holland unveiled a new memorial to commemorate all those who had drowned in a shipwreck off their coast some two hundred years ago. The ship was the Dutch frigate *Valk* which sank in November 1799. A total of 446 lost their lives, of these, 235 were officers and men from the 23rd Foot. A vivid account of this tragedy, given by Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Colonel) J.H.E. Hill appears in Volume I of Regimental Records of The Royal Welch Fusiliers and in the booklet, *Letters to a Vicarage 1796-1815*. This enterprising young officer was one of only 25 survivors of the ship wreck, cheating death by strapping himself to the detached ship's forecandle using only his pocket handkerchief and his braces!

Reading about this extraordinary adventure prompted me to find out more about the life of John Humphrey Edward Hill. The story that emerges is a real life adventure, which is every bit as worthy of a series of novels to rival Bernard Cornwell's Richard Sharpe character.

John Hill was born the son of the Reverend J. Hill of Hennock, Chudleigh, Devon. He was commissioned into the 23rd Regiment on the 29th July 1796 and joined the 1st Battalion on its return from the West Indies in October 1796. He was posted to the Lieutenant Colonel's Company (a full Colonel commanded the battalion at this time) and took part in the disastrous expedition to Ostend in March 1798. Hill, eleven other officers and 192 other ranks from the 23rd Foot, were captured by the French and imprisoned in the citadel of Lille until their release a year later.

His next period of active service came in 1799 when he took part in a raid on the North Dutch coast, with the 1st Battalion. A sharp action was fought by the 23rd who were the first ashore. The battalion lost 18 killed and 77 wounded. A total of seven Dutch vessels were captured and it was whilst sailing home in the captured Dutch frigate '*Valk*' that the now infamous shipwreck occurred.

Having survived life as a prisoner of war and a shipwreck, Hill was to be involved in a number of operations on the coasts of France and at Ferrol and Cadiz during the year 1800 (perhaps a comparison to the Hornblower character can be drawn here!). He subsequently went on to command a company of the Regiment during the Egyptian campaign of 1801 against the French. The Regiment was involved in a number of battles, most notably, the assault on two French Battalions which held the massive sand dunes of Aboukir Bay. Following victory in Egypt, the Regiment undertook a period of garrison duties in Gibraltar in 1802. Hill was promoted Captain in 1803 and was granted a spot of home leave.

In 1805 and 1806 Hill was engaged in operations in the Hanover area of Germany and in 1807 at the siege of Copenhagen, Denmark. It was here that he was wounded for the first time; he was bayoneted by one of his own men! An over enthusiastic member of the night piquet mistook him for the enemy during an alert, stabbing him in his right side. A period of three weeks of bed-rest followed before he was fit again.

Following his service in Europe, Captain Hill left for Halifax, Nova Scotia and then Barbados, West Indies, in 1808. The following year he commanded the Light Company at the capture of the heights of Sourier and the siege and capture of Martinique. During this period, the West Indies was an extremely unhealthy place to serve. Indeed, during a previous period of service from 1794 to 1796 the Regiment had 12 officers and 600 other ranks succumb to tropical disease, lead and alcohol poisoning! Luckily this period of service was mercifully short and the Battalion returned to Halifax in 1809.

In 1810 Hill sailed for Portugal with the 1st Battalion to take part in Wellington's Peninsular campaign, during which he was present at nearly all the major battles including: Ciudad Rodrigo, Albuera, Badajoz, Salamanca, Madrid and Vittoria. At the storming of San Sebastian he was wounded when a grape shot (small cannon ball) passed between his left arm and side. During this time he spent periods in command of the 1st Battalion and of a number Portuguese regiments. He was commanding the 4th Portuguese Regiment at the battle of Nivelles when his horse collapsed on top of him. He required two surgical operations to repair the injuries sustained in this incident. The letters he wrote home during this period show just how bloody many of these battles were. The life expectancy of an officer at this time, especially when storming fortifications, was not high. Hill's letters also show how important the prospects of promotion were in increasing an individual's social standing. This was especially true if an officer did not, like Hill, have the funds to purchase his next promotion.

After returning to Britain for a short period, Hill embarked in March 1815 with the rest of the 1st Battalion following Napoleon's escape from Elba. The battalion was present at the Battle of Waterloo and during the course of the battle Hill was severely wounded. Fighting on foot, in the front line of the square, he was wounded no fewer than five times. He received a splinter of bone (which came from another soldier) driven into his right eyeball and two fragments of stone shrapnel in his cheek. If this was not enough, he also received a musket ball wound to the left side of his jaw and finally, for good measure, a half-pound grape-shot punched through his left breast and shoulder blade, lodging in the back of his jacket!

Miraculously, he survived and made a slow and painful recovery. In a letter to his brother following the battle, he describes in graphic detail how, in the days before anaesthetic surgery and antibiotics, his own wounds were starting to heal. He also, with great distress, describes the terrible injuries sustained by his treasured horse 'Honesty' before it died. Following Waterloo he transferred to the 49th Foot (later the Hertfordshire Regiment) as a Major in 1823. One can only presume that he found life in the 23rd Foot a little too exciting! In December 1823 he rather understandably applied to retire on grounds of ill health, and was granted a pension of 300 pounds per year. He married a Miss Jane Turner and lived the rest of his life at Holt Hall, Totnes, Devon. He died in January 1835, aged 59.

This extraordinary career spanned 28 years. In his application to the King for the grant of a pension, Hill pointed out that when he left the 23rd Foot he was the longest serving member of the Regiment. During his service, he had been at every engagement fought by the 23rd Foot, which included 20 battles, seven sieges, one shipwreck and once set fire at sea!

Some 250 pages of transcripts of his letters home during his long career are held in the Regimental Museum, along with his numerous medals. Extracts from his letters were edited by his Great-Great-Great Granddaughter, Edith Case into a short booklet entitled Letters to a Vicarage 1796-1815.

Remarkably one of those present at the November 1999 memorial unveiling ceremony was one of Hill's descendants Lieutenant Hill, seen in the photograph, a serving member of The Royal Welch Fusiliers.

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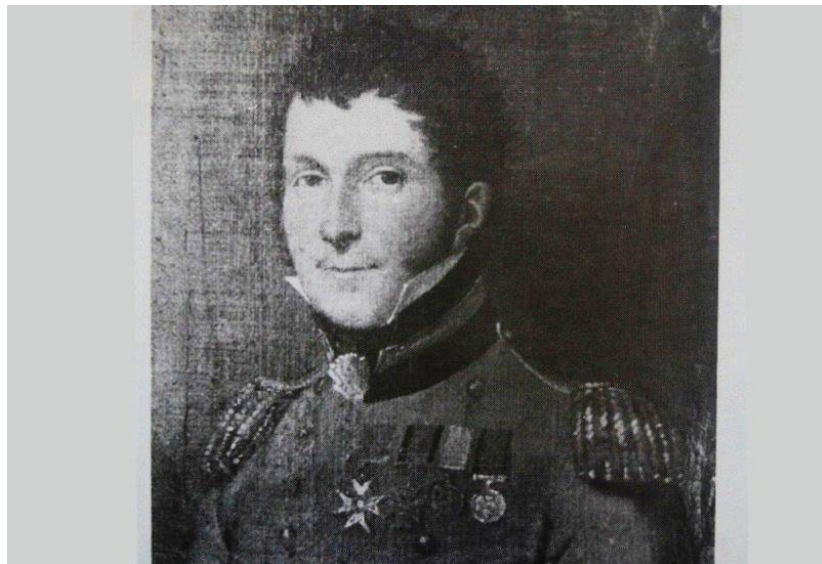
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Captain Edward Hill
pays his respects to his
ancestor



Lt Col John (Jack)
Hill Royal Welch
Fusiliers



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