Uniform of a Private in the Third Foot Guards in 1815.

An Ordinary Soldier in the Army Besieging Bayonne

By Steven Carter, BA, BD, MBA.

Although history books and official records might record the deeds of the higher ranks, most ordinary soldiers besieging Bayonne remain anonymous and their individual experience ill-defined. My ancestor, Thomas Carter (1789-1861), is an exception because some surviving documents provide enough information to reconstruct his experience in some detail, together with insights into his life. Thomas Carter was a 24 year old private in the First Battalion of the Third Regiment of Foot Guards. On 14 April 1814 he was on picket duty opposite the Citadel of Bayonne. Here the experiences and background of one ordinary soldiers besieging Bayonne comes into the spotlight.

In the early hours of 14 April 1814, Private Thomas Carter was at his post on picket duty outside the Citadel, west of the Avenue du 14 Avril and the Jewish Cemetery. He was part of the army besieging Bayonne. This day is recorded as the last in the Peninsular War, which in its final months became an invasion of southern France. Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley (Wellington) had pressed on in pursuit of his rival Marshal Nicolas Soult to Toulouse (coming to battle on 10 April), while resistance from Bayonne's garrison (14,000 men) pinned down Lieutenant General Hope and the Left Wing of the Army (almost 20,000). Thomas had heard news of Napoleon's abdication, so his thoughts were likely turning to how soon he would be returning home. He was blissfully ignorant of the planned sortie that was about to engulf him.

Thomas was born in the landmark year 1789, in Littleworth village near Faringdon, now in Oxfordshire, England. His father and grandfather had been tenant farmers, both affluent commoners who left moderately substantial sums in their wills.[1]

The Comforts of Industry, by George Morland (1790).[2] This contemporary painting of an English farmer's home gives an approximate indication of Thomas Carter's original social status and family background.

Thomas was orphaned by the age of 10. His share of the inheritance helped buy him an apprenticeship. In his teenage years, he was apprenticed as a saddler (1802-9).This trade involved not just making saddles, but all kinds of leather work such as harnesses. Thomas had good prospects because Faringdon was the main station between London and the west – and this was the Golden Age of the Stagecoach (1780s-1830s).

The Old Crown Coaching Inn, in the Market Place, Faringdon.

Thomas would have been familiar with the scene of the Old Crown Coaching Inn in Faringdon's Market Square (and the Saddlers on the left). This coaching inn provided a stop-over point for stagecoach travellers. Faringdon was a thriving stagecoach centre until the coming of the railways by 1840.

As a young man with prospects, Thomas might have entered military life under compulsion. He served four years with the Oxfordshire Militia on (1809-13), mainly on the south coast of England. The militia was a territorial-based infantry used for home defence. If there were not enough volunteers, then the numbers for local militias would be made up by drawing lots. The ballot was run by churchwardens and overseers of the poor in each parish. A list of men aged between eighteen and forty-five was posted on the front of the church door. Perhaps an unlucky draw caused Thomas to be enlisted in the militia at the age of nineteen.[3]

Caricature of Napoleon standing on stilts observing Pitt and England across the Channel.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the threat of an invasion was greater than at any time since the Spanish Armada. By 1805 Napoleon had abandoned the planned invasion and Nelson's naval victory at the Battle of Trafalgar (21 October) eased British fears. However the threat of invasion remained so long as Britain was at war with France.

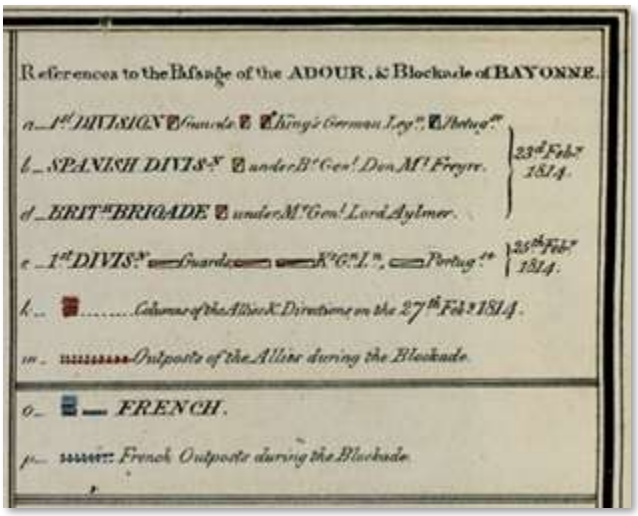
In 1809 Thomas's militia regiment was on garrison duty on the south coast at Gosport. From there they were sent on preventive service duty to Littlehampton, where they remained for many months. In times of war, preventive service was as much to prevent the coming and going of passengers and exchange of intelligence and correspondence with France as to hinder smuggling.[4] During that time the Regiment was brigaded at Brighton under the review of the Prince of Wales (afterwards George the Fourth).

From Littlehampton the Regiment was marched to the Tower of London, where they did Garrison duty for a year; and then the Regiment was sent to Bristol. At this period the Regiment was permanently on duty.

Once Napoleon's defeat in Russia made any invasion unlikely (1812), government policy and pressure from officers persuaded many militiamen to transfer into Wellington's Army. Wellington had once referred to his rank and file soldiers as the "scum of the earth", but militiamen like Thomas were considered superior recruits – they had already completed basic training. Thomas enlisted into the Third Guards Regiment of Foot in October 1813; and was probably shipped over to Wellington's winter quarters at Jean-de-Luz in late December.

Wellington's Army had entered southern France on 7 October 1813 – the same day that Hope had been made Commander of the Left Wing of the Army. Soult had hoped Bayonne would tie Wellington down for months, but instead Wellington left Hope in charge of the siege with the Left Wing – while he himself pursued Soult to Toulouse.

Thomas's only experience of warfare before that fateful April night was likely the crossing of the Adour, completing the encirclement of Bayonne; and moving the lines in closer around the Citadel – all in February 1814. He then settled down to the siege of Bayonne. Like other Guardsmen, he spent much of March digging in the mud as picket lines were established and fortified. He no doubt complained when rain filled his trench, but did not realise the poor weather was delaying the planned sortie.



The Encirclement of Bayonne

In Thomas's zone, the pickets were occupying a sandy ridge close to the fortifications, but separated by a dip. There were walled gardens and enclosures; and the Guards had spent weeks digging in the rain and mud to build their own fortifications, under sniper fire from the Citadel.

Bayonne, from St Etienne. Thomas Carter's post was slightly to the west of this view from St Etienne.

Robert Batty, Campaign of the Left Wing of the Allied Army, in the Western Pyrenees (1826), p.141.

Those left behind at Bayonne had believed that for them the war was over: it was a matter of time before matters were settled elsewhere. Colonel Hope settled into the siege and decided that the Citadel must be taken first. He knew that the storming of Bayonne would lose many lives. He continued with preparations, but anticipated such a costly assault would not be called for - so near the end of the war. Wellington, however, wrote to Hope, urging all haste. Hope continued with preparations, making ready for an attack he hoped would not be required. When news reached them that on 6 April Napoleon had abdicated, then their minds would be turned to thoughts of returning to England.

Finally, the sortie from the Bayonne Citadel began about 3.00 am on Thursday, 14th April 1814. The besiegers were stretched along a four mile perimeter around the city of Bayonne on the south of the River Adour and north of the river from the bridge of boats and around the Citadel and fortifications.

Bayonne, 1814

North of the river, pickets of Maitland's 1st Brigade of Guards held the Allied Right;[5] Lt Gen Edward Stopford's Second Brigade of Guards picketed the Centre; and the Left was held by pickets of Major General Hay's Brigade.[6] Thomas was on picket duty just west of the road to Bordeaux, in the centre with Stopford's Guards units.[7] Lieutenant General Sir Willoughby Cotton, aged 31, was commander of the pickets of the Second Brigade of Guards this night.

The French commander Thouvenot saw the situation differently to Hope. He was loyal to the French cause. He had to take any reports of defeat with caution. False information had been used in the past to gain military advantage. A successful attack could disrupt the siege and dismantle the Allies' works, thereby delaying any planned storming of Bayonne. The fall of San Sebastion (1813) was a horrific warning of what could happen when a fortress was stormed: then the victorious British and Portuguese troops had become a "reeling, riotous mob". Drunken and enraged at the heavy losses they had suffered, the troops ran amok, pillaging and burning the city. One of the survivors, Gabriel Serres, claimed that the troops "committed the biggest atrocities, such as killing and injuring many inhabitants and also raping most of the women." Order was not restored for seven days, by which time only a handful of buildings survived. The rest of the city burned to the ground (600 houses, city hall and record office included).[8] Taking St Étienne could cut the Allies' supply line and weaken Wellington's position.

Thouvenot gathered thousands of troops on the north side in the early hours. News that some deserters had gone over to the Allies meant the sortie must go quickly (rather than at daybreak) to maintain the element of surprise. A feint attack was launched on the south of the river to mislead the besiegers. Soon after, three columns moved out from the north: one to take St Étienne; another to block any reinforcements coming from Boucat; and the third to smash through Thomas's central zone.

In the darkness engineers climbed the ridge to cut through the fortifications near Thomas's position. Surprise and overwhelming force meant pickets were quickly killed or captured and then French troops followed rapidly through, with cries of "En Avent!" Their vastly superior numbers soon broke through the picket lines and came round the back of others in the line.

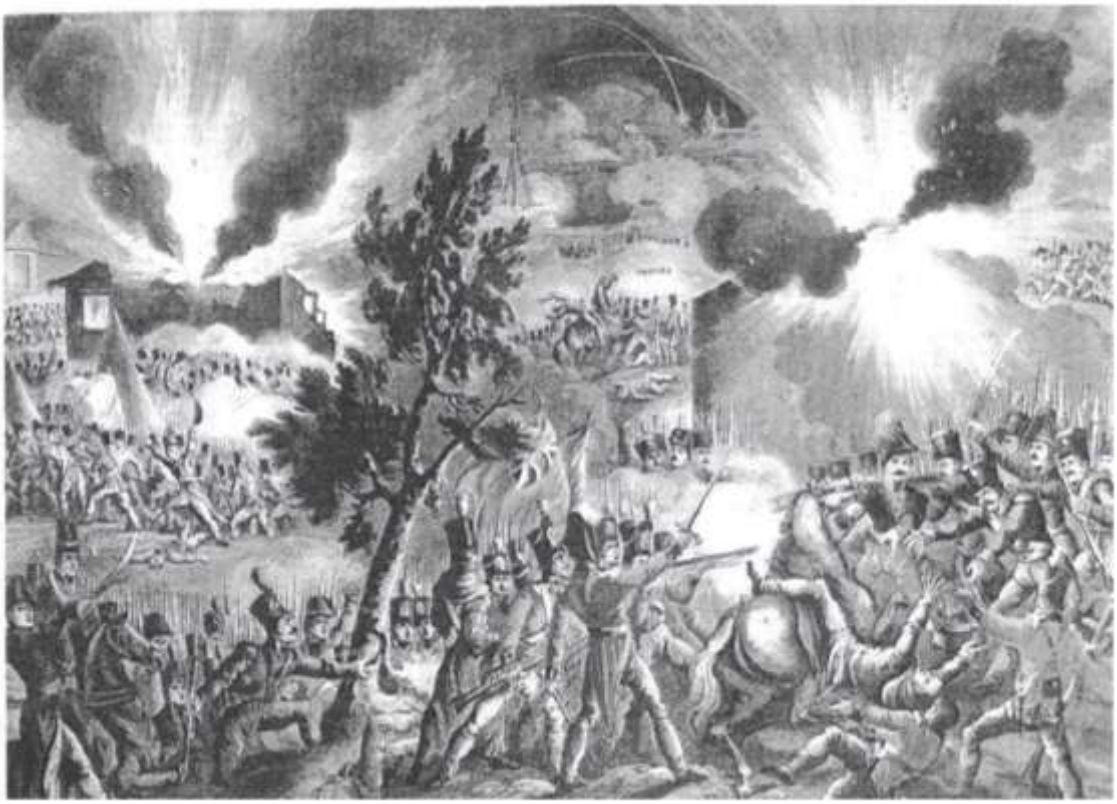
One British account narrates:

> "Having silently collected about 5000 men on the flanks of the citadel, and behind their new intrenchments in its front, they sallied forth so rapidly and in such a forcible manner, that the night being dark, they were over the sentries as soon as perceived; and in a few minutes had penetrated through the advanced line of pickets, bayoneting some and making others prisoners, till they had gained possession of every intrenched point of the road on the right of St. Etienne; and when working parties of sappers, which accompanied the sortie, began immediately to level the work."[9]

In St Etienne the Allies were taken completely by surprise and quickly overrun - apart from brave resistance in a fortified house near the church. Pickets were overrun and the town was abandoned. The French continued to advance and General Hay was killed, throwing the entire line into chaos. It was a pitch black, moonless night. In the confusion soldiers were forced into small groups in the enclosures and restricted terrain, fighting independently and usually confronting each other at the point of the bayonet.

In the centre, the French enjoyed initial success, killing, capturing or scattering the pickets. They seized the crossroads by a bayonet charge (forcing the British defenders to withdraw north); and secured several houses along the road to Bordeaux near the Jewish

A representation of the Sortie from Bayonne, showing the intensity and confusion of the night – with Hope's capture in the front right and the death of Hay in the centre middle distance. Shellfire and bayonet characterised the engagement.



cemetery. Lieutenant General Sir Willoughby Cotton, aged 31, commander of the pickets of the Second Brigade of Guards this night, was taken prisoner. He "escaped by giving up his watch and all the money" on him, receiving a beating for "the smallness of the sum."

The entire scene was confusing. The night was pitch black, with the sky lit with cannon fire from the French fortifications and gun boats on the river – all firing to support the attack and weaken the Allies' defences. Friend and foe were at times indistinguishable. In small, walled enclosures fighting was fierce and mostly at bayonet-point. Wounds were terrible and deadly. Pickets were surprised and overwhelmed with the French column pouring out behind the lines.

The surprise, dark and confusion caused disorientation. The confined spaces led to ferocious hand to hand fighting in small groups. The fight was vicious and confused in the dark. Bayonet wounds and deafening fire characterised the affray. Many unaccounted for soldiers later emerged as wounded from the piles of dead. Many of the men had seen the horrors of war before, but they had not seen such carnage in such a confined area.[10]

During the first phase of the attack, Thomas was deafened (probably a shell landed near him) and he was bayonetted in the thigh. Thomas was in the most dangerous part of the fighting: the centre had 79 killed and 228 wounded and 142 missing – significantly more than the left or right. Thomas became one of the 56 rank and file missing from his battalion (along with and 82 Coldstream Guards). Thomas was captured and taken into Bayonne. Given the darkness and confusion, Thomas was lucky to be taken prisoner – rather than another bayonet wound to finish him off. The French soldier who desisted at this point deserved Thomas's gratitude.

The deadly fighting continued after Thomas's capture. General Hope galloped towards the sound of the guns to assess the situation, but was ambushed by the French and carried into the citadel.

The Allies' initial confusion - made worse by the loss of their commander and the death of General Hay (in charge that night) - gave way to counter-attacks that involved bloody engagements, but eventually succeeded in recovering their lost ground.

General Stopford's men were marching from their camp to St Etienne. Stopford used the First and Coldstream Guards to halt the French advance just north of the crossroads. The French centre column retired to the crossroads and began to reinforce the houses in preparation for another counterattack.

The French left column advanced steadily down the road leading to St Bernard and Boucaut, capturing the Maison Basterreche and Maison Montaigut. The Allies thought the sortie's main objective would be the bridge of boats. Lord Alexander Soltoun rallied his men, turning the convent of St Bernard into a small fortress, and blocked the path of the French left column. Although stopped, the French were successful: the British would be unable to reinforce St Etienne from Boucaut without first engaging with the left column.

Artillery from the citadel, Bayonne and gunboats on the Adour supported each column's attack. French boats on the river blasted into the enemy lines. Nearly seventy French cannon fired in support of the sortie, causing fires along the front, and casting a "horrid glare over the striving masses."

Without any overall orders, the individual commanders began to rally portions of the scattered army. By 4.00 am the Allies had recovered from their initial surprise, halted all three French advances, and began to organise for a counterattack.

Finally, after much heavy fighting, General Hinuber retook St Etienne just before daybreak, forcing the French right column to retreat towards the crossroads. The French troops, fearing they might be cut off, returned to their fortifications. By 7.00 am the fighting was over – at a cost of about 2000 killed and wounded.

By 7.00 am the Allied counterattack intensified. General Howard and his men with bayonet began to dislodge the French emplacements along the crossroads. The west flank of the army near St Bernard attacked the left column. Nothing more could be accomplished by the sortie, so Thouvenot called off the sortie, the French withdrew to the citadel and by 8.00 am all fighting ceased.

Thomas Carter was now a prisoner of war behind the French lines. His wounds – a disabling bayonet wound in his thigh and deafened (probably from shellfire) - would lead to his discharge from the army.

The wounded were far more than ordinarily numerous. The Allies viewed it as one of the most hard-fought and unsatisfactory affairs which had occurred since the commencement of the war. Brave men fell, when their fall was no longer beneficial to their country; and much blood was wantonly shed.

A temporary truce allowed both sides to gather and bury their dead. Bayonet wounds were most common. Hospitals were overflowing with puncture wounds.

George Gleig, in The Subaltern, describes the day after the battle:

> A truce being concluded… the whole of the 15th was spent in burying the dead. Holes were dug for them in various places, and they were thrown in, not without sorrow and lamentations, but with very little ceremony. In collecting them together, various living men were found, sadly mangled, and hardly distinguishable from their slaughtered comrades. These were, of course, removed to the hospitals, where every care was taken of them; but not a few perished from loss of blood ere assistance arrived. It was remarked, likewise by medical attendants, that a greater proportion of incurable wounds were inflicted this night than they remembered to have seen. Many had received bayonet-thrusts in vital parts; one man, I recollect, whose eyes were both torn from the sockets, and hung over his cheeks; whilst several were cut in two by round-

shot, which had passed through their bellies, and still left them breathing. The hospitals, accordingly, presented sad spectacles, whilst the shrieks and groans of the inmates acted with no more cheering effect upon the sense of hearing, than their disfigured countenances and mangled forms acted upon the sense of sight.[11]

The Allied positions were re-established and repairs would only take twenty-four hours. No territory was lost; but casualties were high – especially among the Coldstream and Third Guards.

Thus, the last battle of the Peninsular War was fought on 14 April 1814. Several British historians condemned the sortie from Bayonne - the last act of the war – eight days after the war had officially ended. They judged Bayonne to be a final and tragic chapter in the Peninsula War. They claimed this last engagement of the Peninsular War was bloody and pointless, with much bloodshed and no glory. This futile action was the last British fight on French soil, if fight it was - one last pointless postscript to the war.

The French sortie was defeated with heavy losses on both sides. French casualties totalled 905 men, including 111 killed, 778 wounded and 16 missing. The Allies lost 838 men, including Major General Andrew Hay killed and Hope captured. 506 men from the Guards were lost. These men lie in a special Guards cemetery which still exists today.

Another estimate claims total losses in the siege, including the battle on April 14, were 1,600 French killed and wounded, plus 400 captured. The Allies lost a total of 1,700 killed and wounded, and 300 captured.

Thomas had been taken prisoner early in the attack, as his picket line was overrun. He now found himself amongst about two hundred prisoners taken in the sortie. Despite news of Napoleon's abdication, the defence continued obstinately; and the forces continued to be vigilant. Thouvenot refused to accept hostilities were over until he received direct orders to hand over Bayonne. On April 27 Soult's written orders compelled Thouvenot to surrender the fortress to Britain. On April 28, the Bourbon flag was raised over the city. Thomas was probably held captive for two weeks inside the Citadel (no doubt in poor conditions) and not released from captivity until this hand over.

A dispatch from Wellington, Bordeaux, June 14, indicates that the British were still awaiting at Bayonne the means of embarking for home. The Third Guards' Surgeon returned to England in June, so that was likely when the injured were shipped back, with Thomas amongst them. The rest of the Third Guards returned to England in August; and went to London. Thomas was discharged from his regiment (after two months in the Chelsea Hospital) on Thursday 6 October 1814.

In the last action of the war and perhaps his first, Thomas helped hold at bay the final desperate sortie of the French and repelled it, but at a heavy cost to the Guards and to Thomas himself. As a result of his service in the 3rd Foot Guards, a Private in Lt Col Hope's

Company, he was rendered unfit for further service and discharged on Oct 6 1814, after only 297 days of service. This was in consequence of being wounded in the left thigh (and being deaf) at Bayonne. Thomas missed the 3rd Foot Guards' fight next year at Waterloo (1815). This injury also explains why he is described as an agricultural labourer in future records. It helped change his fortunes (and his descendants) and marks a distinct break with his prosperous family past.

The following anonymous verses commemorate the story of Bayonne:

"For England here they fell.
Yon sea-like water guards each hero's grave.
Far Pyrenean heights, mindful, attest
That here our bravest and our best
Their supreme proof of love and loyalty gave,
Dying for England well.

"Among those distant heights,
Had many a day the wrathful cannon roared.
Through black ravine and sunny field of Spain
War's headlong torrent rolled amain.
Irun's defile and Bidassoa's ford
Beheld a hundred fights.

"Last, by this sea-like wave,
Threatening the fort our martial lines were drawn.
Fierce broke upon their watch at midnight hour
The swift sortie, the bullets' shower.
Red carnage ceased with slowly wakening dawn.
France keeps the true and brave."[12]

Thomas spent two months recovering in Chelsea Hospital, before he was discharged from the regiment on 6 October 1814. After this he returned to Faringdon, where he recuperated staying with his brother John. He worked in John's Marlborough Street bakery, in Faringdon. He married in 1820. In the 1820s he settled in the nearby village of Watchfield. He spent the rest of his life there as an agricultural labourer, working on the farm of another brother, Richard.

In the mid-1830s he was converted by the Primitive Methodist preachers:

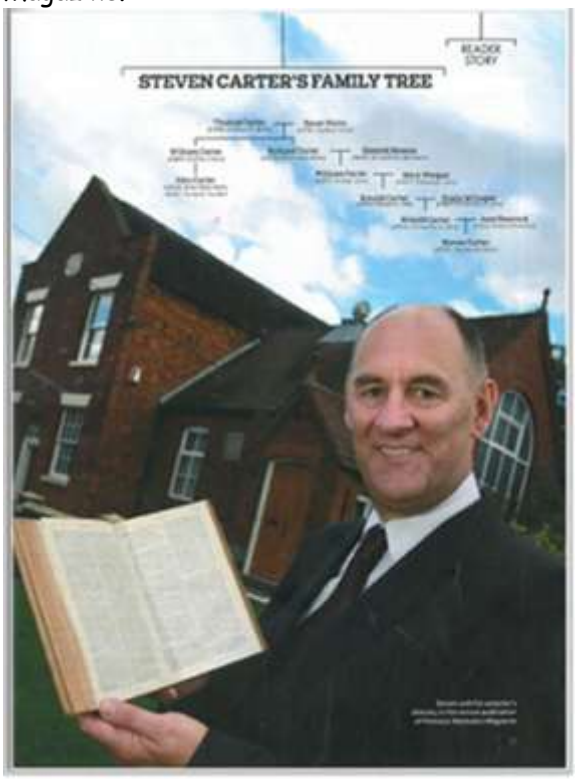
> He continued alien from God for some time, but subsequently by Divine grace his heart was changed, and from that time to the day of his death, he remained steadfast in the faith. He was indeed "a new creature in Christ Jesus, and walked not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

Thomas became a great friend to this Christian, proto-socialist movement.

When he died in 1861, 48 years after the Battle of Bayonne, the Primitive Methodist Magazine published an obituary. I discovered this obituary, by luck, whilst researching on the internet. Although I had already concluded that Thomas was at Bayonne, the obituary enabled me to place my ancestor in the events of 14 April 1814. The obituary recalls his Bayonne experience:

> At the age of nineteen he enlisted into the army, in which service he suffered many hardships. He was in the battle of Bayonne in 181[4]. In that field of blood [many] lives were lost. He was wounded and taken prisoner; but God in His kind providence soon delivered him out of the hands of his enemies, and restored him to his fatherland, where he was placed in Chelsea Hospital. After remaining for two months he received his discharge from the army, and returned into Berkshire, his native county, to live with his relations, soon after which he entered the married state.[13]

Steven Carter with a copy of his ancestor's obituary in the Primitive Methodist Magazine.



From an article in Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine (2012 Jan).

Steven Carter: I am a family history enthusiast who was lucky enough to find documentary evidence concerning my ancestor's experience at Bayonne. I have more information than is usual for rank and file soldiers for several reasons:

(a) Thomas only served in his regiment for a short time, so Bayonne was his only real experience of warfare.

(b) He was injured and so eligible for a pension, which meant a document was kept which detailed the cause of his entitlement.

(c) He later became involved with the Primitive Methodists, who recorded an obituary. The lives of most people of Thomas social status would not be celebrated in any obituary, but the Primitive Methodists – like the French Revolutionaries – did not judge people by the traditional social criteria.

If anyone can add any information to my account of Thomas Carter's experience, - e.g. the likely location or condition of his imprisonment – then I would be delighted to hear from them at: steven.carter1@ntlworld.com.

Further Reading

I have found many interesting books on the Battle of Bayonne. Besides the standard ones, I would especially recommend the following.

1. Paul Patrick Reese, The Ablest Man in the British Army: The Life and Career of General Sir John Hope – especially chapter 12 (freely downloadable).[14]
2. Ian Fletcher has a detailed chapter in Gentlemen's sons: the Guards in the Peninsula and at Waterloo, 1808-1815.
3. Philip a. Hurt, The Guards' Cemeteries, St. Etienne, Bayonne, with a Narrative of the Campaign in S.W. France, 1814 (Paperback). An inexpensive edition of this book has recently been reprinted. A French translation exists on the internet.

Notes

[1] Grandfather John left over £1000 (1791). Father Richard left about £500 for five sons and one daughter (1795). His great-grandfather had been one of about twelve people (from a village of 800) entitled to vote in the 1727 election.
[2] For further pictures, see: www.sterlingtimes.org/morland22.htm.
[3] If a man found himself on the list he could get out of serving by paying a fine or getting another man to fill his place. Perhaps for Thomas the money was not easily available – or he was inspired by patriotic duty.
[4] http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/coastguard.htm.
[5] 1st Foot Guards, 1st and 3rd Batt; and 1 Company 60th Regt., 5th Batt.
[6] 5th Division, 1st Brigade: 1st Foot, 3rd Batt; 9th Foot, 1st Batt; 38th Foot, 1st Batt; 1st Company Brunswick.
[7] Centre with piquets from the Third Regiment of Foot Guards, 1st Battalion, along with 2nd Foot Guards, 1st Battalion, and one company 60th Regt., 5th Battalion under Lt Gen Edward Stopford, in the vicinity of the Blue Chateau or Chateau Bastereeche, where Hope would be captured.
[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_San_Sebasti%C3%A1n.
[9] J T Jones, Journal of the Sieges undertaken by the Allies in Spain, London: 1846, Vol II, page 129.
[10] Both Battalions had two missing officers.
[1111] George Robert Gleig, The Subaltern, p.363-4. Freely downloadable at http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=sCcKAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA312&lpg=PA312&dq=%22the+subaltern%22+bayonne&source=bl&ots=NTiL2tvmuw&sig=XOemUMu1V2UrNao8tUQWPjC7S2I&hl=en&sa=X&ei=FJY8UOnqE8Sa1AXn9oCYBA&sqi=2&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22the%20subaltern%22%20bayonne&f=false.
[12] A kilometre or two outside the walls of Bayonne — the same which defied the British in 1814 — is a guide-post bearing the inscription (the writer thinks in English) "To the Guards' Cemetery." Down a by-road around a turning or two, and past a score of vine-clad cottages of Basque peasants one comes to the spot in question, a little railed-in plot of hallowed ground. Here are seen the original weatherworn headstones of nearly a century ago, and a newer series, practically replicas of the former. There is also a tablet stating that on this spot stood the "Third Guards Camp." That is all. It resembles the conventional cemetery not at all, and may be considered a memorial, nothing more. Certainly there is nothing pathetic or sad about it, for all is green and bright and smiling. www.kellscraft.com/Navarre/OldNavarreCh28.html.
[13] The Primitive Methodist Magazine, May 1862. Freely downloadable at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LQgFAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA318&lpg=PA318&dq=watchfield+bayonne&source=bl&ots=1WJM5SmjKE&sig=ZyWL_NKZod0-4ZMqFpulzOB2DuY&hl=en&sa=X&ei=85s8UNnhNOOr0QWJ4oHICQ&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=watchfield%20bayonne&f=false.
[14] Freely downloadable at http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/1909/.