

CR0341/324/30 and CR0341/324/12A

CR0341/324/30 Letter from George Henry Waller to his father, 8 June 1855



The Crimean War (1853-1856)

The Crimean War (1853-1856) was a war between Russia and the allied forces of Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and Sardinia. The conflict stemmed from a range of complex power struggles between the nations, but centred on the control over the territories of the Ottoman Empire and holy sites in Palestine.

The war in Crimea has generally been regarded as unsuccessful due to its failure to resolve the conflict in the Middle East. However, it is still regarded as one of the first modern wars due to its use of new innovations such as the electric telegraph, tactical use of railways, war photography and blind artillery fire.

The British and the war

Wary of Russian expansion, Britain declared war on Russia in March 1854. It was regarded to have waged a 'limited' war against Russia, meaning that political and social reform was avoided, unlike the 'total' war of World War One.

News reports and photographs that were sent to Britain marked the first time the public were informed of the day-to-day realities of war. The British public were outraged by the reports of terrible sanitary conditions of military hospitals, leading Florence Nightingale and a team of volunteer nurses to be sent to Scutari to care for the British soldiers.

Over 20,000 British soldiers and sailors died during the conflict. Of this number, over 16,000 died from diseases including cholera, typhus and frostbite.

George Waller

In October 1854, George Henry Waller, aged 17, journeyed to the Crimea to join British and allied forces in their fight against Russia. He arrived as an Ensign with the 7th Regiment of Foot (Royal Fusiliers) and was promoted to Lieutenant in December 1854.

When George arrived, the famous battles of Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman had already been fought, and the British Army were spending a long winter surrounding the Russian held city, Sebastopol.

Like many soldiers, George suffered through the long winter of 1854/55, where thousands of troops died, was injured during battle, and caught a fever. His experiences are recorded in letters sent to his family.

George's letters

George wrote over 70 letters to his family during his time away, giving a detailed and vivid account of his experiences of war. Although his letters show only one soldier's experience of the Crimea, they still highlight experiences common to many of the British men fighting there.

In June 1855, the Allies assaulted the Russian defences of Sebastopol, with the British taking an area of trenches known as the Quarries.

In this month's document, George describes the moment he was shot 'on the side of the head' during the attack and the subsequent fighting overnight.

Also featured is one of a few sketches he sent, showing 'the way we get our things up from the Bala Klava' (CR341/324/12)

George used 'cross-hatching' in his letter, a technique used in the nineteenth century to avoid high postal charges and save paper.

Transcription

[page 4]

*I escaped but thank God I
was all right during the night
but I got knocked down this
morning about 5 oclock by
a grape shot on the side of the
head but it did not hurt
me much it just stunned
me at first & it bled a little
but I walked home all right
& tied him up so I am comfor
table enough now but I am
to keep out of the sun. You
sh^d have seen us when we
came in; face & hands covered
with dust powder, smoke*

[page 5, cross-hatched on page 1]

*blood & all sorts of dirt & every body as tired
as possible with hardly a leg to stand on
for we were fighting all night long almost
continually once we were, shying stones
at one another I had a regular stoning
match with one fellow but he was a
capital shot & hit me in the side with
a big stone very soon but I must have*

*hit however for we were so close to them
I only fired 2 shots with my pistol*

References

Lives through Letters: A portrait of the Waller Family, 1796-1856, edited by Hayley Cotterill, compiled by Alaina MacGregor, Hayley Cotterill and Helen Arbon. (Complimentary copies available in the reader's tea room)

CR0341/324 *Letters from Lieutenant George Henry Waller while serving at the Crimea to family members, with related papers* (Please consult the catalogue to order individual items from this series)