

# MY FAMILY HERO

Readers reveal a gem from their family tree

George received the Waterloo Medal for his involvement in the battle



**JOHN LERWILL** worked in IT for many years. Now a writer and historian based in Birmingham, he has been researching his ancestors for over 20 years. Visit his website at [www.lerwill-life.org.uk](http://www.lerwill-life.org.uk)



## ‘My ancestor fought with Wellington at Waterloo’

Amid the gore of one of Napoleon’s bloodiest battles, Private George Whyborn helped rout the French

“The whole field from right to left was a mass of dead bodies. In one spot, the French Cuirassiers were literally piled on each other... All over the field you saw officers, and as many soldiers as were permitted to leave the ranks, leaning and weeping over some dead or dying brother or comrade.”

So recalled one soldier, Harry Smith, of the gruesome aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, on 18 June 1815. Another of the thousands of men who risked their lives in that famous battle was George Whyborn, a private in the 40th Regiment of Foot and the 3 x great grandfather of John Lerwill.

“His regiment played a major role in routing the French, as they were driven back down the hill, and recapturing Le Hay Sainte, and George was wounded in the process,” says John, who has been researching his ancestor’s military career

for almost a decade. “I don’t know exactly what happened, that’s lost to history, but he spent about a month in hospital in Brussels following the battle.”

John first discovered George when he came across his parish register entry from 1818, when he married in Glasgow, at the Scottish Register Office. “I was immediately intrigued because it mentioned his regiment, and I joked with my mother that he may have been there to see off Napoleon at Waterloo.”

After corresponding with David Milner, who keeps a database of soldiers who served there, John was able to confirm that his forebear did indeed receive the Waterloo medal. He also found out that George had served during the Peninsula Wars. John then visited The National Archives, where he found the pay books for the 40th of Foot. “They are a fantastic resource,” he says. “I was able to trace George’s entire career – and his earnings – all the way through the European battlefields, including his spells in hospitals.”

Having enlisted in 1808, George trained in Bristol before being posted in Ireland in 1811. He was then sent to Portugal, where he fought at all the major battles of the Peninsula War. “After Toulouse they thought the Napoleonic Wars were over, so George and the 40th were sent to America to fight in the war that was going on there,” says John. “He was sent to New Orleans and narrowly escaped death when his ship ran aground on rocks off the coast.”

With an itinerary of George’s movements, John then set about trying to get an idea of what his ancestor experienced along the way:

“It’s difficult to put flesh on the bones for a private because histories tend to focus on officers, but I found the memoirs of a Sergeant William Lawrence, also in the 40th of Foot. They offer basic details but also bring to life some of the horrific gore witnessed – and somehow survived – at these battles, which is something we often overlook when looking back at these wars.”

A great example of that is Lawrence’s description of the death of one of his men: “An enemy shell cut our deputy sergeant major in two, then went on to take off the head of William Hooper, one of my grenadiers.” Such a personal connection to the Battle of Waterloo has also changed the way John looks at this particular aspect of our history. “As soon as you find out that your ancestor was directly involved, you want to look at it in much more detail, you want to find out exactly what the ordinary soldiers went through.”

Now John understands something of his ancestor’s experiences on the battlefields of early 19th-century Europe, he is keen to discover more about what happened to George after he retired in 1823: “George was not a very well man by that point, certainly not fit enough to work as a soldier any longer, so he was pensioned off. That means my next port of call has to be his pension records, which I’m hoping will reveal something of his life after all those wars.” ■ *Daniel Cossins*

**WHO IS YOUR HERO?**  
Do you have a family hero you’d like to see featured in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Magazine?

Each month we’ll award our favourite a year’s full subscription to [Findmypast.co.uk](http://Findmypast.co.uk) worth **£149.90**.

**findmypast** USA  
family history in the making

✉ Please write to us at the address on page 3 or email [editorial@bbcwhodoyouthinkyouare.com](mailto:editorial@bbcwhodoyouthinkyouare.com)