

Wadhurst History Society

Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?

Timothy Cox, 14 November 2012

Timothy Cox treated us to the tale of the soldier's wife from the mid 17th century until the end of the 19th – a tale of hardship, disruption and deprivation, yet one of devotion nevertheless.

From the time of the establishment of a standing army in 1660, the idea of a military wife became accepted – but not necessarily welcomed. There was no marriage allowance, but a “quota” of about 6 wives per 100 men would be “on the strength” – and they would earn their keep as cooks, laundry women and nurses. With their husband's career being in the army for life, and the regiment being moved from place to place, it was a peripatetic existence. The pay of the men was poor – 8 pence per day less deductions for food, uniform and medical needs - and a wife on the strength would get half a man's rations (and children, one quarter). She would, however, be subject to military discipline and offences such as theft, brawling, drunkenness or adultery would result in lashings, running the gauntlet or the whirligig – or being struck off the strength.

But there are some remarkable stories: Mother Ross, who lost her husband in 1693, enlisted herself and under the name Christian Welsh or Davies, joined the dragoons and her gender was undetected until she was wounded in 1706. She continued and eventually died in 1739 (several husbands later) having been awarded a pension of one shilling a day. In 1759, during the siege of Quebec, the women were pressed into the Royal Artillery to serve the guns. And in 1857 during the Indian Mutiny, Bridget Widdowson held 11 mutineers prisoner with just a sword; she was relieved by 2 soldiers, and within 20 minutes the prisoners had escaped.

Campaigns in Spain (the Peninsular War), India, the West Indies and the Crimea in the 19th century were hazardous for both soldiers and their wives, and the greater number of casualties arose from disease rather than fighting. If the soldier was killed and his wife survived, she would likely remarry – and some women married as many as 6 times in a campaign such as the Peninsular War.

Sometimes a foreign woman would become an army wife. One young Spanish girl, Juana, married an officer, Harry Smith, after the siege of Badajoz and as he progressed through the ranks in campaigns in India and South Africa she eventually gave her name to Ladysmith in South Africa.

By the end of the 19th century, the army was becoming better organised and more permanent barracks were established, though the married quarters were not great - a corner of the soldiers' dormitory separated by hanging blankets. But the women backed up their menfolk despite the often appalling conditions and dangers they had to endure. However one is left with the question – why

would a woman want to put up with the rigours of an army life? And the answer was that, despite the hardships it was probably better than staying at home!

Mike Goolden