

Ben Battle: A Soldier Bold

Fear is the most powerful weapon possessable by man. It is the ultimate deterrent and the most renowned instigator. There was one point a time where I shrugged fear off just as the morning dew from the cover of a tent. But as with all things, time had struck and with time too came it's most trusted ally, fear. To feel the unrestricted pressure of such a presence had broken many men, yet more so those naïve of it never had the chance to experience such a tremendous pressure, just a timeless slumber. Many, as I once had been, mocked me for letting such emotion possess me; but for even them, regret remains their hell. Now, none are left to mock. The remainder consists of either withered husks of once vibrant men or old trepid beggars. "Faithless coward", they called me. A faithless coward, I am not; for I have experienced the end of days and in that time the reaper spares only the rational.

It was the humid night of July the twenty-first, one thousand eight hundred and twelfth year in the time of the lord. Every man, from quartermasters assistant to Wellington himself, or at least we had figured, was anxious. This was nothing new to us. Most had been on this Godforsaken peninsula since 1808; the whole time fighting the French at every turn, even some Spanish loyalists- it was complicated. Morale was at its highest; never before had we amassed a force this great, all of us, English, Scots, Irish, Welsh, Spanish, and Portuguese fighting for the same cause. So glorious was it. High command had informed us a day before that a large French force was marching directly at us, undoubtedly at the time, with the intent on annihilating our glorious coalition. We couldn't have been happier. The lot of us were prepared to turn our fortunes into favor once more after our bit of a set back the year prior. Most of us had been through this ordeal innumerable times over; my regiment, the fifth foot, had been at Vimeiro, La Coruna, Talavera, and most recently Badajoz. In fact, it was at the siege of Badajoz that made me a corporal. First into the breach was I, followed by the company commander and then what seemed to be the entire coalition. I was merely lucky the captain had been only a few paces from me and

had the “honor” to watch me single handedly kill thirteen Frenchmen, most with the bayonet and Brown Bess itself.

My two best of friends had accompanied me the whole way; Gormley and Watkins. Both at that time were still “honored” with the rank of private first class, but just as I had done a few months earlier, they were intent on earning some stripes. Gormley was from a little cottage in the heart of Wales, whilst Watkins resided at Nottingham, the only city dweller throughout our entire company, possibly regiment. Always gave him trouble did we, calling him perfumed and pompous; nonetheless he was a fighter. The lads referred to me as Ben, though my proper name was Benjamin, even the captain referred to me as such. Never since I had left Portsmouth had I heard Benjamin Grey in a single sentence. Curious, being a foreigner to your own name. Every man was now settled down and we had just received fresh flints, the captain ordered us to clean everything through and through, we did so with much excitement. We laid out the tints, propped them up for the thousandth time, and soon forced ourselves to sleep, for we had figured tomorrow would bear much excitement.

We awoke at the break of dawn to be informed, somewhat to our surprise, that the French were less than a three hour march from the front lines. The captain bid us to ready ourselves and we did so with much haste, ready in marching order in under twenty minutes. We marched at the top of the seventh hour, according to the Brigadiers pocket watch. Our position was to take the dead center, along a very subtle slope providing a near perfect line of fire for every rank. We stood awaiting our counterparts for what had seemed like an eternity, though some impatient, not out of nervousness, but of excitement for what would come. We were invincible, so we thought. Finally the moment had arrived, those Croissant-Crunchers barreled towards us. Every man a part of our glorious army, except for those poor skirmisher bastards with the rifles 100 paces out, was in perfect position to lay God’s wrath upon anyone insane enough to advance towards us. We waited anxiously, fear completely absent.

The artillery erupted, once more beginning its annual symphony. Our 3, 6, 9, 12, and even those monstrous 24 pounders all opened up on the French vanguard. Before we could completely catch up with reality the leading edge had already pushed our skirmishers back up the slope, began to engage us, and then that spectacular French artillery sang. The captain ordered us to make ready, then the instincts kicked in, “present” shouldering our beloved Brown Bess’s we patiently awaited. “Fire!” The great discharge was let loose, that great man-made cloud now rolling over the grass and fallen, the aroma filling the air around us. The drummers furiously beating away at those poor drums, the commanding officers demanding the reload, all so glorious. French artillery finally got around to the front lines and began to train their pieces upon us red jacketed, impeccable automatons. Some men in our regiment were picked off by those lead cantaloupes, though nothing serious, we rejoiced. The second volley was fired and from what we could tell one more such action and we would have driven them back to Paris. The favor was eventually returned and a couple dozen men in the front fell. We simply replaced them, rather enthusiastically, now in the front with nothing between you and the enemy but your belly and the ambient rain of lead.

At that moment the man in front of me fell dead, now I too was one of those lucky to be in the front, fearless and eager. The captain ordered the third volley and finally I could do my duty; the feeling of that recoil, the crack of the powder igniting, the flint making its mark upon the power tray, I rejoiced. Just as expected we drove those French cowards back up the hill, all but out of sight. The same occurred across the entirety of the line; the cavalry soon clashed on the far flanks and soon enough the artillery was in full swing. I had noticed Gormley was now only one rank back and to my left, as we made eye contact a slight grin ensued. The lieutenant gave out a “Huzzah” and soon enough the entire regiment vocalized it thrice over; now with the blood boiling and the mean eager for more we patiently awaited the next command as the artillery played catch. The next order came as somewhat of a queer notion: “Fix bayonets!”. The company initially confused from what I could see hesitated, then the sergeant major made it a point to make sure we weren’t deaf and roared:

“This company will fix bayonets!”, the drum rhythm assuring his claim and then along the line the Non-commissioned officers repeated the order. We did as we were bid, preparing ourselves for what come next. Not a coward among us.

None of us had actually been in a pitched battle bayonet charge, other than the storming of the Badajoz fortress, though plenty of obstacles remained to cower behind; on the field, nothing but the grass beneath our feet, but we were soon to have such an experience regardless. The sergeant then piped up once more: “There they are my lads. Just let them feel the temper of your bayonets!” Renewed vigor swept across the entire line. The captain gave the order to march and I, being in the front, dropped my gun to belly height just as the other hundred or so men at the new vanguard. The other thousand or so within our regiment, Gormley and Watkins included, propped theirs up a bit higher as to not commit treason and stab their own brothers in arms in the back on accident.

After some time marching, we had finally come up upon the reverse slope of the other side of the valley, we could now hear more French being shouted than ever before in our lives. Emerging from the fog of war we were welcomed with what had appeared to be a reformed French line now on the defensive. Now only a few hundred paces off the captain gave his order: “Charge.” In hardly a moment the entire regiment was now at the forefront of a bayonet charge, and being at the very tip of the spear I felt a renewed energy raging through me, and I had made it my goal to be the first Brit to be thrown into French lines at Salamanca. Blood boiling and shouting, we charged.

They fired their volley, impaling dozens next to and behind me with a new cloud forming directly over us, completely incapable of seeing no more than 50 feet in front of us. Nonetheless we charged fearlessly. To much of our surprise, it had appeared that within mere blink of an eye some fifty or so men in the regiment dropped lifelessly to the ground, possibly a few dozen or more wounded. We then slowed the advance for just a

moment realizing what had just occurred, being that those were undoubtedly ranging shots from canon, we advanced once more, fearless and vicious.

Quicker than the mind could comprehend, the fog vanished and some scores of French artillery pieces were bearing down directly at us, being the vanguard we were now *the* target amongst the entire field. With a quick pause over and a double check we renewed our assault, the drums playing louder than I had ever heard before. The men's war cries echoing all around, my heart beating faster than the mind could fathom. Finally, the heavens had opened up and the dogs of war were released. The entire ridge erupted into one large powder tray, touch fuses, and flint locks; our adversary had let loose an innumerable amount shells directly at us, each roughly the size of a man's cranium. The flash was blinding enough and then only a moment later the earth buckled, as did we.

In fact, I had never been the primary target of a grand battery, so it is referred to in the French military, such an experience is truly humbling, but most of all, horrifying. I had been thrown back some body lengths, initially dazed. I then brought myself to raise my head once again and looked around me. The company, battalion, and regiment flags had all been lowered, as those holding them could no longer maintain to do so. I saw hundreds of my brothers in arms lying on the ground. I then noticed the severed limbs and headless men around me. Completely emotionless, I rose once more and then felt a sort of a sharp shove. A bullet had entered my body just left of my left shoulder. Its sting and heat being the only real thing worth noticing at that point. I sat back down clasping my Brown Bess, grinding my teeth together, and attempted to rise once more. I then felt a tug, looking up, it was Watkins; he bid we continue the charge, and then Gormley followed up directly behind him along with a handful of others. Gormley and Watkins dragged me back up, handed me my Brown Bess and ushered me off with them. Making hardly a few paces forward, a cannon ball took off Gormley's head, his blood misting over me. I froze. I saw his body ever so gently fall, unmolested. Watkins then ran over to the now headless Gormley. Just prior to reaching the former Gormley, Watkins had his leg ripped-out from under him

by yet another cannon ball. His blood too, now making its mark upon the earth. Seeing all of this, I hadn't moved an inch in what felt like years, my body now ached and I was experiencing some emotion seemingly foreign to me.

The air was filled with smoke and blood. My senses now homing in, I felt the earth beneath me shake and the roar of the cannon. Glancing down at my bruised and bloodied hands, I noticed a few bits of new shrapnel and more so that my hands were shaking uncontrollably. While coming to my senses, the French unleashed another volley, more men fell. Limbs detaching, their blood painting the earth, and the rolling of man made fog everywhere the eye could see. My ears had been ringing since the first volley of cannon fire to strike our regiment. Now coming back to me, I hear the groans and pleads of the wounded.

Just then I realized the absolute surrealness surrounding me. My emotions too began to show their ugly faces in the hell-fire of combat, and tears beginning to fill my eyes. Looking back to Gormley and Watkins, I noticed Watkins hunched up next to Gormley, motionless, noticing then he had a rather large hole through what use to be his right eye. I called his name; he did not respond. My body and mind aching ever so heavily now, I turned my head away before a tear was shed. Now propping myself up on my knees, I looked toward our objective: the stationary French line, suddenly looking like the most menacing thing this world has ever produced. A monstrous beast that encompassed the damnation of hell itself, heaving at us eternal sleep and heartache. The shouting continued and the assault was revitalized once more. I saw the captain pick up both the Regiment flag and the flag of Britannia; whilst throwing down his pistol he yelled to charge once more, and then he was off. What remained of our regiment followed behind him, a hodgepodge of wounded, dying, naïve, and ignorant young men and boys running towards certain death. Noticing too at that moment of the reality surrounding me, I couldn't make any sense of it, why I was so willing to face certain death. I began to cower.

Still looking at the captain making his way up the hill, he nearly reached the line, but a bullet to his head sent him to a permanent slumber. Just as I watched my beloved captain die for his country, the lieutenant, Boggs, came upon me and asked if I was wounded. Looking at him blankly he pulled me up and began forward. We began forward once more towards that wall of misery and death. Shouting loudly and wildly, he was pointing his sword at that blue and white line of Frenchmen; his companions behind him, bayonets lowered and meaner than ever. Just as we were nearly upon the French, our objective, I stopped, pulling back a bit on Boggs. Looking at me as though he had just seen the resurrection of Christ, he bid me continue; now with my senses in overdrive, I felt the shaking of the ground even more so, heard the shouts of death and glory, and began to panic. Boggs, now yelling at me to move, received a bullet just across his hand, more of a scratch than anything and I then ducked, cowering to the ground just as a new child in his mother's bosom. Boggs exasperated called me a coward and faithless to the crown as my comrades half-watched. He then led his group of whatever remained of our once glorious regiment into the teeth of the French line with more and more reinforcements coming up in support on both sides. Looking back and to my side, I saw the entire Coalition charging onto the French, the cannon booming and guns discharging all the while. Feeling my body to now tremble, I lay even lower and began to crawl back to friendly lines, never to see my Brown Bess, Gormley or Watkins again. A coward I am indeed.

Having blacked out once I reached relative safety, I awoke in an open aired-mass wounded tent. The screams of those being amputated upon were heard well across the Atlantic. Feeling enormous pain now, I groaned and glanced at my wound; the bullet had been removed, patched, and now left to bleed until I bleed no more. Still curious, I asked about the outcome of the engagement to some wounded sergeant, now missing both his legs below the knees. He replied with “a truly glorious victory, indeed”, the others in the tent nodding and agreeing. We had apparently routed the entire French host. The wounded were still trickling into the tent whilst severed arms and legs were being wheel barrowed out. I laid back down, trying to think of everything, but

comprehending nothing. In that moment I heard that familiar “Ben”. It was my company lieutenant, Boggs. He was being transported on a stretcher with what seemed like a hole or two in his right leg. He growled at me that word, that one word, “coward”, you coward he called me. Faithless to the crown and a coward he labeled me; some other of the wounded were listening as well. Murmuring had now started back up after his accusations directed toward me; many were now looking at me. I hadn't even the courage to defend myself. They dragged Boggs off, but just before he was out of sight he shouted: “You should have died on that field”, he then promised to court martial me to make sure I received what I deserved. Now overwhelmed with far too many conflicting emotions, I just laid there and wished that I had passed on that field with Gormley and Watkins. A coward, a faithless man to all that the crown stood for, indeed.

Later that week Boggs died of gangrene. I survived. Now able to move, I wondered around the infirmary, looking for any of my surviving comrades, I found none. I had asked a major passing by if he knew of any remaining men of the fifth regiment, he replied that the fifth received two-thirds to three-fourths casualty rate; every senior officer and flag bearer KIA or unaccounted for. I could all but listen and stand no more. I then walked away without even a salute. Honestly I should have been court martialed for that too. Now a new rumor was spreading around camp of someone known as Ben Battle: the soldier bold, or so they referred to it. It was me. A somewhat true and ironic statement due to my recent cowardice. I too was more bluntly referred to as the faithless coward or just worthless. Though a proper court martial never took place for disobeying direct orders from superiors, no one was actually around to witness it and survive, so nothing could be done in those regards. My recognition grew and even some officers began sneering at me, Ben battle: a soldier bold; the name stuck with time. I was permitted back to England along with some others and the nickname grew, soon enough villages in Scotland had heard of me: the faithless coward. Probably the king himself heard about this coward, though who could do anything other than point and laugh. My war was finished, along with my courage. Indeed, I was a faithless coward.

The decades past have brought only more snide and even more clever remarks, some of which far more clever than I could have ever fathomed. Those that returned after the war, such as I had, resemble somewhat of a lazar-like horde, emotionless and distraught. Many men now minus a leg or two, or even worse, an arm. Some returned as well with situations similar to that of mine, that of being faithless, a coward, or in my case, both. No one mocked one another then, except for the younger generation naïve more so than we had been back on that damn peninsula. For the reaper had harvested the youth and spirit from all, except those so far away from it that, to them, the world was still flat. Learning about what had happened back on the fields of Salamanca, fear truly is the sought after instrument. For fear dictated my once prestigious career of routing any enemy before me and fear broke me down to what I am now. Many, as I once had been, mocked me for letting such emotion possess me; but for even them, regret remains their hell. Now, none are left to mock. The remainder consists of either withered husks of once vibrant men or old trepid beggars. Faithless coward they called me. A faithless coward, I am not; for I have experienced the end of days, and in that time, the reaper spares only the rational.

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