

Private Nicholas Argus

The Napoleonic Wars against French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte had been raging in Europe for nearly six years when twenty-one year old Nicholas Argus was recruited into the 2nd Regiment of Foot (also known as The Queen's Royal Regiment) at Chelmsford in Essex on 4th April 1809. The Queen's Royal was a line infantry regiment of the British Army.

Nicholas was the son of Thomas and Margery Argus (nee Dunn) and we can only conjecture at what he was doing so far away from his home village of Tregony in Cornwall. However, a clue might be obtained from the historical record of the Regiment which states: "*When the militia units were allowed, in 1809, to volunteer into the line, the QUEEN'S ROYAL was very successful in recruiting, and its establishment was increased to 1000*".ⁱ

A further clue might be obtained from the following paragraph from a book relating to militia units of the time. "*During its long wartime embodiment, nearly all the militia regiments were stationed away from their home counties, losing their local ties, and came to be treated as a source of recruits for the army.*"ⁱⁱ It is quite possible that Nicholas was a member of the volunteer Royal Cornwall Militia which may have been serving at the time in Essex. In any event, records show that he was in Chelmsford on Tuesday, 4th April 1809 when he was recruited into the 2nd Foot Regiment by Lieutenant G Williams for a period of seven years. According to his attestation papers, Nicholas was 5 feet 6 inches (165cm) tall with dark hair, hazel eyes, dark complexion and an oval-shaped face.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the time of his enlistment, the 2nd Foot Regiment was based at Ipswich, some 39 miles (64km) from Chelmsford, having recently returned from active service in Spain.^{iv}

Nicholas' first experience of overseas service took place three months later when his Regiment, the Queen's Royal, made up part of the British Expeditionary Force of over 39,000 men that was sent to the Netherlands. The purpose of the expedition was to support Austria which had also declared war on the French and to destroy the French fleet which was thought to be in the Dutch harbour town of Flushing. By the time the British force arrived on 30th July, Austria had already surrendered to Napoleon and the French fleet had been moved to the relative safety of Antwerp. In the absence of clear objectives, what followed was a complete debacle punctuated by four months of inept leadership in a disease ridden environment.

Nicholas' regiment was part of the force that was put ashore on Walcheren Island at the mouth of the Scheldt River. From here, they would capture Flushing. By the time of the British withdrawal four months later, 4,166 British soldiers had died but only 106 had been killed in combat. The remainder had died from Walcheren Fever, believed today to have been a deadly combination of malaria, dysentery, typhus and typhoid fever. Many of the surviving troops faced months of rehabilitation from the disease.

The Regiment remained in England for the whole of 1810 while the troops, including Nicholas, recovered from the debilitating illness.

On 25th January 1811, the Queen's Royal, along with several other regiments, embarked from Portsmouth bound for Portugal to reinforce the British Army fighting there under the command of Lord (later Duke of) Wellington in what became known as the (Iberian) Peninsular Wars. They arrived in Lisbon on 2nd March, after being delayed by severe weather along the way, and were barracked in the castle that overlooks the town.

The Regiment was subsequently attached to the 6th Division of the British Army and participated in the pursuit of the French Army which was retreating from Portugal into Spain

following the arrival of the British reinforcements. The 6th Division was later involved in the siege of the Spanish city of Badajoz which surrendered to Lord Wellington in April 1812.^v

On 22nd July 1812, the 6th Division, including Nicholas and the other members of the Queen's Royal Regiment, played a significant role in the British victory in the historic Battle of Salamanca. Held in reserve at the commencement of the battle, Wellington called up the 6th Division to relieve the 4th Division which was being overwhelmed by the French. Having been forced back, the French consolidated their position by concentrating their remaining forces on the last remaining hill. The official history of the Queen's Royal Regiment describes the ensuing battle thus: *The Sixth Division was ordered to advance in line upon the enemy's position, which it did in a most gallant manner, under a heavy fire of 21 pieces of cannon and of musketry; and after a severe contest, the enemy fled through the woods towards the Tormes (River), protected by the approaching darkness of the night, by which many were enabled to escape: the defeat of the French army was now completed.*^{vi}

The famous victory, however, was not without cost and, at battle's end, 21 of the Queen's Royals lay dead while another 106 had been wounded. The Regiment's losses were so heavy that only four companies remained in Spain to fight on under Wellington while the Regiment headquarters and six skeleton companies returned home to England to recruit new members and re-form.

Historical records show that the four companies remained on the continent, covering themselves with further glory, until returning to Ireland in June 1814 prior to re-joining the headquarters and remainder of the Regiment at Chichester in West Sussex in the south-west of England several weeks later.^{vii}

It would appear then that Nicholas, possibly wounded, was among the six skeleton companies that returned to England because the record shows that, on 18th December 1813, he was in the town of Calne in Wiltshire where he was exchanging marriage vows with Priscilla Allison, daughter of local couple Charles and Sarah Allison (nee Edwards). It would be pure conjecture to imagine how Nicholas and Priscilla might have met but probably reasonable to speculate that the six cadre companies might have been based in the area while recruiting new members from among the populace.

During the whole of 1815, the Regiment was stationed at Gosport, near Portsmouth, in Hampshire on the south coast of England. Nicholas and Priscilla's first child, Mary Ann, was christened at Calne on 19 February 1815. Whether Nicholas was able to be present is not recorded.

In January 1816, the Queen's Royal Regiment re-located to Chatham in North Kent where Nicholas, on completion of his seven years military service, was discharged from the Army on 3rd April 1816. Eight days later, members of his former Regiment left Chatham for Portsmouth from where they embarked for service in the West Indies.

Nicholas returned to his home village of Tregony with his wife and baby daughter. Here they would have four sons, two of whom, Thomas and John, would emigrate to Australia in 1844.

i Historical Record of the Second or Queen's Royal Regiment of Foot, Clowes and Sons, London, 1838, p. 59

ii Gee, Austin. *The British Volunteer Movement, 1794-1814*. Oxford University Press, 200

iii Attestation papers discovered during research by Susanne Lawson (nee Argus)

iv Historical Record of the Second or Queen's Royal Regiment of Foot, Clowes and Sons, London, 1838, p. 58

v Ibid p. 60

vi Ibid p. 61

vii Ibid p. 66



Uniform of a Private in the 2nd Regiment of Foot (The Queen's Royal Regiment) at the time that Nicholas Argus was serving in the Regiment