



The Last Ironsides: The English Expedition to Portugal, 1662–1668

by Jonathon Riley.

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Outside the Iberian peninsula, Portugal's absorption into Spain and subsequent twenty-six-year struggle for independence are largely forgotten. Also forgotten is the fact that, in 1662, Charles II shipped a brigade of British soldiers—mainly veterans of Oliver Cromwell's army that he wished to get rid of—to assist the king of Portugal, the father of his new bride, Catherine of Braganza. In *The Last Ironsides*, Lt. Gen. Jonathon Riley¹ chronicles the exploits of the British brigade in a dense but rewarding narrative of a neglected piece of British military history.

The author proceeds chronologically through the book's twelve chapters, first describing the formation and leadership of the brigade, then turning to a blow-by-blow account of the five-year conflict. Portugal's mountainous terrain, parched summers, and rainy winters restricted the fighting to short, indecisive campaigns in the spring and fall. In each chapter, Riley provides background on aspects of early modern warfare: recruiting in chapter 3, command structure in chapter 4, logistics and siege warfare in chapter 5, battlefield tactics in chapter 8, and so on.

While the subject of *The Last Ironsides* is ostensibly the British brigade, it highlights the role of the French Huguenot commander, Lt. Gen. Herman von Schomberg. (One wonders how modern Brexiters would react to British soldiers being commanded in combat by a Frenchman under the supervision of the Portuguese government.) The struggle between the competent Schomberg and his incompetent Portuguese bosses and fellow commanders is a major theme of the book. Riley leans heavily and uncritically on two sources—a memoir of a French officer who served under Schomberg and a hagiographic biography written in 1807.

The author skillfully pieces together the most likely course of events from conflicting and fragmentary accounts of military engagements. He has also personally walked the relevant ground. He commendably clarifies the different military logic under which seventeenth-century forces operated: campaigns were often fought for distant political purposes such as impressing foreign allies, rather than for clear military objectives. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of non-military factors in the make-up of the brigade, which was a stew of political, ethnic, and sectarian tensions—republican and royalist; Irish, Scottish, and English; Anglican, Presbyterian, Independent, and Catholic. One royalist colonel was disciplined for telling his troops they “were but Cromwell's whelps, and that they were sent here for murdering the late king, and were banished men” (67)—disheartening words to hear from a superior officer. Portuguese leaders, counterintuitively, preferred English Protestants to English or Irish Catholics, who were suspected of harboring pro-Spanish sympathies. (The Spanish army in Portugal included an Irish brigade, and some of the British royalist officers had served in the Spanish army during the Interregnum.)

Speaking with the voice of experience, the author notes that “the command arrangements in Portugal were all that is worst in an alliance or coalition force, where national interest is of more im-

1. Riley is the author of fifteen previous books, several of them on the early history of the British army.

portance than the defeat of a common enemy” (69). Skillful diplomacy was crucial: the survival and successes of the brigade owed as much to the maneuverings of Sir Richard Fanshawe, British ambassador to both Spain and Portugal, as it did to General Schomberg. Negotiating the complexities of seventeenth-century international relations, Fanshawe had to encourage the Portuguese alliance with France, while simultaneously ensuring that the level of French support did not overwhelm British influence. After Britain declared war on the Dutch Republic in 1665, British and French troops continued to fight side-by-side in Portugal, even though France was obligated by treaty to support the Dutch. In the end, the war was resolved not by Schomberg’s battlefield prowess but by tectonic shifts in great power relations: a resumption of open war between France and Spain drove the Spanish to conclude the war with Portugal quickly.

Riley draws on recent studies of seventeenth-century logistics in his vivid descriptions of the daily needs of the “itinerant cities” (79) that were early modern armies. A “grand forage” conducted to meet the armies’ constant need for green forage (for cavalry horses and pack animals) occupied most of their combat effectives and limited the fighting season to spring and fall. In the spring, when barns and granaries were empty, armies had to keep moving just to find food. This dictated where and when they marched and which cities were besieged—things not obvious to those simply following arrows on a map. Siege warfare was particularly tricky. An encamped army could consume all available food and forage in a matter of weeks, making an assault necessary.

Following Schomberg’s biographers, Riley often hints that the British (and French) troops were solely responsible for any successes.² But if Portuguese leaders were so useless, how did they manage the engineering feat of converting their medieval castles into “state-of-the-art fortresses equipped with modern guns” (78) between 1641 and 1660? Riley makes little effort to assume the perspective of Portuguese leaders. Doing so could have yielded fruitful analysis of the nature of separatist movements and civil wars. The fall of one city to the Spanish, for example, sparked riots in Lisbon, amid accusations of treason and popular fears of a pro-Spanish coup. But *The Last Ironsides* is the story of the British brigade, not the Portuguese. Even allowing for a certain amount of hero worship, Schomberg was in fact an exceptional commander, who deserves to be more widely known.

Riley’s painstaking research in some very dry sources enables him to determine which specific officer was promoted when and who was related to whom. But displaying that same diligent research sometimes impedes his narrative: exciting battle descriptions can suddenly devolve into long disquisitions on a particular officer’s later career, a subject of interest only to the most obsessive fans of the late-seventeenth-century British army. The same may be said for the blow-by-blow accounts of battles fought using long-gone weapons, tactics, and communications methods that make studying pre-twentieth-century warfare a matter of purely antiquarian interest. Riley does avoid the current scholarly fashion of using war as a lens through which to investigate non-military aspects of past societies or to elicit lessons that might be applicable today. His is a proprietary interest in the history of the institution he has served so long and so well. This is fitting and admirable, but such a narrow focus, combined with the thick narrative detail will likely reduce his readership to a few British army aficionados, members of the Sealed Knot, and the odd graduate student.

This is a pity. While the “lessons for today” school of military history has been justly criticized,³ books like *The Last Ironsides* can enlighten us about present-day forces that do not fight the way industrialized armies do: polyglot or even multinational militaries serving states with weak bureaucra-

2. Perhaps seeing a parallel with English and allied troops fighting alongside hapless, incompetent, often treacherous local forces in today’s conflicts.

3. See, e.g., Antulio J. Ecchevarria II, “The Trouble with History,” *Parameters* (2005) 78–90.

cies, underdeveloped and inefficient logistical and pay systems, and ethnic and sectarian fractures. The reading lists of American and British military academies lean strongly toward twentieth- and twenty-first-century military history. Jonathon Riley, as a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is uniquely qualified to demonstrate that today's military leaders have much to learn by studying the more distant past. Perhaps he will do so in his next book.