

Author's Note: Although members of the 69th Regiment of Foot did in fact serve as marines onboard HMS Agamemnon in the Mediterranean, the premise that there were riflemen in the regiment is fiction. The Experimental Rifle Corps, which used the more practical Baker rifle, was not formed until 1800.

Whilst unusual, it is possible to find documented evidence of women serving, disguised as men, in the armies and navies of the time. Although it was officially forbidden, it is likely that other soldiers or sailors knew the true gender of these individuals; if they were good at what they did and didn't create problems within the ranks, it may have been disregarded. Men with no sea experience at all were sometimes pressed when shortages of seamen became extreme, so a person with skill, even if he was of suspicious masculinity, may have been invaluable.

Although much of this story is based upon historical events, my interpretation of those events is my own invention. Many of the officers and others referred to in this work were actual people, and I hope that I have treated them fairly. Captain of Marines Raleigh Spencer, however, is entirely fictitious.

As is Captain Nelson's amanuensis.

'... I'll 'list as a rifleman and wear a cap of blue...'

'The Banks of the Nile'

— English Folk Song



Chapter One

My name was once Eleanor Buccleuch. My family called me Nell, but you must never call me that. To you, my name is Ned. Ned Buckley.

Nell Buccleuch is dead. I have buried her someplace I hope no one will ever think to look. Someone is searching for me, you see. If I ever go back to England, it will be in a coffin.



After nearly two weeks of being bashed about by waves off the coast of Corsica, my mess and I disembark at St Fiorenzo on 7 February 1794. Jack Mackay has been violently seasick for so long that I wasn't sure he was going to live to see dry land.

We were never intended for marines, but there weren't enough of them in the Mediterranean, so here we are. We've been on the *Tartar* frigate since November. Back in England, we had been part of a rifle detachment.

The boat carrying us ashore wallows in the rough sea. I'd never expected to go to sea for any longer than it took to travel to Gibraltar. I don't know what the others expected. I never asked them.

Behind me, Mackay retches again. We have heard it so often that none of us really take any notice. It isn't as though there's anything we can do for him.

We bivouac on a nasty strip of beach, whilst the officers in charge try to decide what to do with us. Did they not have a plan in place before they dumped us here? They might have figured it out whilst we were being blown all the way to Elba; they had plenty of time.

I am soaked and frozen, and my messmates must be, too; but the relief of finally being off that damned ship overcomes any tendency to be sullen. That, and the anticipation of action. Tom Sharpe wipes his wet hair out of his eyes and grins at me.

Eventually the command overcomes their inertia, and we begin to inch forward. Ordnance, supplies, and canvas get offloaded and dragged into position, in preparation to attack the forts at St Fiorenzo. This is what the army does, and there is nothing particularly momentous about these preparations; but to me it feels almost like the advance of the Roman Legion. Not that, with approximately 1400 of us, we are anything even remotely approaching legion. Far from it.

This is my first siege. No; actually, this is my first real military engagement. My nerves and sinews feel as though there is a vibration coursing along them, not unlike the way the ground trembles when a group of horsemen thunder past. It is not anxiety, exactly; I know what that feels like. I think this is excitement. We are about to put the rifle and artillery drills of the past year to the test.

I read in one of my father's books that the great General Wolfe told his troops at the Plains of Abraham, *'The officers and men will remember what their country expects from them, and what a determined body of soldiers, inured to war, is capable of doing against five weak French battalions mingled with disorderly peasantry.'* I cannot say that I have any idea what it feels like to be 'inured to war,' but I am about to find out how I react under fire. If a bullet finds me, or a cannonball rips off my head, then, like Wolfe, I have nothing more to worry about.

The six of us in my mess form a rifle squad that gets sent ahead of the foot soldiers and artillery to cover their advance. It is not like fighting in close order; we do not advance in lines. We move as a loose unit, and we move fast. Under the command of Will Fowler, our acting corporal, we are practically autonomous.

To protect our artillery piece, not only do we have to try to take the French by surprise but draw their fire as well. It's a race from one position to the next.

We were trained to target their officers. I quickly learn that there is an element of demoralisation that affects the line regardless of who gets shot. If men are falling all around you, their rank ceases to be of much significance.

Will Fowler signals us to move. We sprint across uneven ground; my heart pounds to the rhythm of my feet. Behind us, I hear the line open a volley, and a field gun bellows. I am only remotely aware of all this. My only objective is getting to our next position.

Just as I am about to reach the stand of trees that is our goal, I see Billy Baxter hit the ground ahead of me. He flips over his own shoulder and lands on his back, and I have to dig in my heels to keep from running over him.

He rolls and gets back on his feet as I grab his rifle. Something whines past me.

‘Go! GO!’ Baxter shouts. The French have sighted us.

He can’t run. He tries to put weight on his leg and staggers.

It is only about twenty yards to the trees. I shove his rifle at him and drop to one knee. ‘You go—I’ll cover you!’

I see the man who fired at us. He is reloading his musket as quickly as he can. He withdraws the rammer and sockets it smoothly home.

I sight down the length of my gun. As the French soldier brings his Charleville to his shoulder, my finger tightens on the trigger. The Frenchman takes aim, and I fire.

I saw his eyes. He knew that I had him; I was just a split second ahead of him. The barrel of his gun jerks skyward as his body spins away, a bullet in his left shoulder.

I run like mad.

Billy Baxter did not get shot. ‘My foot landed in a bloody hole,’ he tells Fowler.

Jack Mackay and Tom Sharpe are firing from a shallow rise in front of us as the gun crews advance. Bertram is reloading at the edge of the copse.

‘You stay here and harass them from the trees,’ Fowler tells Billy. ‘We’ll collect you on our way back. Buckley, you’re with Bert. Good shooting.’

The guns are established and dug in for the night. The army has managed to push the French back a few hundred yards towards St Fiorenzo.

‘D’you think you’ve killed any of them?’ Jack asks, as we sit near the cooking fire in the darkness. The days are not that bad, but it gets cold at night. I am glad of my wool blanket.

‘I’ve not really thought about it,’ I tell him. ‘I know that I’ve hit some of them. Does the idea bother you?’

‘I’m not sure.’ He pulls his blanket closer around his shoulders. ‘It’s war. We shoot at them; they shoot at us. Some of us are bound to die, so it stands to reason that some of them will die, too...’

‘Yes,’ I say.

We let the subject drop.



It has been twelve days. I record in my journal, *‘Today marks the fall of St Fiorenzo. One of the French frigates in the harbour is burning, and the navy has taken the other into its fleet. The French are fleeing into the hills. We have done it!’* Twelve days that passed in a blur of powder and smoke. I saw some men wounded, but no one killed; and my mess survived unscathed, apart from Baxter’s turned ankle. We’re set to pursue the French over the hills towards Bastia, propelled by the momentum of victory.

It doesn’t exactly work that way. On 23 February, we reach the summit, and there we halt. We wait, whilst the officers confer. And then, inexplicably, we are told to retreat. We return to St Fiorenzo to sit on our hands for the next three weeks.

We’re finishing our evening meal when the officers appear. The sun is sinking, and the mosquitos are starting to buzz. Billy Baxter slaps at one on the back of his hand and his palm comes away smeared with his own blood. ‘Shit,’ he says in disgust.

The two officers are looking at our mess and talking between them. I recognise Captain Clark. I haven’t seen him since Gibraltar. Our mess went to the *Tartar*, but Captain Clark was on the *Agamemnon*. He is talking to a man who I realise, with a start, is Lieutenant Colonel Villettes.

Tom Sharpe pokes me with his elbow and nods in their direction. ‘They ’as lookin’ at you, Neddy.’

‘No, they weren’t,’ I retort, but my gut clenches. What would these officers want with me, unless someone has guessed my secret?

For the first eight weeks after I joined the 69th, I said very little. I drilled, and mustered, and followed orders. And I observed.

I had no sisters. I have one brother, and we were very close until he was sent away to school. I learnt a great deal of unladylike things from, and alongside, Arthur. We remained close even after his marriage, until our world began to come apart at the seams.

I remember riding from Surrey to Brighton with Arthur when we were both in our teens. I was riding astride, in breeches, and had a borrowed saddle that did not fit me. When we stopped for the night, Arthur observed with amusement, 'Nell, you walk like a man!'

'You try riding with that horrible saddle tomorrow,' I snapped. But remembering that experience reminded me how to walk 'like a man.'

I cannot say how successful I have been at becoming a chameleon, but I have seen no indication that any of my messmates suspect me. That does not mean that someone else does not.

'I think they are, Ned,' says Jack Mackay softly. He is the quietest of us all, except for Bertram, who rarely says anything at all, so he doesn't count. Jack's eyelashes are long and pretty, and if I were still who I used to be, they would make me jealous.

Captain Clark strides towards our fire. We all jump to attention. 'Edmund Buckley.'

'Sir.' I try to keep my voice steady. It wants to waver like marsh grass in a breeze.

'Come with us, Buckley.'

My messmates don't dare look apprehensive, but I can feel it. Each one of them is wound as tight as a watch spring. I clench my jaw and step forward.

Captain Clark looks at my companions. 'Relax, men. He will come back to you on his own feet.'

Meaning they do not intend to beat me... or drum me out of the army. He leads me away from the others.

Colonel Villetes greets me with, 'Captain Clark tells me you write a fair hand.'

'Yessir.' I try to remember when Captain Clark had seen anything that I had written.

'And you are trained with artillery.'

'I was on an artillery crew until they reassigned me to a rifle unit, sir.'

'You've been on HMS *Tartar*.'

'Yessir.'

'There is someone we want you to meet.'

Captain Clark and Colonel Villetes lead me down to the bay. There is another clutch of officers standing on the mole, all red coats except for one. I recognise Lieutenant Colonel Moore and General D'Aubant, among others. Clark isn't taking me *there*, is he? He is.

The other man is obviously a naval captain. His dark blue coat sports gold lace that gleams in the setting sun, and his fair hair creates a glowing nimbus around his face where it emerges from under

his hat. He and the others are having an animated discussion, but the navy man is more animated than the rest. There's an energy about him that fairly vibrates, compared to the army officers. The other thing that sets him apart is how much smaller he is than the army men. He can't be very much taller than I am, and he is as slender as a reed.

Clark and Villettes march me straight for this group of officers. My heart wants to climb into my throat.

One of the army officers gestures in our direction with his chin, and the navy captain turns around.

Villettes steers me into this knot of men and addresses the captain. 'Captain Nelson, this is Edmund Buckley. We think he will serve you well.'

I feel like a suspect horse being offered at auction. Everyone is inspecting me critically.

Captain Nelson has a startlingly boyish face, with a long nose and a rounded, narrow chin. With the sun behind him, his hair is almost as bright as the lace on his coat. His lively blue eyes meet mine, and I sense a quick mind behind them.

'Mr Buckley,' he says. His voice is rather thin, and higher than I expected. There's a hint of a drawl in the way he says 'mister'. He indicates that I should come with him with a jerk of his head. 'Walk with me.' Without looking to see if I am following, he stalks off in the direction of the town. I glance at Clark and Villettes, then hurry to catch up.

He slows his pace a little when I reach him. He looks over at me. 'Edmund Buckley.'

'Ned, sir.'

'Do you not like "Edmund?"'

'No one ever calls me that, sir.'

'Well, I do not intend to call you that, either. I shall call you Mr Buckley.'

'Yessir.' He could call me Guy Fawkes if he wanted to. I'm not going to argue with him.

'My first name is Horatio. But I am not inviting you to call me that. I am only called that by my family.'

'Nosir. I mean, yessir.'

'Those gentlemen,' he says, referring to the officers on the mole, 'think that I need a liaison to handle communications between themselves and me. I agreed because we are going to be at Bastia, and most of them intend to stay in St Fiorenzo. I will need you to bring dispatches and so forth to them here in St Fiorenzo, because I am going to be too busy to come here myself.' He stops walking and looks me up and down. 'Have you seen action, Mr Buckley?'

‘I fought in the siege of St Fiorenzo, sir. As a rifleman, although I trained with an artillery company initially.’

‘Perfect,’ says Captain Nelson. ‘I don’t expect this will take very long, perhaps no longer than it took to take St Fiorenzo. Then you should be free to return to your rifle company.’

‘Very good, sir.’ We’re a squad, not a company. Not even a unit. But it isn’t my place to correct him, and I’m sure he doesn’t care.

‘Go back to your camp and get your kit. Bring it back here, then you will come with me on *Agamemnon*’.