

Our Sporting Heroes



The RWF Depot Cricket Team, 1898

The Royal Welch Fusiliers has associations with many successful and elite sportsmen. Some reached the pinnacle of their success when serving with the Regiment; others laid the foundations of later success during their service. A selection of their stories can be found on these pages.

Sport has long been important to the British Army, as a means of furthering fitness, team spirit and individual achievement.

Prize fights in the Army were established early in the 19th century and a formal School of Army Gymnastics was set up at Aldershot after the Crimean War. Sport was included in 19th century Army reforms designed to improve the lot of the ordinary soldier and as a stimulus to recruiting. Physical Education played an important role in training while other sports were used to bring a sense of discipline to recreation. Soldiers had a lot of recreation time to fill, particularly those on garrison duty abroad. Officers brought an enthusiasm for sport engendered at public schools. Sport was therefore an interest that could be shared by both officers and men - good for inter-rank relationships.



1st Battalion RWF Football Team,
Dublin 1912



2nd Battalion RWF Boxing Team, Hong Kong
1937

Football and Rugby Football have traditionally been the most popular sports in the Army reflecting the situation in civilian life.

Annual Army Athletics Meetings were held from 1876. After an initial reluctance to embrace the sport, Army Boxing Championships were established from 1892. Indian Army Boxing Championships were in place by 1912.

Sport is still included in routine fitness training and units hold regular sporting events. Inter-unit rivalry is as keen as it ever has been. Soldiers are still encouraged to pursue a sporting interest, whatever their ability, and minority and individual interest activities are encouraged, often producing “elite” athletes who compete at the highest level.



Regimental Boxing in the 1990s

RAY WILLIAMS (9 September 1959-)



Ray Williams at the
Commonwealth
Games in 1990

Born in Holyhead, Anglesey, Ray Williams is a successful weightlifter. Introduced to weightlifting at Holyhead High School after an initial interest in gymnastics, he was voted Young Welsh Sports Personality of the Year in 1977 after being placed in the Junior Weightlifting Championships. He joined the army in 1979 and served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers until being selected for the Army Physical Training Corps in 1984.

Ray Williams won the Welsh Weightlifting Championships in 1983 and the Celtic Nations title in 1984. During the 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh he won the Gold beating David Lowestein of Australia and Jeffrey Brice a fellow Welshman.

Williams came fourth in the New Zealand Commonwealth Games of 1990, and then retired from the sport to continue his 24 year career in the army, which took him all around the world.

However, he was lured out of retirement in 2002 when the Commonwealth games came to Manchester. Being 17 years older than the other competitors, he equalled the world veteran record in the 40 to 45 age class.

In January 2003, Williams retired from the Army and returned to Anglesey to coach local young weightlifters and work with the Sports Council for Wales. He took eight weightlifters from NW Wales to the Welsh Championships in Cardiff, and they returned with five gold medals, two silvers and a bronze. In the same year Williams was appointed Wales' first National Weightlifting Coach.

Ray Williams coached Michaela Breeze to a Gold Medal at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, and in the same year he won the World Masters Championship in Bordeaux, France, becoming Wales' first ever World Champion in the Sport. He currently has an athlete very close to qualifying for the 2012 Olympics.

Since 2008 Ray has worked on fund raising to provide a new state of the art facility for athletes from North Wales.

Ray remembers when, after winning his Gold Medal in the 1986 Commonwealth Games, he awoke next day to receive the first of many congratulations telegrams. It was from the Regiment then on active service in Northern Ireland. It read "...very well done on your magnificent achievement in winning Gold. We watched on every available Television set!...." He says reading the telegram meant as much as the Gold. "I will always be a Royal Welchman and I have so many fond memories of my time within the Ranks."

JOHN O'HARA (circa 1840s-1890s)

John O'Hara was born in Ireland and began his military career when he was commissioned Sub-Lieutenant in the 95th Regiment of Foot on 21 September 1872. In December 1873 O'Hara transferred to the 23rd Regiment of Foot (Royal Welch Fusiliers) in the hope of being sent out to fight in the Ashanti Campaign. Instead he was posted to the Depot and subsequently joined the Second Battalion at Gibraltar in 1874.

According to the records, O'Hara resigned his commission in June 1876 because of financial stress and became a matador in the Spanish bullring.

Bullfighting in Spain seems to have originated during the 800 years of the Spanish War of Reconquest (1711-1492). Both Moors and Christians would organise hunting expeditions as a respite from killing each other. They soon realized that of all their prey the Iberian bull offered the greatest challenge as it preferred to die fighting rather than flee.

Bullfighting today usually consists of six bulls and three matadors who are dressed in their iconic 'suit of lights'. Matadors greet individual bulls with a series of passes with a large cape called 'verónicas' (named after the woman who held out a cloth to Christ on his way to the crucifixion). Subsequently mounted 'picadors' are introduced to weaken and enrage the bull by lancing it before the 'banderillos' move in on foot and stick their 'banderillas' (brightly coloured barbed sticks) into the shoulders of the bull in order for it to lower its head for the kill. The 'Faena' or final phase begins with the matador demonstrating his skill and bravery with more passes before ultimately slaying the bull unless he is himself slain or wounded.

How O'Hara entered the profession is not known but the first writer to mention him was Sanchez de Neira, author of the first bullfighting encyclopaedia. According to him O'Hara was a bullfighter of poor quality who became a matador after watching bullfights at San Roque and Algeciras. These shows were attended by British soldiers garrisoned there; moreover posters for the Algeciras bullring were published in English and Spanish.

O'Hara's career seems to have begun in 1874 in bullrings in and around Andalucia and Barcelona. In August 1876 he appeared in Seville, the audience anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Irishman in the Maestranza bullring – one of the most renowned in the world.

Unfortunately the local press published some unflattering reviews regarding his performance.

Unperturbed O'Hara fought again in Malaga on 20 August and at Los Campos Eliseos on 10 December. From then on very little is known about him other than he fought in Alicante in 1877, a local newspaper describing him as a "handsome and brave gentleman but who knew very little about bullfighting".

A British contemporary of O'Hara was General Smith-Dorrien who in a section of his memoirs describes how he met him in Cork in 1877: "One day an individual looking somewhat out at elbows appeared in the mess and turned out to be a rather remarkable person. He had been an officer in the Regiment (95th Foot) but that shortage of wherewithal to enjoy life had forced him to exchange with another Regiment (23rd Foot).

Gibraltar had become his new station and the dangers of the curse of shortage of cash still pursued him, he left the army and became a matador. I remember him showing us with pride the matador pigtail neatly plaited and curled up on the crown of his head."

Both the 95th and 23rd Regimental Records describe how O'Hara enlisted in the cavalry and became a sergeant instructor of gymnastics before joining the Cape Mounted Rifles. However they differ regarding his death. According to the 95th Records he died in Alexandria in the late 1890s but the 23rd Records describe how: "O'Hara met his death skylarking on a train between Dover and London. He had seen fit to climb on the roof of a moving train and was struck by a bridge under which it was passing."

FRED PERRETT (9 May 1891-1 December 1918)



Fred Leonard Perrett was an outstanding Welsh International Rugby Union prop forward who played club rugby for Neath Rugby Football Club.

Perrett was born in Briton Ferry, South Wales and originally played for his local club before eventually joining Neath.

After only a few games for Neath he was selected for the Welsh XV and earned the first of his five Caps in December 1912 against the touring South Africans. Wales ran the Springboks close but lost by a single penalty kick.

Perrett was selected for Wales in the 1913 Five Nations Championship. Wales lost the first game against England but won the remaining three to finish second overall.

Perrett turned professional in September 1913 joining Rugby League giants Leeds Rugby League Football Club.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 Perrett enlisted in the Welsh Guards and served in France from 19 February 1916. In June 1917 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and was posted to the 17th (Service) Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers in October 1917.

Perrett's luck ran out a week before the Armistice and he was seriously wounded on 4th November 1918. He died, aged 27, in a Casualty Clearing Station on 1st December. He is buried at Terlincthun British Cemetery at Wimille in France.

GEORGE LATHAM (1 January 1883-9 July 1939)

Born in Newtown, Powys, Latham was a professional footballer and coach.

After serving in the ranks during the South African War, George Latham joined Liverpool Football Club from his home town club Newtown in 1902. He made his debut on 8 April 1905 when Burslem Port Vale were thrashed 8-1 at Anfield in a Second Division match.

In all he played eighteen times for Liverpool plus one appearance in the FA Cup. In addition, Latham was capped ten times for Wales making his debut against Scotland in 1905.

His last international on 18 January 1913 against Ireland in Belfast was a curious affair as he had travelled with the team as trainer but ended up playing at right back in a single goal victory.

When Cardiff won the Welsh Cup in 1912 Latham featured in the final and made the unique gesture of giving his medal to Bob Lawrie who had missed the game through injury.

During the First World War, Latham was commissioned as an officer in the 7th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers, serving in the Middle East. He rose to the rank of Captain and was awarded the Military Cross for his gallantry at Gaza in 1917 and a Bar to his MC in 1918. 7th Battalion RWF won the British Forces (Egypt) Football League Cup in 1919.

Latham returned to Cardiff City as coach and mastermind ed the club's finest hour – beating Arsenal 1-0 in the 1927 FA Cup Final. He is the oldest League debutant in Cardiff City's history making his debut in 1921, aged 41, against Blackburn, after two of Cardiff's players became ill. He also managed the British team at the 1924 Olympic Games.

Latham retired in 1936 and died in 1939. As a sign of respect in his home town, Newtown Athletic Football Club's stadium, Latham Park, is named after him.

HARRY BEADLES (28 September 1897-29 August 1958)

George Harold Beadles was a Welsh International footballer. One of seven children, Beadles was born in Llanllwchaiarn on the outskirts of Newtown, Powys to Thomas, a quarryman and Sarah Ann Beadles.

As a child he attended a local Board School but left at the age of twelve to work as a farrier. His brother Albert also worked at the same warehouse but was killed after being hit by one of the carts used there.

In 1914 Beadles, then 16, along with his two older brothers Ewart and Ernie, enlisted in the 7th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers (TF).

While his battalion was stationed in Britain Beadles was a bugle boy but in 1915 the 7th RWF was sent to Gallipoli and Beadles served in the front line. During this time he was awarded the Serbian Gold Medal for Gallantry for saving the life of a Serbian observer officer who had been wounded in No Man's Land.

In December 1915 the Allied forces were evacuated from Gallipoli. Beadles was found floating unconscious in the sea and was sent to Malta to recuperate. After recovering he rejoined his battalion in Palestine and took part in all three Battles for Gaza and the eventual push that took Jerusalem under Edmund Allenby. (During the second battle of Gaza his brother Ewart was awarded the MM)

7/RWF remained in Palestine until 1919 and it was then that he met another talented footballer George Latham and the pair became lifelong friends. 7/RWF won the British Forces (Egypt) Football League Cup Final in 1919.

Returning to Newtown after demobilisation, Beadles played for his home town club from 1919 until 1920, he then moved to Merseyside to play for an amateur side called Grayston's of Garston, which represented a local shipping company. Although officially employed by the firm it appears that Grayston's were more interested in Harry's footballing skills! In 1921 he signed for the mighty

Liverpool Football Club scoring six goals in eleven games when Liverpool won the League for the first time in sixteen years. Liverpool were very strong winning the title again the following season.

In 1924 Beadles joined his old chum and mentor from the RWF George Latham who was coach at Cardiff City. While playing for Cardiff

Harry won two Caps for Wales playing in consecutive matches on 14 and 28 February 1925 against Scotland and England. He was part of the team that lost the FA Cup Final 1-0 to Sheffield United in 1925. After a brief spell at Sheffield Wednesday he signed for Southport in 1926. Beadles was captain and top scorer in each of his three seasons scoring sixty-six goals in 102 appearances. Injury curtailed his playing career but he spent a short time coaching in Ireland with Dundalk FC before retiring from football.

Back in Merseyside he spent a short time as a prison officer in Walton Jail. From 1939 he was a hotelier at the Hillside in Huyton and in the late '40s he ran a pub called The Cannon near Anfield. After a long illness he died on 29 August 1958 aged 60.

HOWELL LEWIS (24 May 1888-29 May 1971)



Howell Lewis, born in Pontardawe, Glamorgan, was a Welsh International Rugby Union wing who played for Swansea and was capped four times for his country.

Lewis joined Swansea in 1910 and was part of the Swansea team that beat the touring South Africans in 1912. Swansea won the game by a single try even though Lewis was off the field for a quarter of the match after some skulduggery by the Springboks. In those days substitutes were not allowed so the win is even more impressive. Lewis eventually returned to the pitch after twenty minutes to finish the game.

His debut for Wales, on 1 February 1913, was against Scotland as part of the Five Nations Championship. Wales won 8-0 and Lewis was re-selected for the remaining matches against France and Ireland both of which resulted in Welsh victories. His last international was against England in 1914 which saw Wales lose narrowly at Twickenham.

During the First World War Lewis was commissioned into the 7th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers (TF) and was posted on active service in August 1916. A month later he was wounded whilst with a trench digging party. He returned to his battalion after he recovered and was promoted to Lieutenant in July 1917.

After the war Lewis returned to lead Swansea during the 1919/20 season, at the end of which he retired from Rugby. He died in Guildford, aged 83.

JOHNNY BASHAM (1889-1947)

With a surname like Basham it was inevitable that John Michael would end up as a pugilist.

Born into a mixture of Irish and English parents in Newport, Montgomeryshire (now Gwent) in 1889, life was tough for young Johnny who was one of eight siblings brought up by Edward and Ellen Basham. To supplement his parents' income Johnny sold newspapers barefoot on the streets of Newport before graduating to become a "Spare boy" at the local glass and bottle works where he carried beer for the bottle makers. During the night shift he quickly established himself in improvised fights wearing a set of old boxing gloves and was persuaded to enter competitions in the boxing booths run by the legendary showman Jack Scarrott.

Chiefly fighting for medals and trophies, his training was done at the Crindau Working Men's Club and soon "Young Basham of Crindau" had beaten all the local talent. Luckily he was backed by Captain Evans of Chepstow, adjutant of the Monmouthshire Volunteers, who was able to arrange bigger and better fights. On New Year's Day 1910, at Newport's Drill Hall, in his professional debut Johnny was knocked out in round four by Fred Dyer. For the next few months Johnny enjoyed mixed fortunes but in 1911 he made a decision that would change his life and joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers at its Headquarters in Wrexham, North Wales.

In many ways Wrexham was the most English of all the larger towns in North Wales, although it had a large Welsh speaking minority. For the next fifteen years Wrexham would be Basham's home, where he would marry and do most of his training for his most important fights. Significantly, Wrexham was close to Liverpool Stadium, the premier boxing venue in the north of England.

Officers of the Royal Welch Fusiliers regarded boxing as a scientific and healthy sport. Major R E P Gabbett, CO of the Wrexham Depot, willingly gave his permission for Basham to fight in contests held at the Barracks and the Drill Hall as victory reflected well on the Regiment. As an interest in boxing grew in the 1890s, halls and clubs were built where spectators could watch in comfort. The most prestigious of these was the National Sporting Club in Covent Garden, London which developed a leading role in British boxing when Lord Lonsdale, its first President, put up the first Lonsdale Belts for British title holders. If a champion succeeded in defending the title three

times then it became his personal property, along with a small pension at the age of fifty. The firm Mappin and Webb designed the belts at a cost of £250 each. The first man to win one was Pontypridd's Freddie Welsh when he defeated Johnny Summers at the NSC in 1909. By 1913 Johnny Basham, aka "The Happy Warrior" or "The Fighting Fusilier", was making a name for himself in the world of boxing. He also married Winifred Trader at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Wrexham on 12th August 1913.

Nine days later in Liverpool, Basham stepped into the ring with South African Harry Price. After eleven rounds, with Price laying unconscious on the canvas, a stunned audience watched in disbelief as Basham was escorted from the ring and taken to Dale Street Police Station where he was charged with GBH. After a sleepless night in his cell Basham was told that Price had died of his injuries. At the inquest the decision was that death was caused by misadventure and since it was a boxing match no blame could be apportioned to Basham who was free to resume his career.

An impressive run of victories culminated in a chance to fight for the British Welterweight title, in December 1914, against the redoubtable Johnny Summers who had previously held the featherweight and lightweight titles. Newly promoted Sergeant Basham boxed brilliantly to stop Summers in the ninth round, despite losing a few teeth early in the fight. Johnny defended his Welterweight title many times and in 1916 he won his Lonsdale Belt outright.

During the early years of the First World War and before being posted to France, Basham was part of an elite corps of Army Physical Training Instructors under the command of Captain Bruce Logan. Apart from Basham the team included Jim Driscoll, Jimmy Wilde, Bombardier Billy Wells, Pat O'Keefe and Dick Smith. (Driscoll and Wilde were both former World Champions and Bombardier Wells became famous as the 'gong man' in the Rank films.) The team became known as "the famous six" and toured Britain taking on all comers in a military boxing booth show.

Johnny Basham was unwittingly involved in sending the famous poet, and fellow Royal Welchman, Robert Graves, to the Front. Graves had learned to box at his school, Charterhouse, and a meeting with Basham was the catalyst for his posting to France:

".....Johnny Basham, a sergeant in the regiment, was training at the time for the Lonsdale Belt. I visited him one evening where Basham was offering to fight three rounds with any member of the regiment –the more the merrier..... I asked if I could have a go. He lent me some shorts and I stepped into the ring.....I caught him off his balance and knocked him across the ring. He recovered and went for me, but I managed to keep on my feet. When I laughed at him, he laughed too. We had three very brisk rounds and he very decently made me seem a much better boxer than I was.....As soon as Crawshay heard the story he rang me up at my billet and told me that he had learned with pleasure of my performance.....to show his appreciation he would put me down for a draft in France in a week's time."

Robert Graves Goodbye To All That 1929

Basham was more fortunate than Graves. His destination in France was St Pol, where the gymnastic staff under Colonel Campbell had its Headquarters, and he renewed his acquaintance with Jim Driscoll. In his fictional account of the life and times of Jim Driscoll – "Peerless Jim Driscoll", published in 1984, author Alexander Cordell describes the difficulties of being a physical training instructor in France. On many occasions, fuelled by drink and bravado, an opponent often twice the size of the boxing instructor would not know how to pull his punches. However, one sparring partner that Johnny Basham definitely did pull his punches for was HRH The Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII and later Duke of Windsor. After the session, His Royal Highness emerged undamaged and laughingly accepted Basham's cheeky offer of "Have a Woodbine, Sir?"

Royal interludes notwithstanding, Basham's time in the army had a damaging effect on his boxing prowess; arguably he lost four years when he was at his physical peak to the war. Nevertheless his post-war record was initially very good and in 1919 Basham took on Francis Charles, the French hero and holder of the Croix de Guerre. Although ten years later Charles was blind and helpless, he was in 1919 the Welterweight champion of France. Basham won easily on points and later, in his last appearance at the NSC he defeated Fred Kay to become British, European and Empire Welterweight Champion.

It was unfortunate that Basham was a contemporary of a true boxing legend who he was never able to beat. Born Gershon Mendelhoff

into a Jewish Russian immigrant family in London's East End, Ted "Kid" Lewis was the 'nom de ring' he adopted to hide from his disapproving father that he had taken up boxing. "Kid" Lewis' remarkable career record showed 282 fights over a twenty year period during which time he won nine major championships. Moreover, he contested titles at every weight from feather to light-heavyweight. Between 1920 and 1929 Basham and Lewis fought four times and each time Johnny received a fearful beating.

After 1921 Basham's career was on the wane but he did produce one night of magic on 31st May 1921 when he defeated Gus Platts on points over twenty rounds at the Royal Albert Hall to become European Middleweight Champion.

In reality, this was as good as it got for Johnny Basham but like so many others before him he continued boxing. As more defeats followed he turned to drink and his health deteriorated. He spent the last ten years of his life back in Newport where he became a familiar sight on the streets and in the pubs. On Saturday 7 June 1947 Basham collapsed and died at his Mounjoy Place home, apparently the victim of a seizure. He was 56 years old.

All through his darkest days Johnny held on to his beloved Lonsdale Belt but following his death his widow decided to sell it. The Belt is now believed to be in America but the identity and whereabouts of its present owner is unknown.



Johnny Basham (1889-1947). In this autographed postcard, Basham is wearing his Lonsdale Belt.



The inscribed silver top of a cane presented to Johnny Basham. The inscription reads: "Presented by Lt Col H Jones Williams to Sergt J Basham 3rd Batt. RWF to commemorate his winning the Lonsdale Belt for the third time. May 1st 1916."

MARTIN MINTER KEMP



Martin Minter Kemp was born in 1935 in Aylesbury. He joined the Army in 1952 and in 1954 obtained a short service Commission in the 2nd Bn Royal Welch Fusiliers. He then became a Regular Army Officer. He was promoted to Captain in March 1962 and served with RWF in Germany, Japan, Korea, Malaya and Singapore.

Captain Minter Kemp's home was Plymouth and he was a keen yachtsman. He regularly sailed aboard the RWF's sloop Shenkin and with her he had completed a 500 mile single-handed round trip into the Atlantic thus qualifying for the Observer Trans-Atlantic Yacht Race.

In 1966 he was navigator of the winning boat, Toria, a 45 foot ketch-rigged Trimaran, in the Round Britain Race. In June 1968 he entered the Single Handed Trans-Atlantic Race with the same vessel, renamed Gancia Girl, after his main sponsors, the Gancia family, famous for their wines. He took with him a Pye two-way short wave radio of revolutionary design and sent reports on his progress to the Observer and Daily Express.

Minter Kemp set sail from Plymouth on June 1st. On the first night of the voyage his steering gear was damaged and he had to remain in the cockpit for most of the race. In mid-June terrific storms caught the competitors and several came to grief. Gancia Girl, in the midst of a Force 9 gale began to list, having shipped water in her starboard float. "The starboard hull was virtually submerged.....Under the deck lights a black hole showed where the after hatch, improperly secured by me, had been swept away. I descended into the hull and started bailing. By 0330 I was able to emerge.....and polish off what was remained with the pump."

Minter Kemp arrived at Newport, Rhode Island on 5th July having taken 34 days, 13 hours and 55



minutes to complete the course. He finished in seventh place, arriving 8 days after the winning yacht, Sir Thomas Lipton, sailed by Geoffrey Williams. The Observer reported "Of all those who have crossed the finishing line, Minter Kemp seemed the least exhausted as he stepped ashore...."

His faith in the Trimaran was complete - " I never had a moment's worry about the safety of the boat. No other craft..... would have survived so much water aboard with so little apparent effect".

Battalion Part 1 Orders of July 8th 1968 stated that Martin Minter Kemp's success "ranks with the best achievements by individuals in the Regiment during its long history".

RICKY NICHOLSON (8 November 1973-)



Ricky Nicholson was the first World Champion in any sport for the Royal Welch Fusiliers. During the 1990s he saw service in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, eventually becoming a Lance Corporal. He then worked with the Recruiting Team based in Wrexham.

Nicknamed 'The Tank', his sport was kickboxing and he became WAKO European Super Cruiserweight Champion. .

Nicholson became Commonwealth Light-Heavyweight Kickboxing Champion in 1996, and successfully defended his title in 1997 and 1998.

In September 1999 he took the title of World Super Heavyweight Champion, beating the Lithuanian Rolandus Digris with a 5th round knockout in the title bout.

"The Russian was huge so I knew I'd have to tire him out quickly" said Ricky "but the bigger they are the harder they fall". Nicholson said he came away relatively unscathed – but couldn't say the same

for the Russian. "Let's just say he won't be walking properly for the next two months" said Ricky.

ROBERT BARCLAY (1779-1854)



Robert Barclay Allardice, generally known as Captain Barclay, was a notable Scottish walker, boxing trainer and entrepreneur known by his contemporaries as 'the celebrated Capt Barclay'.

Barclay was born on 25th August 1779, in Ury near Stonehaven. His father was MP for Kincardineshire. Aged 18, upon the sudden death of his father, Barclay inherited the family estate. He was not academically inclined and preferred the outdoors. He was also possessed of a prodigious strength. To escape the unwanted attention of his guardians he left Ury for Lark Hall, a rented house near Bath. There, through his aristocratic friends, Barclay discovered gambling, bare knuckle fighting and long distance walking.

His feats of pedestrianism are legendary. In 1801 he walked 110 miles in 19 hours 27 minutes in a muddy park. In 1802 he walked 64 miles in 10 hours and in 1807 he walked 78 miles over hilly roads in 14 hours.

In 1803 Barclay was commissioned into the 23rd Regiment (Royal Welch Fusiliers) as a 2/Lieutenant. He became a Lieutenant in November 1804. In 1806 he transferred, with the rank of Captain, to the Nova Scotia Fencible Infantry but soon resigned and returned to the 2nd Battalion of the 23rd.

In 1809 Barclay performed his greatest feat - walking 1000 miles at the rate of 1 mile per hour for 1000 consecutive hours to win a wager of 1000 guineas.

Eight days later an emaciated Captain Barclay left with his regiment for the Dutch coast, their destination lay at the mouth of the River Scheldt, the access to Antwerp. Barclay acted as Aide-de-Camp to Lieut General the Marquis of Huntly.

The Walcheren expedition, as it was known at the time, was intended to relieve the pressure on Britain's Austrian allies against Napoleon's France by opening a second Front. A second aim was to destroy the French fleet believed to be in Flushing. The expedition was ill-conceived and doomed from the start. Lord Castlereagh, the War Minister, was responsible for planning the expedition while George Canning, the Foreign Secretary, had some say in assembling and staffing it. Exacerbating the problems was the expedition's undistinguished military leader Major General John Pitt, Earl of Chatham.

Within two months the force had returned to the ports of Ramsgate and Deal, the cemeteries piled high with bodies – the official returns revealed a 40% loss to the 40,000 strong Walcheren Force, mostly from disease. The consequences were nearly as spectacular; Lord Castlereagh resigned then shot Canning in a duel - in the leg with his second shot! The Prime Minister also resigned and Spencer Percival became Prime Minister to lead Britain against an increasingly bellicose Napoleon Bonaparte.

Captain Barclay had had enough of the army, and from now on he would restrict himself to nothing more than his local militia. He gravitated more and more into the heart of 'The Fancy' – the set of gambling, aristocratic hell raisers headed by the Prince of Wales. Barclay became the personal trainer of the fearsome boxer Tom Cribb. Overweight and lethargic, Cribb was whisked away to Barclay's estate in Ury prior to his second fight with Tom Molyneux for the Championship of the World. Following a strict regime Cribb lost two and a half stones and easily beat Molyneux. Barclay won an astonishing £10,000 in side bets.

In later years Barclay became bored and returned to farm the family estate but he was a poor farmer and he lost money. After several unsuccessful claims to hereditary titles he began a new business venture - The Defiance Stagecoach which ran between Aberdeen and Glasgow. He once took the London Mail coach to Aberdeen single handed, sitting in the driver's seat for three days and nights. Ultimately, the business failed owing to the emergence of the railway.

Captain Barclay died on 1 May 1854 at home in Ury from a combination of old age, strokes, and a kick in the head from a horse he was breaking in. He was nearly 75 years old.