Twitter Thread by Alex Deane



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This is the 19th instalment of #deanehistory.

Die Hard is the best Christmas film. This truism is well known.

But the phrase “Die Hard” actually has a much longer history.

In the early 1800s, Spain & Portugal fought the Peninsular War against the invading / occupying French. As usual, in any given scrap in the last millennia or so, the British were on board, against the French.

At the Battle of Albuera, quite near the Spanish/Portuguese border, in 1811, a British/ES/PT force fought Napoleon’s Armée du Midi (included some Poles from the Duchy of Warsaw). In sum: heavy losses on both sides, result a score draw. Such conclusions belie the human stories.

Major-General Houghton was a British national hero. Two thirds of his brigade died in the line at Albuera, including Houghton himself. The French were able to enfilade (fire along their longest axis) with a devastating hail of grapeshot & canister (like huge shotguns).

Colonel William Inglis, one of the many Scots to have flourished during Empire, commanded the 57th Regiment of Foot, part of Houghton’s Brigade. He’d joined it as an Ensign & served with it since the American Revolutionary War in 1781.

So we can imagine how it felt to see 57th, his home & his comrades his entire adult life, massacred under him.

Early on, a 4 pound piece of grapeshot lodged in his neck. This isn’t good for you. He refused to leave the field, staying with his Regiment’s colours as the battle raged & his line shrunk back towards him.

As he lay dying (as he & others would have thought), he called out to his beloved men, again & again…

“Die hard, 57th – die hard.”

For he and they would have thought that time was the end of them. All that was left was the question of how they died. (“As if the way one falls down matters!” “When the fall is all that's left, it matters.”)

But surrounding their Colonel, facing their end, the 57th fought ferociously, their concentrated fire repelling the French until they were finally relieved by other British forces.

Inglis became famous for his cry & the 57th became known as “The Die-Hards.”

Inglis could not be operated upon until two days after the battle (imagine the metal lodged in your neck for two days.)

But he ultimately recovered, fought in the Peninsula again, was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath & in retirement was made Colonel of the Regiment in which he’d served for over 30 years.

The true story of Die Hard.