



Waterloo: A New History

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Wellington remarked that Waterloo was “a damned nice thing,” meaning uncertain or finely balanced. He was right. For his part, Napoleon reckoned “the English are bad troops and this affair is nothing more than eating breakfast.” He was wrong—and this gripping and dramatic narrative history shows just how wrong.

Fought on Sunday, June 18th, 1815, by some 220,000 men over rain-sodden ground in what is now Belgium, the Battle of Waterloo brought an end to twenty-three years of almost continual war between imperial France and her enemies. A decisive defeat for Napoleon and a hard-won victory for the Allied armies of the Duke of Wellington and the Prussians, led by the stalwart Marshal Blucher, it brought about the French emperor’s final exile to St. Helena and cleared the way for Britain to become the dominant military power in the world.

The Napoleonic Wars are a source of endless fascination and this authoritative volume provides a wide and colorful window into this all-important climactic battle.

Waterloo: A New History Details

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Author : Gordon Corrigan

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From Reader Review Waterloo: A New History for online ebook

Mike says

I enjoyed his unapologetic style and viewpoints. May not be your cup of tea as a scholar, but certainly made for an interesting read. His military background shows well in his writing and perspectives. Calling the British cavalry a fire and forget weapon... Priceless.

Robert LoCicero says

Clearly intended for military enthusiasts this volume sets the characters, the political and sociological setting and the military assets available to the major participants in the final "hundred days" of Napoleon Bonaparte. This memorable and most significant battle occurred after Napoleon left his home on Elba Island off the Italian coast where he had been banished after the collapse of his regime in 1815. He mustered another mammoth French fighting force and sought to push the British along with their Dutch allies and the Prussians back towards the English Channel and the German Rhineland before the Austrian and Russian armies could enter France to administer a second coup de grace. It was a near run thing and really this author, a renowned military historian believes that Napoleon lost the battle rather than Wellington winning the battle.

The author does a great job giving the reader a very readable and enjoyable play by play on the battle and its aftermath. I learned a lot and as I am an avid boardgamer both Napoleon era and American Civil War I am looking forward to my next simulation of this battle. The failure to win at this battle resulted in Napoleon finally being banished to the remote volcanic island of St Helena in the South Atlantic. A sad ending for a great man.

Sweetwilliam says

I spotted this book in the gift shop just after I made an impromptu visit to the Butte du Lion, in Waterloo, Belgium. Before this, the only thing I really knew about Napoleon was from the Bill and Ted movies. He loved Farrell's ice cream and the water park and... well...he got ditched. But seriously, Napoleon is the reason why French was the only foreign language required at West Point. How many Civil War Generals were nicknamed after Napoleon? Why did Santa Anna refer to himself as the Napoleon of the West? It was not because of the more recent French penchant for dropping rifles and surrendering en masse while waving the alternate French flag (AKA the white bed sheet). No! It was because the moniker Napoleon harkens back to a time when the French were conquerors of all of Europe! So I bought the book and guess what? I liked it. It was excellent!

Gordon Corrigan did an outstanding job of explaining the tactics of the day. Without this detailed information it would be impossible to really understand why Marshal Ney's French cavalry charge against Wellington's British and Dutch infantry was not successful. You see, Ney attacked on too narrow of a front and the only reason to attack infantry with cavalry in the first place was to get the infantry to form squares so that the artillery (which would be brought up closely behind the cavalry) could take advantage of the unmissable target and blow huge holes through it with shot and shell. But this didn't happen. Ney attacked without infantry or artillery support. Why? Was it the damned Belgian mud again? The artillery could not be

wheeled into position because the heavy gun carriages sank in the Belgian mud. Also, the solid shot would not skip along the ground and would instead just burrow in the mud, killing nothing. This was the same Belgian mud that would doom the British 100 years later during the Passchendaele offensive of 1917 (see my review of *They Called it Passchendaele*). It also could have been due to the fact that most of the capable staff officers had their heads separated from their necks years earlier during the French Revolution. The author points out that the French were lacking in staff officers because most military academy graduates had been executed years earlier. At any rate, when Napoleon awoke from his nap he was aghast to see French cavalry attacking infantry unsupported. Wait! Napoleon was sleeping? Yes, just before the battle's climax, Napoleon decided to take a nap and he turned all matters over to Marshall Ney. The author said something about the middle-aged Napoleon was suffering from complications from STDs such as syphilis and that these STDs tended to sap his stamina. Anyway, when Napoleon awoke, it was too late. Ney had shot the French wad by leading an ill-advised cavalry charge and now there was no way to destroy the Prussians and the Anglo Dutch Armies by piecemeal as Napoleon had intended. Napoleon had met his Waterloo.

I loved the detail and the research about the tactics used in 1815. The difference between light cavalry, heavy cavalry, lancers, the musket battalion's vs rifle battalions, platoon firing, artillery tactics and strategy etc...it is mind boggling that someone was able to capture all this and put it down on paper. Corrigan's book documents all anyone would want to know about the tactics of the day and then some. At times I wanted to shout "Let's get on with the fighting already." But be patient and be grateful for the research. This book stands as a primer of how battles were fought on the continent during the Napoleonic era. I only wish that Corrigan or someone else would do the same for other conflicts. This is a must read and besides, some of his footnotes are really funny.

Nooilforpacifists says

Aussie Rick said it already. Only thing I would add is that the footnotes alone are worth the read.

Jeff Clay says

Sections of this book are top notch filled with interesting vignettes of players, minor and major, and stories that may not be critical to understanding Waterloo (both the immediate battle and the enormous significance of its result), but are vivid and fascinating on their own. However there are times when going down rabbit holes gives one just that view: lots of thick brush and weedy bits and pieces. Thus, whilst I found the chapters on Commanders and Soldiers on the whole revealing and necessary to the script, much of the chapter on Officers was just tedious. And so it was by the time we got to the sixth chapter - Battle Joined - I was more than ready for it. But again, the final five chapters told less of a coherent story than a series of fascinating tales. In many ways this gives one a rich, arguably deeper view of the significance of the day. Perhaps so. With regards to his voice, I found Corrigan's writing style familiar and at times even predictable with his witty asides. Also, at times, it was annoying and unnecessary. As far as research goes, he clearly knows his subject material and though very opinionated he is also very fair in his assessments. In the end, I would not recommend this book, but am not sure that this is THE ONE Waterloo book one must read. (I have only read one other Waterloo book - David Howarth's Waterloo, A Near Run Thing - and can heartily recommend that book for a battles-eye view of that day.)

Richard Barnes says

Comprehensive and for the most part, a lively account of the lead up and background, actual events of and then aftermath to the famous battle.

There are parts where Corrigan recounts the life story of yet another officer where the book drags a little - but this is a small gripe, and in a book that tells a full history of the battle then full rundowns of those involved should be expected.

Besides, where Corrigan really excels in his obvious joy in retelling - his personality squeaks into his account, not in any way that damages objectivity, but it makes this book far more than the dry account it could be.

This would have three stars, but it gains a fourth for Corrigan's footnote about how income tax was introduced in the UK as temporary measure to pay for the Napoleonic wars - we still wait for it to be withdrawn.

Steve says

I was a bit of a history nut growing up, but never really knew that much about this battle. My only comment would be: Waterloo was not the battle that "saved" Europe, but only one that "changed" it. One can hardly say that Europe was "saved," but rather just moved in a different direction than it would have in a French-dominated 19th Century. Also, Wellington was a pretty smart general.

Jeff says

(Note: I received this book as a first reads giveaway)

I really enjoyed this book - the author brings a clear background and narrative to Waterloo. I think, however, what I enjoyed most about the book was its readability - which is not always easy to achieve when you're talking about 200 year old military positions, staff, etc. Actually - I want to revise what I enjoyed most about the book: the author's humor, which was most often on display in the footnotes.

Linda says

A former soldier himself, the author's witty, self-evaluation, makes a dry subject come alive and makes his interpretations--much written history of the era is missing or incomplete--that much more valued.

Jeff says

This is pleasant, chatty book full of light, witty humor and very English aplomb. The author, a retired British army officer, writes this brief history in a positive tone, with lots of references to his own and indeed timeless military experience. I grinned at his remarks upon the difficulty of parade marching and the easy loss of control over a body of soldiers. However, the book has some very serious flaws. To start with the endnotes were mis-edited in the paperback, with chapter three disappearing entirely. Older sources, primarily English ones, are clearly the foundation of the book and that in and of itself is not bad, but it certainly flavors the book as a more Anglocentric view than the title would suggest. For example, statistically the engaged Brunswick and Hanoverian troops took higher casualties than the British line troops, but they get scant mention. More serious are the numerous historical inaccuracies and in some cases, outright wrong statements. For example, the essay on firepower is seriously flawed, especially in light of Brigadier Young's classic book, "Firepower" and Charles Grants' review of the Franco- Prussian musketry tests of 1806/09. Muskets were not accurate at 80 yards, especially dirty ones using inferior powder. The French army had very serious ammunition supply problems, which delayed the start of the great battle itself by three hours+. The French army was not comprised largely of seasoned veterans. The French did not issue campaign medals after every battle. The British army officer corps was not as meritocratic as implied, as the concept of being a gentleman had much to do with the class and leadership structure of not only the army, but British society as a whole. The crucial command role of NCOs in the Prussian army (esp. Landwehr formations) is ignored etc. etc.. etc. etc. There are lots and lots of small incorrect statements. These are individually just minor flaws, but they accumulate to give an inaccurate picture of events. Overall the narrative arc is fine and the details are often humorous and self-revealing but sometimes, just outright wrong.

Alec Gray says

A brief but in depth look at the famous battle- this year is the 200th anniversary- that covers the entire napoleonic period. A good primer on leaders, soldiers, tactics and everything else

Mo says

I have read great fictional accounts of this battle (Sharpe's Waterloo, An Infamous Army), so decided to mark the 200th anniversary by reading an historical account. I found it full of fascinating nuggets and insights to what led up to and what determined the outcome on that day. I highly recommend it for anyone with an interest in this period of time. That said, I made no attempt to keep track of the endless names of companies, regiments, brigades, corps and other military units and thought the extensive resumes of commanders could have been shortened in the text and included in more detail in an appendix. The author is a military veteran as well historian, so he includes often caustic comments of his own.

Walt O'Hara says

This wonderfully chatty, iconoclastic look at the great Waterloo battle is worth a read. The author, Gordon Corrigan, gazes at both the French and Allied side with a somewhat sardonic eye. The resultant prose is humorous, informative and quite interesting. Waterloo is a battle I have read many treatments on-- books,

articles, and even wargames. I appreciate an author who can bring a new point of view to this familiar ground.

Tim says

Decent book on a battle I knew pretty much nothing about. Author brought an interesting perspective to the story. Amazing to see the little things that went wrong that could have turned the entire tide of the battle.

'Aussie Rick' says

I have just finished read Gordon Corrigan's latest military history book; *Waterloo: A New History of the Battle and its Armies*. I don't think anything much 'new' can be said about this battle, however Gordon Corrigan's account does make much of what has been written before appear fresh and interesting. The author, a retired British Army officer, brings a slightly different perspective to this famous battle and his style of writing is very engaging and without any national bias although he does like to tweak a nose or two in the narrative or in his footnotes. Like this account taken from the Introduction in regards to the 150th anniversary of Waterloo held in 1965:

"In 1965 the Allies of 1815 were invited and contingents from Austria, West Germany, Holland, Belgium, Spain and Portugal were on parade, as were the Russians, despite this being the height of the Cold War. As the occasion was officially, if not in reality, a commemoration rather than a celebration, the French too were invited. Not unnaturally they declined to attend, and the story doing the rounds was that their president, the Anglophobic General de Gaulle, had refused on the grounds that he was too busy preparing for the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings the following year."

The author provides a very easy to read general overview of the Napoleonic wars and the events and people involved in the lead up to this climatic battle. I have read much of this before but I still enjoyed the details provided by the author and learnt something new along the way in regards to the uniform of the Portuguese Cacadores: "For a long time this author assumed that the brown was a deliberate attempt at camouflage uniform, pre-dating khaki by nearly a century, until meeting the direct descendant of the officer who raised the first battalion of Cacadores, who explained that the only way his ancestor could obtain enough cloth to make identical uniforms for 600 men was to go into a monastery and requisition the monk's habits."

The author provides short but interesting biographies on all the major players from all the armies involved and some great details on the officers and men of those armies. For example, this account in relation to British colour sergeants: "The rank of colour sergeant was instituted in 1813, and he was the equivalent of today's company sergeant major and company quartermaster sergeant rolled into one. Although colour sergeants supposedly acted as escorts to the colours in battle, this task was more usually delegated to sergeants who had annoyed the sergeant major, as it was one of the more dangerous positions to hold in action."

I found the author to be very fair in his assessment of Napoleon, Wellington and Blucher and provides a soldiers view of what he believes occurred on the battlefield, using his military experience, his research of the numerous accounts available and what he picked up from walking the battlefield itself. I found a distinct lack of any national bias in his writing which was very refreshing.

There are ten general maps of Europe, France and the battlefield, all easy to follow and all placed within the book in the appropriate areas. There are two sections of colour plates within the book, mostly lovely paintings of the period and a few photographs of pivotal locations on the battlefield as they are today.

Overall this was a great story, easy to read and one that I would recommend to anyone who wanted to read one good book on the Battle of Waterloo
