

Last year around the 199th anniversary of the battle, the U K Defence Forum took a party of MPs and Peers to visit the battlefield as a prelude to visiting sites of major battles of 1914/15. Now Dr John Callahan looks back beyond the hype of the 200th anniversary to the enduring lessons learned - or confirmed as timeless.

"So Long as Campaigns are conducted on the surface of the earth, the principals of strategy which have guided Alexander, Caesar, Turenne, Marlborough, Frederick, Wellington, Napoleon, and every other great general of the past, will hold equally good." - David Chandler, New Introduction to Napoleon's Campaign in Poland, 1806-1807, by F. Loraine Petre.

As the frenzy to make money off of the most famous campaign in military history by the mass sale of dubiously useful, but colorfully repackaged books comes to an end (hopefully), it is useful to look again at the Waterloo campaign with an eye to picking out the key lessons of the battle. This brief treatment aims not to rehash the specific events of the campaign, but rather to focus on the key lessons to be learned by soldiers and statesmen from the battle. The point here is to make Waterloo relevant in a world in which it might not seem so, a world of hybrid and 4th generation warfare, which seems starkly removed from the linear tactics of a bygone era.

To provide a brief refresher on the campaign, Napoleon, having been exiled to Elba after his defeat in 1814, returned to France in March, 1815, with the aim of re-establishing his rule over France. The allied powers, then meeting at Vienna, declared a coalition war against him, which led to a frenzied mobilization and deployment phase which lasted a hundred days and culminated in a three day campaign which saw the French Army move from victory to draw to catastrophic defeat in less than the time it took for the U.S. led coalition to defeat Iraq in 1991.

Having achieved his initial goal of placing his army between his enemies, and having defeated one of them, the Prussians, by the 16th of June, he then effectively lost the campaign through inaction on the 17th, and most critically, failed to prevent the union of the Anglo Allied and Prussian armies on the field at Waterloo on the 18th. That failure cost him the battle, the campaign, and the throne, as well as any chance of avoiding exile further afield from Europe. Nevertheless, all three armies fought with great glory, if not skill, and the campaign had enough tense moments and victories for both sides that it continues to fascinate to this day. For all of Napoleon's failures, the battle was still a "Near Run Thing."

Waterloo is also precious to military historians because it marked both the end of the Napoleonic Wars but also the beginning of the modern era in terms of military art and science. Due to the efforts of Carl von Clausewitz and other military theorists, study of the Napoleonic era and the Napoleonic style of leadership became the very foundation of modern military science, and remains so to this day. The period brought us modern style military staffs, organizations, and mindsets, and Waterloo is its most famous battle. From 1815 on, technology advances mated with the massed warfare of the 1789-1815 period to make war almost prohibitively lethal and destructive, culminating in the Second World War. And, in an admittedly simplistic way, Waterloo is the granddaddy of all of it.

What happened?

After three months of frenetic activity, France was about to go to war. After detaching trusted subordinates with small forces to guard the numerous frontiers of France, Napoleon gathered around 120,000 men, including his reserve elements, the heavy cavalry and the Imperial Guard, in an attempt to defeat his nearest enemies, the Anglo-Allies and the Prussians, before the more distant and slower moving armies of the Russians, Austrians, and Spanish could have an impact. Outnumbered by nearly two to one, Napoleon's operational solution was to drive his army along the seam between the Anglo-Allies and the Prussians, keeping them separate and defeating them in detail. In the second week of June, Napoleon achieved operational surprise over his enemies by rapid and

secret concentration of what he called the Armee' du Nord in the vicinity of Charleroi. This location surprised Wellington, who expected the French to threaten his lines of communication, and so the Anglo Allied Army was slow to react. 15 June saw the French army slowly move up the Charleroi-Brussels road and place itself largely between its two enemies.

16 June saw two battles, at Ligny and Quatre Bras. Ligny was the last great Napoleonic victory. Attacking whilst outnumbered by at least a third, the French defeated the Prussians through the quality of their troops, junior officers, and artillery, with a climactic charge by the reserve elements to seal the victory. Less than 10 miles to the west, at Quatre Bras, Marshal Ney, through a combination of late arriving orders, simple tardiness, and the unwillingness of his subordinates to take responsibility and initiative, both failed to take a key crossroads from Wellington, and to provide meaningful support to Napoleon at Ligny, support which could have destroyed, rather than just beaten, the Prussian Army. The most famous example of this is the back and forth march of D'Erlon's I Corps between the battles, aiding neither. That failure, added to the inexplicable inactivity showed by the whole French Army and its commander on the morning of 17 June, undid all the gains of the campaign and effectively gave the initiative back to the Allies and Prussians.

A morning of inactivity followed by an afternoon of heavy rain allowed Wellington to withdraw safely to the Waterloo position, just as the Prussians were reforming and withdrawing north, unmolested, to try for a linkup there on the 18th. The morning of that fateful day found the ground muddy and the French army strung out for miles along the road to the battlefield. Nevertheless, Napoleon thought that he held a commanding position on the highest ridgeline in the area. That ridge, however, turned out to be just out of effective artillery range of Wellington's line, and not sufficiently high to allow Napoleon to see behind Wellington's front. Furthermore, key defensive positions such as the fortified chateaus of Hougomont and La Haie Sainte were nearly invisible from Napoleon's position.

The battle of Waterloo began in late morning with a failed assault on Wellington's right, anchored by Hougomont, followed by a nearly decisive blow against his left, an attack which was only stopped by the expenditure of Wellington's heavy cavalry reserve. By this point, in early afternoon, the Prussians, having evaded a tardy pursuit by Napoleon's right wing under Grouch, reached the field in ever increasing numbers, eventually assaulting Napoleon's right and shoring up Wellington's left. Late in the afternoon, with Napoleon increasingly distracted, Ney squandered 10,000 heavy cavalry on a series of fruitless attacks on Wellington's center right, culminating with the belated seizure of La Haie Sainte in early evening. The climax of the battle came with a final assault on the Allied line by elements of the French Middle Guard, which dramatically failed and led to the unravelling of the whole of the French army, and the end of the Napoleonic dream.

This essay examines a few of the key lessons of the campaign and the battle, for military practitioners, and by a military historian and former diplomat. It is not exhaustive, and it is also not heavily sourced. It is meant to cause discussion, and, perhaps even more importantly, research, education, and enlightenment amongst those who would fight our nation's battles and those who would write about them for the future. In no particular order, the lessons are: Use of high ground; Centralized Position; the benefits of decentralized command; choice of subordinates; use of combined arms; and playing to your army's strengths, especially when that strength is rapid mobility and maneuver.

The high ground matters, but not in the way you might think.

Wellington's famed ridge, running roughly along the Ohain Road, was not as high as that occupied by Napoleon's army. But it was high enough, in that Bonaparte could not see over it to be able to track the movement of reserves or the development of counterattacks

by Wellington. Further, neither Bonaparte's ridge, nor the secondary ridge to which he moved his grand battery before the attack of D'Erlon's First Corps, was high enough to give his artillery an edge in striking the Allied line. Wellington was well able to use his famed reverse slope defensive tactics to full effect. In fact, the two major crises of the battle, the first at the height of D'Erlon's attack, and the second, the attack of Napoleon's Imperial Guard, both involved seizure of the high ground.

High ground also proved to be a key enabler for the defense of the French right flank. The area east of Plancenoit was so broken up by hillocks and woodlots that Lobau's Sixth Corps, which, with supports, barely numbered 20,000 men, was able to successfully hold up all of Bulow's Fourth Prussian Corps as well as a large portion of Pirch's Second Prussian Corps. Although they were on the field as early as 1PM, it was nearly four hours later that this force, eventually numbering almost 60,000 men, made a significant assault on Napoleon's right rear. Indeed, a little discussed what if for the battle is if Lobau had positioned his corps even further east, where the terrain was even more favorable for defense.

Decentralized command matters, a LOT, and so does choosing the right subordinates.

Waterloo is often seen as an epochal battle in terms of the radical changes which would bring about what we call modern warfare. In fact, the battle was not, as numerous others, most notably Austerlitz, Jena-Auerstadt, Friedland, and Abensberg-Eckmuhl, not to mention Leipzig, deserve the title more. But Wellington was right when he made his "same old way" comment, notwithstanding whether he said those words one day or ten years after the battle. Mission based command saw its renaissance in the Napoleonic wars, as Napoleon himself, not an infantryman by trade, realized that the most effective way to fight ever larger battles was to trust subordinates to do their jobs, and not to meddle in the achievement of those objectives. Indeed, during the glory years, this was not a problem, since the Emperor was gifted with a cadre of highly talented subordinates. The Emperor, through his staff system, came to rely on the ability of those below them to understand his intent, and to achieve that intent how they saw fit in terms of tactical minutiae. There is little reason to doubt that such a French leadership structure as was seen at a battle of the 1805-1809 period would have won the campaign, however, that structure was very much lacking in 1815. Without even taking into consideration the problems associated with using Marshal Soult as a Chief of Staff, the simple fact was that, through either the lack of seniority, lack of ability, or lack of faith in the Emperor in the division and corps commanders, Imperial intent was frequently ignored and very often not met during the campaign, from its very beginning with the lack of urgency crossing the Sambre, through the failure of Drouot D'Erlon to take any meaningful action on the 16th of June, when even splitting his force to support both of the battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras would very possibly have won the campaign on that day, or at least made destroyed most of the Prussian army, Napoleon was consistently unable to trust his subordinates. On the 18th, the best examples of this are the failure of General Reille to keep the Hougomont diversion from becoming a full blown attack, and Ney's usage of the cavalry in the late afternoon. Most of all, Grouchy's inactivity stands as a demonstration of this fact. While one cannot blame Napoleon for beginning the campaign in his normal fashion, where he takes a huge hit is in not adjusting to the facts, and more closely managing his subordinates once they demonstrated that their capability, or inspiration, were lacking.

Wellington suffers from the exact opposite problem. From the beginning of the campaign, the Duke's efforts to micromanage the operational movement of his armies and their tactical operations nearly brought disaster. This is not to detract from his brilliance. His management of Hougomont, and his timely release of the Cavalry, and deployment of reserves stand as testament to his flexibility, and his choice of

terrain was masterly, and undoubtedly saved Britain the battle. However, a true pessimist would note that many of the British successes, opposite from the French, took place where key subordinates disobeyed orders or took matters into their own hands, most notably General Perponcher-Seydlintski, who openly disobeyed orders and stood at Quatre Bras, saving the campaign, and whose redeployment of Bijlandt's brigade from its exposed position at Waterloo helped preserve it for the repulse of the main French attack. Furthermore, Wellington's micromanagement, particularly of Hougomont, led to key lapses on the far side of his line, most notably the misplacement of Bijlandt and the inexcusable failure to reinforce or re-provision the garrison of La Haie Sainte when ammunition ran low, in spite of the fact that another unit, the 95th Rifles, using the same weapons as the King's German Legion Light Infantry who manned the chateaux, did not run short. In modern parlance, it would be quite easy to see Wellington abuse modern technology to maneuver squads around the battlespace, to the detriment of overall strategies.

Against the irony of Napoleon's misplaced trust in his subordinates and Wellington's nearly disastrous micromanagement, the one army in the campaign which clearly demonstrated that it had made the jump to modernity was that of Prussia. While, in terms of troops, Prussia's 1815 army was the worst it had produced in the period, the same cannot be said of its leaders. Prussian commanders consistently displayed initiative and creativity that was lacking by intent in the British Army and unexpectedly lacking in the French. Examples abound. The most notable is General von Ziethen, Prussian First Corps commander, whose decision to commence a fighting withdrawal, but to continue covering Wellington's assembly points, gave both Wellington and Blucher time to adjust to events. To Ziethen also goes a decision which might have saved the battle of Waterloo, when he, in theoretical contravention of his orders from Prussian Chief of Staff von Gneisenau, chose to obey Blucher's overall intent and support the British Left Flank, when by all rights he could have blamelessly "turned left" and headed off to Plancenoit. That decision, which buttressed Wellington's left, let him contract his front just in time to repulse the attack of the Imperial Guard. The most important example of initiative of all was shown by Count Nostitz, who, in, on his own initiative, took the wounded Blucher north, toward Wavre, instead of North East, to Namur, allowed them to intervene at Waterloo on the 18th. To reiterate, it was the Prussian officer corps, not that of either other combatant, which demonstrably made the jump to decentralized operations that leaders proselytize today.

An aside. I don't overly criticize D'Erlon or his division commanders Quiot/Allix, Marcognet, and Donzelot for the formations they used to attack Picton's position along Wellington's left flank. Latest research is that the deep divisional columns worked well against the enemy they expected to face. More recent evidence shows that Picton's "fire and countercharge from a position of surprise" maneuver, a key to British success in the Peninsula, largely failed against the columns, with the relatively small, badly abused (two days prior, at Quatre Bras) British battalions bouncing off the massive columns. What the French were beaten by was something they had not experienced before, which was a large amount of well led, elite heavy cavalry. The formation that worked so well against infantry was woefully inadequate to fend off the cavalry, with well-known results.

This leads to the next lesson: Combined arms matter, a LOT.

Every French success in the battle occurred because of combined arms combinations of Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery. Of course there are only two case studies to draw on, the successful seizure of La Haie Sainte early on the evening of the 18th, and the successful delaying action by Lobau's Sixth Corps against von Bulow's Prussian Fourth Corps on the French deep right flank.

Combined arms were critical for the allies in the most dramatic attack of the day, the

countercharge of the British heavy cavalry against D'Erlon's attack. This effort involved seven regiments of cavalry, four divisions of infantry, and their supporting artillery and light infantry in the most dramatic Allied effort of the day. Famously, that attack fizzled when it outran its infantry supports, and in effect became a single arm attack. This was also the case for the massive French Cavalry charges of later in the afternoon. Given the nature of the charges (Some say that Ney viewed it as a pursuit), it is unsurprising that infantry were not involved; however, it is inexplicable and inexcusable that the horse artillery batteries integral to the various cavalry divisions were not involved. In contrast, the highly successful integration of infantry, cavalry, and artillery brought about the only real French success of the day, the storming of La Haie Sainte, in the early evening hours.

Here the British win out again, consistently, and in addition to the repulse of D'Erlon, successful combined armed tactics are seen in the defense of the main ridge line against Ney's Cavalry. While it was very unlikely that horse were going to break squares which also occupied high ground, skillful use of artillery in the defense as well as consistent and continuous counter attacks by the Allied (mostly light, as the heavies had been expended as noted above) cavalry helped to ensure that the French could not concentrate enough force on those squares that did waver to destroy them.

Energy is important, especially in a commander. Napoleon famously said that he could generate everything he needed to fight a war personally except for time. In a campaign which lasted three days, such a statement would hold even more weight than normal. In short, every second of the campaign was a treasure to be spent on maneuvering and victory. Napoleon's lethargy in the campaign is famous and in great contrast to his earlier campaigns, even just one year before in the defense of France. The energy shown by Wellington, and even more critical, by the aged Blucher, was central to allied success.

The most famous example of operational lethargy exhibited in the campaign was that shown by Napoleon on the 17th of June. As Wellington withdrew from the trap that the Prussian withdrawal put him in, and while Blucher dictated the future battles of the campaign by his withdrawal northwards, Napoleon did nothing of note for the entire morning, not even launching his pursuit until late in the morning, far too late to be decisive, and, most critically, allowing a pace ♦ killing thunderstorm to set in. That storm not only allowed Wellington's escape, but so delayed the French that they could not attack early on the 18th because the condition of the roads and fields prevented the army from moving up in a timely fashion.

Coalition warfare is tough. Marshal Foch famously said that having commanded a coalition in war, his respect level for Napoleon had dropped. This was because he saw first-hand how difficult it was to get members of a coalition to do anything, and to serve a unified cause. The allies in the 1815 campaign (and indeed in every other campaign of the period) had an enormously hard time cooperating, even though it was obvious that none of them could stand alone against Napoleon. In fact, the success of the allied coalition rests almost entirely on one man, Gebhard Leberecht von Blucher, the commander of the Prussian Army of the Lower Rhine. It was Blucher who time and time again made his military decisions based on the alliance rather than based on the direct interests of his own army. Most notably, this meant retreating to Wavre rather than Namur/Liege, allowing him to intervene decisively at Waterloo on the 18th of June. This was in spite Wellington's complete failure to live up to his side of the deal on the 16th, when he did nothing (besides meeting in person) to support the Prussian effort at Ligny. It could be that Blucher had learned from the 1813 and 14 campaigns that Prussia alone could not defeat the French, as exhibited in a series of beatings his army took, especially in 1814, when caught alone and not in concert with his allies.

If you are a maneuver army, maneuver.

The French Army of 1815 was

not the Grande Armee of the Camp of Boulogne which conquered Europe between 1805 and 1809. Nevertheless, the great strength of the French Army was its ability to maneuver rapidly. Prodigious marches brought about the great encirclement at Ulm, the crushing victories at Jena and Auerstadt, and a series of rapid concentrations and victories right through the rest of Napoleon's campaigns. Marching faster than your enemy lets you set the terms of an engagement, finding flanks to attack, or seizing the good ground before your opponent does.

In 1815, the Armee du Nord was decisively lacking in the alacrity needed to achieve its desired aim, that of getting between its opponents and defeating them in detail. This was in part lack of good leadership, in part because of bad staff work, in part because of Napoleon's personal lethargy, in part because of the weather, and in part because of good rearguard work by the Prussians on the 15th of June and the British on the 17th. Nevertheless, a failure to maneuver, the French Army's greatest strength, meant that in every battle of the campaign, the allies dictated the terms of the engagement and held better and stronger positions. That the French pulled off Ligny, in the face of superior numbers and terrain, and did as well as they did at Waterloo, are testaments to the ability of the French infantry and their junior commanders to do their jobs, and do them very very well.

Central Position is a critical enabler: Wellington expected the French to attempt to roll his right flank, and force him eastwards towards Blucher and away from his lines of communication back to England, via the channel ports. The French ability to maneuver quickly made the attack along a central axis possible, but then the lethargy and uncertainty mentioned elsewhere in this piece rendered the issue moot.

Conclusion

Rather than rehash the minutia of the Waterloo Campaign, this brief work attempted to draw out key elements of the campaign and its battles in an effort to answer the "who cares" question for modern military practitioners. Amidst all of the glory, insanity, and romance of the campaign, particularly viewed from two centuries of distance, the key elements focused on in the piece, from use of high ground to maneuver, choice of subordinates, command style, and the validity of coalition warfare. The list is not exclusive, but designed to inspire thought and interest in this most famous of military campaigns, while also demonstrating the continued relevance of the first "Modern War" to the conduct of military affairs in the 21st century and beyond. The reality, in the end, is that the distance in thought, deed, and military action between 1815 and today is simply not that great.

Modern ideas about "regular" warfare were shaped, through the writings of von Clausewitz and Jomini, by the Napoleonic Wars. Today's concepts of 4th generation and hybrid warfare involving all aspects of national power and capability would not have sounded overly strange to those Napoleonic generals, such as Davout and Suchet, who successfully subdued regions of Spain and Germany in the face of a wide range of threats. They knew, as did von Clausewitz and a range of military thinkers up to the present day, that war is war, no matter what a particular culture might call it. Von Clausewitz cautions commanders to understand the war they are attempting to fight, and with that warning in mind, the basic lessons of one battle, campaign, or war, are timeless.

So it is with Waterloo.