

24 Hours at Waterloo, 18 June 1815.

By Robert Kershaw. London: W.H. Allen, 2014. ISBN 9780753541449, pp. 421.

In the spirit of the '24 Hours' themed series, *24 Hours At Waterloo 18 June 1815*, takes a detailed look at the battle which ended the Napoleonic Era. Robert Kershaw's extremely readable account provides a thrilling blow by blow or more accurately hour by hour discussion on the unfolding of the Battle of Waterloo. The publication of the book coincided with the celebration of the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo which held considerably more attention in Europe than in South Africa.¹⁶

Right from the start it should be clearly stated that this is a traditional military history written in the classical style of campaign and battle histories. Whereas the author does not apply the narrative of nationalist or imperialist methodologies the account remains true to the

¹⁶ The celebration of the bicentennial of the Battle of Waterloo saw many publications, some of which include, B. Cornwell, *Waterloo: The True Story of Four Days, Three Armies and Three Battles* (London: William Collins, 2014); T. Clayton, *Waterloo: Four Days that Changed Europe's Destiny* (London: Little Brown, 2014) and R. Muir, *Wellington: Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814 -1852* (New Haven: Yale University, 2015), amongst others.

profession of arms as it focusses on the combat experience and negates social and economic matters, only referring to them as relevant to and in relation to the battle. No surprise that Kershaw as a former colonel in the paratroopers, reveals the ‘soldier’s’ view of the engagement. The author adds a fresh perspective to a well-known story by demonstrating that history is, as E.H. Carr declares, a never-ending dialogue between the present and the past aiming to understand what has happened through a modern lens.¹⁷

The book commences with a prologue which includes the timeline, map and introduction which provides the context for the narrative to unfold. The body of the book is then divided into 10 chapters which breaks up the day of the battle into a division of hours and represent themes of attack and defence respectively. The book is concluded with an epilogue, endnotes, a bibliography and an index as well as a brief biographical introduction of the main characters who participated in and reported on the battle.

Kershaw’s account makes use of primary published and secondary sources in his well-written and well-structured narrative. The voices of the survivors are brought to life by their accounts and memoirs of the battle. The book is filled with nuggets of fascinating and interesting facts which give the account depth and context. The surviving officers were prime candidates for leaving behind their memoirs as they were literate in a time where illiteracy was common. In addition, and interestingly Kershaw adds that many sergeants were required to be literate because of their administrative duties within their respective regiments and thus they also left behind accounts of the campaign and battle. These participants who left behind accounts of the battle for posterity were advantaged to be able to observe a considerable part of the engagement unfold because of the relatively geographically inferior size of the battlefield.¹⁸

The Battle of Waterloo was the final combat which engendered the spirit of the *Grande Armée*. The battlefield placed approximately 200 000 soldiers, 60 000 horses and 537 artillery pieces in a localised rural geographical space in what became an all-out battle of attrition between two

¹⁷ K. Jenkins, *On What is History: From Carr and Elton to Rory and White* (London: Routledge, 1995), 55

¹⁸ R. Kershaw, *24 Hours at Waterloo 18 June 1815*, (London: WH Allen, 2014), xxii.

well-armed, well-disciplined and well led forces. The rate of death and injury averaged between 60 – 120 casualties per minute.¹⁹

Chapter 1 discusses the first couple of hours of 18 June 1815, 00:10 to 02:00, and gives background and context by commenting on the previous engagements at Quatre Bras and Ligny. The engagements prior to Waterloo reflects Napoleon's success in outmanoeuvring the British-Allied force at Quatre Bras and Ligny. The dialogue then transfers to the technical level discussing the individual experience of soldiers, a theme that is carried throughout the book. The experience of the soldiers prior to the Battle of Waterloo is marred by the misery of the cold, rain and mud in which many of them spent that fateful morning. Wellington's force was exposed to diverse climatological elements which ranged from hot weather on 13 June, where his forces were compelled to retreat from Quatre Bras and Ligny in the face of Napoleon's surprise attack, to cold and wet conditions on the night of 14 June and the morning of 15 June 1815. The geographical setting for the tactical encounter is set in the first chapter, describing the approximately 21 square kilometres where the *Grande Armée* was to make its final stand.

The operational manoeuvre and battle at Quatre Bras and Ligny epitomises Napoleon's strategy of the central position which aimed at placing his forces between two opposing allies before they could amalgamate their forces, defeating them piecemeal. In the case of the battle preceding Waterloo, Napoleon divided his forces to attack the numerically weaker and unprepared British-Allied forces who were for the most part caught unawares. In discussing Napoleon and Wellington's decisions regarding the broad options of manoeuvre or battle, Kershaw reminds his audience of the administrative and logistical difficulties of gathering, mobilising and concentrating forces before the age of mechanisation.

The second chapter explores the gloomy hours from 02:00 until 10:00. Kershaw patches together a narrative from the many primary accounts and weaves together the grim picture of cold and anxious soldiers who were contemplating the forthcoming battle with reference to their previous experiences at Quatre Bras and Ligny. The thoughts and concerns of the men were often for their families, who would when allowed accompany them on campaign.

¹⁹

Ibid, xxii.

An interesting point brought forward by Kershaw was the role of woman on campaign and that many soldier's wives would apply for permission to go on campaign with their husband's regiment. Marriage was frowned upon by most officers who tried to convince their men against the option of matrimony. On the topic of woman on campaign Wellington is quoted as saying "it is well known in all armies that the women are at least as bad, if not worse than the men as plunderers".²⁰

Chapter 3 opens with a sketch of the battlefield and discusses the period between 10:00 and 11:30. The battlefield sketch offers the reader the opportunity to understand the relative geographic proximity and demonstrates, in a novel fashion, where the various narrators and participants stood in their battle formation. The opinions and views of Wellington regarding his polyglot force, which are by no means in short supply, are also mentioned in this chapter.

Wellington's opinions did not only extend downwards to his subordinates but also upwards to the British government, who he did not hold in the highest regard prior to the campaign as they did not provide him with the number of men and artillery which he requested. The British-Allied forces had 157 artillery pieces, which were 90 cannons less than that what Napoleon possessed.²¹ Kershaw makes the comparison of Wellington's troops to that of a modern NATO, where a polyglot force is employed to achieve national objectives in an international organisation.

The author brings to life the times in which Napoleonic and British soldiers lived and served. In terms of motivation for joining the army besides the fiscal reasons which included plunder, one advert, which when considered through today's perspective appears tongue in cheek, stated 'too much wife?'.²² The motivations and proclivities of the various military forces from different nations are discussed as the European Alliance and Napoleonic forces aimed for total victory.

The fourth chapter discusses the opening shots of the battle over the hours 11:30 until 13:50 as well as the terrain which shaped the battlefield. Kershaw alludes to the inaccuracy of timepieces of the day, but it is generally assumed that the opening shots were fired at approximately 11:00. The central aspects of the terrain which influenced the battle are

²⁰ *Ibid*, 45, 46.

²¹ *Ibid*, 80, 81.

²² *Ibid*, 98

outlined which include Mont Saint Jean Ridge and the built up obstacles of Hougoumont Chateau and La Haye Sainte farmhouse. Wellington had carefully selected the terrain where he placed his forces in preparation for defensive battle.

The importance of the climate and terrain is further highlighted in chapter 5 *The Muddy Slope* which covers the timeframe 13:50 to 14:15. There was extensive rain prior to the battle which resulted in waterlogged and soggy soil which hampered the movement of forces. During the planning process of military operations, terrain is seen as a neutral factor which can influence either side depending on the plan of the commander. The French forces commenced the attack with an artillery bombardment followed by an infantry advance. Much of the British forces were hidden in dead ground behind the ridge and the chapter discusses in detail the mauling of the French infantry as they crossed the ridge and met with British cavalry.²³

Chapter 6, *A Cascade of Cavalry* discusses the events from 14:00 to 15:00 and brings forward the sheer immensity of the violence which transpired on 18 June 1815. The author states that even for the Napoleonic Era, which was generally gruesome and harsh, the Battle of Waterloo was regarded as particularly macabre. Many of the soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or some form of combat stress prior to the battle which at the time remained undiagnosed.²⁴ Many more would show symptoms of combat stress after the battle.

The seventh chapter addresses the French cavalry charge during the hours 15:00 until 18:00, one of the critical events which influenced the outcome of the battle. Marshal Ney led the cavalry charge on his own initiative at an inopportune time, on waterlogged ground and towards a hidden enemy which were in a strong defensive position. Napoleon is said to have commented “this is a premature movement which may well lead to fatal results”.²⁵ The British infantry squares subsequently annihilated the French cavalry.

Kershaw highlights and elucidates the character of pre-industrialised Napoleonic warfare where the rudimentary level of

²³ *Ibid*, 169.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 199.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 228.

technology resulted in the forced use of masses of men to act as parts of a concentrated war machine. Volley fire made the single shot muskets effective through the concentration of fire. Iron discipline in line and square formations were required to absorb musket and cannon fire as well as cavalry attack. The book speaks to the brutality experienced by the soldiers on the battlefield as death or injury became a virtual certainty.

Chapter 8 discusses the events which took place from 18:30 to 19:30 as the day approached its zenith. The decimation of the French cavalry and part of the infantry had taken its toll on the British-Allied squares holding the ridge line. Wellington became concerned about his centre which was where Napoleon was directing his attention.²⁶ The impending onset of darkness created a desperation on both sides, with both fatigued forces anticipating the arrival of the Prussians although for disparate reasons.

The ninth chapter echoes the anxiety felt by the opposing commanders as the hours 19:30 until 20:30 are illuminated. Kershaw identifies the battle's 'tipping point' during this timeframe as Napoleon who was holding the Prussians on his right had to decide on his final actions with the remnants of his force which was the revered Imperial Guard. Wellington also had to decide whether to reinforce the Prussians on his left or whether to strengthen his centre.²⁷ The British-Allied forces maintained their defensive positions and their infantry squares broke the advance of the Imperial Guard whose retreat became infectious as the French offensive crumbled. The Prussian forces arrived on the scene from the East at the same time overwhelming the French forces.²⁸

Chapter 10 which is the last chapter discusses the French retreat from 20:00 until midnight. The British-Allied forces did not have enough in them to pursue the retreating French forces and the Prussians assumed the role. It was generally believed by British and French soldiers that without the arrival of the Prussians on the French right flank, the French forces would have stood their ground.²⁹

While reading Kershaw's account and on arriving at Chapter 10, I felt in some ways as if I had witnessed the battle and I could sympathise

²⁶ *Ibid*, 272.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 306, 307.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 326.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 333.

with the soldiers of both sides who upon the realisation of the French retreat breathed a sigh of relief as the epic day drew to a close. The physical and emotional strain must have been overwhelming and the only thing worse than surviving with psychological scars was being physically wounded with inadequate medical care. The epilogue discusses some of the political ramifications of the battle as well as the fate of many of the participants and survivors including the commanders and soldiers.

Within Kershaw's account of the battle are many sub-narratives which give context to the political dimensions of the Napoleonic Era. Furthermore, the micro-biographies of individual soldiers, non-commissioned officers, officers and commanders fill the book with an electrifying vivaciousness which thrills, saddens and elates its readers. In a time of *levée en mass* and concentrated warfare where the harsh military discipline echoed the times in which the soldiers lived, where the value of life was negligible, Kershaw gives a voice to those who anonymously fell in service to a "greater" cause.

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