

The Napoleon Series

About John Hussey as Told by Himself

When I was seven I came across a novel by G A Henty about Crecy and Poitiers; some of the didactic chapters left me confused but the action parts were all to my taste, and I was hooked. I duly followed Henty's indestructible boy hero in all sorts of campaigns from the 10th Century to the 19th ('same play, different costumes'). Then I discovered that the man who had written that delightful children's book *The Story of a Red Deer* had also described Marlborough's wars and so began my lifelong involvement in Sir John Fortescue's great *History of the British Army*. And that in turn led from Sir John to Sir Charles Oman, and so the trail went on. Mahan and Corbett and Richmond told of the maritime dimension. So this was how the era of sail and 'Brown Bess', of Hawke and Nelson, Marlborough and Wellington, opened for me and surrounds me still.



John Hussey by Anna Kunst Photography

Meanwhile I had received a sane and standard education, did National Service, and survived three years of constitutional, economic and diplomatic history at Cambridge, and from there joined British Petroleum (BP). I served BP for the next thirty years (1957-87) in all sorts of roles and in places across the world. A couple of years working in France polished up my French (and saw the start of my collection of works on Napoleon), a love affair in Munich improved my German. I was fortunate to work in French West Africa and in the ex-Belgian Congo for seven years of the 1960s, for that taught me, day in, day out, the reality of logistics, the need for cooperation (even among competitors when things got rough, for which lucky man can guess when the tables may turn against him and help becomes vital?), and for the bonds of comradeship.

I had one customer, a factory in the Congo surrounded by barbed wire and bunkers, marooned in an area dominated by Mulelist rebels. The factory's re-supply across difficult country was a matter of life or death. During the day their furnaces burned used cheap sugar cane but the power output proved variable. At night the generators had to work without hitch to maintain the perimeter lights upon which the night-watch depended, so oil burned every night. Across some 18 months we probably lost money on that contract but we never once left them unsupplied with oil, and the logistical task was an immensely wearing but immensely rewarding one. (Recollection of it also proved of use when I turned to writing military history.)

A later spell in the 1970s running our operations in Nigeria seemed dull by comparison, though that sink of corruption outdid even the Congo in some respects. And for the other parts of my 30 years I dealt with Spain, Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East, with India and Pakistan and Ceylon, with South-east Asia and Australasia, all marvelous

places with their own opportunities and special problems. Nothing was ever dull, or – if it did sometimes seem humdrum there was always something in store: including being in a murderous hijack in Pakistan on one occasion.

My wife had a major cancer operation in 1982 and in my mid-fifties I decided to spend as much time as possible with her. Very wisely she insisted that I should not drop intellectual interests, and so I struck up an acquaintance with an historian of the First World War. I had always been interested in the Great War, and had a relation who had served as a GSO 2 to Sir Douglas Haig in 1917. He in 1965 had shown me John Terraine's *Douglas Haig, the Educated Soldier* and said 'This is what we have been waiting for; he really does understand it all'. So, belatedly in the 1980s I made contact with John Terraine and thus began one of the most fruitful friendships of my life. John was a doughty fighter and a much enduring one; his knowledge was immense and his commonsense perhaps even greater. And he had the seeing eye; he could spot amidst a sequence of anodyne sentences the one item that was key to the whole business. Take it day by day, read it word by word. And so I began research into the war of 1914-1918, and a string of articles was the result.

Then I was asked by my friend Julian Thompson of San Carlos Water fame if I would write a short popular book in a planned series 'The Great Commanders'. I took Marlborough as my subject, while recognizing that ten years of campaigns and the extraordinary story of his political career, could not be treated so spaciouly as Winston Churchill had done in four massive volumes. Consequently I took two campaigns only, examined them in as much detail as my publishers would permit, making a brief connecting narrative as linkage, and trying to see the campaigns afresh and *not* through the eyes of earlier writers. The series fell victim to accountants and management consultants who led the publishers to trim, reduce and finally to abandon the project (even our skimpy maps were under a death-sentence at one point). My volume attracted little interest; an academic tutted over it in dudgeon (ignoring the explanation in my preface), but a gifted soldier praised the 'zoom-in' solution and paid some compliments, so I was satisfied.

By then I had turned to 'the matter of Waterloo' that was much in the news in the late 1990s and began a new assessment of the story, finding gradually that what I had believed for some fifty years was not quite the case and that there was much more to say. Two articles in *War in History*, several in the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* and a succession in *First Empire* set out my findings. As a result of all this work I was asked by the Belgian authorities to be the British national representative on an international committee of historians to advise on the restoration of the Waterloo battlefield and I served on it for four years, 2003-07.

But in 2007 my wife became very ill with cancer once more, and, as I had some medical problems of my own, I resigned from the committee, having become much more of a 'carer'. But I continued to write, and a tough no-nonsense comrade, Dave Watkins, insisted - despite some adverse pressure - on allowing me space for my findings in his *First Empire* magazine until it closed in 2011. It was another good friend, Lionel

Leventhal, who suggested that I turn all this work into a book and so my evenings were often spent revising and rewriting the 1815 story, all with an intended submission date of 2014. I was about 80% through a full draft when my wife's health finally collapsed, and when she died in mid-2014 I had no mind to continue. But after a due interval Lionel coaxed me back and encouraged me to think that even after the cascade of books on the subject that duly descended in 2015 there might be more still to say. And so it is that the book has reached publication stage. If it should find favour and live, then in a few years the belated publication date of 2017 will be no matter. In any case History is a debate without end, and somewhere sometime in the future a new work surely will appear.

As to recognition, I have been very lucky in being paid for work that I enjoyed anyway, and receiving an OBE in 1971, and being elected more recently to a Fellowship of the Royal Historical Society. So I have been more than amply rewarded.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: March 2017