

The Napoleon Series

An Interview with John Hussey: Part I

By [Robert Burnham](#)

Editor's Note: This is the first in a multi-part interview with John Hussey who has spent years writing a new book on Waterloo, called *Waterloo: The Campaign of 1815* which will be released in May 2017. Since John Hussey lives in England and I ten hours away in Hawaii, we decided do the interview via email during February and March. Although I had a list of questions for him, it quickly turned into a free flow of questions and answers and then more questions based on his answers. Neither the publisher nor John provided any of the questions or asked that I avoid any topics.

Question #1: I am sure many of the readers of this interview have the same question I do. Why another book on Waterloo, especially since so many books on the campaign were published two years ago for the bi-centennial?

John: The story of Waterloo as it has so often been presented gradually ceased to satisfy me. I had read the account in Henty's *One of the 28th* when I was a boy and the drama of that final titanic struggle never left my imagination. With maturity came fresh thoughts and I must have read perhaps a dozen or so works across the next forty years. Sections of Hardy's *The Dynasts* stay so clearly in my mind: the spirits shaking Wellington's soul during that interminable afternoon when Prussian assistance seemed forever promised but nowhere in sight. However Siborne had me nodding a few times when occasionally the density of detail seemed almost an obstacle to progress, whereas the American John Codman Ropes delighted me with his ample discussion and balanced reasoning. Some accounts were merely of their time, so that their arguments have dated: the Frenchman Thiers and his critic Chesney are cases in point, their disputes were the day before yesterday's disputes. The brilliant Henry Houssaye swept me along and half turned me Bonapartist – at least for a while; over a century on his is still the outstanding French account. I dabbled a little with von Ollech and Delbrück, and found them surprisingly at variance with Victorian opinion, but my limitations in German stopped me from anything more than reaching a very general impression of their arguments, and I was happy to accept as valid the counter-arguments in (say) the final part of Robinson's *Wellington's Campaigns*, particularly because Robinson was always so fair-minded and polite in his comments. And that is something that I want to emphasize, because historians sometimes become so bound up in their theories that disagreement seems to verge on treason to them, and since we are not granted divine omniscience we ought to cherish and cultivate balance and politeness even when recognizing the limits of an historian's intelligence and grasp of matters.

In the early 1990s we were offered “new perspectives” on Waterloo, and although I was mainly concerned with First Ypres 1914 and Cambrai 1917, I went back to the sources for 1815, reliant now on long years of reading and reflection - and with hard-won experience of men, motives, and events, from my own career. I found a storm was raging over the findings and the evidence itself, and it continued through that decade, so I began to delve further. By now I had joined that most marvellous of libraries, the London Library, and found a vast multi-lingual collection of books on the Napoleonic wars, even such remote journals as the *Kriegsgeschichtliche-Einzelschriften*. So I burrowed deeper and deeper. I sat down to read Lettow Vorbeck, and then Pflugk-Harttung and was humbled and astonished by the quality of the latter’s work, among the top five studies of the campaign. And a series of articles was the result, spread across some twelve years.

But articles are soon forgotten and the journals they appear in tend to end up on reserve shelves in library basements. A book is still the one sure way to present an argument to the reading public. As I have written in my Preface:

“There are many books on the battle of Waterloo, and fine ones, too. Why should another be written? . . . my answer is that this book offers a new approach, with much more attention paid to the inception of the campaign and the aftermath. For the battle, although titanic, was merely the culmination of a long period of ‘undeclared war’ during which Allied statesmen and generals tried to establish how best to contain and beat a resurgent Napoleon, ‘disturber of the world’s peace’. Moreover the battle, though decisive, was also the preparatory step towards Napoleon’s final exile, and peace negotiations that ended in a remarkably moderate treaty. The extreme sanction of going to war can be justified only if it leads to a better world where disputes can be settled peacefully by reform, accommodation, and diplomacy, and the peace treaty of November 1815 ended serious war in Europe for half a lifetime and a world war for a century. Thus Waterloo (and the actions at Charleroi, Ligny, Quatre Bras and Wavre) was the hinge between two vital and lengthy episodes of enormous importance, that deserve more attention than usually they receive.”

Far too little consideration has in the past been given to logistics in this campaign, to food supply (and payment), and the integration of many small independent contingents into the two armies under Blücher and Wellington in Belgium. These problems complicated the establishment of an agreed Allied strategy in Belgium, and even when the main differences had been resolved, there remained the further complication of determining how to use the vast numbers of German, Austrian and Russian forces moving slowly across Europe to form up on the Rhine. The problems of coalition in 1815 were daunting, and they demanded an immense amount of time and effort to resolve before the Allies could be ready to invade France. Not to study these matters is to falsify the story of the actual campaign. It is as though, following the evacuation at Dunkirk in 1940, the story jumped immediately to D-Day 1944, ignoring the effect of the Russian front, ignoring the time it took to re-equip the British army, jumping past the Allied integration and

planning (PLUTO, the Mulberry harbours, the deception plans), that for three years went into making 'Overlord' something more than a wild gamble.

My intention was that my book should appear just as bicentenary celebrations were about to start. Domestic troubles made that impossible, and if this book seems belated by appearing long after 2015, in a few years that will cease to matter.

Moreover, while new manuscript material is still surfacing I do not think that it greatly changes the main lines of the story. It was a surprise to learn in 2003 from Mark Urban's excellent *Rifles* that Sir Andrew Barnard was dissatisfied privately with some of the performance of his elite 1/95th, but while this makes a more human and rounded depiction of one moment in the day, the overall picture does not change. However, in reading and rereading the sources, many in print for 150 years, I found that a close scrutiny did yield new insights in old texts, and that, I hope, is what the reader will recognize.

So, where many of the new books concentrate on the great four days, mine deals with the entire year, and indeed in a short introduction looks back to the very commencement of the world struggle in 1792 and its course up to the fall of the First Empire in 1814.

Question 2: You just mentioned logistics. I have never seen a book on Waterloo that goes into as great detail on logistics as you do. Please expand on the following comment, such as why it is important to the study, your approach to the topic and the sources you used.:

"Far too little consideration has in the past been given to logistics in this campaign, to food supply (and payment), and the integration of many small independent contingents into the two armies under Blücher and Wellington in Belgium. These problems complicated the establishment of an agreed Allied strategy in Belgium, and even when the main differences had been resolved, there remained the further complication of determining how to use the vast numbers of German, Austrian and Russian forces moving slowly across Europe to form up on the Rhine."

John: Logistics is a really boring non-subject, to judge by the limited attention given to it in much military history. And yet it is fundamental to daily life. Ask yourself how it is that every morning a city (London, New York, Istanbul, wherever) wakes to find fresh milk, fruit, meat, bars of soap, cough drops, shoes, in its high-street shops: get up at 4.30 am and walk round, watch the delivery vans off-load the carefully programmed loads - and marvel. It does not happen by luck or chance but by unremitting unobtrusive good administration.

Wavell in his 1939 Lees Knowles lectures on *Generals and Generalship* and before he became famous, called 'the matter of administration' fundamental to generalship. Wellington in 1811 had said exactly that, in his simple direct way: 'It is very necessary to attend to all this detail, and to trace a biscuit from Lisbon into the man's

mouth on the frontier, and to provide for its removal from place to place, by land or by water, or no military operations can be carried on, and the troops must starve’.

So logistics handles food, forage, clothes, boots, equipment and ammunition, and a thousand other things. Once provided with these the soldier will march well and fight. He may not march fast – Marlborough and Wellington usually set strict limits to Mr Atkins’ daily marches – but it brings him to battle in reasonable shape. And if he knows that should a cannon be lost in the fighting, the QMG will swiftly provide another new shiny one, he will fight all the better.

The Allies in Belgium faced two great problems: the need to provision 250,000 men in a friendly small nation for a period of several months, and the heterogeneous nature of their armies. On the first count the solution was far from easy and caused real and grievous difficulties among the Allies. On the second, Blücher’s force was relatively homogeneous: though of course some of the Rhenish troops had only been Prussian since 1814. The Saxons that formed part of his army were a potential problem for they had much to complain of at Prussian hands and poor man-management led to mutiny, something that no army commander should be proud of. Nor was that all, for the Saxon mutiny dangerously weakened Blücher at a very delicate moment when there were fears of Napoleon attacking. But if the Prussians had problems, Wellington’s situation was even worse. For while awaiting the arrival of his old regiments from the American war his main source of strength was of second battalions and the excellent KGL, to which was allied a Netherlands army that many feared to be unstable, and a host of small separate contingents that had to be integrated very quickly indeed. And these contingents often had different pay, supply and logistical demands. If Blücher’s army was hewn from a couple of unseasoned planks, Wellington’s was a confection of marquetry. I am amazed at how well the two allied commanders settled down together, despite different traditions and several differences of view. To me it seems perverse to speak of them as though basically hostile to each other; they rubbed along, they put up with coalition as a necessary precondition for their primary task: beating Napoleon.

Here Napoleon had a great advantage, a veteran army of Frenchmen determined to save France for their emperor, and unencumbered by allies who could complicate his plans. But it came at a cost. It was his last army, and if broken it could not be replaced, And it marched to a different system of logistics. Napoleon famously said ‘Don’t talk to me of supplies; 40,000 men can live in a desert’ and his devoted men believed him and marched for glory. But then remember Clausewitz’s comment that in 52 summer days to 15 August 1812 the *Grande Armée* by the time it reached Smolensk after a 350-mile march, had lost 10,000 men in minor actions but 95,000 in wastage along the road. Nor did the men survive in a winter desert. Again, the splendid army that Napoleon took into Belgium in 1815 was soon desperate for food and forage, and this placed a drag on its operations in a campaign where each day of delay could prove ominous. The famous ‘*Système D*’ (*débrouiller*, sort it out for yourself) always had its drawbacks.

If we keep in mind the Allied experience of 1814, then we can recognize that in 1815 the same approach of massed concentric armies was the preferred solution once the greatest conqueror of his age seized power again in France. Hundreds of thousands of Austrian, German and Russian troops were to cross Germany to mass on the Rhine and overrun eastern France, perhaps taking Paris again, while Blücher and Wellington gripped Napoleon in the north. I call one of my chapters 'All too quiet on the eastern front' because the ditherings and delays at the grand headquarters in Heidelberg, the belated arrival of troops, the disputes over the right strategy, not only frustrated the commanders in Belgium and imposed delays upon their intended invasion of northern France, but allowed the initiative to pass to Napoleon. The eastern front, too quiet though it was, played its unhappy part in the Waterloo campaign.

As to sources on logistics, virtually everything has been in the public domain for ages: a little can be found in the old histories, much more is traceable through scattered references in either *Wellington's Despatches* or the *Supplementary Despatches* volume published in 1863. The last is the more useful, as the letters from diplomats in Vienna that are published there contain a vast amount of incidental information that explains how the provisioning and payment was to work and what were the arguments for this or that solution. (And can I say here, in passing, that the Victorian editors of *Supplementary Despatches* did their work remarkably thoroughly on the whole, when tested against the archives now in the University of Southampton; they still merit our thanks.)

Question 3: On to problems of coalition warfare! You said that

“I am amazed at how well the two allied commanders settled down together, despite different traditions and several differences of view.”

What do you mean by different traditions and several differences of view?

John: Both the British and the Prussians had long experience of fighting in coalition, something that France really had not. France, *la grande nation*, was used to controlling satellites and giving the law, but Britain had [and for centuries to come] nearly always fought its European wars in an alliance or *entente*, sometimes as a major partner – as in Queen Anne's time – or more often as a junior one, as under Ferdinand of Brunswick in the Seven Years' War.

Setting a joint policy is never easy: Protestant Holland in Marlborough's time, Protestant Prussia in the time of the Elder Pitt had significant differences of opinion with Britain; and when Arthur Wellesley took up his command in the Peninsula his new Catholic allies had to swallow the fact that he was technically a 'heretic' and in Spain's case that Britain had been an enemy for centuries and indeed until a couple of years ago. Those are external factors, but there are also domestic ones. The memory of Cromwell's major-generals died hard. Britain feared and distrusted a standing army. It despised the wretches who were driven by hardship to serve in it. It felt safer to prefer as its military leaders men of property, JPs, the squirearchy, as against men who made their careers roving with swords

for sale. This may have been good for liberty but the country – having obtained what it demanded - did not like it when these ‘amateurs’ could not match the professionals who fought for autocracies, and as for these country gentlemen in red coats they knew full well how low was the soldiers’ standing in English society. The British army knew its place and was duly humble in its requests to parliament. All this was inbred into its generals, and Wellington was no exception.

Marlborough was supremely suited by temperament and training for the trials of coalition: endless patience, flattery, cajolery, charm, persistence. Wellington lacked some of this suppleness, and his simple clear understanding was compounded with a ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ coolness that must have hurt and dismayed his garrulous, proud, but not always very reliable Iberian allies in the Cortes and in the field. But it did mean that when he went to Belgium in 1815 he was fully experienced in the needs of coalition.

But whereas in Britain the army was a despised nuisance, in Prussia the state was the army and the army was the state. A military man stood high in society and expected and received deference and even abject respect; he held by law a privileged place over the civilian and was not held to account by civil law as was the man in the street. It could make for arrogance - and it could lead to farce, as when in 1906 the jail-bird Voigt could get instant obedience and a fraudulent pass from officials because he had scrounged an officer’s second-hand uniform to become the Captain of Köpenick. It was the other face of Prussian officialdom, which in the schoolmaster and the bureaucrat stood for a frugal, efficient system fairly different from the other, not very well-run, states that made up Germany.

The War of Liberation had seen Prussian armies marching beside those of Russia and Austria but in the campaign of 1814 the hesitancy of the supreme commander, the Austrian Schwarzenberg, had seriously upset Blücher and his chief of staff Gneisenau. And Blücher was the sharp sword of that great international force, and Gneisenau the intellectual who complemented his fighting instincts, so that at the peace they felt they had contributed more than the Powers-that-be would recognize. Moreover they held strong views on how the Prussian state should function, and Gneisenau in particular expressed these views with considerable violence.

Then in late 1814 the futures of Poland and Saxony were being argued over at the Congress of Vienna and it seemed possible that Russia and Prussia might confront Austria and Bourbon France and Britain. War between the victorious Powers seemed likely till the Tsar, having got Poland, abandoned Prussia over Saxony. Britain was far from popular at Berlin. And within weeks because of Napoleon’s return, Britain and Prussia, a maritime Power and a Continental Power, of different traditions and attitudes, were yoked again in alliance. It would require great care in handling.

How it was handled is a long story running all through my first volume and too intricate to summarize here, but I would say that overall it did succeed, that Blücher and Gneisenau did adapt and meet Wellington's wishes in many things, that Wellington in turn helped them through several difficulties and would have helped with more had they let him, and that the two chiefs did like and understand each other. Gneisenau by contrast was more ambivalent, had fairly unfriendly views about Britain in general, and formed so poor an opinion of Wellington's army that, ten days before Waterloo, he could say that unless the Prussians supported the Duke's army it could not stand on its own feet and 'would be completely useless'. This assessment has to be borne in mind when considering how the two armies were *expected* to perform, and indeed how they *actually* performed.

Question 4: You mentioned in your last answer that

"Gneisenau by contrast was more ambivalent, had fairly unfriendly views about Britain in general, and formed so poor an opinion of Wellington's army that, ten days before Waterloo, he could say that unless the Prussians supported the Duke's army it could not stand on its own feet and 'would be completely useless'."

Do you think this affected the way he dealt with Wellington? Please give an example one way or the other if possible?

John: Briefly, I find Gneisenau a disappointment. The negative vibes in him damaged his character and career, and he seems in Winston's words either at your feet or at your throat. I have summarized one or two instances [one of the most damning comes in Volume 2 where he said that British opposition to the dismemberment of France was due to a desire 'to nurture war on the Continent and keep Germany dependent on England' [17 Aug 1815].

It is important to emphasize that through the spring and early summer the two armies were cantoned in quite different parts of Belgium and were not in close contact: strategy and supply necessarily led to that. Wellington's headquarters was at Brussels, the Prussians' at Liège and later Namur, so that they were separated by a day or so's ride. Hence the vital role of liaison during this campaign. The Duke appointed Colonel Hardinge who proved acceptable to Gneisenau and able to give accurate reports to Wellington. The first Prussian liaison officer General Röder was not a success for he came to dislike and distrust his hosts and his reports must have affected the already uneasy Gneisenau. Röder's successor Müffling proved much more successful, being more open-minded and objective and establishing good personal relations with the Duke; but he seems to have been chosen because some at Prussian headquarters wished him out of the way. And so one of the curiosities of the night of 14/15 June was that when issuing late night orders the Prussians entirely left their man in Brussels out of the communications loop.

Röder was imbued with stereotyped views on 'perfidious Albion' but from even the much more amenable Müffling's memoirs it is plain that the informal, even lounging, habits of monolingual British officers were something of a trial. Englishmen, unfortunately, always have found, and probably always will, 'Continental' a bit odd. On the other hand while Wellington's officers may have thought German formality rather a bore, they never doubted the quality of German troops: in the Peninsula nobody took much notice if a British scout came scampering back, but promptly stood to arms when a KGL scout did the same. So I think that in the 1815 campaign the British *respected* their Prussian allies, or rather, they did so *until* they came upon the wanton destruction wreaked during the Prussian march to Paris.

So how did the headquarters rub along? All the evidence is that Wellington liked Blücher, felt that he could rely on his fighting qualities, and felt that he could generally convince him by sensible argument. The warmth seems absent from the Duke's relations with Gneisenau; cogency, persistence, courtesy, but no warmth. In later years the Duke's words about him were brief and cold, but during the campaign the relationship from Wellington's side has to be inferred by reading between the lines.

Gneisenau clearly had great intellectual qualities, but I would say that he tended to over-confidence in good times and undue pessimism in setbacks. He was arrogant and yet insecure, and maybe had a form of tunnel-vision that limited his ability to grant that others could hold different views. Müffling insisted that Gneisenau from the start was suspicious of Wellington, and indeed I think it shows. He had to accept the Duke's views, but he did not really like it. He sensed suspected enemies more clearly than he recognized friends or allies. From his various remarks I should say that he could be jealous of his peers, abrupt to his subordinates, impatient at the way in which his monarch handled affairs. He saw 'traitors slinking through the darkness' in Berlin, he was totally hostile to the claims of the Netherlands government over Prussian encampment in their country, and suspected Wellington's motives for much of the Hundred Days.

As he thought Wellington's army 'completely useless' by itself he may have judged its assistance would be fairly minor, and certainly he made little effort to guide its intentions on 15 June. The record concerning Prussian orders on 14, 15 and 16 June is not one that gives much satisfaction, and his role in this was crucial. On the morning of Ligny he seems to have thought that a half-mile tactical retreat by his advance corps might encourage the English to flee to the coast and embark, so poor was his opinion of them. Pflugk-Hartung held that the Prussians hoped that Ligny could be the decisive victory of a two-day campaign, that if it was won by Prussia alone then it would place Prussia as the dominant Power in the peace settlement, and only when it became clear that some 25% of his army could not arrive in time did Gneisenau seriously desire Wellington's involvement. Ney at Quatre Bras put paid to that possibility of direct support and so Ligny proved a major defeat. Not a decisive one, however, because Wellington kept Ney tied down and so stopped *le rougeaud* from aiding Napoleon. What Napoleon

needed, a crushing victory, ended as a mere victory on points. What I find sad, is the way that Gneisenau then turned his energies to creating an excuse of 'betrayal', one that he elaborated into a myth that became a standard element in much 19th Century history. Even after eventual victory the poison still worked in him, making for incidents of such difficulty before peace finally came that he was sent by his own king into a form of rustication.

Schwarzenberg fell below acceptable standards in high command because he was placed above his ceiling, but Gneisenau whose ceiling was far higher was hobbled by failings of personality, and so he ended 1815 as a disappointment, and a man diminished by his own defects. Happily, one can say that Prussian glory was fully maintained and even enhanced by his great and simple chief.

To be continued. . .

Placed on the Napoleon Series: March 2017