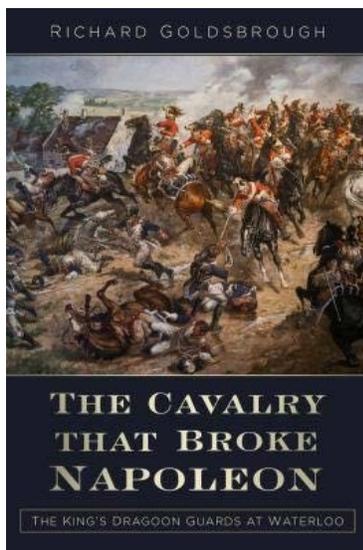


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Goldsbrough, Richard. *The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon: the King's Dragoon Guards at Waterloo*. Port Stroud: History Press, 2016. 272 pages. ISBN: 9780096692 \$37

“O when we came up with them the slaughter it was great,  
Our gallant troops so boldly led soon caused their lines to break,  
We charged them so boldly and made for to run,  
And cut them down with our broad-swords like moths in the sun.”<sup>1</sup>



Over the past several years we have seen two histories of British infantry divisions during the Waterloo Campaign: Gareth Glover's [\*Waterloo: the Defeat of Napoleon's Imperial Guard\*](#), which despite its name is a study of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and Philip Haythornthwaite's [\*Picton's Division at Waterloo\*](#). *The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon* is similar to these books, but instead of looking at the British cavalry at Waterloo, it is a history of one specific cavalry regiment during the 1815 Campaign: the King's Dragoon Guards.

When I first heard of the book I was curious about why the author chose this regiment to write a book about. I knew it took heavy casualties at Waterloo, but other than that, I could not really say much about it. After I read the book, it became clear why the author wrote it. Most people who know about

Waterloo are familiar with the charge of the Union Brigade, which is given credit for stopping the French infantry attack on the center of the Allied lines. It has been immortalized in print, in Lady Elizabeth Butler's painting "Scotland Forever", and even in the 1971 movie "Waterloo". What many people have forgotten is that the Household Cavalry Brigade also participated in the charge and they were as instrumental in the destruction of the French infantry corps as was the Union Brigade.

In Wellington's Army at Waterloo, the Household Brigade, also known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade, consisted of the four senior British Cavalry Regiments: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Life Guards, the Royal Horse Guards, and the King's Dragoon Guards, which was also known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards. This regiment was the senior line cavalry regiment in the British Army. The King's Dragoon Guards, like the Scots Greys, had not seen active service since 1794. During the previous 21 years it served on garrison duty throughout the British Isles and it was able to recruit up to strength. At Waterloo, it had over 600 officers and

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<sup>1</sup> Page 213. From the poem "The Battle of Waterloo" by Trumpeter Samuel Wheeler of the 1<sup>st</sup> King's Dragoon Guards,

men, making it the strongest Allied cavalry regiment at the battle. To put it in perspective, the other three regiments in the Household Brigade totaled only 620 officers and men.

Although the focus of the book is the story of the King's Dragoon Guards in the Waterloo Campaign, *The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon* is much more than that. It opens with two chapters that sets the scene for the charge that is the core of the story. But then the author provides a short history of the regiment from its origins in 1685 until it received orders to join Wellington's Army in April 1815. Instead of continuing with the story, Mr. Goldsbrough examines the regiment. He provides information on the officers who led it, the men they commanded, and the horses they rode. The King's Dragoon Guards was an English regiment and it recruited mostly in the north. He provides information on where the men were from, their former occupations, height, etc. He also looks at how the regiment was organized and the duties of the officers and non-commissioned officers. There are chapters on the uniforms they wore and the equipment they used, training and tactics, and daily life in garrison.

The second part of the book begins with the deployment of the regiment to Flanders, its march to Quatre Bras on 16 June and the retreat to Waterloo the following day. He then digresses briefly with a chapter on the French infantry and cavalry they faced on the battlefield. He was able to identify many of the regiment's opponents during the day, but also admits that he was unable to determine who some of the others were. He also describes the charge of the Union Brigade, which was to the left of the Household Brigade. This is important because the King's Dragoon Guards were on the left of the Household Brigade and thus on their left was the Union Brigade. Equally important was that during the confusion of the charge, the left wing of the regiment actually charged with the Union Brigade.

The next two chapters go into great detail of the charge of the Household Brigade as seen through the eyes of the officers and men of the regiment. The regiment initially fought the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Cuirassier Regiments and after defeating them continued on into the French infantry. Like the Union Brigade, the regiment soon lost its cohesion as the officers lost control of their men and many of them continued to charge deep into the French lines. One of the mysteries from the battle was what happened to the right squadron and the regimental commander during the charge. The author was able to piece together their fate. The next chapter looks at what happened to the regiment when it was counter-attacked by the French cavalry and how the survivors made it back to the British lines. The intensity of their charge is reckoned by how few returned. After the charge the regiment could only muster 30 officers and men fit for duty.

*The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon* could end at this point, but it does not. There is a chapter on what the regiment did the rest of the battle, plus one on the march into France and the occupation of Paris. The author ends the narrative with chapters on what happened to the officers and men after they left the regiment and then a short history of the regiment from 1815 to 2016.

When I first saw the title of the book I thought it was typical hyperbole used by a publisher to catch the eye of the browser. Mr. Goldsbrough recognizes this and begins the final chapter with “The title of this book is a bold statement with which many would disagree.”<sup>2</sup> He then presents a series of arguments that both support and undermine his thesis. He also asks various experts – both historians and military professionals – for their thoughts. After presenting all the arguments, he lets the reader draw his own conclusions.

*The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon* closes with two appendices. The first is a poem about the charge by Trumpeter Samuel Wheeler of the 8<sup>th</sup> Troop who was wounded at Waterloo. Appendix 2 is a by-name listing of every officer and soldier in the regiment who fought at Waterloo. It includes their rank, the troop they were in, and whether they were killed or wounded.

*The Cavalry that Broke Napoleon* is a detailed examination of a regiment that played such a critical role in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Mr. Goldsbrough brings its story to life with passages from numerous eyewitness accounts by the regiment’s officers, NCOs, and troopers. It is a labor of love by a former officer of the regiment and his dedication to telling his regiment’s story shows. In addition to collecting primary sources, I also collect regimental histories. This is one of the best I have read in many years. I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in the Waterloo Campaign or how a cavalry regiment operates both in garrison and on campaign.

On a final note. There is no monument at Waterloo commemorating the sacrifices and achievements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Kings Dragoon Guards. The author has pledged that the net proceeds from the sales of the book will go to creating a monument.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Page 201