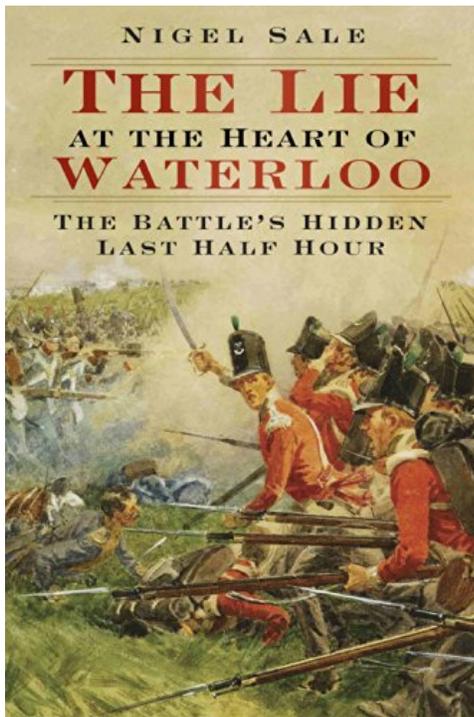


Napoleon Series Reviews

Sale, Nigel. *The Lie at the Heart of Waterloo. The Battle's Hidden Last Half Hour*. Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: The History Press, 2014. 288 pages, ISBN# 9780750959629. £20.00; US\$35.00; Cdn\$41.95.



The Bicentenary of the Battle Waterloo will take place on the 18th of next June. This event will rightfully be celebrated by all intelligent persons because it marked the end of the public career of a leader who initiated a series of conflicts that claimed the lives of an estimated five million persons. As might be expected, the Waterloo Bicentenary has prompted a flood of publications whose authors claim to have uncovered some new facet of the famous engagement. Among them are a number of excuses from that large group of wailing acolytes from the "Why-oh-why-did-he have-to-divide-his-army-after-Ligny?" school of historical thought.

Nigel Sale is among those authors who claim to have uncovered something new about Waterloo but his claim stand on much firmer ground than most. Sale is a former officer of the The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (which later became 1st Battalion, The Royal Greenjackets, and is now

2nd Battalion, The Rifles, if you follow the unceasing meltdown of the British army). More to the point, during the Napoleonic period, the ancestors of the "Ox and Bucks" were the 43rd and 52nd Foot, which were among the first light infantry regiments formed in Britain. As a young officer Sale was taught a regimental tradition held that the 52nd Foot "had struck the decisive blow at Waterloo" when it put to flight the French Imperial Guard. He was puzzled, however, because the regiment seemed to have received very little recognition for this feat in the many books about Waterloo. Following his retirement from the army, Sale set out to establish just what exactly the 52nd Foot did at Waterloo and why their deeds, if so important, have never been properly recognized.

To answer these questions, he carried out a painstaking study of the last thirty minutes of the battle, focusing on the attack and repulse of the Imperial Guard. Sale bases his work primarily on eyewitness accounts and, in doing so, not only re-creates the deployment and movement of British units but also those of French units, particularly the Guard, in very great detail -- almost minute by minute. In fact, I have never before seen such a detailed examination of the organization, formation, movements and combat at Waterloo of the Imperial household troops. Also pleasing is the fact that the author illustrates what are complicated tactical movements with a series of well drawn and legible maps. The result is a masterful piece of historical detective work which I am sure will markedly affect future writing about the famous engagement.

I am not going to discuss Sale's discoveries and conclusions, or how and why the 52nd Foot never got the recognition it so very richly deserved because I do not want to give away his fascinating story. I will only say that the man largely responsible for the obfuscation of the historical record has been criticized by other authors for altering the facts in his own favour. Poor Old Beaky – perhaps it is better to be the loser because you at least get some sympathy.

One thing that I found very interesting was that, after Sale goes through the final half hour of the battle in detail and in slow time, so to speak, he then puts it all back together and retells the story in quick or real time. This is because he recognizes, as serious military historians must do, that battle is a very chaotic experience with many events taking place simultaneously. It is an historian's task to bring order out of chaos but, in doing so, he or she must be careful not to transform an often terrifying and confusing event into something akin to a formal 18th century minuet. In combat, Murphy's many laws run rampant and things rarely work out as planned. As one British general remarked: "We always seem to fight on a hillside in the pouring rain at the junction of two maps." And then, of course, the radios fail.

I have a few quibbles with this book. First, the scale on the map on p. 45 is incorrect because 10 miles does not equal 11 kilometres, it equals 16 kilometres. I found Sale's terminology of "Garde" for the French and "Guards" for the British to be somewhat clumsy. It would have been better to use the English word, putting a national identifier before it when the British guards units are mentioned. Third, the figure illustrated on the back cover is most certainly not a soldier of the 52nd Foot -- it is Don Troiani's very fine study of a man of the 104th Foot, the only regiment of the line in the Napoleonic British army that was recruited in Canada. I am very familiar with it because it graces the jacket of one of my own books, which is a memoir by an officer of the 104th Foot.

But these are -- as I said -- quibbles and do not detract from the quality of Nigel Sale's work. The [Lie at the Heart of Waterloo](#) is such an important book that it deserves to be in the library of not only every serious student of Waterloo but also in the collection of anyone with an interest in Napoleonic tactical warfare. It is an excellent example of painstaking research, balanced analysis and clear communication of a most interesting -- but complicated -- subject.

"Up the Ox and Bucks!"

Reviewed by [Donald E. Graves](#)

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