To many, Waterloo seems a million miles away, a pre-industrial war of extravagant uniforms, utterly at odds with the drab reality of 21st Century conflict. But these were real men, who experienced real conflict, many of whom lived well into the 19th Century.

In many ways Waterloo was an aberration, an unexpected coda to a war that had seemingly reached a decisive climax the year before. Napoleon had been defeated and despatched to his exile on Elba. Europe was rid of the Corsican ogre. The Russian, Austrian and Prussian monarchs could control Jacobin excess. Britain would be free to reap the profits of its maritime and economic power, its strategy of limited continental liability vindicated. France would strive for a settlement between Royalists, Bonapartists, Republicans and Liberals.

The return of Napoleon threw all this in the air. Unlike the slower-burn events of 1789-1792, the 100 Days arose from nothing and demanded urgent answers, with armies mobilised and policy created on the hoof. It is against this background that the relevance of Waterloo must be determined, for there is something different about the campaign of 1815 that marks it out from what went before.

There are many extraordinary things about Napoleon, but one of the most startling is that he is the only great man of history to have staged not just one, but two successful coups d’état. His return from Egypt in 1799 and his subsequent seizure of power on 18 Brumaire were audacious in the extreme. While he was hardly unknown in 1799, he was viewed as something of a novelty: a young man who could be controlled by other, more experienced figures such as the Abbe Sieyes and Talleyrand. This proved to be a significant miscalculation on their part.

While his return in 1815 superficially bore resemblances, in one critical respect the Emperor Napoleon of 1815 was a long way from the General Bonaparte of 1799. Nine campaigns and a million casualties had left France scarred and suspicious of her former hero. From 1799 to 1814 Napoleon had exercised increasing powers to tax, spend, mobilise and fight with the unconstrained resources of his empire. By contrast, his return in 1815 was met with unease by the Parisian elite. In consequence, Napoleon could not fight the Hundred Days through Clausewitzian absolute means: he could not properly conscript the class of 1815, nor recall...
previous classes, he could not mobilise the National
Guard, and he could not guarantee enough money to
equip his troops.
He could not even guarantee the reliability of the
regular army, many parts of which were uncertain
about what his return meant for France. Key figures
such as Fouche doubted his ability to consolidate
power and hedged their bets by maintaining avenues
of communication to the Bourbons. And Napoleon was
forced to dissipate the limited troops at his disposal
dealing with a Royalist insurgency in the Vendée and
guarding borders on secondary fronts.
Therefore, in many ways, the politics of France in
1815 meant Napoleon was doomed to failure from
the outset. Once the campaign began, this conditional
acceptance of his return quickly manifested itself.
Napoleon had survived setbacks before: the Syrian
fiasco, Eylau in 1807, Aspern-Essling in 1809, Russia in
1812, the Spanish Ulcer and Leipzig in 1813 were not
enough to cause his political support to collapse. But in
1815, there was a brittle quality to Napoleonic power
that could not survive a defeat like Waterloo, despite
Napoleon's initial hope in its aftermath that it could.
This, it seems to me, is a profoundly modern problem.
Increasingly, it is the perception of defeat as much
as its reality that determines the outcome of a given
military venture. Whether or not Napoleon could have
reconstituted an Army after Waterloo seems beside the
point: his position was, in political terms, untenable and
his second exile the result.

Given this political vulnerability, Napoleon’s strategic
choice in 1815 was either to sit on the defensive or
seize the initiative; by first taking on Britain and Prussia
in Belgium, Napoleon calculated that he could knock
out, not only the Coalition paymaster, but also his most
inveterate foe, Prussia. Some have characterised his
decision as a gamble, but the alternative of fighting on
the defensive in a repeat of 1814 would not only have
had the same result, but been alien to his character as
the high priest of offensive action.

I shall not dwell at length on Prussian objectives in
1815, except to say that the trauma of 1806 informed
at a profound level her national psyche from 1813 to
‘15. If unconstrained, Prussia would have fought a war
of revenge and of annihilation, which would not have
stopped simply with the execution of Ney, without the
moderating influence of England.

This observation leads naturally to my next reflection
on modern war, namely the challenge of Coalition
politics. General Maurice Sarrail, the French commander
at Salonika in the Great War remarked sarcastically that
‘since I have commanded a Coalition, I think less of
Napoleon’. In fact, Napoleon’s armies from 1809 to 1813
were very much coalitions. But they were coalitions under
one dominant partner, in much the same way that the
US coalitions operated in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1815,
less a Polish lancer squadron and a Swiss regiment,
Napoleon’s army was exclusively French.

The speed with which the crisis of 1815 developed
partially invalidated this approach. The shock of
Napoleon’s return, coupled with war weariness, meant
Britain had to involve itself directly in the rapid termination
of the problem on the Continent, rather than allowing the
usual indirect strategy to take its slow course.

Under Wellington, Britain therefore committed to
command a continental army that would be as central
to the outcome as Marlborough a century before and
Haig a century later. But with many of her best troops
still in America, or worse, simply demobilised, Britain
was not militarily balanced to meet the challenge. Again,
this seems to me to be a very modern phenomenon,
and one with which the authors of ‘Army 2020’ must
again wrestle today: are we an Army preparing for ‘the’
continental war, deterring Russia in Ukraine, or an Army
scanning multiple horizons in the Middle East, North,
West and East Africa, or elsewhere, for ‘a’ war?
In contrast, the Allied coalition of 1815 was cobbled together at short notice, had no dominant power, and was unable to agree effective command and control arrangements. More profoundly, Wellington and Blucher made different risk calculations, based on their own national interest. If defeated, the Prussian instinct would be to withdraw back along her lines of communication eastwards. Wellington, by contrast, feared being turned from the West and cut off from the Channel Ports, so kept a significant number of troops out of the fight to deal with such an eventuality.

The two armies were therefore destined by instinct and policy to diverge rather than concentrate. The fact that they continued to cooperate resulted as much from character as intellect. Certainly, some Prussians thought otherwise. Certainly, some Prussians that they continued to cooperate resulted as much and policy to diverge rather than concentrate. The fact that they continued to cooperate resulted as much from character as intellect. Certainly, some Prussians thought otherwise.

Wellington, by contrast, feared being turned be to withdraw back along her lines of communication. More profoundly, Wellington and Blucher made different risk calculations, based on their own arrangements. More profoundly, Wellington and Blucher made different risk calculations, based on their own arrangements.

In contrast, the Allied coalition of 1815 was cobbled together at short notice, had no dominant power, and was unable to agree effective command and control arrangements. More profoundly, Wellington and Blucher made different risk calculations, based on their own national interest. If defeated, the Prussian instinct would be to withdraw back along her lines of communication eastwards. Wellington, by contrast, feared being turned from the West and cut off from the Channel Ports, so kept a significant number of troops out of the fight to deal with such an eventuality.

The two armies were therefore destined by instinct and policy to diverge rather than concentrate. The fact that they continued to cooperate resulted as much from character as intellect. Certainly, some Prussians thought otherwise.
D'Erlon and Reille in the Peninsula. But like any large institution Napoleon's army had to deal with its own internal politics. Many of the Marshals owed promotion to their Republican power base: Augereau, Bemadotte, Brune, Jourdan, Victor and others were brought into the tent, others such as Moreau were left out. Napoleon extended that same tent towards reconciled Royalists, such as Caulaincourt. The best example in 1815 was General Bourmont, who had fought as a Bourbon insurgent in the Vendée, was reconciled with Napoleon, but whose Royalist instincts got the better of him: he deserted to the Allies in the opening stages of the campaign.

And while meritocratic principles generally prevailed, Napoleon could never quite avoid the temptation to employ his family. Jerome Bonaparte's appointment to command a division owed nothing much to talent.

What is interesting about Napoleon's Army in 1815 is just how difficult it was to reconstitute the best of what had been available before: Desaix, Lannes, Bessières, Berthier and Poniatowski were dead; many such as Marmont had changed sides; many more were retired or ambivalent. Murat fought his own quixotic war to secure Naples.

Those who did rally came with their own baggage: Ney was damaged by the years of campaigning; Soult too proud to roll his sleeves up; the cavalry officer, Grouchy, inexperienced as a combined arms commander. At first sight, it seems odd that highly competent and loyal commanders such as Davout and Suchet were used in other roles, but their work serves to highlight the sheer breadth of problems Napoleon faced in June 1815 outside the campaign theatre. This is much the same for a modern Army, which cannot afford simply to concentrate on operational activity, but must cover all lines of development.

The question of technology plays a surprisingly peripheral part in most studies of the Napoleonic Wars. Despite the turmoil of the Revolution, it was in technological terms, a conservative period. Napoleon himself was partly responsible: as a gunner he took a keen interest in Marmont's modernisation of the Gribeauval artillery system, but beyond this, he embraced little by way of genuine innovation: he showed no interest in Britain's development of spherical case-shot, or of rockets. He failed to see the potential of rifled technology, despite his mass use of skirmishers. The use of balloon technology, begun before the Revolution, never developed momentum. Part of the problem was that France was not as industrialised as Britain and even Britain was still some years away from the wholesale introduction of railways.

There are also practical reasons why new technology failed to make its mark. Despite the impressive use of shrapnel, it was the massed employment at Waterloo of French artillery firing solid round-shot that caused the most casualties. Wellington viewed his rocket troop as a nuisance that would scare his horses more than it would harm his enemies. And La Haye Sainte fell because of logistic friction when its defenders ran out of their specialist rifled ammunition.

It is in the analysis of the gaps that we gain the best insights into the conduct of modern war. Perhaps the most interesting gap was the lack of means to communicate. Fifty years before wireless telegraphy and 100 years before wireless telegraphy, Napoleon's ability to command and control his army was quite remarkable. The explanation of his success is, of course, not technological, but procedural, and is his principal contribution to the conduct of modern war.

The central organising principle around which Napoleon's army was created was its separation into divisions and corps. Napoleon did not invent the division, but he recognised its tactical value, enshrining it as the primary unit of tactical action. While Napoleon never used the term, the invention of the operational level of war, as the critical layer between the tactical and the strategic, was his defining contribution to the art of war. Central to the Napoleonic model was the Corps system. The corps d'armée, a combined arms force of two or more infantry divisions, a cavalry division, guns, engineers and other formation troops, was able to operate independently of other corps and flexible enough to exploit different, often parallel avenues of advance. Once engaged, each corps was powerful enough to hold the ring until other corps could concentrate.

In an age without the technical means of direct communication over distance except by semaphore, the corps system stressed the doctrinal need for initiative, offensive spirit and mutual support. The system relied on competent corps commanders, but it also necessitated strong command and control from the centre: when Napoleon allowed his commanders genuine independent command or tried to group corps in, to use another anachronism, armies or army groups, it invariably failed.
At Waterloo, Napoleon used a far more coherent corps system than Wellington, who was forced to mix up his formations to underwrite the risk of the highly inexperienced Prince of Orange, whose presence was as unhelpful to Wellington as Jerome’s to Napoleon, but necessitated by Coalition expediency. Napoleon wasted this advantage by allowing Grouchy and Ney to act as subordinate commanders of groups of corps, without giving them the staff or time to bed in, frequently changing their responsibilities, and either reaching over their heads, or leaving them for too long to their own devices. Slim’s famous comment in the opening paragraph of Defeat into Victory that: A division is the smallest formation that is a complete orchestra of war isn’t really true in 1815. The Napoleonic division was not a fully combined arms formation in the British, French or Prussian armies. The British 3rd Division at Waterloo contained three infantry brigades, some artillery and no cavalry. By the Great War, the 3rd Division had evolved into a more complex structure, but again without cavalry. On 1st Day, the 3rd Division contained an Armoured brigade, but the British still shied away from genuine combined arms cooperation, until the expense of Goodwood and the other Bicage operations forced change. It was only at this stage of the war that Slim’s dictum was realised.

While the French and British, to varying degrees, corrupted the purist Corps and divisional system during the Waterloo campaign, the Prussians had quietly copied the best of the Napoleonic system and made it their own: the resilience of the Prussian army after Ligny owed much to the quality of their formations, quality that would endure throughout the rest of the 19th and half the 20th Centuries. Stalin’s famous joke: The Pope? never mind the Pope! How many divisions does he have? illustrates his definition of military power - the Soviet union had 491 divisions by April 1945. In the Great War, the British Army created ninety divisions, but manpower shortages and other priorities in the Second World War meant the Army raised only 46 divisions between 1939 and 1945.

When Slim made his quip, the notion of the division as the defining metric of land power was at its apogee. But less than fifty years later, the Soviet Union would cease to exist and a Polish pope would wield considerable influence without recourse to a single division. Today, Britain has only one deployable division.

The received wisdom of the decade of campaigning in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya is that success or failure can be attributed to the value placed upon influence as the engine of change. Well directed violence can support the achievement of influence, but violence alone has ceased to be the primary activity around which military planning should coalesce. In effect, the ‘vital ground’ is now in people’s minds. Therefore, modern operations at both the Corps and Divisional levels are not just a binary contest between friendly and enemy forces, but about getting multiple actors and audiences to alter their behaviour in support of political objectives.

To some extent Napoleon, a great communicator in so many ways, failed to understand the consequences of war among the people: his emphasis on physical manoeuvre in the Peninsula from 1808 to the end, in Russia in 1812 and in the German campaign of 1813, ignored the consequences of popular opinion. These wars presaged the true age of modern war. The Waterloo campaign, played out among a francophone peasantry in Belgium, never lasted long enough to test these extra dimensions.

In the final analysis, Napoleon was a profoundly contradictory figure: cultivated, highly intelligent and well read, he personified the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and yet his belief in his destiny was highly romantic and at odds with the modern world. His ruthlessness was matched by his humanity; his egoism by his sense of the common good. His contribution to the conduct of war was enormous, with commanders striving for the next 150 years to recreate the manoeuvrist magic that underpinned his approach to operational art.

For some, his contribution to physical manoeuvre seems suddenly less relevant in the age of manoeuvre in the virtual and cognitive as well as physical dimensions. With its short duration and absence of people, the Waterloo campaign has more in common with Gulf War 1, than with Gulf War 2 and all that has followed since. Despite these reservations, the impact of Waterloo on Europe was profound and shaped the conduct of war for 150 years. Perhaps we have entered a new age in which influence is more important than destruction. But the arrival of the age of multi-dimensional manoeuvre does not invalidate the skills necessary to manoeuvre effectively in the physical domain. Today in the armies of the West, there are barely any commanders who have manoeuvred above battalion level, let alone within a division or corps. More disturbingly, there are few if any policy makers who understand that true deterrence will not stem from the existence of a high readiness multi-national brigade (as is presently mooted by NATO), but from properly found armies divided into corps and divisions along Napoleonic lines and matched by appropriate air power.

In the British Army in 2015, just as in the British Army of 1815, a long period of conflict may now be ending, and with, in some minds, no prospect of general war in our lifetimes. A young generation of Periunitar and Waterloo commanders carried on their careers in the Army and applied their experiences, not just in the practical domain of small-scale imperial conflict which opened the door to new influences, often learnt bottom-up, but also in the blizzard of military publishing that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Yet despite the efforts of these thoughtful and capable officers, the Army remained in thrall to one dominant individual, the Duke of Wellington, whose insistence on viewing the future through the lens of the past, blinded efforts at reform. Wellington was not wholly successful in blocking important technological change and improvements to the Army’s disciplinary system. But it was still an army that in large part failed to grasp the Napoleonic system of war and paid the consequences in the Crimea.

The Waterloo campaign may have ended in disaster for Napoleon, but in its opening stages he displayed all of his old manoeuvrist skills. How many commanders today, I wonder, could in a matter of days concentrate an army of 120,000 men almost without detection, advance at speed in the classic batallion carre along parallel but supporting routes, hint at envelopment, but deliver a rapier thrust to divide two opponents from a central position? The British Army in the Crimea struggled to meet this Napoleonic standard and we must suspect that the Army of the 21st Century will also struggle, unless properly resourced to train for war. There is much, therefore, still to be learnt from the master of manoeuvre.