Army Update/Comment

The Battle of Waterloo 1815, oil on canvas by William Sadler II (1782 - 1839). ***Wikipedia, Released.***

The Relevance Of Waterloo To Modern Warfare

This article is based on a lecture by ***Major General James Cowan CBE DSO*** *gave to the RMAS Waterloo Symposium on the occasion of the bicentenary of that battle. While the subject is of historical relevance much of it is of modern interest.*

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'etat. His return from Egypt in 1799 and his subsequent seizure of power on 18 Brumaire[1] 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

[1] *18 Brumaire was the 8th year in the French Republican Calendar and the 9 November 1799 in the Gregorian (Western) calendar.*

Napoleon in his study at the Tuileries. Oil on Canvas by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) completed in 1812. ***Wikipedia, Released.***

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 Vendee 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.

Britain, too, faced a strategic problem in 1815 that informs our understanding of the modern world. She had fought the Napoleonic Wars through three traditional means: the establishment of a maritime stranglehold on the continent; the funding of her allies' continental armies; and the conduct of peripheral campaigns such as the Peninsular War.

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?

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 sardonically 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.

Marshall Ney and his staff leading the cavalry charge at Waterloo: Oil on Canvas by Louis Dumoulin (1860–1924). ***Wikipedia, Released.***

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 distrusted British motives, but Wellington's willingness to stand and fight, Gneinenau's decision to put his head before his heart, and Blucher's stout determination to effect a link-up despite his battered condition after Ligny, ultimately determined the outcome of Waterloo. Recent Coalitions abound with examples of technical solutions to inter-operability, but mutual trust and mutual interest are the true guarantees of success. The question of Coalition politics does, however, go deeper than the Anglo-Prussian relationship, or indeed the macro combination with the other Great Powers, Russia and Austria. Much as he had in the Peninsula, Wellington found himself commanding a micro-coalition, a polyglot Army of smaller partners, one of which, the Netherlands, was also host to the coming denouement. Wellington presided over this complex weave of Dutch, Belgian, Hanoverian, Brunswick and Nassau troops, few of whom he knew well and some of whom had fought previously for Napoleon.

Portrait of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, by Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), 1814, Wellington Museum. ***Wikipedia, Released.***

He called it an infamous army, but in truth, this has been more the norm than not for the British way in war. In 2015, I command the 3rd UK Division, a formation that has every expectation of going to war under Allied command, and with allies under command. In the last two years, I have worked with US, French, Danish, Italian, Polish and German forces. In Helmand I fought not only in a macro coalition under US command, but in a micro-coalition of Danes, Estonians and French troops, as well as Afghans.

In 1815, the 3rd Division was commanded not by Sir Thomas Picton (who had led it through the Peninsula), but by Sir Charles Alten, (or to give him his proper name, Karl von Alten, the only German to have commanded this Division). Within its order of battle sat only one British formation alongside KGL and Hanoverian brigades. Infamous or not, Wellington's army at Waterloo proved remarkably resilient and there is no reason to believe that a future coalition, properly prepared, with commanders who trust each other, and with unity of purpose, could not achieve a similar end.

I would like to turn now to the organisational characteristics of the three armies and their relevance today. The rank and file of all Napoleonic continental armies was founded on the principle of mass conscription. Indeed, the dominance of the French Army in the period 1792 to 1813 owed much to France's large population (increased substantially as the Empire grew). Carnot's levee en masse was the initial means of exploitation, and developed into the Napoleonic annual class conscription. Austria, Prussia and Russia followed suit and, by 1813, were using mass armies not only as military instruments, but as expressions of nationalism. Britain's approach was the exception to this rule and mirrored its policy of limited liability.

The armies of developed nations in the 21st Century have all reverted to 18th Century small professional forces, in which manpower is at a premium. Does this mean that the large conscripted armies that dominated Europe from 1789 to 1989 are now a thing of the past? It is interesting to note that we are now at the same remove from the destruction of the Berlin Wall as the armies at Waterloo were from the storming of the Bastille.

The extraordinary pace of change in both instances suggests that we should beware complacency about the likely direction of strategic travel. A hundred years ago a perfect little British army, designed in the aftermath of the Boer War, was almost annihilated by the gigantic challenge of a continental war and then rebuilt at huge cost as a mass citizen army. The army we design for 2020 should not repeat this mistake and must retain a platform from which a larger force can once again be formed.

Napoleon's system of war grew out of access to an extraordinary reserve of manpower. The traditional view is that he saw manpower as a commodity he could spend freely. Without the need for expensive support, he could unshackle his troops from the inhibitions of the logistic chain and move them faster than his opponents. In consequence, he could concentrate mass on the battlefield to overwhelm his enemies. Certainly, there is no smoke without fire to this point of view: while Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland were all enabled by manoeuvre, Eylau, Aspern, Wagram, Borodino, Lutzen, Bautzen, Dresden and Leipzig all showed Napoleon's willingness to expend the lives of his men.

This trend followed its disturbing course through the 19th Century to the Clausewitzian *schlacten* of the Great War. But in an age in which the value placed on human life has risen substantially, such profligacy seems deeply alien to Western practitioners of war in the 21st Century, even if the leaders of IS, AQ and the Taliban think otherwise.

A nuanced study of the Napoleonic Wars does however show a more variegated picture. I have twice mentioned Britain's strategy of limited liability, which led to Wellington's careful husbandry of his manpower. There is nothing very different in this to Montgomery's 'teeing up' of battles to preserve Britain's diminishing manpower in the Second Word War, or to the country's reaction to casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And even Napoleon himself was not deaf or blind to the consequences of excessive bloodshed. Much work has gone into studying Napoleon's various physical illnesses, but perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the possibility that he suffered from that very modern, (or is it timeless?) phenomenon, PTSD. What else explains his increasingly erratic behaviour in the late Empire, his bouts of energy and lethargy, anger and optimism? Setting aside the cumulative psychological effect that the deaths of friends and commanders such as Desaix, Lannes, Lasalle, St Hilaire, Bessieres and Duroc had on him, the frequent exposure to the shock of battle and mass casualties, must have taken its toll. Napoleon's apparent paralysis on the morning of the 17th June after Ligny, touring the wounded when he should have been pursuing his enemies, seems deeply human.

A similar human dimension can be seen in the otherwise cool impression that Wellington liked to present to the world: the evening of Waterloo - deafened by incessant gunfire, traumatised by the death or injury of most his personal staff, giving his bed to a dying officer, and writing the famous Waterloo despatch, with its agonizingly long list of casualties, is another profoundly human vignette.

Napoleon went to significant effort to improve the logistical services of his Army. Baron Larrey's medical innovations took the French Army beyond the primitive first aid that had previously prevailed. Extraordinary logistical efforts were made for the invasion of Russia. In his very engaging biography Andrew Roberts's litters his narrative with examples of Napoleon's voluminous correspondence in which not the smallest aspect of administration goes unnoticed. And while Napoleon's army was founded upon conscription, it also relied upon a cohort of long service veterans, both inside and out of the Imperial Guard, many of whom served as long as modern soldiers, often longer.

It is this professional cohort that marks out the Napoleonic Army as a modern institution and upon which I should now like to concentrate. Central to the idea of a professional officer corps, is the concept of a General Staff. The British Army is giving thought to the re-establishment of a General Staff as the driver of

This painting depicts the French Cuirassiers charging onto the British Squares during the Battle of Waterloo. Oil on canvas by Henri Félix Emmanuel Philippoteaux (1815-1884), painted 1874, Victoria and Albert Museum. ***Wikipedia, Released.***

professional standards. The present G1-9 staff system is often described as 'Napoleonic'. In fact, this arrangement is a 1917 American derivation of the French 3rd Republic's Bureau system and owes nothing to Napoleon.

In contrast, the staff organisation in use by the British Army until the 1980s would have been, to a large extent, recognisable to Wellington, and was only then supplanted by the G system. It is of course not the British or French, but the Prussian model upon which 19th and 20th Century General Staffs drew their inspiration.

But if the French Napoleonic staff system was an organisational dead end, this does not invalidate its conceptual relevance to the modern world. At its heart, lay the relationship between Napoleon as commander and Berthier as Chief of Staff. Soult's replacement of Berthier, following the latter's death, is the exception that proves the rule and shows the essential nature of a competent staff to the successful outcome of a campaign. Soult's staffing mistakes during the Waterloo campaign are well documented:

- *the lack of command and control clarity regarding D'Erlon's Corps on the day of Ligny and Quatre Bras led to D'Erlon shuttling pointlessly between the two battlefields, failing to intervene decisively in either.*
- *On the day of Waterloo, the failure to give Reille clear orders not to allow his Corps to be fixed needlessly at Hougoumont;*
- *the failure to grip Ney, whose erratic tactical decisions led the entire Reserve Cavalry into the attack against unbroken Infantry;*
- *and, of course, the vague nature of the late instruction to Grouchy, which failed to energise the latter, leading to his non-appearance at Waterloo.*

These are lessons that continue to resonate with commanders and staff in the 21st Century: timeless reminders of the consequences of staff imprecision.

But whatever its imperfections, first and foremost, the French Army was a meritocracy, formed of battle-hardened commanders who had fought throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It was also a surprisingly broad church in which talent was the common denominator. Milhaud had been a Jacobin, Grouchy was an aristocrat; Foy a liberal; Kellerman had made his name at Marengo; Mouton at Aspern, Vandamme at Austerlitz; 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: Augerau, Bernadotte, 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 Vendee, was reconciled with Napoleon, but whose Royalist instincts got the better of him: he defected 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, Bessieres, 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 wired 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 strategic, was his defining contribution to the art of war. Central to the Napoleonic model was the Corps system. The corps d'armee, 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 genuinely 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 D 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 Bocage operations forced change. It was only at this stage of the war that Slim's dictum was realised.

Attack on Plancenoit, during the battle of Waterloo, by Prussian Divisions of Hiller, Ryssel and Tippelskirch which overwhelmed the French Imperial Young Guard and the 1st Battalions of the 2nd Grenadiers and 2nd Chasseurs by Ludwig Elsholtz (1805-1850). ***Wikipedia, Released.***

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 Stalin 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 people in Belgium, never lasted long enough to test these extra dimensions.

British Army flexes its armour in Poland exercise. Soldiers from the 1st Battalion The Royal Welsh, scan the horizon for the enemy during Exercise BLACK EAGLE in western Poland. Here Bulldog armoured personnel carriers navigate the undulating terrain of a churned up track through the forest. ***Photo: Staff Sergeant Mark Nesbit RLC, Crown Copyright.***

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 battlegroup 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 Peninsular 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, blighted 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.