

WALKING WATERLOO

THUNDERING HOOVES, THE STAMP OF MARCHING FEET AND THE POUNDING OF DRUMS! HAD TOM HIBBERD TURNED UP OVER 200 YEARS AGO THIS IS WHAT HE WOULD HAVE HEARD ON THE BATTLEFIELDS OF THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN!

I TURNED 40 A WHILE BACK AND DECIDED to give myself a present, having long been a fan of the Sharpe novels written by Bernard Cornwell, I decided I wanted to visit some of the locations that are written about in the books. This led to me checking out the website of "The Cultural Experience" and choosing a four day walking tour of the Waterloo battlefields.

marching the length of France, he and his rapidly reassembling army reoccupied Paris and Napoleon once again was declared Emperor. Upon hearing the news, the old allies declared war on Napoleon. Britain, Holland, Prussia, Spain and Russia all vowed to raise armies of 200,000 men and converge on Paris; ridding themselves of Napoleon once and for all!

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Being of a somewhat nervous disposition, the idea of heading off with 16 strangers for four days was quite intimidating. My nerves were greatly soothed when the glossy tour handout arrived in the post, complete with all the instructions and beautiful detailed maps. Our trip left from St. Pancras International via Eurostar. Here I met the group, our Tour Manager, Gael and our guide for the weekend Retired Major General Ashley Truluck. Having never used the Channel Tunnel before this was an adventure in itself. After what seemed like a very short time (and a light breakfast) we arrived in Brussels for a tour of some of the historic areas and buildings that would have played a part in June 1815. It quickly became apparent that our time in Belgium would be spent in the rough chronological order that the battles took.

enemy's armies individually, forcing the others to lose hope and sue for peace. The French veterans marched to war once again, crossing the river Sambre at Charleroi and heading for Brussels. The allies, partying at the Duchess of Richmond's Ball, learnt very late in the day of Napoleon's intentions and scrambled to react.

FRIDAY - EUROSTAR, BRUSSELS & WATERLOO TOWN

After being exiled to Elba, Napoleon quickly became bored with the small island and decided to make one last bid for power. After

Our tour started in the Grand-Place, in the centre of Brussels, an amazing 13th century square surrounded by guildhalls and stunning architecture, where you could imagine strolling allied officers resplendent in their uniforms. After a light lunch we headed up to Royal Palace, where the Duke of Wellington held his meetings and forged a fragile alliance to see off Napoleon. We also saw the Duke's residence. Unfortunately the location of the Duchess of Richmond's Ball where Wellington learned of Napoleon's advance is now under the Brussels ring road!

Leaving Brussels in our executive coach we followed the march of the British reserve down to the small town of Waterloo. Here we visited Wellington's Head Quarters (though only used after the battle), which is now a dedicated museum. Although

small, this holds a fantastic collection of artefacts and weapons and is well worth a visit. There are moving tributes to the loss of life and quality of medical care (or lack of), as well as personal recollections of the battle. Just across the road is the Parish church, which is filled with memorials to the dead. This is a moving, sombre reminder that war is not glorious but results in death and loss.

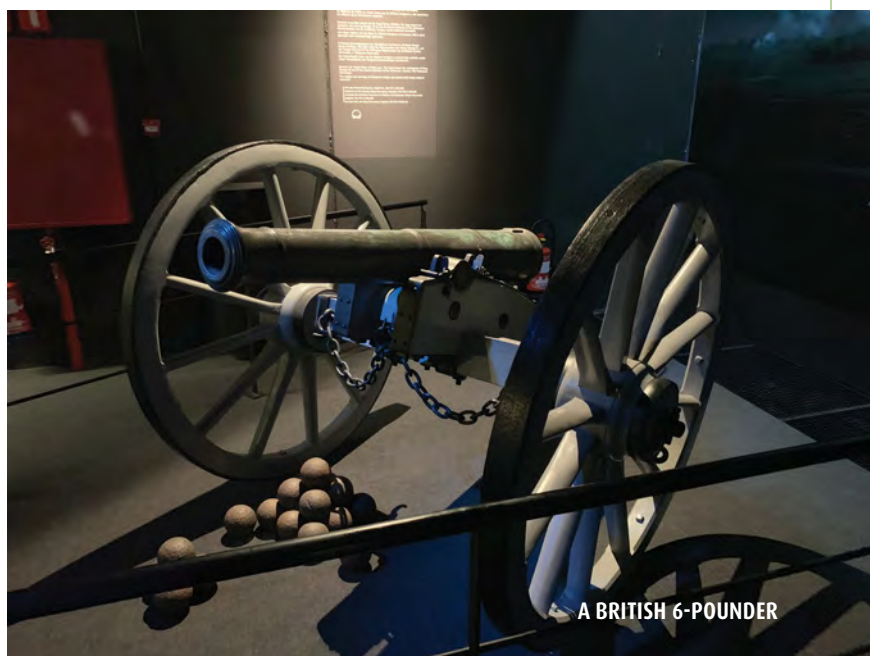
From the HQ we took a short walk to the hotel where we would be staying for our time in Belgium. This was a delightful four star in the heart of Waterloo and a great place to unwind after a long day of traveling.

SATURDAY - QUATRE BRAS & LIGNY

Napoleon's army advances up the Charleroi - Brussels roads. It splits into two wings. The Left Wing under Marshal New will capture the crossroads at Quatre Bras and if possible, push onto Brussels. The Right Wing with Napoleon will fight the Prussians who have fortified the village of Ligny and are offering battle. At the end of a hard day's fighting the Prussians are defeated, though not broken and falling back parallel to the British troops. Wellington secures a scrappy victory at Quatre Bras, though news reaches him that Blucher and the Prussians have withdrawn leaving his flank exposed. His army is forced to withdraw North to a new battlefield - Waterloo.

The day dawned bright and we looked forward to our first day walking the battlefields. I packed my Cannae Pro Gear Legion pack (see Airsoft Action TV for the review), which drew some admiring glances. The coach took us down the Brussels - Charleroi road, which gave some of us our first sight of the Waterloo battlefield. I must admit I felt tingles down my spine on seeing this.

We quickly moved onto Quatre Bras to see the area where Wellington met with the Dutch officers that were superbly holding the crossroads against a much larger French force. Other than some monuments, there are no Visitor Centres or attractions here, even a barn that was used as a hospital and depicted in paintings of the time, has very recently been pulled down to make way for new building projects. We walked the length of the British line, learning



A BRITISH 6-POUNDER

about the actions on the day and just what a fine run thing the battle was. Troops arrived just in time and were deployed straight into the line where they were needed. We learned about how the French attacked in column and were seen off by the British line and the bayonet.

Then onto Ligny. This little-known battle, just two days before Waterloo, saw a large pitched battle between the French and the Prussians. This area has changed little and is largely still farmland. Many of the original buildings are still in situ and tracks crisscross the land, allowing the walker to visit the key points of the battle. The fighting in and around Ligny was vicious and went on for hours before the Prussians were forced to withdraw. We enjoyed a hard-earned beer in the town square before following the line of withdrawal to the Prussian command positions overlooking the village. Our day's walking ended at the spot where Marshal Blucher was unhorsed by French cavalry.

Following the allied withdrawal, the day after Quatre Bras and Ligny we retraced our outward journey and finished with dinner at a Bistro overlooking the fields of Waterloo.

SUNDAY - WATERLOO, HOUGOMONT, LA HAYE SAINTE, PAPPERLOTTE, PLANCENOIT

It rained all night, leaving the the two armies wet and miserable. Due to good staff work the Anglo-Dutch had deployed in their positions and were ready to start. The French were much more scattered due to their need to forage for food and took valuable time to organise. The first shots were fired in the late morning. Wellington's plan was to hold the ridge of Mont Saint-Jean until the Prussians arrived on the French Flank. Three farm house complexes were used to defend the ridge. Papperlotte on the left, La Haye Sainte in the centre and Hougomount.

Our day started with a tour of Hougomout. This former Chateaux was crucial to the defense of the line. It was rebuilt for the 200th anniversary of the Battle and features a wonderful (if over the top) audio-visual display. Hougomout is sacred ground for the British Army and our guide did a wonderful job of describing the action without glorifying what happened within and outside the walls. It's quite rare that I am moved so much by bricks and mortar.

We moved onto the left to visit the location of the first major French infantry assault, of 18,000 troops and cavalry. Having read so much and seen movies and tv shows depicting the farmland, it came as quite a shock to see how small it actually was/is. On the day there were 250,000 men spread out over just 3 square miles. The French assault was stopped by British line and then finished



BAKER RIFLES AND SWORD BAYONET



by the famous charge of the Household, Guard and Union heavy cavalry. Although one of the most successful charges in the history of the British army, ultimately the poor leadership showed and the remains limped home after being counter-attacked.



We then walked onto the extreme left of the British position, guarded by the farm complex of Papperlotte and then through lovely country lanes to the village of Plancenoit. This was the area the Prussians arrived and engaged the French flank. Once a scene of horror, it is now a quiet country location and we enjoyed the hospitality of the bar in the square, bringing the day to a close.

MONDAY - WATERLOO, IMPERIAL GUARD, VISITORS CENTRE, EUROSTAR

It is now late in the day. Prussian troops are probing the French flank and, whilst being held for now, are threatening to overwhelm the defenders. It is time for one last throw of the dice. Napoleon's Imperial Guard are prepared for attack. These hand-picked troops have never been defeated in battle and their deployment means victory. The assault is launched on the British centre and right. The ground leads the Guard into the centre of Wellington's freshest and best troops. Wary of cavalry, the Imperial Guard advance in square and are once against met by line. A general advance is sounded and French troops press forwards. This is the moment of crisis, the fate of Europe rests on what happens now...

On our last day we followed the line of the French assault onto the British ridge. When on the ground it is easy to see how important the farm houses of La Hay Sainte and Hougomont are to the defense. The final few metres are up a slope which restricts your view of what lies beyond and here waited the British troops. We paused at the location where the British Guards lay in wait and where the 52nd came out of line to flank the French attack. Ashley told the story of the day and how finally the Guard broke under the weight of fire and the bayonet. Waterloo was won!

Our final few hours were spent at the Visitors Centre and in climbing the mound. Rather than being a monument to Napoleon as I had previously thought, it is instead a tribute to the Prince of Orange. The new Visitors Centre is fantastic and though (in the opinion of this Brit) spends too much time looking at Napoleon, is worth a visit. There is also another audio-visual presentation (that owes much to 3D glasses and a moving floor). A highlight for me was the ranks of uniforms displayed.

HOME JAMES AND DON'T SPARE THE HORSES

And that was that! Time to head for Brussels and the Eurostar. I had a fantastic time. The Cultural Experience Tours are not cheap and there are less costly ways of visiting the battlefields. However, our trip was largely faultless, comfortable and the expert knowledge of our guide Ashley, second to none. The tour manager Gael was constantly making sure that we were okay and that the next few stages of the trip were queued up and ready to happen. The hotel was top notch and transport comfortable and always available. I've already booked my next 8-day holiday in 2019, to visit Wellington's battlefields in Spain!

If all this sounds rather wonderful then head over to The Cultural Experience website to see the plethora of tours they have on offer: www.theculturalexperience.com

