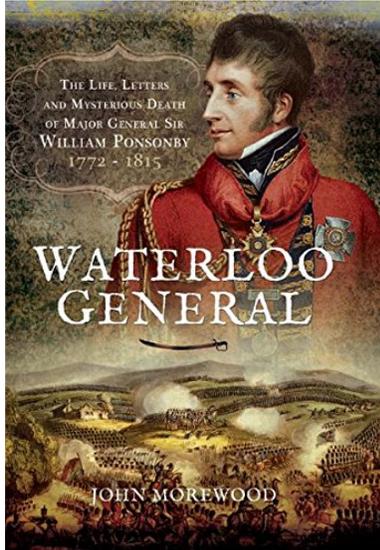


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Morewood, John. *Waterloo General: the Life, Letters and Mysterious Death of Major General Sir William Ponsonby 1772 – 1815*. Barnsley (UK): Pen & Sword, 2016. 278 pages. ISBN# 9781473868045. \$45 / £25



*Waterloo General* is the first full length biography of one of the heroes of Waterloo -- William Ponsonby. He was born into an Anglo-Irish aristocratic family and joined the army in 1794. Although initially an infantry officer, four years later he exchanged into the 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, a cavalry regiment that he would be associated with for the next 16 years. He saw little action until he went to the Peninsula in 1811 and served there for the rest of the war. In his spare time he was a member of Parliament. He is best known for leading the Union Brigade in possibly the greatest British cavalry charge of the Napoleonic Wars, at Waterloo. He did not survive the charge.

*Waterloo General* covers all of William Ponsonby's life. Its author had access to the Ponsonby family archives and it contains information about him that is not available elsewhere. There is much background on the family's politics (they were Whigs and sympathetic to the Irish cause) and finances. One of the recurring themes throughout the book is how the family's fortune was mismanaged, which caused William to spend considerable time and effort trying to resolve the problems. Not much is known about his youth, but William did study at Trinity College. After he exchanged into the 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, despite his family's leanings, he was involved in suppressing the Irish Rebellion of 1798. In 1799, William and his regiment were transferred to England where they spent the next twelve years on garrison duty.

In 1811, the 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards were ordered to the Peninsula and *Waterloo General* devotes about 25% of the book to William's time there. He commanded the regiment for about year until he was appointed its brigade commander in July 1812. He led the brigade throughout the rest of the Peninsular War. After Napoleon abdicated, he was responsible for marching the brigade about 1000 kilometers from southern France to ports on the English Channel, where they embarked for home. The last half of the book covers the Waterloo Campaign and General Ponsonby's role during it.

One of the best scenes in the 1971 movie "Waterloo" was the charge of the General Ponsonby's British Cavalry Brigade, which was known as the Union Brigade. In a charge that lasted less than an hour, 1000 British dragoons broke the French Infantry Corps commanded by General D'Erlon. The movie also covered the French counter-

attack that gutted the Union Brigade and a gritty re-enactment of the death of General Ponsonby by French lancers.

The author examines in great detail this epic charge, which has become controversial over the past two hundred years. No one disputes that the charge destroyed a French corps, but within a few months after Waterloo, there was much debate over General Ponsonby's role in the charge. Additionally the death of General Ponsonby is also one of the most contentious events of the battle.

The question about the charge is whether General Ponsonby went against normal practices of keeping one regiment in reserve to protect the other regiments from the enemy who would counter-attack the cavalry after they became disorganized and ran out of steam. They were the most vulnerable at this point and the job of the reserve was to ensure the spent regiments could return to their own lines unmolested. This did not happen during the charge of the Union Brigade. All three regiments charged, failed to rally after riding down the French infantry, and were in turn decimated by the French cavalry. The controversy is whether General Ponsonby actually ordered the reserve to charge or did the regimental commander take it on his own initiative to do so. Unfortunately, neither General Ponsonby nor the commander of the regiment in question survived the charge. So they cannot defend themselves. The author examines all aspects of the charge in great detail to determine why it happened and why it got out of control. This is worth the cost of the book in itself!

One of the myths that arose shortly after the battle was why, how, and where General Ponsonby died. Over the years, many different versions have been told, and the most commonly accepted one is shown in the movie. Was he riding a hack instead of a charger? If so, why? Did his financial problems impact his ability to buy a decent horse? Did he really get bogged down in a muddy field and stabbed to death by Polish Lancers? Why was he caught virtually alone by the French cavalry? Was he captured and then killed by the French when some British troopers tried to rescue him? Mr. Morewood looks at these questions and consults numerous British and French eyewitness accounts, including one by the French sergeant who claimed to have killed him!

I only found one problem with *Waterloo General*, and this is a relatively minor error. On page 64 he writes about Colonel Ponsonby being appointed to command the cavalry brigade of General John Le Marchant, after he was killed at the battle of Salamanca on 22 June 1812.

“William's appointment was a testament to Wellington's view of his abilities, as it could be argued that Lord Edward Somerset was a more obvious choice. Somerset belonged to a family that was close friends with Wellington. They shared the same politics. He was the elder brother of Wellington's secretary. He had been a lieutenant colonel longer than William, and had served in the Peninsula longer. Despite the problems of having a brigade commander who had

an uncle and a best friend leading the opposition to the war effort in the House of Commons, and who would, on promotion to the army staff, have access to confidential papers which could be dynamite if they fell into the wrong hands, Wellington was obvious certain that William was the right man for the job.”

It makes good reading, however the author ignores one salient fact. Wellington was restricted by army custom on who he could promote. Many of his selections on who would command which brigade was based on the seniority of the officers. Date-of-rank trumped ability every time. Wellington’s *Dispatches* contain many letters about senior officer promotions. When two colonels had the same date-of-rank, seniority was determined by their date-of-rank to lieutenant colonel. The author is correct that both Colonel Ponsonby and Colonel Somerset had the same date-of-rank to colonel, and Colonel Somerset was promoted to regimental lieutenant colonel almost three years earlier than Colonel Ponsonby. What he overlooked was that Colonel Ponsonby had been promoted to brevet lieutenant colonel (which is also called army rank) a year before Colonel Somerset had been promoted to regimental lieutenant colonel. When serving outside of a regiment – which commanding a brigade would be – seniority was determined by when the individual was promoted regardless if it was regiment or army rank. Colonel Ponsonby was 37 places senior to Colonel Somerset. So Wellington had to offer him the command first.

*Waterloo General* is not just a biography. It is also a history of two of the best cavalry brigades in Wellington’s Army in the Peninsular War and the Waterloo Campaign. In the late summer of 1811, a new heavy cavalry brigade, consisting of the 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards and the 3rd Dragoons, was sent to Peninsula. William Ponsonby commanded the 5th Dragoon Guards initially and upon the death of General Le Marchant, was given command of the brigade. The author spends considerable time telling the history of the brigade from its arrival in the Peninsula until Napoleon’s abdication in April 1814. He draws on many accounts by officers, soldiers, and even the brigade’s commissary officer to tell its story. He also does the same for the Union Brigade during the Waterloo Campaign. Although the focus is on the role of William Ponsonby, the reader is given a good history of the two brigades.

One of my pet peeves about books are maps. Most books will only include one or two maps and many are put in as an afterthought rather than adding contribution to the narrative. I always look at the maps with several questions in mind. Are they appropriately placed? Are they easy to read? And of course do they tell us what they are supposed to? *Waterloo General* has seven maps! Two cover William Ponsonby’s time in the Peninsula, while the other five are about the Waterloo Campaign. These maps answer the questions above with a resounding yes. My only complaint is that he places the legend for the three maps concerning the charge of the Union Brigade on the page preceding two of the maps and then twenty pages later he has the third map. The reader has to refer back to the first two maps to find the legend. All and all, a minor flaw for an otherwise great effort on the maps.

Mr. Morehouse teases the reader with the title of the book: *Waterloo General: the Life, Letters and Mysterious Death of Major General Sir William Ponsonby*. Does he delivers on what the title promises? He definitely does. *Waterloo General* is an excellent biography of a British general who was destined for obscurity until fate placed him in the right place at the right time that allowed him lead the epic charge that led to the defeat of Napoleon's Army. Unfortunately he died in the charge and was never able to enjoy the many accolades that ensued. *Waterloo General* is well written and is a valuable addition to our literature on the Napoleonic Wars.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2016