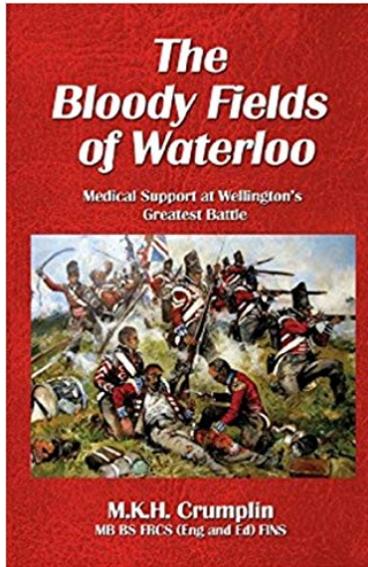


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Crumplin, Michael. *The Bloody Fields of Waterloo: Medical Support at Wellington's Greatest Battle*. Godmanchester (UK): Ken Trotman, 2015. 272 pages. ISBN# 9781907417412 £40.



Most books on the Waterloo Campaign only cover the political and military events that ended with the defeat of Napoleon and his subsequent exile to Saint Helena. Few, if any, explore the cost of the struggle in terms of casualties. *Bloody Fields* is the exception. Its author is Michael Crumplin a retired British consulting surgeon, who specializes in medical matters of the era. He is also a frequent contributor on the Napoleon Series. *Bloody Fields* is his second book.

The book opens with a review of the battle and the likely number of casualties during each of its stages. It then examines the history of the medical staff of the British Army from 1661 to 1815. It looks at the British Army Medical Board and how it set policies, recommended the appointment of medical personnel, inspected hospitals, etc. The book then goes into detail about the duties and functions of the various medical personnel, including the inspector general, resident military officers, hospital staff (directors and inspections), physicians, staff surgeons, hospital mates, apothecaries, purveyors, regimental surgeons, and regimental assistant surgeons. The book even discusses the medical personnel who were assigned to the Ordnance Board. If you ever wondered what the difference was between a staff surgeon and a regimental surgeon, this is the book for you.

Chapter 4: “Aftermath of Victory” is possibly the most interesting of all the chapters. In it Dr. Crumplin discusses in great detail how the wounded were treated during and after the battle: how they were transported to the various field hospitals, the triage of the various patients, how their wounds were treated, and how they were sent to various hospitals in Brussels and Antwerp for long term care. He then explores the different wounds, what caused them, the accepted way of treating them, and the prognosis for surviving them. There are sections for Head, Neck, and Face Wounds; Chest Wounds; Abdominal and Pelvic Wounds; Wounds of the Upper Limbs; and Wounds of the Lower Limbs.

Many of the descriptions of the wounds are based on a report written by Professor John Thomson, of Edinburgh University, who arrived in Brussels on 8 July to help with the wounded. For example, a typical description of the wounds is:

“Head, neck and face wounds. . . Most of these were caused by sabre or musket balls and in general healed well, the region having a rich blood supply. Thomson observed surprisingly few wound infections in these cases. Sabre cuts frequently sliced off a portion of the skull, and the protective membrane covering the brain – the dura mater, so exposing brain. He describes a French casualty with a portion of the cerebellum (i.e. the portion of brain below the main cerebral hemispheres) quite exposed and which was observed to pulsate in the depth of the wound for eight weeks. The patient had a great feebleness and some weakness in the legs. Another Frenchman was nursed with 20 sabre cuts over his body, one into the elbow joint became infected with a fatal result. When a post mortem was performed (many of these, referred to as ‘dissections’ were performed as a teaching exercise), no less than thirteen cuts were found in the top of the skull, none of which had penetrated the full thickness of the cranium.”¹

Bloody Fields goes on to look at individual casualties and gives descriptions of their wounds and how they were treated. There are chapters on general and staff officers, such as rather long passages on the amputations of the Earl of Uxbridge’s leg and the arm of Captain Thomas Noel Harris, Brigade Major to General Hussey Vivian; cavalry and infantry; the Royal Artillery, and the King’s German Legion.

Bloody Fields closes with eleven appendices that provides short biographies of the medical personnel assigned to the British forces in Flanders, including the Medical Staff, Staff Surgeons, Hospital Assistants and Mates, Apothecaries, Purveyors, Regimental Staff for Cavalry and Infantry, Ordnance, Royal Wagon Train, and the King’s German Legion. Because the system was so overwhelmed by casualties, both military and civilian doctors and surgeons were sent over to Belgium to help. Their biographies are also provided.

Bloody Fields is richly illustrated with 57 color and 29 black and white images. Many of the illustrations are of wounds drawn by contemporary surgical artists, such as [Sir Charles Bell](#), and are quite graphic. They are not for the squeamish! Most of the illustrations come from Dr. Crumplin’s private collection.

For those who plan to visit Waterloo, plan on visiting the Mont Saint Jean Farm. It was used as a field hospital by the Anglo-Allies during the battle. It has now been turned into a brewery and the [Musée de Mont St Jean](#) devoted to medical support during the battle. Most of the exhibits are from Dr. Crumplin’s private collection.

Bloody Fields is a must read for those interested in the medical history of the Waterloo Campaign. But it is also more than that. Because it provides much background information on the history of British military history and detailed information on the different wounds that were common during the era, it is the go to book on the topic. Highly recommended.

¹ Page 67

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: July 2018