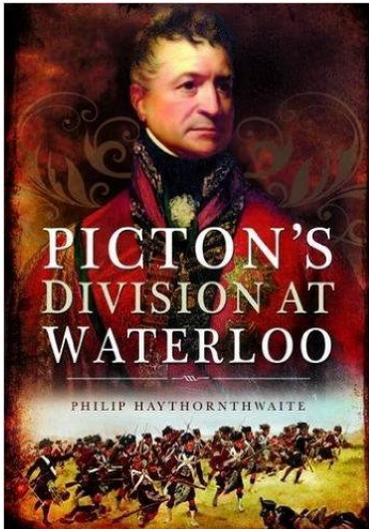


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Haythornthwaite, Philip. *Picton's Division at Waterloo*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016. 237 pages. ISBN: 9781781591024. \$50



In July 2015 I read Gareth Glover's [Waterloo: the Defeat of Napoleon's Imperial Guard](#). Despite the misleading name, it was the story of the British 2nd Division during the Waterloo Campaign. After finishing the book, I thought that it would be great if we could get similar books on the other divisions. Someone must have been listening for *Picton's Division at Waterloo* answers my wish!

One of the rocks of Wellington's Army during the Waterloo Campaign was General Thomas Picton's 5th Division. It was the first division to reach the key crossroads of Quatre Bras and reinforce the badly outnumbered Dutch troops. During the next several hours the British troops held off numerous French infantry and cavalry attacks that caused immense casualties and the decimation of its command structure. Two days later, the division was in the center of the line and once again was involved in heavy fighting. By the end of the day, the 5th Division was only a shadow of its former self, having lost 43% of its strength in two days of combat.¹ Among the Division's British casualties were its commander who was killed, both brigade commander wounded, and of its 8 battalion commanders, two had been killed or died of wounds, and three wounded.²

The book begins with a brief overview of the political and military situation at the time and then immediately goes into the organization of an infantry division and its command and staff elements. There are discussions on the roles of the division staff – such as the Assistant Quartermaster General, the Assistant Adjutant General, the Commander of the Artillery, and the commissary officers; the brigade staff, including the brigade major, and the aide-de-camps. It also covers the internal organization of the division. A chapter is devoted to General Picton's life and includes information on his personality, command style, and his popularity or lack of, among his officers. Also in the chapter is information on his staff, among which were some of the most famous chroniclers of the Napoleonic Wars. They include his extra-aide-de-camp, Ensign Rees Gronow,³ his brigade major.

¹ Adkin, Mark. *The Waterloo Companion*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2001. Page 44.

² Pages 215 - 218

³ Gronow, Rees H. *Captain Gronow: His Reminiscences of Regency and Victorian Life: 1810 – 60*. Christopher Hibbert (ed.). London: Kyle Cathie; 1991.

Major Harry Smith,⁴ and his Assistant Quartermaster General, Lieutenant Colonel William Gomm.⁵

The next chapter covers the infantry. There is a summary of the British regimental system, but then Mr. Haythornthwaite looks at the division's two British and one Hanoverian brigades. For the two British brigades, he provides a short biography of the brigade commander, and then a 2 – 3 page history of each of the battalions. These histories focus on their service during the Napoleonic but also contains information about the senior and notable officers in them. The author finishes the chapter with a couple pages on the Hanoverian brigade and the artillery attached to the division.

The next two chapters covers the period before the campaign, including life in Brussels and how the division assembled when word that the French had crossed the border into Belgium. Not surprisingly, almost 25% of the narrative covers the division's epic stand at Quatre Bras on 16 June, where so many of its soldiers became casualties, but refused to break. There is a chapter on the withdrawal to Waterloo and then a massive chapter on its critical role during the battle. For each of the battles, the author provides an overview of what the division was doing during different parts of the day, but he also tells what each of the battalions were doing throughout the day, plus during the critical times of the battle!

Among the officers and men of the 5th Division were many individuals who left accounts of their experiences during the Waterloo Campaign. Rather than retelling their stories, the author quotes extensively to place the reader in the midst of the action. I was familiar with about 50% of these sources and was surprised by the number of accounts Mr. Haythornthwaite was able to dig up that were new to me.

One of the themes of the book is that despite the casualties among the senior officers at all levels in the division its impact on its ability to function in combat was not adversely affected. The author's theory is that the British regimental system of officer promotions with its rigid order of seniority was key to their success. He supports this by showing that when a senior officer became a casualty, again and again, the next senior officer immediately stepped up and assumed command. The continued superb performance of the 5th Division throughout both days of battle lends credence to this theory.

Instead of cluttering up the narrative with a ton of data, the appendices have a detailed order-of-battle for the division down to the battalion level. It includes the names of the staff officers, battalion and artillery commanders, unit strengths for the day of Waterloo taken from the official "morning states" of 18 June, and unit casualties for both Quatre Bras and Waterloo, with the names of the officers who were casualties and totals for the enlisted soldiers.

Picton's Division is heavily illustrated with over fifty images, many were drawn either immediately after the battles or within a few years; about half of them I had never seen

⁴ Smith, Harry. *The Autobiography of Sir Harry Smith: 1787 - 1819* London: Constable; 1999.

⁵ Gomm, William M. *Letters and Journals of Field-Marshal Sir William Maynard Gomm from 1799 to Waterloo 1815*. Francis Carr-Gomm (ed.) .London: John Murray; 1881.

before. The book also includes four contemporary maps that clearly show the disposition of the 5th Division's brigades and in two of them the battalions! Unlike many books, where the images are located in the center of the volume, the illustrations in *Picton's Division* are appropriately placed throughout the text. For example, on page 130 there is a discussion of the Forêt de Soignes. On the same page is an engraving of the forest that was published in 1816.

Picton's Division is a well-researched, quick read that is rich in detail that brings to life the deadly struggles of a British infantry division in the Waterloo Campaign. Hopefully there will be follow on volumes! Highly recommended.

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2016