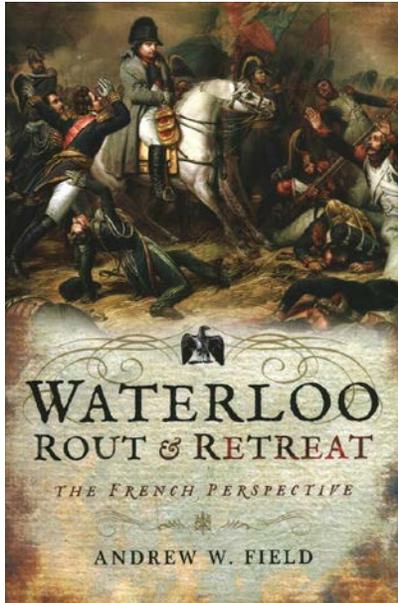


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Fields, Andrew W. *Waterloo Rout & Retreat: the French Perspective*. Barnsley (UK): Pen & Sword, 2017. 352 pages. ISBN# 978152670718. Hardcover. £25 / \$40.



This is the fourth book in Andrew Field's study of the Waterloo Campaign from the French perspective.¹ Most books on Waterloo end with maybe a chapter on the Allied march to Paris and the re-instatement of King Louis XVIII as the head of France, but few go into great detail. *Waterloo Rout & Retreat* is the only modern study that I know of that focuses on the events after Waterloo from the French point of view. Prior to Mr. Field's book, there was William Siborne's massive *The Waterloo Campaign 1815*² which has about 150 pages to the advance on Paris, Paul O'Keeffe's 2014 study *Waterloo: The Aftermath*, and of course there is John Hussey's recent two volume study *The Campaign of 1815*. The second volume, called *From Waterloo to the Restoration of Peace in Europe*³ has about 100 pages on the topic. These books are very good, but they primarily tell it from the British and Prussian perspectives, with much of it being on the political

situation.

What makes *Waterloo Rout & Retreat* unique is that it tells the story from the French point of view, drawing extensively on a large number of French primary sources. Furthermore it is mostly on the French Army after Waterloo rather than the political situation. The parts that cover politics deals almost exclusively with what happened to the army after the restoration of King Louis XVIII.

Waterloo Rout & Retreat is organized chronologically beginning with a recounting of the collapse of the French Army on the night of 18 June. Each subsequent chapter is devoted to one day and covers how various units and individuals responded on that day. These 11 chapters cover the panic-stricken flight back to border, the slow rallying of the troops, and the desperate attempts to organize some opposition to slow the advancing Allies before they reached Paris. Chapter 15 covers the defense of Paris and the many small combats and skirmishes that helped delay but never stopped the implacable Allies. Here you will find information on the last battles of the French Army, including Rocquencourt and Versailles on 1 July, and Meudon and Sèvres on 2 July. Chapter 16 looks at the Armistice, which required the French Army to leave Paris and move into cantonments

¹ The others are: *Prelude to Waterloo: Quatre Bras*, *Waterloo: the French Perspective*, and [Grouchy's Waterloo: the Battles of Ligny and Wavre](#). All are published by Pen & Sword Books.

² It was first published in 1848.

³ Published in 2017. Sample chapters can be seen at [John Hussey's Waterloo: the Campaign of 1815](#)

across the Loire River, while the final chapter is about the permanent disbandment of the army.

Waterloo Rout & Retreat has two appendices. The first is French order-of-battle that was retreating from Belgium based on the parade states from 23 – 26 June. The second is similar but looks at the strength of the French Army at Paris on 1 July. The first appendix is broken down by corps, division, and regiment, while the second looks at the corps and division.

What happened to the French Army after Waterloo is not a pretty story and Mr. Fields pulls no punches when he tells it. He documents the wholesale panic at all unit levels, including the vaunted Imperial Guard; the hopelessness that swept through the army and prevented rallying the men; and the desertion of their commands by many senior French officers. But he also tells of the leaders who did their jobs and were able to keep their men together, often in company size units or smaller, and helped formed the nucleus of the force that kept the Allies at bay long enough for the defence of Paris to be organized. Although much of each chapter focuses on the daily problems of the main part of the French Army, Marshal Grouchy's masterful extraction of the Army's Right Wing from Prussian encirclement is not overlooked.

Like his previous books, the author tells the story of this disaster using the words of the men who lived through it. He was able to find close to 100 different accounts from participants of all ranks. The reader are not only told of the events as seen by general officers but also from the viewpoints of privates, corporals, sergeants, junior officers, staff officers, and field grade officers. Not surprisingly there are many stories from those in the infantry and cavalry, but there are also those from the support services, especially by doctors. Most of the accounts are straightforward and unapologetic. Even the ones by the senior officers who abandoned their commands rarely make excuses for their actions.

In an interesting side note, Mr. Fields writes quite a bit about Marshal Louis Davout, the Minister of War. Considered by most as the best of the French marshals, he was noted for his personal integrity and iron will that dominated all. Yet his actions during the defense of Paris and arranging for an armistice that saw the eventual disbandment of the army was not received favorably by the army. Many of those quoted in the book believed they were betrayed by him. This may cause some readers to re-assess their opinion of the marshal.

Waterloo Rout & Retreat is a superb study about what happened to the French Army in the weeks and months after Waterloo. Strongly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2018