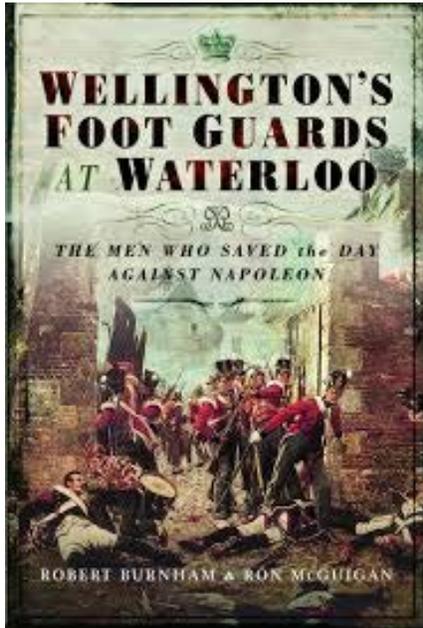


The Napoleon Series

An Interview with Robert Burnham about His New Book: *Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo*

By [Steven Brown](#)

Burnham, Robert and Ron McGuigan. *Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo*. Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2018. Hardcover, 344 pages. ISBN: 1526709864, 9781526709868 £20 / \$30



Steve: *I saw that you have recently had a book published on the British Foot Guards in the Waterloo Campaign. Rather than doing a traditional review, I thought it would be more interesting to interview you about the book.*

There have been a few division-scaled studies of Waterloo in recent years – for example, Glover on the 2nd Division, Haythornthwaite's 5th Division. Does this book serve the same purpose for the 1st Division?

Bob: In addition to collecting British memoirs and diaries, I also collect regimental histories. When Gareth Glover's Waterloo: the Defeat of Napoleon's Imperial Guard Henry Clinton, the 2nd Division and the End of a 200-year Old Controversy and then Philip Haythornthwaite's Picton's Division at Waterloo were published, we decided to do one on the 1st Guards Division. It only looks at those units that served in the division, which were four

Foot Guards Battalions, a foot artillery brigade and a horse artillery troop. I wanted to do something slightly different, which was to tell the story through the eyes of the officers and men who were in the Division. Fortunately, they were some of the most literate men of the time and we had close to one hundred sets of letters, diaries, and journals to draw on.

I would like to point out that the book is not just about Waterloo but covers all of 1815, from garrison duty in Brussels in the winter of 1815 to the build-up and formation of the division in the spring to the battles of Quatre Bras and Waterloo to the march on and eventual occupation of Paris. It was a very busy year for them!

Steve: *I see that the sub-title of the book is "The Men Who Saved the Day Against Napoleon". Given that the Emperor's stated aims were to drive Wellington away from the Prussians on the left flank then drive up through the centre to Brussels, how does a singular localized action on the right flank deserve the credit for saving the day?*

Bob: Many people do not realize that the author does not control the title of the book. The publishers reserve that right. One writer once told me that for a book to be successful the title had to have Napoleon, Waterloo, and/or Wellington in the title. This book hit the jackpot since it has all three. To answer your question further, towards the end of our introduction we have the following statement which reflects our feelings on this;

“This book is a straight-forward re-telling in their own words of what the Guards did and did not do in the Waterloo Campaign. It is not our intent to revisit the controversies surrounding the defeat of the Imperial Guard. This has been done by others. There is enough glory in that defeat to be shared by all.”¹

As for the impact for holding Hougoumont - it was important because the Anglo-Allied Army's right flank was anchored on it. If it had fallen it could very well have caused the whole army to be rolled up and forced Wellington to retreat eastwards.

Steve: *James MacDonell seems to have spent much of his career in the Mediterranean. How did Wellington know him, and why do you think he later claimed to choose him to command at Hougoumont?*

Bob: This is an excellent question that we really do not have an answer to. MacDonell served with the Portuguese Army in the early days of the Peninsula War and was back with the Coldstream Guards in 1812 – 1813. So, Wellington may have known of him from his Peninsula days, but nothing about his service there stands out. Mackinnon's *Origin and Services of the Coldstream Guards* does not mention him at all other than his service at Waterloo. There might have been a social connection, but not one I can find.

Steve: *Has Lord Saltoun been overlooked for his part in the defence?*

Bob: Definitely. I think his role in the whole campaign has been understated. It would hard to write a believable novel based on him in the Waterloo Campaign, for wherever and whenever the Foot Guards saw action he was there. In the march to Quatre Bras he led the two light companies of the 1st Foot Guards as the Division's advance guard. These two companies were the first to be committed into the attack to clear the Bossu Woods. After the Anglo-Allies retreated to Waterloo on 17 June, his company was initially assigned to Hougoumont and he was responsible for setting up the defense of the Great Orchard. Before the attack began on 18 June, his company was ordered back up the hill, but around 1:30 he was ordered to take the two Light Companies of the 1st Foot Guards back to the Great Orchard. He took over command there and fought for several hours before he was relieved. He and the remnants of the two companies went back up the ridge just in time to be present during the great French cavalry charges. In a little-known incident that occurred during a break in the charges, his battalion (the 3rd Battalion) was sent down the ridge to clear away the numerous French skirmishers that were shooting at the battalion. They got to the bottom of the hill and found a French infantry regiment waiting for them. It was during this firefight the battalion took most of its casualties. (On a side note, the 3rd Battalion had 55% casualties at Quatre Bras and Waterloo. They took

¹ Page XI.

more casualties than the Coldstream Guards and 3rd Foot Guards combined. It also took 150 more casualties than the 2nd Battalion 1st Foot Guards.) Once the cavalry attacks were defeated, the Guards came under intense artillery fire and the 2nd Battalion's commander was killed. Lord Saltoun was his replacement. He was commanding it when they fought the Imperial Guard and were at the point where the Imperial Guard came the closest to the Foot Guards. Waterloo did not end Lord Saltoun's being in the thick of the fighting. During the advance of the Allies into France, the fortress of Peronne refused to surrender. Lord Saltoun commanded the forlorn hope that successfully broke into the fort and forced it to capitulate.

Steve: *A lot of Guards officers were detached doing duty on the staff. What effect did that likely have on the division's operational efficiency?*

Bob: I think it had a major effect not so much on the division's efficiency, but on the battalions' ability to operate cohesively. So many of its company commanders volunteered for staff duty, that at one point the Duke of York actually told Wellington that he could not have any more. By mid-June 1815, 16 of the 40 company commanders (forty percent) were not with their companies. Another 12 subalterns were also serving elsewhere. By the night of Waterloo, only 8 captains were still left. Three of them were commanding their battalions. Many of the companies were commanded by ensigns.

Steve: *The Guards battalions were brought up to strength with significant drafts from the militia before the campaign. Did they deserve their reputation as the 'elite' of the army at Waterloo?*

Bob: Most of those drafts from the militia occurred in 1813, so the battalions had the soldiers for many months. They definitely were lacking in combat experience, at all levels. However, I believe 'elite' is a state of mind and of discipline. What they lacked in experience they had in a regimental ethos that said they were elite. In real terms this meant that they would get the job done despite the heavy casualties.

Steve: *Following on from the above – was it their inexperience that caused them to suffer such significant losses in the Bois du Bossu at Quatre Bras?*

Bob: Yes! However, there were many factors that contributed to it. They were committed to the attack after at the end of a long march. Many Guardsmen were too exhausted to move very far into the woods before they collapsed from exhaustion. Their intelligence was also faulty. They were told to attack into the woods but not really told what to expect. Thus, the two 1st Foot Guards battalions were fed piecemeal into the fight two companies at a time. The wood was quite thick in places and suddenly a regiment that was not known for being flexible was broken down into companies to fight as skirmish companies. By nightfall, they had cleared the wood, but the officers had lost control of their companies. There were numerous instances of friendly fire. When the disorganized battalions reached the other side of the wood they were hit by French cavalry. It was only their discipline that allowed them to get back into a formation before the cavalry attacked them. Many soldiers did not make it.

Steve: *The North Gate – why did it take the French so long to discover it? Why didn't they just drive up a battery and blast it down?*

Bob: I am not sure the French realized it was there initially. If you look at the layout of Hougoumont, the North Gate was in the northwest corner. Directly to the south was a large wood and to the left of Hougoumont was a tree line that blocked its view. The only way for the French to bring it under direct fire would have been to bring the guns up to the tree line which was within 50 metres of the gate. The French did eventually bring up a gun to shoot at the South Gate and did set the farm on fire with howitzers.

Steve: *I've walked the battlefield, and from the edge of Hougoumont you can only just see the roof of La Haye Sainte, and nothing at all over on the Allied left flank. Do you think the garrison had any idea what was going on elsewhere on the battlefield?*

Bob: None whatsoever. There are several reasons why they would not have known. The first is that there is a ridgeline that runs north/south that bisects the battlefield. They might have been able to see the roofs of La Haye Sainte through all the smoke, but it is unlikely. But the real reason is that the men who were defending Hougoumont had their hands full. The farm itself was a very strong position, however they also had to defend the Great Orchard which was just to its east. It was over 200 metres long. While the defense of the North Gate as gone down in history as an epic stand against overwhelming odds, the hardest fighting after the North Gate was secured was in the Great Orchard. It was touch and go for many hours.

Steve: *A theoretical question obviously; but if medals for valour existed back then in the British army, would you have given any to the Foot Guards - and if so, to whom?*

Bob: There are many - but some who stand out are:

The men who helped Captain MacDonell close the North Gate. If they had failed to do so, Hougoumont would probably have fallen.

One of my favorites is Sergeant Charles Wood of the 3rd Battalion 1st Foot Guards. During the incident where the battalion moved down the ridge to clear away the skirmishers, they got in a massive firefight with a French regiment. They saw French cavalry nearby and formed a square right in front of French infantry regiment. A very one-sided fire fight took place and the battalion took heavy casualties and among them was Ensign Edward Pardoe who was killed. During a lull in the fighting, the square was beginning to waver. Sergeant Wood took the ensign's 'bloody coat and forced himself through ranks of the square and waving the coat over his head called to them, that "while our officers bled, we should not reckon our lives dear." This seemed to steady the men and eventually the French infantry withdrew.²

² Page 177.

James Graham who earned the nickname as 'The Bravest Man at Waterloo'. He helped closed the North Gate and later when barn at Hougoumont was on fire, he rushed in to rescue his brother. After he got him to safety, he returned to his position on the wall.

Steve: *I noticed that this is the fourth book you and Ron McGuigan have co-authored. How did this come about?*

Bob: I first met Ron through the Napoleon Series about 20 years ago. We were both interested in the British Army and he was always my go-to guy for when I was stumped in my research. As a matter-of-fact he still is. I do not think that in 20 years there has been more than a handful of questions that he could not answer. In about 2004 he suggested I write a book and since it was his idea, I roped him into the project. In the past 13 years we have co-written four books and many articles for the Napoleon Series. All of the books have been on some aspect of the British Army. The most interesting thing is that I have never met him. In all these years our only contact has been via email, except for one 15-minute phone call. In a typical writing day, we probably exchanged 10 emails.

Steve: *Finally – and not altogether seriously: Where did they learn those 'surf volleys' they let loose against the Imperial Guard at the end of the movie? Did Major-General George Cooke ever visit Hawaii? ☺*

Bob: That was another Cook, and he was a Captain!

I would not have wanted to be in the front two ranks of the formation shown in the movie – but their depiction was, in a way, accurate. The 1st Guards Brigade, which consisted of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Foot Guards, were not in the traditional two-deep line. They had taken so many casualties that their combined frontage was about 120 men wide or 70-80 metres wide. Two other things that caught my eye in that scene was they showed the French were Imperial Guard Grenadiers, but the British Guards fought the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 3rd Chasseurs and the single battalion of the 4th Chasseurs. They were of course Imperial Guard and wore bearskins.

The other thing about the attack and shown in the movie was Wellington turning to General Maitland, who was commanding the remnants of the Guards Division and saying "Up Guards and at them". This is a myth that had grown since the battle. Lord Saltoun, who was in command of the 2nd Battalion at the time and was where General Maitland was, wrote to William Siborne in 1838 about whether it was really said. "I did not hear him, nor do I know of any person, or ever heard of any person that did. It is a matter of no sort of importance, has become current with the world as the cheering speech of a great man to his troops, and is certainly not worth a controversy about".³

³ Page 192.

Within the book we also look at some of the other myths that have come about in the past 200 years.

Steve: Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo is a fine and much-needed tribute to the 1st (Guards) Division in the Waterloo campaign. The book does not stop at the conclusion of the battle, but goes on to describe the actions of the 1st Division in the march to Paris, and the siege of Peronné. There are sixteen pages of illustrations (with nineteen full-colour images) and fifteen appendices, covering everything from monthly strength returns, to awards received, to promotions within the Guards in 1815. There is also a chapter providing mini-biographies of all Guards officers present in the campaign. To my eyes this book looks definitive. Highly recommended.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: May 2019