

The Napoleon Series Reviews

A Tour of Waterloo with Campaigns and Culture



This was my fourth visit to Waterloo. I was familiar with the battlefield but it had been several decades since I had been there so I was curious to see how it had changed. More importantly I did not want a standard battlefield tour. Instead I wanted one that focused on the British Foot Guards. I contacted in advance my tour guide, noted Napoleonic scholar Gareth Glover, and he tailored the tour to my request. It was the best battlefield tour I have ever taken.

On the first day of the tour we followed the route that the British Guards marched on from their cantonments in Enghien southeast to Quatre Bras then on to Waterloo. Due to prior research we knew most of the villages and towns they passed through but were not 100% sure what roads they took. Gareth was able to determine much of it by consulting his copy of the 1779 Ferraris Map and by using a 1:50,000 scale map we were reasonably sure that the route we took was what the Guards marched on. The 40 kilometer drive took us through farmland, numerous small villages, woods, and up and down steep hills before we arrived in Quatre Bras.

The next day we travelled back to Quatre Bras from our hotel in Waterloo and spent several hours there. We initially examined the approach of the Guards Division to Quatre Bras, trying to find the spot where they went from a march column into a tactical formation. Having established the likely spot we drove a short distance to explore the terrain on the eastern side of the village. Unfortunately, the Bois de Bossu -- the forest that was key terrain -- has been cut down so it was difficult to conclude how dense it was in 1815. However, Gareth did drive us via back roads and narrow lanes to Pierrepont, the farm on a hill that the French occupied and stopped the Guards' attack from the Bois de Bossu. Although the map we were using to determine the British position showed a very steep incline between the two positions and many British accounts talk about how dominating of a height it was, it was not. The French position was higher, but the slope was gentle. After leaving Pierrepont we stopped at Gemioncourt Farm, where the 2nd Guards' Brigade light companies moved into late in the day. We were not able to permission to walk through the buildings, however I was able to gain a good impression of how defensible they were.

From Quatre Bras we drove north to the Lion's Mound at Waterloo. We parked at the 1815 Visitor Center and hiked eastward along the ridge that the Allied Army defended to the Hougoumont Chateau. One of the sub-themes of the tour was that to fully understand the battle you must walk the terrain and see how it impacted the commanders' decisions. This walk was a real eye-opener for me. I had always been told that the ridge had been levelled to create the Lion's Mound. This was true, but only part of it had been. The further east we walked and the closer we came to position occupied by the Guards, the more dominant the ridge became. Standing on the top of the ridge it was easy to see the ridge occupied by the French to the south and the valley in between. However, if you walked 20 – 30 meters down the ridge to the north it completely blocked the view towards the south. Conversely, the French on the ridge to the south and in the valley could see nothing on the other side of the ridge.

We spent the next three hours exploring the Hougoumont Chateau, its formal gardens, and the great orchard. Gareth has extensive knowledge of the grounds and its defense. As we walked the grounds he pointed out the changes that have been made to the Chateau over the years. We also spent considerable time discussing the numerous stories / legends that have grown around the fight for the Chateau and how recent archeological finds have thrown new light on what occurred there. We then walked the terrain that the French cavalry charges covered in their attack on the Allied lines. What was striking was how restricted of an area the French cavalry had to maneuver in.

Although my primary interest was in the British Foot Guards role in the campaign, we did look at other aspects of the battle, including: standing where Napoleon and Wellington stood at various times of the battle to determine what they could see from their position and how the terrain impacted their decisions; a close examination of the ground that D'Erlon's Corps attacked across and then decimated by British cavalry – this was not done at a distance, for we stood on the ridge the British infantry hid behind and even in the location where the Union Brigade began their epic charge. We also went to where the French Grand Battery was located and then to a place about halfway up the slope that the French had climbed to get to the top of the ridge. From there we explored the fight for Plancenoit and walked over the ground where they fought. The last evening, we went to Genappe and saw why it was such a bottleneck for the retreating French on the night of 18 June.

Gareth took the time to stop and show me the various monuments on the battlefield. Because I was interested in the Guards, he also took me their memorials and burial places -- not just the ones on the battlefield but also those in the Church of Saint Joseph in the town of Waterloo and the Wellington Museum. In addition to the most famous monuments we also stopped at ones often overlooked -- such as the Prussian monument in Plancenoit and the memorial to General Duhesme, who commanded the French Young Guard and died of his wounds in Genappe.

Much to my surprise, Gareth arranged a meeting with a collector who had purchased items that were once in Sergeant Cotton's Waterloo Museum which was set up right after the battle. He bought several items to show us including a Coldstream Guards' shako plate and the sword that belonged to Ensign Walter Forbes who by the end of the battle commanded a company in the Coldstream Guards.

Although I have studied the British Foot Guards in the Waterloo Campaign quite extensively, the three days I spent with Gareth Glover walking the battlefields have given me a greater appreciation for what they accomplished. It used to be said that a picture is worth a thousand words. A corollary of this might be, no description of a battlefield can ever substitute for walking the terrain. I cannot say enough about my Campaigns and Culture Tour of Waterloo. It was everything that they promised and more! They have set the standard for Waterloo Tours!

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