



The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo

by Brendan Simms.

New York: Basic Books, 2015. Pp. xvii, 186. ISBN 978-0-465-06482-3.

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The general public often remembers the Battle of Waterloo as a monumental but remote and inaccessible conflict. Commanders like the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Gebhard von Blücher dominate its narrative, not the average soldiers who did the fighting and dying in their thousands. In *The Longest Afternoon*, noted political scientist Brendan Simms¹ (Univ. of Cambridge) tells a masterful story of the 378 men of the 2nd Light Battalion, King's German Legion, who defended the small Belgian farm of La Haye Sainte on the fateful afternoon of 18 June 1815 before running out of ammunition and giving way in the face of superior French numbers.

The actions of the Hanoverian riflemen who occupied the center of the Allied army's three advanced positions have been overshadowed by the defense of Hougomont, the charge of the British heavy cavalry, the attacks of Ney's French cavalry on the British infantry squares, and the defeat of the French Imperial Guard. Simms contends that the protracted, stalwart resistance of the Germans was decisive. Maintaining their position until late into the fight, they drew in and inflicted disproportionate losses on Napoleon's troops.

The author begins with the formation of the King's German Legion—the Hanoverian exile force that fought loyally for George III during the Napoleonic Wars—but most of his book chronicles the contest in and around La Haye Sainte. This tight focus is a strength of the narrative, recalling Jac Weller's classic account of Waterloo through Wellington's eyes.² Simms's visceral, personal, well-sourced account of the fighting paints a vivid picture of the hard-fought battle from the viewpoints of men of all ranks and positions in the battalion as well as of their opponents. Many of his sources are new, including an unpublished account by Maj. Georg von Baring, commander of the 2nd Light Battalion, which expands on and sometimes contradicts his better known sanitized official report. The stress throughout is on the tangible experiences of the men of the battalion.

Baring and his surviving men could look back at a considerable achievement. There had been fewer than 400 of them to start with, all soaked, hungry, exhausted and in some cases hung over even before the battle started. Even though the garrison was continually reinforced throughout the afternoon, it was at all times heavily outnumbered by the attackers.... From the early afternoon onwards, they were under more or less constant attack and subjected to frightening, if ineffective, shelling. Their shoulders were "jellied" from the recoil of their weapons; their mouths "begrimed with gunpowder." The combination of exertion, smoke, the biting off of cartridges and the earlier consumption of alcohol must have made them very thirsty. The sight of the dead and dying in the confined

1. His other work includes *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire* (NY: Basic Books, 2008), *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present* (NY: Basic Books, 2013), and *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (2016; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2017).

2. *Wellington at Waterloo* (1967; rpt. Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1992).

spaces, and the plight of the wounded must have told on their nerves throughout. Nevertheless, the defenders held out for nearly five crucial hours while Napoleon's clock ticked.... Even as the farm was being overrun, the officers and men of the rearguard obeyed orders to hold the house, while the commander and the rest of the force escaped. (103–4)

Simms convincingly shows that the Hanoverian defense of La Haye Sainte was essential to preventing French from penetrating the Allied line. The defenders held the farm so long that, by the time their enemy was able to seize the place, the question of ultimate victory had been rendered moot by the Prussian arrival on the French right flank.

Although *The Longest Afternoon* is its author's first foray into military history below the level of grand strategy, his formidable expertise in Anglo-Germanic politics helps him explain just why the 2nd Light Battalion is so often overlooked. For one thing, he argues, neither the British nor the Germans subsequently liked to identify the Hanoverians as "their own." Since Queen Victoria could not inherit Hanover, it passed to her uncle in 1838, breaking its personal ties to the United Kingdom. When the kingdom was annexed by Prussia in 1866, the men who traced their unit identity to their predecessors who had fought at Waterloo became part of the German army. Kaiser Wilhelm II, an enthusiastic nationalist, ardently emphasized specifically the German rather than the British history of the King's German Legion; he "proved to be especially adept at this process of calculated amnesia, assimilation and appropriation; and in this particular case, his peculiar love-hate relationship with Britain may also have played a role" (119). The chasm opened in European politics by the First World War fundamentally soured the memory of the King's German Legion in both Britain and Germany, leaving it a kind of cultural orphan. Simms's discerning account of this process helps explain why the King's German Legion has been so overlooked in history.

Despite these considerable virtues, the book suffers from an identity crisis. While it reads like a closely argued academic paper, it is clear that the author wishes it to appeal to a broad audience as well, in the manner of a popular history. The outcome is an uncomfortable marriage of styles. Thus, Simms assumes—or not—an audience with great prior knowledge of the Waterloo campaign and the British and French armies of the Napoleonic era. For example, he mentions the Baker Rifle several times before giving an (awkwardly inserted) explanation of how it differed (crucially) from the Model 1777 Charleville or India Pattern Infantry Musket used by French and British forces. Worse than that, Simms's account exposes his lack of familiarity with, or oversimplification of, many technical aspects of various weapons and related drill manuals. In his discussion of how one loaded a Baker Rifle, for instance, he omits the critical detail that a lack of the less common type of ammunition required for the weapon was a primary factor in the Hanoverians' abandonment of their positions. Simms also understates the range and effectiveness of the weapon in comparison to the standard musket, estimating its range at only 180 meters (197 yards), while 274 meters (300 yards) was considered a standard effective range often exceeded by well-trained marksmen, with aimed kills at much longer ranges on the record.³ The accumulation of such errors exposes his flawed grasp of small-unit military history.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Longest Afternoon* is an engaging book that advances a convincing argument. While it is too academic to attract a broad audience, it has more blood flowing through it than any purely scholarly work. Brendan Simms tries hard to put his readers into the

3. See Willoughby Verner, *A British Rifle Man: The Journals and Correspondence of Major George Simmons, Rifle Brigade, during the Peninsular War and the Campaign of Waterloo* (London 1899) xvii.

boots of the men of the 2nd Light Battalion in order to capture their experience and its impact on the larger battle. In so doing, he has usefully moved to center stage one of the critical actions of the Battle of Waterloo.