



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

Brendan Simms

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In 1815, the deposed emperor Napoleon returned to France and threatened the already devastated and exhausted continent with yet another war. Near the small Belgian municipality of Waterloo, two large, hastily mobilized armies faced each other to decide the future of Europe—Napoleon's forces on one side, and the Duke of Wellington on the other.

With so much at stake, neither commander could have predicted that the battle would be decided by the Second Light Battalion, King's German Legion, which was given the deceptively simple task of defending the Haye Sainte farmhouse, a crucial crossroads on the way to Brussels. In *The Longest Afternoon*, Brendan Simms recounts how these 400-odd riflemen beat back wave after wave of French infantry until finally forced to withdraw, but only after holding up Napoleon for so long that he lost the overall contest. Their actions alone decided the most influential battle in European history. Drawing on previously untapped eye-witness reports for accurate and vivid details of the course of the battle, Simms captures the grand choreography and pervasive chaos of Waterloo: the advances and retreats, the death and the maiming, the heroism and the cowardice. He describes the gallant fighting spirit of the French infantrymen, who clambered over the bodies of their fallen comrades as they assaulted the heavily fortified farmhouse—and whose bravery was only surpassed by that of their opponents in the Second Light Battalion. Motivated by opposition to Napoleonic tyranny, dynastic loyalty to the King of England, German patriotism, regimental camaraderie, personal bonds of friendship, and professional ethos, the battalion suffered terrible casualties and fought tirelessly for many long hours, but refused to capitulate or retreat until the evening, by which time the Prussians had arrived on the battlefield in large numbers.

In reorienting Waterloo around the Haye Sainte farmhouse, Simms gives us a riveting new account of the famous battle—an account that reveals, among other things, that Napoleon came much closer than is commonly thought to winning it. A heroic tale of 400 soldiers who changed the course of history, *The Longest Afternoon* will become an instant classic of military history.

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

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Larry says

The first day of Waterloo (Quatre Bras) was a tactical surprise for the Allies. Driven back by Napoleon's attack, Allied forces fell back in near disorder. This short book is a microhistory of the second day's key position—one that saved the Allies from losing the larger battle. The key position was the large farmstead called Le Haye Saint, adjacent to a vital crossroad (the Brussels-Chartreu Road intersection) and four hundred meters in front of the main Allied line. The advance line was held by a remarkable military unit called the King's German Legion, which was part of the British line of battle but which was largely made up of Germans who fought against Napoleon as a symbol of the tyranny that had driven them from their homeland. Le Haye Saint itself was held by the four-hundred strong 2nd Light Battalion, flanked by the 1st BN, by other light infantry, and by the 95th Rifles. Like the 95th, the 1st and 2nd BNs were armed with Baker rifles (just like Sharpe's men in Cornwell's novels), and they made the French assaults on their positions very costly. Led well, the battalion at the farm "fought to the last bullet but not to the last man" (p. 126), and retired in order, having suffered thirty-some killed and nearly a hundred wounded. Simms' subtitle—"the 400 Men Who Saved the Battle of Waterloo"—seems well chosen, and he has made the most of the resources available.

Myke Cole says

This is a fascinating and impeccably researched account of the valiant action at La Haye Sainte. The author is incredibly even-handed, and steers clear of the temptation to lionize the men who held on despite such incredible odds. He is likewise careful not to lionize the conflict overall, and shows real compassion and intellectual rigor in a field that so often lacks both.

Simms has a fiction-author's gift for finding story beats and providing a dramatic arc that makes the reading of a potentially dry monograph an absolute pleasure. He understands the focus in fiction, as in non-fiction, must be character, and he does his level best with the highly limited source material available for a conflict fought two centuries ago. This is the only reason I did not rate this work 5-stars, as I did Donovan's *A Terrible Glory*. This is through no fault of the author. As Simms is dealing with the source material available in 1815, and Donovan, 1876.

Definitely worth your time. A slim volume you will tear through in a couple of days, which is a high compliment to Simms' narrative force.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

A short, but terrific, historical account of the ferocious fighting at the farmhouse of La Haye Saint on the Waterloo battlefield on June 18, 1815. Four or five-hundred men of the British Army's King's German Legion managed to hold off and repel several significant attacks by elements of Napoleon's French Army. I had always been aware that this fighting at the farmhouse had been important to the outcome of the battle, and this little book really explained why from a tactical perspective.

Trish says

I felt I ought to read something about Waterloo in the week leading up to the 200th Anniversary of the battle, so I've put a couple of books into the reading rotation. The Longest Afternoon is a history of the KGL defence of La Haye Sainte, one of the key actions of the Battle. Mind you, the account of the battle does read like an adventure story!

Martin says

Quick and Fun read about Waterloo. Reads a little like a novel... Really enjoyed this...

Doug says

This is a nicely done account of the heroic defense by the Second Light Battalion of the King's German Legion of a critical farmstead and road junction during the final day of the Battle of Waterloo. The book's cover claims that it is the story of, "The 400 men who decided the Battle of Waterloo." Such claims are almost never true and are not in this case. Sounds to me like an overzealous editor trying to sell books since the author clearly states that as important as this action was, it was by no means the sole deciding factor in the battle. What Simms does here is provide a stirring account of the determination and valor of a group of men who withstood horrific artillery barrages and numerous attacks by French infantry and cavalry who outnumbered them not less than ten to one that went on for over six hours. It is interesting that the Kings German Legion is largely ignored in accounts of the battle even though they were largely responsible for maintaining Wellington's center until the arrival of the Prussians. As is so often the case, those who get the credit are decided by the politicians and generals, and the guys who actually did the fighting and dying are forgotten.

Andrei says

I found this book to be very entertaining. It is made up of accounts from soldiers which fought at La Haye Sainte, and therefore provides a very interesting approach to the recounting of events from that faithful afternoon. There are many names mentioned, along with many Regiments/Battalions/Divisions and even Corps. This can throw the reader off track, but the storytelling technique employed by Simms assures a very eventful read.

Kelby says

listened as an audio book. great small book that was very informative.

Colin Prendergast says

Fabulous monograph on the neglected contribution of the King's German Legion. I'm proud that my 5 times great grandfather, Otto Ricks was one of the survivors from La Haye Sainte!

Fraser Kinnear says

Surprising that one can devote a whole book to just a single location within an entire battle. Even more interesting how holding a farmhouse for a few hours until Prussian reinforcements arrived was arguably the critical moment in Wellington's defeat of Napoleon, and therefore Napoleon's second failure at conquering Europe.

Jake Hahn says

As boring as it is short.

Jur says

“In der Beschränkung zeigt sich den Meister.”

Brendan Simms has written a beautiful short book on the defence of the La Haye Sainte farm during the Battle of Waterloo. Its garrison throughout the day consisted mostly of Germans and Simms adds new life to their story by introducing a lot of new first hand accounts and academic literature.

The book focuses on the events during the battle, but also offers a good introduction to the King's German Legion and its role in the long struggle against Napoleon, and a very interesting post-script on the legacy of Waterloo in Hannoverian military history.

My only and minor quibble is that it overemphasises the importance of the farm to the outcome of the battle, but I guess that to justify the writing of the book.

In the torrent of English language books published leading up to the 200th anniversary it stands out for fresh perspective and research. Probably the final account of the struggle for La Haye Sainte from the allied perspective for the foreseeable future.

Take away: given that all three farms across the allied front (La Haye Sainte, Hougomont and Papelotte) fell or almost fell due to a lack of ammunition, you wonder why arrangements for supply hadn't been made. Didn't the British army encounter this problem in their battles in the Peninsula?

David Lubin says

What a great find this book is. Waterloo was such an important event in the history of the European continent and yet so many facts are lost in the praise of Wellington and the British. But it was not the British that won this battle, it was the Prussians. At great cost. Simms has done incredibly good research of the individuals who were involved and the courage that they showed. I learned a great deal from this book and will be happy to recommend it for those interested in this topic.

James says

Wellington famously described Waterloo as "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life", and Brendan Simms illustrates this nicely with this concise account of the struggle for control of the Le Haye Sainte farmhouse which anchored the center of the British line.

400 men held the position for the longest time and the theory goes had they yielded earlier, the French would have time to pour through the center, smash through Wellington's army long before Blucher could have come to the rescue. It's always been an excellent way to spend an idle hour or day in thought on whether any individual or small group can truly influence history or if we are all hostage to broad streams of economic and climate change. It is worth noting that there were multiple armies advancing into France let alone the Prussian reinforcements, simply put I find it hard to see how Napoleon would not have just run out of men sooner rather than later.

The fighting was brutal - a walk into repeated salvos, then a bloodsoaked brawl periodically raked by grape shot. I found the stories around the fighting more interesting than the fighting itself. For a start it was surprising to find out how many of Wellington's army were German, a fact that was not highlighted in my schools version of Waterloo. In the aftermath the author follows the lives of those who survived and the extent to which they suffered. In short there was a lot to interest the more general reader.

Geoff Habiger says

Probably like many Americans my understanding of the importance of the Battle of Waterloo probably came from a passing tidbit about the Duke of Wellington, the 1970 movie starring Rod Steiger and Christopher Plummer, and of course the ABBA song. We all know that Napoleon's fate, and attempt to rise again to power in Europe was determined by the battle. But unless you have a deep interest in the battle, or the Napoleonic era, most people's understanding of the battle is limited to what I mentioned above. In *The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo* by Brendan Simms we are given a detailed look at the battle from the perspective of a single group of soldiers, the men of the Kings German Legion (KGL), who held the critical part of the battlefield in the very center of Wellington's line. The 400 men of this regiment managed to check the mighty French army for most of the day, blunting Napoleon's attack and allowing the Prussians to enter the battle and "save the day" for Wellington.

Simms does an excellent job of presenting not only the importance of the battle, but detailing the lives of the ordinary German soldiers who fought on the side of England to defeat Napoleon. We get a very personal and intimate understanding of the ordinary soldiers and officers who fought in the KGL, pulled from many memoirs and recollections recorded well after the battle. Simms explains why these Germans chose to fight

for England, and how their experience in England, and fighting in the British army against France, helped to shape a Anglophile culture in the area around Hanover (where most of the KGL was from) for years after Napoleon was defeated. The Longest Afternoon shows us the battle told from the individual soldier's perspective, giving us a better understanding of how honor and duty can overcome the horrors of battle. I was amazed at the personal heroism described in the book, and how the battle ebbed and flowed around the stone farmhouse where the KGL made its defense. Simms also discusses the importance of the arrival of the Prussians, and takes a hard look at the many histories and analysis written in the past 200 years about the battle, showing how mistakes on both sides affected the battle and how the men of the Kings German Legion held out under overwhelming odds, and under conditions that would cause ordinary people to flee in panic.

I recommend The Longest Afternoon for anybody with an interest in military history, European history, or wanting a detailed examination of one of the most critical battles in history. Simms makes the actions of the soldiers relatable for the reader, giving you a personal perspective for the battle.

I listened to the audio edition of the book read by Michael Page. Page does a great job of conveying information in a clear and understandable manner. His style made listening to Simms narrative quite enjoyable.
