Welcome to Wellington at Waterloo, a podcast from Royal Collection Trust in association with the Humanities Research Institute of the University of Buckingham. Saul David, Professor of Military History at Buckingham, gives a lecture to an audience in the historic nave of St George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle on the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo in 1815. Professor David examines the battle and evaluates the Duke of Wellington’s crucial role in the allied victory over Napoleon Bonaparte. For other talks, lectures and study days within our events programme, visit the What’s On guide of Royal Collection Trust website.

Good evening and welcome to such a fabulous location for a talk. I think it’s probably the finest that I’ve spoken in. Wellington at Waterloo: I’ve spoken actually to some of you in the audience - I know I can see some of my students here this evening - about Wellington’s whole career and I’ve hinted at some of my thoughts about his contribution to the allied victory at Waterloo, but I have not had the chance until now to speak in such depth about the battle itself. So you’ll have to bear with me, it’s a long and tortuous trail but it deserves the telling. And I think if we think of one thing about this famous battle that took place close to Brussels on 18th June 1815, it finally settled that age old question of the Napoleonic Wars, who was the finest General. The two greatest men of the age finally come face to face for the first time in their careers and Wellington of course comes out on top and it is assumed by many people that that somehow settled the argument in his favour, but if I’m going to say anything contentious tonight it is that I feel, as I will explain as we go through the story, that in many ways Waterloo, both the campaign and the battle itself, was one of Wellington’s least convincing victories.

So, just rewind a little bit to 1814 to set the scene. We’ve got, at the time of the first downfall of Napoleon in April 1814, Wellington himself, at the end of a long and hard and very brilliant campaign in the Peninsular, has crossed over into France with his veterans who’ve pretty much won every battle they’ve… they certainly haven’t lost any battles. He has really made a huge psychological difference to the allies, I think, because if you think about
with the allies that the armies of Napoleonic France, which had pretty much carried all before them up to that point, were beatable. So he’s now got a very fine army, it’s on the verge of taking Toulouse and the word comes that Napoleon has abdicated and everyone assumes the game’s over. Now, something very telling happens at this point – I just want to move the slides on – so here’s Wellington in 1814. Now of course, he’s been given every honour you could be given for these victories, including finally the Dukedom of Wellington. He’s also a Field Marshal, the first Field Marshal ever in the British army, a rather gaudy baton designed by the Prince Regent himself in true Prinny style. They’ve got pretty much nothing left to give him. It’s interesting that after Waterloo they have to scrape around for honours to hand over to him. But he’s won pretty much everything there is to win and he’s asked a very crucial question, I feel, which is does he ever regret never having been opposed in battle by Napoleon so that he could know, one way or another, who was the greatest. And his answer is very telling, and this is the answer: ‘No, and I’m very glad I never was. I would at any time rather have heard that a reinforcement of 40,000 men had joined the French army’ – effectively two corps – ‘than that he had arrived to take command’. Now, you could say this is a throwaway comment that he didn’t seriously mean, but I suspect he might have meant it, actually, and I think that his behaviour prior to the battle of Waterloo might give the indication that he was more than a little worried about the prospect of taking on this very fine General. I mean you have to remember the victories that Napoleon’s won and certainly if you’d asked the man in the street, who wasn’t a Briton, in Europe in 1814 as to who they thought was the finer General, they probably would have plumped for Napoleon.

So just leave it in the back of your mind that he was slightly concerned, I think, at the possibility of taking him on. Of course he had no idea what was about to happen, and what was about to happen of course, is that Napoleon is going to leave the Isle of Elba where he’s exiled, he’s going to very quickly return to power. So he does leave in March 1815, at which point Wellington of course, having been briefly Ambassador in Paris, is now British plenipotentiary at the Congress of Vienna. And when Wellington hears that Napoleon’s escaped he’s not terribly worried actually. He thinks one of two things is going to happen; either – and this of course is before Napoleon’s re-established himself in Paris - the King of France’s armies are going to deal with him, or, if that doesn’t happen, the united powers of Europe – very conveniently, of course, all the monarchs are at Vienna – will solve the problem themselves. ‘I don’t entertain’ he says, ‘the smallest doubt that if unfortunately it should be possible for Bonaparte to hold it all against the King of France, he must fall under the cordially united efforts of the sovereigns of Europe’. We know of course that Louis
XVIII’s armies did not stay loyal and that by 20th March 1815, Louis himself had fled to Brussels and that he, that is Napoleon, very quickly and in extraordinary sense when you think about it, reassumed the reins of power and very quickly the armies rallied to him. Of course the key was how were the armies going to react, and the armies on the whole preferred to serve under Napoleon.

It’s at this point of course that Wellington’s next suspicion comes true, which is that the powers unite against Napoleon and they set in train a series of plans that will eventually lead to all the major powers – that is Prussia, Austria, Russia and Britain – providing troops who will, in their numbers of course, overwhelm the army that Napoleon can put in the field. The only chance Napoleon’s got is if he deals with them one by one, it’s his only chance, and the allies realise this, they’re not foolish, they realise this and when those two armies that are closest to France that assemble the quickest, and those are the armies of course that are commanded by Wellington himself, which was a polyglot force – I’m sure you all know the story – I mean it was a real mixed bag, he had about 115,000 men under his command in The Netherlands and they were, only about a third of them were British, about another third were Dutch and Belgians. And the interesting thing about the Dutch and Belgians is that the Belgians in particular had recently fought for the French and Wellington was not terribly convinced that they were going to be that reliable, and he also had a number of Germans serving under him, both Brunswickers and Hanoverians. So he had a mixed bag, Blücher also had some slightly less reliable troops and the equivalent I suppose of territorials in his army, but those two armies together were as big as the single field army that Napoleon himself could put into the field. So it was quite clear to the allies that all they needed to do was act on the defensive, long enough for the other armies, that is the Austrians and the Russians, to come into the fray and they couldn’t lose. Napoleon, on the other hand, his strategy was clear, he had to take on and defeat these two initial armies in The Netherlands as quickly as possible if he was to have any chance at all. So you’ve got two opposing strategies here, and one thing added into the mixture, I think, and there may be a certain amount of argument from Wellington in retrospect, was that he wasn’t entirely convinced with the quality of his troops. Now I’ve already talked about the Dutch-Belgians and as we will see they actually performed very well, the Dutch-Belgians, much underrated at the time and much under-recognised by history actually, and only recently has that begun to change. But he was also worried even about the quality of his British troops and there are some interesting quotes, actually, which I’ll come on to here. ‘I’ve got an infamous army’ he complained, and this was in May 1815, so we’re only a month before Waterloo. ‘Very weak and ill equipped and a very inexperienced staff’. And then he goes on to say, ‘I’m overloaded with people I’ve never seen
before and it appears to be purposely intended by the Horse Guards’ – they’re of course, that’s the army high command in the UK – to keep those out of my way whom I wish to have’. Now he’s really talking about his choice of staff officers, which is pretty crucial to someone like Wellington because he keeps absolute control over all aspects of his army and his staff are the means by which he controls that army. This is not entirely fair; this quote, the truth of the matter is that by the start of the actual campaign proper, he did have a lot of the key people he wanted, people he knew and could trust in key appointments. And there’s also a question mark actually more recently by scholars as to whether his army was really as poor as he suggested it was. It is true that it wasn’t as good as the old Peninsular army, but it actually had a number of very fine troops. And here’s a quote by Ian Fletcher, the very highly regarded Waterloo historian: ‘It was a pale shadow of the old Peninsular army’, he acknowledges, ‘but there were nevertheless some very fine regiments present and the British contingent was certainly not the inexperienced raw army that some historians would have us believe’. So this notwithstanding, and maybe it added a little bit to Wellington’s caution and we should take that into account, but I’ve already set the scene for you as far as the strategy is concerned. The allies are going to act on the defensive, Napoleon’s only hope is if he takes the initiative. So there’s just one further element that is crucial really in how the actual Waterloo campaign plays out, and that is a decision that’s taken very early on in the campaign and that’s this famous meeting between Blücher, the Prussian commander, and Wellington on 3rd May. This meeting is crucial because it’s at that meeting that they decide on what they’re going to do next, and what they’re going to do next is not advance, so they’re going to act on the defensive, but more importantly than that, if one of them is attacked, the other one must come to his aid as quickly as possible. And more than that, they actually agree on a location where they’re going to concentrate their armies.

So I’m just going to move you one to, not a brilliant map this, but you’ll get some kind of sense of what I’m talking about. Prior to the campaign starting, you’ve got these two huge armies in the field. Now they can’t all be ready for battle because they don’t know when the fighting’s going to start, it’s only going to start if and when Napoleon advances, and actually they don’t think he is going to advance, so they’re not terribly worried, but they’re making plans and at this famous meeting on 3rd May, if he advances against one or other of us, the other army will come quickly to their aid. And they’ve also agreed where they’re actually going to join up. You can see the division of the armies here, here are the Prussians on this side and this is Wellington’s polyglot army on that side, and there’s the junction, the famous crossroads of Quatre Bras, which we’ll come on to the story in a moment, but in effect,
they’re going to concentrate their armies as close as possible to the join of the army at Quatre Bras. So bear that in mind when we move on to the next stage of the story.

Napoleon’s only hope, as I’ve already pointed out, is if he can take the initiative. Not only has he got to take the initiative, he’s got to have the opportunity for taking on one or other of those armies without the other one interfering. This is not going to be easy given the strategy that’s just been agreed between the allied commanders. But, he’s going to give it a go anyway. And the reason it almost succeeds, I would suggest contentiously, is because of certain crucial errors that are made by Wellington at the early stage of the campaign. Now bear in mind that quote I gave you earlier about him being cautious about taking on Napoleon. He had from very early on in this campaign, we know from letters and conversations that he had, an overriding fear that Napoleon was not going to attack head on, as he actually does, he’s going to try and outflanking manoeuvre which he’s done many times in campaigns prior to this, and that he’s going to sever the lines of communication behind the British army, the allied army, back to the Channel ports, and this is not going to give Wellington if things go badly wrong a chance to escape. He’s fixated with the possibility that this will happen and he’s particularly worried about the area of advance. He really thinks it’s going to be in this direction with the possible threat of Napoleon advancing up there. What Napoleon actually does we will discover in a minute, is he comes right up the middle of the two armies to try and force them apart, and succeeds up to a certain point. Now, we still don’t have a potential disaster on our hands as long as Wellington reacts quickly when word comes that the Prussian advance has begun, the actual attack has begun. So what actually happens? Well, I think the key day in the campaign is not 18th June, the famous Battle of Waterloo, it’s actually 15th June. This is the day on which the campaign is almost lost, and I’ll explain why.

What happens in the morning of that day, shortly after dawn, is that the French, Napoleon begins his surprise attack and he begins his attack against the Prussians in the vicinity of Charleroi, so he crosses over the frontier here and he advances towards Charleroi, driving in the Prussian outpost. Now the first thing the Prussians do is quickly send word back to Wellington that they fear a major attack is underway and can they put in place the original plan, but Wellington is not convinced this is the attack. Now, we know with hindsight it was the major attack, he did not know at the time. But as the day went on, more and more indications were coming in and, I’ve forgotten to mention, the fact that there was intelligence prior to 15th June that was indicating that if the attack came anywhere it would come in this direction and not further to the West which is where Wellington feared it would. Now, the
reason he doesn’t immediately put in place the plan that he’s agreed with Blücher, that is to concentrate around Quatre Bras, is because he doesn’t think this is a major attack. He’s convinced himself it won’t be, and therefore if he moves too soon here, the French are going to get round him here. And so he delays and he delays and he delays, until about six o’clock in the evening, he’s finally convinced that probably the main French army is coming up the Charleroi road and he at last issues preparatory orders. Now this is important, preparatory orders, because I’ve seen in many history books that he issues orders for his army to move at six o’clock, he did not, he issued preparatory orders and the actual orders for the army to concentrate and move towards this concentration point, which I’ve already pointed out, were not issued until ten o’clock that evening, by which time it is too late for them to move during daylight and they cannot move until the following morning. Why does all of this matter? Because if the army can’t properly get on the move, and bear in mind, here’s the reserve here and here are the other two corps here, if he can’t move until the morning of the 16th, if there is a major action that day, which there is – and we’ll come on to that in a moment – it’s very unlikely that the allied army is going to be able to intervene in time. And that is exactly what happens. And that is also why we have the famous quote by Wellington, which you’ve all heard before. There is some question as to whether or not this quote is actually valid, and I would go along with that, I mean you could say that about an awful lot of these famous sayings. ‘Napoleon has humbugged me, by God.’ I mean even if he didn’t say it, he certainly was thinking it, that’s the important point here. But it’s wonderful isn’t it, he’s humbugged me. He’s gained 24 hours on me, and that is pretty much exactly what Napoleon had done. He had gained a crucial 24 hours in which he could try and put his plans, the only plans that could give him the hope of staying on the throne, and that is to defeat these armies piecemeal, one after the other, and he is going to be given the opportunity to take on the Prussians on the 16th pretty much without Wellington’s interference.

Now, we also know what happens on the 16th. Well, I certainly know and I’m going to tell you what happens on the 16th. We know it’s not decisive, but it almost was decisive and it could have been decisive. I’m going to move on to a map of – this’ll give you a good sense of what’s going on, on the crucial day, which is 16th June. So on that morning the troops finally begin to move down. Now actually, it’s interesting, the orders for them are not to concentrate on Quatre Bras, they’re to concentrate on Nivelles, because that was the concentration point for the British and the Prussians are going to concentrate over here at Sambre, from the junction between them, as I’ve already said, is the crossroads at Quatre Bras. Now, if – and this is an important point – if the brigade, the allied brigade, it was actually a Netherlands brigade, holding the position of Quatre Bras had actually followed the
orders it was given, which was to move to Nivelles, they would have left those crossroads uncovered and it would frankly have been a disaster, the campaign would have turned out very differently. Luckily, the local commander disobeyed orders. Everyone now recognises this, this crucial contribution. If it was just that alone it would have been a big enough contribution, but that contribution played by that single brigade, then reinforced by another one, gave Wellington enough time to get down from Brussels with at least a portion of his army – his whole army never concentrates at Quatre Bras, it’s important to remember that - on the 16th, but enough of them get down in time to reinforce the brigade which has stayed there and has held on while a separate wing of the French army has pinned it in position.

What Napoleon’s actually done this day, on the day of the 16th, is he’s advanced on two axes. His planning is to feel his way forward and whichever location seems to be the most promising in terms of the size of the army that’s there, he’s going to go for it, and it actually turns out to be the Prussians, of course, because as you know, the Prussians have concentrated much more quickly than the British. So the main fighting’s going to go on at Ligny. Meanwhile, a wing of his army, Napoleon’s army, is up at Quatre Bras. Napoleon thought we’ll take Quatre Bras no problem, they don’t take it because of the Netherlands brigade, the fighting of course is a very close run thing that day, as I’ve already pointed out, Wellington never gets his whole army into play, he doesn’t need to because it’s not the main French effort. So while the British are holding on, and Wellington I won’t deny does very well in the actual defiance of Quatre Bras because he is personally on the field that day, the real action’s going on here. This is the battle that could have decided the campaign and it very nearly does decide the campaign. What actually happens in this battle at Ligny, which is between Napoleon with the bulk of his army and the Prussians, is that slowly but surely – it’s a real slogging match, this battle – but slowly but surely the French are getting the upper hand, partly due to the incompetence of the Prussians who don’t get all their forces into play.

So it wasn’t just, you know, I’m not just bashing Wellington, the allies made a lot of errors in this campaign. In fact everyone makes errors in this campaign, it’s one of the great ‘what might have been’ campaigns. If you want to do a counter factual on any campaign then Waterloo is the one to do because so many hinge moments. And this is the great hinge moment because towards the evening of the 16th, and I can’t dwell too long on Ligny, because of course I’ve got to get to Waterloo itself, but towards the evening the French are getting the upper hand, they are driving back the Prussians, now is the time for the killing blow, now is the time for a flank attack from the force that is over at Quatre Bras, which is of two corps, so about 40,000 men, possibly stronger, Napoleon orders Ney to detach one of his corps so that they can take the Prussians in the flank, from slightly to the rear and to the flank. It
would have destroyed the Prussian Army. What actually happens is that Ney countermands this crucial order by Napoleon and that corps is never actually sent into action. Ney’s had a lot of stick for this ever since. It’s interesting that some of the recent books on the battle put the blame not entirely on Ney, they say that Soult, I think one of the great errors made by Napoleon, as we know in retrospect, is that Soult, his Chief of Staff who had of course been a Marshal, is a Marshal in his own right, but had been an Army Commander in his own right and had got a number of bloody noses against Wellington in the Peninsular, had sent and sends all the way through the campaign very unclear orders to the various commanders and those orders, if you look at the detail of them, that were sent to move this corps were not entirely clear. It wasn’t entirely certain what Napoleon was trying to do. So I’m exculpating Ney a little bit, but this was a major, major opportunity and the overall point that I must stress is that Napoleon only got this opportunity because the allied armies did not concentrate quickly enough, and the reason they didn’t concentrate quickly enough is because Wellington was worried about this phantom attack which never took place.

So by the end of 16th June the two armies had fought separate actions, the two allied armies that is, Wellington knows that he’s held on at Quatre Bras and he’s pretty confident that the next day, by which time the whole of his army will have been able to concentrate, he in conjunction with the Prussians are going to be able to finish off the French. What he does not realise is that the Prussians have got a seriously bloody nose at Ligny and they have been forced to retire. They’d taken a hell of a lot of casualties, including something like 9,000 soldiers who just leave the Prussian colours. So this is a major, major blow. And as you can see from the map, they retreat in a northerly direction, which was just as well, because if they’d headed towards Liège and away from Wellington, the campaign would have turned out very differently. But Blücher, and even his Chief of Staff, Gneisenau, who doesn’t come very well out of the story in the sense that he’s very antagonistic towards Wellington and said some very nasty things about the British, but even Gneisenau realises that actually the most important thing is that despite these errors and despite the fact that the British haven’t done entirely what they’ve promised they’ll do, they stick together, that’s their only hope. So they march north, so that they can at least move on an axis that keeps in contact with the British Army, which of course is in this sort of area but is still moving in. It’s chiefly at Quatre Bras and Nivelles. Wellington doesn’t know any of this and on the morning of the 17th he receives the pretty chilling news that the Prussians have not only been beaten, they’ve been forced to retire an awful long way back in the direction of Wavre. And it’s at this point that he makes the fatal, some would say very fortuitous decision, to retire himself to a location we’re all going to know an awful lot about very soon, and that is the ridge at Mont-Saint-Jean. Now,
Waterloo of course is here and the battle is called the Battle of Waterloo, but the French almost certainly would have called it the Battle of Mont-Saint-Jean if they’d won it. And this is all we need to know about it and I’ll show you a much better map of the dispositions in a moment. So why does he go back to Mont-Saint-Jean? Well, two reasons. The first reason is of course it’s keeping in contact with the Prussians, he knows where they’ve gone, his plan is to retire so that the armies can still be linked and therefore help each other out if necessary. He also knows that if he stays in his current position, the French, that is Napoleon, can turn all his force on him and he will almost certainly be defeated, or he fears he will be defeated, his army not being properly concentrated. And he’s very wise to move back, frankly. So he moves back on the 17th, but he also wants to know, is there a good chance, because there’s this great debate as to whether or not Wellington would have stayed at this new location up here if he wasn’t convinced that the Prussians were going to come and assist him. So why was he convinced? Well, relatively early on, on the 17th during the course of the morning he gets information from Gneisenau, the Chief of Staff of the Prussian Army along the lines of – and this wasn’t terribly encouraging news – we’ve lost our ammunition train, our reserve ammunition, and we think we only have one whole corps, that’s about 20,000 men, who can come to your assistance. And Wellington’s response is interesting, he says, ‘He would’ he responds to this message, ‘accept a battle in the position of Mont-Saint-Jean if the Field Marshal’, that is Blücher, were inclined to come to his assistance even with one corps only. So he’s staking all on the possibility that he can hold this new position of Mont-Saint-Jean if the Prussians come with just one corps, 20,000 men. That’s going to tip the balance in his view.

So why Mont-Saint-Jean, why does he choose the specific location? It’s interesting, and this is entirely in Wellington’s favour, that a lot of planning has already gone on during the spring after they know that Napoleon’s on the loose and there’s potentially a campaign in the offing, to map the various routes leading to Brussels, obviously a key strategic location, that can be defended. He sends out his engineers to actually plot the most ideal locations and on the road he’s now on, the best position, they’ve pre-plotted, is at Mont-Saint-Jean. It’s not a coincidence they go there, he already knows it is a very good defensive position. And more importantly than that, they’ve actually created a map, a very detailed map, of which I saw a copy of the original during some filming recently over in Belgium, which was held by the engineers in Brussels, they needed in a hurry. So the morning of the… on the afternoon of the 16th actually, when he’s not entirely sure what’s going to happen next, he asks for this map and the map arrives during the battle, during the Battle of Quatre Bras, and the map is almost lost because the staff officer carrying it is unhorsed, almost killed by French cavalry, and his
horse disappears and he thinks, oh my God, I had one job to get that map to Wellington’s staff and now I’ve lost the horse, and it’s obviously in the holster on the horse. Luckily the horse is grazing in a nearby vegetable garden so he recovers the map. Now, do not underestimate the importance of this map because they already know from the map the best positions to put the troops, so as they’re retiring on the 17th, in contact with the French by the way, the French cavalry and horse artillery are in contact with them all the way, there’s some skirmishes going on, he knows exactly where they’re going to put the troops because they’ve already looked at the location.

So let’s have a look at the actual battlefield itself. Now, if you go to Waterloo, you might be surprised that the so-called ridge is not a, you know, it’s not Talavera frankly, if any of you have been to Portugal. This is not a sheer cliff face, it’s a swelling in the ground and if you stand in the middle of the battlefield at Waterloo, Mont-Saint-Jean, only then when you’re right in the centre can you get a sense that the ground rises up on both sides, but it’s not terribly spectacular, this rise, and you must bear that in mind when you think about the potential strength of the defensive position. Of course if you’re acting on the defense and you’ve got any kind of slope, it is an advantage, but it wasn’t a huge advantage. So what Wellington does at Waterloo as far as his dispositions are concerned I think is quite curious, and I’ll tell you why. These are the dispositions of the troops on the morning of the battle on the morning of the 18th. Two and a half miles from the number of troops Wellington had, which is about 74,000, and we’ll come on to why his army wasn’t bigger in a second, the French have about the same. There’s much dispute about the numbers, of the size of the two armies, but most historians now agree that they were roughly similar. So he’s got 75, 74,000 men to cram into a relatively small area. This is only two and a half miles across, this battlefield. That is an awful lot of men for a relatively small area. He had the opportunity to create a very strong defensive position, that is depth right across the front, so why does he not do that? What he actually does is completely load up the right side of his position and the left is very thin. You could get a sense of it from this map here. Here’s the road going through the centre of the battlefield, this is the key point of the battlefield, this is actually the bit that Napoleon tries to drive through and almost succeeds. The weakest bit of his line was here, his left, Wellington’s left. The second weakest was his centre, and the strongest by far was his right wing. Why did he make the right wing so strong? Well, there are a couple of obvious points. He knew the Prussians were over here, he’d been told the day before that they were going to come to his assistance, during the night of the 17th he’d received another message, very encouraging message from Blücher, saying at daylight we will march to your assistance, one corps immediately, to be followed by more. So, 20,000 men going to be
heading your way at dawn. So Wellington’s got it in the back of his mind at some stage during the next day the Prussians are going to turn up and they’re going to come from this direction, is what he thinks. So I can think that’s the only reason why he leaves this side thin because the Prussians are going to come and support it. The middle is more curious, because this middle left position is the position he almost loses the battle in and he should have made it stronger. We’ll come to the crucial beats of the battle in a moment. But he seems still fixated on the possibility of a left hook from Napoleon. He cannot believe that the tactics Napoleon’s going to use on this battle are going to be as simplistic as just smashing up the middle, which is pretty much what happens. And you may have some sympathy with him and think, you know, he had good reason to suspect something else was going to go on, but the consequences of this conviction were two. He unbalanced his defensive position at Waterloo with almost disastrous consequences, one. And two, he detached a sizeable chunk of his army, 17,000 men, some historians say even more, to hold a position which isn’t even on the map, it’s over here somewhere, Hal and Tubize, again thinking there’s going to be an outflanking manoeuvre. Well, we know there wasn’t, so you could say well, you know with hindsight there wasn’t, that doesn’t mean there couldn’t have been. But at no stage even during the battle does he think of calling in these men, it’s really curious and of course those 17,000 men would have made all the difference, and we’ll come to the hinge moments of the battle in a moment as they occur one by one.

If the French had any advantage at Waterloo, given that they were going to be attacking uphill against an army that was of roughly similar size, it was in two areas: one, cavalry, they had more cavalry. And given that the army are roughly similar, it means they had less infantry, okay, so that is balanced out to a certain extent and you could argue that the crucial arm in any slogging match is the infantry, so if anything that gives the allies a slight advantage. But where Napoleon had an undoubted advantage was in the number of artillery pieces, the guns he had, and of course as an artillerist, Napoleon had learnt his trade as an artilleryman, this is a key element of his battle tactics. You mass a lot of your guns together and you use this so-called grand battery to literally blast a hole through the centre of the opponent’s position, and that’s of course what he tries to do with the grand battery. So he has a slight advantage in terms of artillery, but as I’ve already hinted, his actual battle tactics are not terribly imaginative. Here’s the array of his forces here, he can do a number of things, what he actually does as the battle plays out is attack from left to right, and we’ll follow the various beats of the battle as we go along.
He had hoped, of course, to begin the battle as early as possible. Very sensible. The earlier he begins it the more time he gets to defeat Wellington before and if the Prussians intervene. It’s interesting, two things quickly to say about Napoleon prior to the battle, first of all he doesn’t think the allies are actually going to stand and fight, he’s pretty convinced he’s going to be in Brussels by the following day, so he’s pretty surprised when he sees the full battle array on the morning of the 18th. But he’s also not convinced that the Prussians are ever going to have the opportunity to intervene, partly because he’s sent a chunk of his own army in pursuit with the specific purpose of preventing the Prussians from actually getting to the battlefield. They make a hell of a pig’s ear of it of course, as we know, and one of the reasons for that is again Soult’s orders are not – or Soult [pronounces ‘Sute’], however you want to pronounce it, I’m terrible with my French pronunciation – but Soult’s orders are not terribly clear and again, part of the blame, I think, must go down to him as well as Grouchy, the independent commander who was off in this direction.

So what actually happens with the battle itself? Well, he wants to attack as quickly as possible. Now we know, don’t we, from the film ‘Waterloo’ and any other element of popular culture about the battle, that the battle is delayed because of the wetness of the ground. It has poured with rain the day before. Very bad news for Napoleon. I’ve already talked about his artillery – to get his guns into position is going to take time over heavy ground, and more importantly than that, guns do not operate well until the ground has dried out. They’ll get stuck in a position. You need them to be mobile, you need to be able to roll them back in after the first recoil, you do not want to fire them in wet ground. But there’s another problem that Napoleon’s got and that is, that a lot of historians often miss, his army is quite dispersed on the morning of the battle; it isn’t sitting in this position here, this is where it gets to when the fighting actually begins, it’s coming up all the way through the morning. So the first opportunity he actually gets to attack, and it’s not because of idleness or sitting around with a cup of tea, à la Suvla Bay, it’s not because of that, it’s because he simply doesn’t have his troops in position and his guns on dry enough ground to be able to manoeuvre into their grand battery. Here’s the grand battery, by the way, just here, so you can see it’s going to try and blast a hole straight through the middle. It can’t have been – this is another interesting thing – Wellington would have seen the sitting of the grand battery and he would have known that most of the damage was going to be done here, and still he makes little attempt to bolster the centre and left of his line.

So what happens next, well we’ll move through the… Well, traditionally four crucial moments in this battle, four crucial elements to the story. First element. The battle begins
roughly twelve o’clock. Nobody knows for sure, by the way, to be certain of timings during this battle or pretty much any other battle, but this battle in particular. The sources disagree over a period of something like three hours. The start of the battle can’t even be agreed, anything from ten, ten thirty, to one o’clock. But again, we have to take a figure, we have to agree on a figure and it’s roughly twelve o’clock that the battle starts. Actually the cannonade has begun before this, but the first attack begins roughly at twelve o’clock, and it begins towards this point here. One of the things I haven’t mentioned is that there are two keystones to Wellington’s defensive system at Waterloo, two breakwaters that he must hold if his whole line is going to hold. One is at Hougoumont here and the other is at La Haye Sainte here. This one was given an adequate garrison with a certain amount of preparation prior to the battle. This one was not. There’s a very good book, actually, out on the KGL by a brilliant Cambridge historian which, his simple argument is that the KGL at La Haye Saint, with very inadequate resources and not even a proper amount of reserve ammunition, are the ones that win the Battle of Waterloo. And we can agree on that or disagree on that.

What is not in doubt is that these 400 men of the 2nd King’s German Legion hold out for an awful long time in very unpromising circumstances. You can see it’s slightly isolated from the front line here, as is Hougoumont, but Hougoumont has very strong forces behind it. It also has Wellington keeping an eye on it all the way through the battle. Now, if you got to Hougoumont today, because it’s still absolutely intact and you can go in there, there’s building a museum there I think, which will open in time for the 200th anniversary, it’s a kind of wonderful location to go and visit, you would get the sense that the battle was won at Hougoumont. It was not. If it was won at anywhere, it’s won at La Haye Sainte. But nevertheless, there were some extraordinary things done at Hougoumont. The reason I don’t want to concentrate on Hougoumont is because the fighting there is a sideshow, it was never intended to be taken by Napoleon, he had no intention of taking it. His plan is to go here. What he wants to do is pin this part of the line, get his troops in location, not even in the house, they’ve just got to take the woods around it and most of the attacks will then be protected on the flank as they go in in this direction. What actually happens is that the corps commander, Reille, without orders, having been rebuffed from his initial assault on Hougoumont, which he’s not intending to make anyway, keeps attacking. So this becomes a battle within a battle, which almost happens without thought, it just happens because of the spontaneity of the local commanders, and it cost the French an awful lot of men but it does not play a key role in the outcome of this battle.

The second major attack I think is one of the – there are two key moments in this battle and I’m now going to come on to one of them. The first attack proper, the attack that’s actually
pre-planned by Napoleon – again, lots of debate about what he was trying to do, but we have to have some kind of consensus on this and the consensus is that this next attack is one of the key moments - what Napoleon’s actually trying to do is he wants to pin the allies here and then launch a series of hammer blows, consecutively from left to right. So he sends off the one corps that hasn’t been in action yet in the campaign, that’s D’Erlon’s corps – that was the corps, by the way, that should have marched to Ligny, but the order is countermanded by Ney – 16,000 fresh men marching in huge columns against this weak, as I’ve already pointed out, centre left of Wellington’s army. And this attack, which is launched at one thirty, almost succeeds on its own in winning the battle. It’s an extraordinary thought isn’t it, with the drums going, the sight of these huge columns advancing uphill – I’ve walked the line they took – up towards the line. There’s a Netherlands brigade immediately in their front which breaks and flees. There’s also a relatively thin crust because if Wellington was remiss in the number of troops he had put in this location, he was even more remiss in the type of troops. Now, they were good troops, I’m not denying it, but actually, the key position here is held by the 5th Division as you can see, or you could see if you could see that writing there, Picton’s division. It was a very fine division, but it’s been in action at Quatre Bras and it’s been badly mauled, this is not an intact division. And Picton’s division looks at one stage as if it’s going to fall back. There are two key moments that prevent this massive attack just from driving straight through the centre of the allied line. One is the counter attack ordered by Picton himself. Famously, he dies very early on in this counterattack, but his infantrymen who look like they’re wavering counterattack the French just as they get through, there’s a kind of hedge line where you get the sunken lane here, just as they come through the hedge line they counterattack with the bayonet. And almost simultaneously, the only other reserve behind them, which is two brigades of heavy cavalry, on their own initiative, decide to charge. We’ll come on to Wellington’s thoughts on this charge in a minute, but they do not react under Wellington’s order, they react under their own local commanders and they charge at this key psychological moment as the French infantrymen seem to be carrying all before them. And these two counterattacks together completely dislocate D’Erlon’s attack, so that his 16,000 troops are driven back and frankly, part of them – not all of them, but part of them – cut to pieces by one of the heavy brigades, in particular the Union Brigade, the famous Scots Greys, Inniskillings and Royals who attack roughly on this side. And then you’ve got the Household Cavalry attacking the other side who take a lot of French cavalymen – I’ve missed them out of the story, I can’t mention everyone – they take them in the flank and drive down the hill.

Now, we know what happens next, I think, which is what happens whenever cavalry are used during the Napoleonic Wars, they get out of control, they get over-excited and they pursue
far too far. An element of the story which is often forgotten actually is that so convinced was
Napoleon that this initial thrust by D’Erlon’s going to succeed, that he’s actually ordered the
grand battery to move up in support, in close support. Remember he’s an artillerist, he uses
his artillery like a kind of hammer blow, to move up in close support so that their fire is going
to be even more destructive if there’s anything left of the allied line. What actually happens,
as we know, is this counterattack by the cavalry comes through D’Erlon’s force, cutting down
an awful lot of it, and catches the grand battery as it’s re-siting itself. You see a lot of
accounts of the battle in which they imply that the grand battery’s still in its original position,
which is up the other side of the valley, it is not, it is on the move and it hasn’t actually found
its new location, so it’s in a very vulnerable position and a number of the gunners are cut
down and the traces are cut and the guns potentially could be taken. They are not taken
because the French themselves counterattack, particularly with this force here, which are
lancers. And I could go through the whole battle in huge detail, I simply don’t have time, but
suffice to say that after an incredible initial success in this charge, the remnants of the heavy
cavalry that charge are cut to pieces by this French counterattack.

And what is the end result of this as far as Wellington’s concerned? In effect, those two
heavy brigades which are the strike force, the cavalry mobile strike force, in the allied army
that day are not out of commission for the rest of the battle. And Wellington, even though
they’ve probably saved his skin, given this rather dodgy troop disposition that I’ve already
referred to, is furious – he’s always furious whenever anyone takes the initiative. How
furious? According to a witness, ‘He was perfectly furious that this arm had been engaged
without his orders and sent the survivors to the rear’. I mean not literally to the rear, he just
said right, you know, fall back until I need you. They do not, they are not used, there are not
enough of them left to be used in any kind of formed or effective way for the rest of the
battle.

So let’s quickly go back to the map here because we need it really for the various stages of
attack. At three now is the cavalry, this mass cavalry attack. So this took place at about one
thirty, we’re going to now move the story on, other things are going on, but I can’t deal with
everything in this battle. We’re now going to move to the next crucial stage of the battle,
which is the massed cavalry attacks that we’ll all remember from the famous film, ‘Waterloo’,
that are supposedly launched by Ney at around four o’clock in the afternoon, and these mass
cavalry attacks, and we’re talking about tens of thousands of horsemen, go on for roughly two
hours. What on earth is Ney up to? This has been a mystery historians have never been able
to get their heads around, but I’ve just come across the most brilliant and explicable – for the
first time someone has explained it properly. What was actually – and the book in question, actually, a book I would thoroughly recommend, is probably the best recent account of the battle, I think, and there have been an awful lot of them, but the best single account of the whole battle by a historian called Tim Clayton. Clayton’s explanation is completely believable. This wasn’t just some mad attempt because, you know, we can’t think of anything else to do, this was a deliberate policy to break through the already weakened centre of the allied line. But – and here’s the crucial but – it wasn’t ordered by Ney, it was ordered by Napoleon himself, and it was ordered in conjunction with a new infantry attack and when you realise that, all of a sudden this mass cavalry attack makes a lot more sense doesn’t it? So who was this force, what was this force that was actually going to join in with the cavalry? I think we’ve got the cavalry here, 4th Cavalry Corps here. It was the corps that hadn’t been used yet, so again, just think of a corps as about 20,000 soldiers. There is another 20,000 soldiers under a General called Lobau, that he is going to use for this killing, smashing blow. If Lobau had been able to join the attack, the massed attack by the cavalry, they probably – we can’t say anything for certain – they probably would have broken through. Why does Lobau not join in the attack? Because, and here’s the important point, because the Prussians are already on the battlefield. Where are they? Wellington thinks the Prussians are going to come here, that’s why he’s left that sector of his army so weak, as I’ve explained. Where the Prussians actually come, the first Prussians that is, in this direction here. Here’s Plancenoit, there’s a major fight for Plancenoit during the battle. Look at its position in relation to the French, you can see what a dangerous manoeuvre this was as far as the French are concerned and even before they get to Plancenoit they’re spotted, that is the Prussians on the far flank of the battlefield, and Napoleon knows he must react to this. So what does he do? He deputes Lobau’s corps to act as a defensive screen while he tries to win the battle in the interim.

So from the point that the Prussians first arrive on the battlefield, which is about the same time the cavalry attacks begin, roughly 4pm, we’ve now got a battle against time for Napoleon. He must finish off Wellington before the Prussians can arrive in enough force to tip the balance. So they send the cavalry through. One of the bits of the story I’ve missed out of course is that heavy cavalry, that is armoured cuirassiers with these kind of great breastplates, have already done considerable execution in the centre of the battlefield. And it’s partly as a result of this that Napoleon thinks this weakened centre, they might be able to get through it just with cavalry alone. We know of course what actually happens, which is that Wellington very cannily arranges his, most of his forces behind the ridge line here, so it’s out of sight of most of the artillery, but also it’s in a position, it’s not in line formation, which of course takes time if you’re in line, if you’re spread out like that to get into a defensive
position, a square, that can deal with cavalry, it’s in columns which are halfway house, basically. They’re in a position to form a square very quickly and that’s exactly what they do. So for these two hours, attack after attack, no single square is actually entered by French cavalry, it has very little effect. Of course psychologically it’s very disturbing, a number of gunners get cut down, some artillerymen, allied artillerymen, much to Wellington’s fury, actually withdraw to the rear without orders, because of course you can imagine, when the infantry go into square they’re very vulnerable and some of them move into the squares themselves, but some of them actually limber up their guns and disappear. But the cavalry do not have a major effect tactically on the course of the battle because of these very clever counter tactics used by Wellington. And he himself, to do him absolute justice, is brilliant at this stage of the battle, he’s everywhere, he is personally present, and of course his staff are pretty much wiped out during the battle so you can see how dangerous it was for him. I think there’s one member of his immediate staff that’s unwounded by the end of the battle, pretty much all of the rest of them have been either killed or wounded. It’s a miracle he survived the whole day, but he was personally moving these troops into position, ordering them into different formations. He retreats into one of the squares himself at one stage because French cavalrymen are on the move. But the cavalry do not have a great effect on the battle.

The next hinge moment is what happens next, and this is 6pm. Again, it’s much disputed but just let’s go with 6pm. What happens at 6pm is this location that has held out all through the battle, it’s been attacked numerous times, heroically defended by these KGL, 400 of them, and of those 400 something like 30 get out of the place. They finally withdraw at 6pm, why? Because they’ve run out of ammunition. And if there’s another slight beef I have about the way the battlefield’s been set up, it’s something I already hinted at earlier which is that Hougoumont’s had lots of troops to defend it and enough preparation, La Haye Sainte did not. They did not even arrange for reserve ammunition to be in the vicinity and eventually they simply ran out of ammunition. And this absolutely key point, this is a far more important location than Hougoumont as far as the defensive position of the allied line is concerned, because it is in the centre and behind it are these battered formations that have already been hard hit. And when it falls, it enables the French to do what they’ve been trying to do from the beginning of the battle, which is to move their artillery up very close to this position here. In particular their horse artillery which is the most easily manoeuvrable. They get it up to the ridge line so it can fire directly into the allied squares. Now, if a square is a very solid formation against cavalry, it is disastrous when it is up against artillery, for obvious reasons, and they cannot be certain of moving out of the square to disperse and therefore make them
less likely to be hit by artillery balls while the cavalry are still on the loose. And so a number of these British squares are literally shot to pieces, most famously the 27th Inniskillings, who out of a, I think the numbers are something like, they lose something like 500 men out of a total of 800, without firing a shot, they haven’t had a chance to do any fighting, they’re just shot to pieces. They’re dying where they stand and some of the most heartrending descriptions of the battle itself are the descriptions of the absolute charnel house of some of these squares when the French artillery get to the position they get to because of the fall of La Haye Sainte. This is the crucial moment of the battle. This is the point at which it could have been lost, even though the Prussians are on the battlefield and are fighting for Plancenoit now. So the Prussians are now heavily engaged here and Napoleon’s having to devote more and more of his troops to defend Plancenoit. What is the significance of this? We’ll come on to that in a second.

The real problem Napoleon’s now got is two things: time and available troops to finish off the job, because if one thing is not in doubt, it is that the allied army, that is Wellington’s forces, are reeling at this point, they are on the point of destruction, particularly in this weaker position here. Now, after La Haye Sainte falls, at about 7 o’clock after the French have brought up their artillery and they are shooting the squares in the vicinity to pieces, the commander of the brigade that also includes the 27th Inniskillings, sends a message to Wellington which will give an idea of how serious things have become. I’ll just find that message. Hackett asks if his brigade can be relieved, that is, taken out of the line. Of course that’s never going to happen and Wellington’s response is, ‘Tell him what he asks is impossible, he and I and every Englishman on the field must die on the spot we now occupy’. But don’t be in any doubt that Wellington himself was very worried at this point. How worried? We know how worried he was because of his lovely quote at around 7pm, ‘God bring me night or bring me Blücher. One or the other, because otherwise I’m going to lose this battle. The time they occupy’ - that is the Prussians – ‘seemed interminable, both they and my watch seemed to be stuck fast’. He is now relying in his own words on the arrival of the Prussians. And bear in mind that when the battle started, not only has he been in relatively strong, you know, I’ve already pointed out it wasn’t the strongest defensive position, but nevertheless he’s on the defence with a slight incline and roughly the same number of troops as Napoleon, and yet he’s pretty much admitting in this quote here, if it’s accurate, and I think it is, that if one or other doesn’t come in a straight fight that day he is going to lose. Seven pm’s crucial because I think it’s the last point, and most historians agree on this, that the French – the wonderful thing about Waterloo is that it is a proper hinge battle, there are moments where it could have gone either way, you always need that in these great historical
events, it’s why it makes it such a wonderful battle to study, the consequences of course were so far reaching - but if the French had a chance to win the battle again, it was at 7pm. That is the point at which Napoleon should have thrown in his reserve and they should have attacked through the centre and if they had, there was a very thin crust holding there. What Wellington had actually done, he knew the centre and the left were weak of course, and he now knew that’s where most of the French effort was going. So he sent across a certain number of troops: the Brunswick contingent and some cavalry, but not crack troops, frankly. I don’t want to be too harsh about the Brunswickers, they performed very well, but they were the last people he would have absolutely relied on in a crisis and cavalry, frankly, against a serious infantry attack are not going to stand. So you can see how potentially weak this position in the battlefield was, why does Napoleon not attack, we don’t know to this day why he doesn’t attack. But what is interesting, he knows that the Prussians are not only here, but they’re actually up here. Well, I don’t think he does. Again, going back to Clayton, Clayton’s argument is that the crucial moment of the battle is 7pm, this is when he should have attack but he delays, he fatally delays. Nevertheless, there is an indication that it’s now the time and maybe he gets a little over-confident as a result of this. That is a new body of troops arrives in this location over here, in Fichermont and Papelotte, which have been captured by the French early on in the battle. Napoleon, according to Clayton – and we can agree or disagree on this – thinks that they are his troops that he’s sent out to the wing and have now been sent an order to get back to the battle as quickly as possible. And having been convinced that he’s now got French here and that they’re going to turn the battle, he can get on with his attack. But still he takes his time and it’s that time, it’s that crucial 30 minutes, frankly, that makes all the difference. In truth, as we will discover, the troops that were actually at Fichermont, at Papelotte were Prussians. So not only have you got Prussians at Plancenoit down here, you’ve got a separate corps, von Zieten’s corps that have now arrived here and they, as they feed in slowly but surely and word eventually gets to Wellington that it’s the Prussians, are going to make all the difference as you can imagine. So the race against time is, once you get beyond seven thirty, which is when Napoleon makes a definite decision and the orders are now put in place for the final attack, the final famous attack, I think the battle’s a done deal now, he can no longer win it. It’s a very, very fine window of opportunity, frankly, but seven to seven thirty he has to order the major attack at 7 o’clock and he doesn’t, he waits 30 minutes and it’s too late.

Now, the next problem he’s got, what’s he got left to launch his final attack with? Well, we all know it’s launched by the Imperial Guard don’t we, these hugely vaunted, very impressive moustachioed giants with their gold earrings and their tattoos, you know, they looked like
pirates, but they’re huge, imposing and they’re wearing these great bearskin shakos, psychologically they’re pretty terrifying. The problem Napoleon’s got is that he started out with 37 battalions of them – young, middle and old guard – and he’s now only got about 13 left, 13 or 14. Why? Because not only has he used Lobau’s corps to stop the Prussians advancing in this direction here, he’s also used a significant chunk of his guardsmen, his Imperial Guard. So when he launches this final attack, he gives the order at seven thirty and it really gets going between seven thirty and eight, it’s only about 11 battalions left. He started with 37, he’s got 14 when the final attack begins, he keeps three in reserve – everyone agrees about the odd battalion, but let’s just say for the sake of argument, 11 go forward. Eleven? What, that’s it? They’re pretty impressive, these guys, but 11 to break through the centre of the allied position, which even Wellington by now is moving more and more troops over from the right.

This is where the final attack goes in, it goes in between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. Now, even there were only 11 battalions launching this attack, it still has initial success, as I think we know, and a number of units break before it, and even the British troops that are standing before it are looking pretty unsteady. Two crucial things happen next, and the first of them again is to give the Dutch and Belgians their credit. Chassé’s division of – Chassé, by the way, had fought on the French side, I think that’s right, I must check with one of the expert’s on this, who I think’s in the audience this evening – but Chassé’s fought for the French earlier on, he’s now fighting for the allies, he’s not considered to be the most reliable commander. Chassé has brought his brigade over, and his brigade is the first formation to disrupt the final attack by the Imperial Guard, both with artillery and a bayonet attack. And of course I think we all know the other crucial contribution that’s made. So that’s the morning.

We’ll go to the final map actually, so you get a sense of what’s going on. This is 8pm, okay, so this is the final moment of the battle. Look what’s happening here, I mean it’s very telling. Here are the Prussians at Plancenoit, look where they are in relation to the rest of the French line. Here are the rest of the Prussians over here, well there they are there. That’s the rest of Wellington’s defensive position and these are the final attacks being put in by the… there’s the final attack being put in by the old guard. The other formations that play a key role in turning back the old, sorry, not the old guard – the old guard don’t actually go into the attack, as it happens, but the middle guard are the ones that play the key role in the attack – the 52nd Light Infantry, Colborne’s force who, much to his fury, don’t get proper recognition after the battle. It’s one of those beefs that you might have with Wellington that he doesn’t give people their due. And also famously the Guards. ‘Now’s the time Maitland, up and at them.’
Famous quote by Wellington to the brigade commander, Maitland, to set his guardsmen in action. The 1st Foot Guards launch a counterattack at the same time as the 52nd, and of course there’s more disruption going on caused by Chassé’s brigade, and together they force the Guards to retreat pell-mell downhill. Now, the rest of the army’s already beginning to crumble because an awful lot of Prussians are arriving on the battlefield, but this is the final blow, frankly, for the French Army. ‘La Garde recule!’; that famous quote, ‘The Guard is retreating!’, if the Guard are retreating the rest of us better get on our heels too, and the army begins to stream away. In effect the battle is over.

It’s interesting, actually I was reading a very good history of this recently about the… Wellington’s won the battle but his armies taken terrible casualties, and I’ll come on to the casualties in a moment. That is, the allies have won the battle. It would have been very easy for him not to have launched this final attack. One of the arguments as to why he does it is because who wins this battle is going to be crucial to the post-battle settlement of Europe, it must be the British who are seen to be playing the key role. So he takes a calculated risk, because he can’t know for certain that this headlong attack he orders is going to be successful and he follows it very closely himself, much to the irritation of his staff, but he orders it nonetheless. And of course the next thing we have is the famous meeting of Blücher and Wellington outside La Belle Alliance, which is – oh well, you can see it there – there’s La Belle Alliance, where you’ve still got the inn which exists to this day, and they meet there and they make the final dispositions, the Prussians are going to carry out the pursuit of Napoleon’s army, but the battle now in effect is over.

So how do we make sense of all of this, because a number of – well, I’ll just deal with the casualties actually, because they’re quite telling. This area of ground here is roughly two and a half miles by two miles, very small area for a battlefield to be fought. By the end of the battle something like 200,000 troops are on this ground, and of those 200,000, 50,000 are now casualties. The bulk of them are of course the French, they’ve taken the worst casualties. How many? About 25,000. The British about 15,000, the Prussians about 7,000. Seven thousand, give you an indication of the amount of fighting the Prussians do, given that they only come to the party relatively late on. Some historians, particularly those biographers of Napoleon, are convinced this wasn’t a battle won, it was a battle lost. And it is true that Napoleon, and I haven’t dwelt on Napoleon for obvious reasons, well not too much anyway, Napoleon does make a number of key errors. He doesn’t take opportunities that are afforded to him, partly because his subordinate commanders don’t always follow their orders, but one of the reasons for that is he’s put the wrong people in the wrong jobs and Soult is
probably his worst single appointment. Now, the counter argument of that is he simply didn’t have the quality that he was used to in years gone by, and that is true. But one of his best commanders, Davout, was left in Paris, and he should really have been with the army. He misses opportunities or his sub-commanders miss opportunities. And also, fatally, he is over-confident and he doesn’t believe that the allies are going to be as steadfast as they are in supporting each other. When he’s given the Prussians a bloody nose on the 16th, psychologically he thinks they’re out of the game, out of the equation. He’s not worried that they are going to interfere and he thinks he can deal with Wellington on his own. A very, very foolish miscalculation, and it might explain why he wasn’t more determined to take on Wellington on the 17th, for example, when of course the Prussians would not have been able to come to his assistance. A lot of delay in the morning of the 17th, some argue that it was kind of fatal delay. So Napoleon almost certainly was not on his top form, he was not the great commander of previous battles.

But that’s just one side of the story and the other side of the story are some of the things that I’ve already talked about. I think that Wellington gives, by his own errors, he gives Napoleon the chance to win a campaign he really should have had no right to win. Two quotes by Wellington are very telling about this and I’ll get on to them right this minute. There’s the famous meeting at La Belle Alliance of the two commanders lifting their hats there, there are the casualties. That’s an interesting quote isn’t it? ‘He thought’, wrote a historian of the battle, ‘that Wellington would not try to support the Prussians on 16th June and he was wrong. At Waterloo he thought the Prussians could not come to the aid of Wellington and he was wrong.’ But let’s concentrate on Wellington, because of course this talk is chiefly about Wellington. There’s no question Wellington performs well when the battle is underway, he does, I’ve already talked a little bit about he’s constantly on the move, you know, his sheer presence is, the psychological effect of having him there, totally trusted by his men, was a massive factor. Here we are, by one of them, ‘I firmly believe that under any other man but the Duke of Wellington even British valour would have been unavailing’. But in the words of the man himself, I’m afraid, we get to the real essence of this battle. First of all the dispatch, written just a few hours after the battle. ‘I should not do justice to my own feelings or to Marshal Blücher if I did not attribute the successful result of this arduous day to the cordial and timely assistance I received from them.’ And secondly, in a letter to his own brother, ‘You will see the account of our desperate battle over Boney. It was the most desperate business I ever was in, I never took so much trouble about any battle, and never was so near to being beat. I never saw infantry behave so well.’ Within these two letters, I feel, lies the key truth of this battle, that the allies almost lost it and that they would have lost
it but for two factors: the arrival of the Prussians, of course, and secondly, the very stoic fighting qualities of not just the British infantry that Wellington gives credit to, but also a lot of the other infantry: the King's German Legion and the Dutch and the Belgians who have not been given proper recognition, and only now are scholars beginning to recognise that.

If the Prussians hadn't arrived – if and but – historians say, well, Wellington knew they were going to turn up, so what's your point? The point is, fairly matched, the two armies fairly matched, because of errors, because he's allowed himself to be in that position, Wellington has given Napoleon a chance to do the impossible, which is to defeat… and who knows what would have happened next. And it is for that reason that I feel that the real honest evaluation of this battle is that it is not a great indication of Wellington’s generalship. Thank you.

You’ve been listening to a podcast from Royal Collection Trust. For more information and details of future lectures and other events, find us online at Royalcollection.org.uk. Thanks for listening.