

The battle of waterloo history essay



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Napoleon was a man of military genius. He is recognized the world over and his principles form a part of study of military history as well as principles of war. Despite all his success, Napoleon also had certain weaknesses, which led to his ultimate defeat at WATERLOO, in his last battle.

2. Carryout analyses of the battle of WATERLOO bringing out the weaknesses of Napoleon's Army in that battle which ultimately lead to his defeat.

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

INTRODUCTION

1. " Men of genius are meteors intended to burn to light their century", and thus with these words of Napoleon himself we venture into the world of a military genius. Oswald said " Napoleon's life was an immense toil, not for himself, not for France, but for the further". The conduct of war is an art based on ageless fundamental concepts that have remained valid irrespective of the prevailing means and methods of warfare. Waterloo was the site of Napoleon's last battle, which albeit he lost, nevertheless provokes us to study it analytically to deduce and learn important lessons from it. But, surely without historic truth to lead us through the past, it is vain to form judgments on it, or to seek to deduce lessons for the future.

2. The Battle of waterloo was the final and decisive action of the Napoleonic Wars that effectively ended French domination of the European continent and brought about drastic changes in the political boundaries and the power balance of Europe. Fought on 18th Jun 1815, near Waterloo, the battle ranks as a great turning point in modern history. For a student of military history, this battle is

not only full of enthralling action and captivating events, but its careful analysis can reveal imp lessons which can benefit us even today.

AIM

3. To carry out analytical study and highlight the weaknesses which lead to Napoleon defeat in the Battle of Waterloo.

Scheme of Presentation

4. The Battle of Waterloo is covered in the fol seq:-

a. Backgr.

b. Face of the Battle Field.

c. Opposing Forces.

d. Opposing Plans.

e. Conduct.

(1) Attk on Hougoumont.

(2) D'Erlon's Attk.

(3) Battle for La Haye-Sainte and Planchenoit.

(4) The Gds Attk.

f. Weaknesses and Factors Lead to Defeat.

Analysis

Concl.

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BACKGR

5. After raising France to a posn of pre-eminence in Europe from 1804 to 1813, Napoleon met defeat in 1814 by a coalition of maj powers, notably Prussia, Russia, Britain, and Austria was then deposed and exiled to the island of Elba, and Louis XVIII was made ruler of France. In Feb 1815, Napoleon escaped from Elba and returned to France. There may veterans of his former campaigns flocked to his stander, and in Mar 1815, he again ascended the throne. The Congress of Vienna, alarmed by Napoleon's return to power, had reacted quick to the crisis Austria, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia each agreed to contribute 150, 000 tps to an invasion to be assembled in Belgium near the France border. A majority of other nations present at the congress also pledged tps for the invasion of France, which was to be launched on 1 Jul 1815.

6. In Paris, Napoleon, learning of the invasion plan, quickly determined to attk the allies on their own gr before army could take shape. He mob within two months a massive army of trained soldiers. He deployed some of these tps within France as a security force and grouped the remainder into attk units.

7. On Jun 14, 1815, Napoleon, moving with the utmost speed and secrecy, reached the Franco-Belgian border with 124, 000 of his tps. Another 56, 000 men were lt behind in sdry or sp posns. Napoleon's grand strat for the coming campaign was typically audacious. Facing him beyond the Belgian border were two separate allied armies. The larger army, a force of 116, 000 Prussians, led by the Prussian Fd Marshal Blucher, was based at Namur. Adv elements of Blucher's army were stationed as far west as Charleroi. A force

of 93, 000 British, Dutch, Belgian and German troops was based at Brussels, with an outpost in the village of Quatre-Bras. The leader of this army, British General Arthur Wellesley, 1st duke of Wellington, was also commander in chief of the allied forces. Napoleon planned to attack both armies with the aim of splitting and destroying them. To carry out this plan he divided his force into attack wings and a strong reserve, which consisted of trusted veterans known as the Old Guard.

Face of Battle field

8. The battlefield of Waterloo is extremely small in area. The opposing forces occupied two low ridges separated by a gentle valley extending over a distance of about 1500 yards. In width the battle zone barely extended over 5000 yards stretching from the chateau of Hougoumont in the west to the town of Appellate in the East. From the center of the French positions from the small hamlet of La Belle Alliance, the Brussels to Charleroi highway traversed the area of ground separating the two armies. This entered Wellington's forward positions at La Haye Sainte before breaching the crest and running down the reverse slope towards Mont-St-Jean beyond. This road in fact, neatly bisected the battlefield and provided the French with their main axis of advance.

OPPOSING FORCES

9. COMPOSITION Composition of different forces of the theatre is as under:-

a. The French Army

(1) Commander-in-Chief. Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte

(2) Commander Left Wing. Marshal Michel Ney

(3) Commander Right Wing. Marshal Grouchy

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(4) Army Composn.

(a) Imperial Gd

(b) I Corps

(c) II Coorps

(d) III Corps

(e) IV Corps

(f) V Corps

(g) VI Corps

I Cavalry Corps

(j) II Cavalry Corps

(k) III Cavalry Corps

(l) IV Cavalry Corps

(m) Total: 124, 000 Men, 366 guns

The Anglo-Allied Army

(1) Comd-in-Chief: Fd Marshal Arthur Wellesley, Duke Of Wellington

Army Composn.

I Corps

II Corps

Gen Res

Res Cav

Hanovrain Res Corps

(f) Exiled Bourbon French

(g) Total: 93, 000 Men, 216 Guns

The Prussian Army

(1) Comd-in-Chief : Fd Marshal Blucher

Army Str

I Corps

II Corps

III Corps

IV Corps

Total : 116, 00 Men, 312 guns

10. Disposn. Into an area of barely three sq miles were crowded two sizeable armies with hundred of guns and thousands in cavalry. French tps were deployed in arrays having full view of the allied army to gain max psychological advantage. On the other side of the valley allied comd Wellington was also deploying his fmns to meet the impending fury.

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French Army

To the east of Brussels rd stood I Corps, and towards west was II Corps.

Some little way to the rear of these corps was massed the bulk of the French Cavalry in adv posns.

Centrally placed behind these masses of inf and cavalry was VI Corps and two further divs of cavalry.

In the rear stood the Imperial Gds.

b. Allied Army

The gen shape of Allied disposns resembled a wedge with bulk of the forces massed on rt. The lt was lightly held intentionally as the arrival of Blucher was being relied upon.

The main posns of Allies lay mostly to the north of Braine l'Alleud- Ohain rd running between high banks and gen fol the line of Mont.-St-Jean crest.

Bulk of the main forces was drawn up on the reverse slope behind the rd, considerably protected from French arty fire.

About a mile west, Brain' Alleud was held in strength.

Party of I Corps, a res div and some cavalry was on the extreme lt.

Most of res cavalry was drawn up in rear of the rt center. However, some cavalry took post close to Mont.-St-Jean.

In addition, Wellington placed some troops in advanced positions occupying the chateau of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte.

Prussian Army Prussian forces were under command Blücher, which were presently engaged at Warve in the east. They were to reinforce the main Allied forces and reinforce the eastern flank. While advancing towards Waterloo, he left behind III Corps at Wavre.

OPPOSING PLANS

French Plan

11. The French plan was simple and concise, revealing the Emperor was determined not to waste any time in fancy maneuvers. Wellington was to be crushed by a series of unsophisticated frontal blows. Details of the plan are as follows :

A feint attack by Prince Jérôme's division of II Corps would be conducted on the allied advanced position at Hougoumont with a view to force Wellington to move his reserves from the center to the left flank. Thereby weakening the sector behind which he would receive the major blow.

As soon as possible the Army is formed up, Marshal Ney will attack on Mont-St-Jean in order to seize the cross roads at the place.

To this end artillery of II and IV Corps will mass with that of the I Corps. The guns will bombard the troops holding Mont-St-Jean and I Corps will begin its attack.

II Corps will also advance keeping abreast with the I Corps

Coy of Engrs belonging to IO Corps will hold themselves in readiness to fortify Mont-St-Jean as soon it is taken.

Allied Plan

12. Wellington plan was to be rested napoleon until Blucher forces could arrive. The two Armies would join each other south of waterloo, On Blucher arrival, The Prussian Army would out flank. The Emperors night atk and overrun the hole French Line.

MAIN FEATURES OF CONDUCT

Attk on Hougoumont

13. Rains on the preceding day of the battle made the gr sodden and delayed opening of the battle. The battle started at 11. 30 am by an atk on the allied adv posn at Hougoumont by price jermi's div of II Corps.

14. At this stage instead of calling off the atk and instead using arty, he asked for rfts.

D' Erlon's Attk

15. Napoleon delayed the main battle to allow for the gr to dry. He massed his arty and at about 1: pm opened a hvy and substantial fire to blast a gap in the allied center prep to D'Erlon's

16. Although French inf fought bravely but they were swept back. M any were cut down by the opposing cavalry and more the 3000 surrendered and very soon two third of D'Erlon's shattered men were running down the slope in complete disarray.

Battle for La Haye Sainte and Plancheniot

17. At this stage Napoleon had no hope of Grouchy reaching. Waterloo.

Napoleon could now either call off the battle or fling everything at Wellington in the hope of destroying him before the Prussian assistance became eff.

18. Without ref to the emperors he ordered a full-scale pursuit hoping to convert the apparent allied retreat into a full-scale rout without further delay. In excitement the scale of cavalry attk escalated out of proportion and by 5 pm no less than 5000 French cavalry assault the slope towards the center of allied force. However the sodden gr rescued speed of adv to a slow trot.

19. However, the emperor considered the Prussian's threat to his first pri and ordered his final res to form a line facing plachenoit. Planchenoit was in French hands in no time. The mov thus stabilized Napoleon's flank.

The Gd's Attk

20. Reassured for the being about his rt Napoleon was last able to return his attention to the affairs of center. He had one last trump card to play nine battalions of the Imerial Gd that had returned into res and were now aval. The gds were ordered to mov ahead in comd of Emperor himself upto 600 yds of allied front before he relinquished the comd to Ney.

21. The Imperial gd mov fwd but Wellington was ready. His rft of center was complete by arrival of tps from East, which was by now in posn. The Prussian I Corps was on the pt of arriving from Northeast and on Wellington's order, lay down behind the banks of the Ohain rd.

22. The French lost all impetus and in a short span of time were recoiling down the slope. With defeat staring in their face, the French stood momentarily against the onslaught. Sensing his opportunity, Wellington waved his hat and 40,000 allied troops swept forward from Mont-St-Jean. A moment later, the cohesion of the French Army snapped and unit after unit, dissolved into a horde of undisciplined fugitives.

ANALYSIS

23. The Plan To the plan Marshal Ney had added a pencil note that the attack will be first delivered from the left instead of beginning from the right. This aspect was revealing in several aspects.

First, it was clear that the Emperor was entrusting the actual handling of the battle to Marshal Ney.

Second, There was no specific mention of the need to launch an all out attack on Hougoumont by II Corps.

Third, the instructions for sappers reveal that Napoleon was determined to cut the road to Brussels, Wellington's line of retreat.

The Plan showed a single massive offensive spearhead by the merest handful of preliminary attack. However, there was no mention of any emergency action or adaptation to meet the arrival of additional Prussian forces.

Some critics also claim that the French should have attempted to turn Wellington's right flank rather than indulge in so straight forward an assault but Napoleon needed a quick victory while the sodden character of the ground would inevitably have delayed any elaborate maneuver.

24. Attk on Hougoumont. By allowing action around Hougoumont into a maj struggle, jeromi committed the first tac blunder. Wellington only mov one bde whereas the decisive eff of the action was that greater part of the French II Corps was tied down for most of the battle. Thus at the very outset the French plan of battle was jeopardized and thrown off bal by the unrealistic determination of a div comd who failed to aprc his true msn.

25. Protection of Rt Flank In order to protect his rt flank Napoleon ordered part of VI Corps to the threatened sec. Which drew up in a line East of between planchenoit creating a sec front. If he had placed his force in the rea of D'Erlon's Corps, he would have been able to sp D'Erlon's 2 pm attk and taking post to repel or check Prussian adv also.

26. D'Erlon's Attk

a. Wellington could be congratulated on routing D'Erlon's poorly coord and ill org attk for a loss of some 4000 inf. However, D'Erlon's adoption of an outdated of adv was a tac blunder, which allowed Wellington to route the effort.

b. Although prep bombardment by art was restored to but there was no attempt to provide adequate cavalry sp to the inf attk and properly coord a bal attk. On these counts, D'Erlon's chances of success were jeopardized from the beginning.

27. Ney's 1st Cavalry on La Haye Sainte.

This aslt was also as badly planned and handled as D'Erlon's earlier offensive.

This dir of attk was it self an error.

The Cavalry should not have been lunched prior to the caputre of La-Haye-Sainte. The cavalry adv with out any arty or inf sp and once again the principle of proper coord was neglected.

The absence of French Horse arty in close sp meant that the allied were not subj to an eff pt blank fire during the charge.

28. Shortcomings of Napoleon's Marshals. During the yrs of exile at St. Helena the fallen Emperor made great efforts to place the resp for the cataclysm on his immediate subordinates.

Grouchy can certainly be criticised for failing to march towards the sounds of the guns on the late morning of 18th and delaying his pursuit of the Prussian Army.

Ney's inability as an efficient fd comd is shown by repeated launching of inadequately sp attk of a piecemeal nature and his failure to use resources readily aval in order to ensure success.

29. Deterioration in Napoleon's Overall Ability. The chief resp for the shortcomings can only be laid at the door of the Emperor himself. The original strat conception was brilliant but there were great flaws undermining the entire effort. There are some undeniable indications of deterioration in his overall ability.

Napoleon proved to be obstinate, arrogant overconfident.

He appt sec rate men to key appts, when better were aval.

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He tended to underestimate the powers of his opponents. He ignored Blucher's sense of loyalty and definitely discounted Wellington's ability as gen.

His health was also not in its prime and during the battle her was being treated for piles.

e. These factors led him to delay opening of the battle on 18th jun and to refuse Ney vital rfts at the critical moment in the battle.

f. Preoccupation with the sdry battle on his eastern flank accts for his lapse of judgment.

30. Lack of Comd and Con. Throughout the battle Napoleon failed to ex sufficient con over his subordinates. While it is not the resp of the comd in chief to interfere excessively in the details of the battle at tac lvl, his overall supervision is vital to ensure that the plan is exec with a min delay and confusion. This insufficient comd and con led to permitting the fol:

a. Jeromi to turn a feint attk into a maj effort.

b. D'Erlon's to adopt an outdated fmn.

c. Ney to throw away the Cavalry

d. Grouchy to mov away beyond recall.

31. Napoleon should never have allowed these mistakes to happen. A high deg of con was possible on such a rest B fd as Waterloo. The Emperor may have been unfortunate in the weather of the preceding twelve hrs, but this

factor does not remove one iota of resp for the lapses he displayed at diff critical moments during the days.

32. Allied Comds. Credit here also goes to Wellington on the way he handled the battle, chose the excellent def posn and conducted its def in the most tenacious and praise worthy manner. His men too deserve praise; allied army was a hybrid collection of multinational fmns yet fought magnificently throughout the long and exhausting day.

33. Finally honor must be paid to Fd Marshal Blucher and his Prussian soldiers whose arrival at the opportune moment at the French rt flank undoubtedly swung the fortune of the day.

LESSONS LEARNT

34. Looking back, as one considers the ldrship, forces, mnvrs and engagements of those days, one is struck by the unpredictable nature of the series of successes and failures, influenced by such factors as “ Chance and Friction” to use language of Clausewitz. With analytical study of mil history, certain lessons can always be drawn which have implications not restd to a particular sit or battle only. The invaluable lessons obtained from analysis of the battle of Waterloo are equally applicable to the present. These lessons are:

a. Surprise and initiative. When on the early morning of the 15th of Jun the French Army crossed the frontier into Belgium, Napoleon had achieved complete surprise over Blucher and Wellington. Their armies were too widely scattered to offer series resistance. In all his yrs as comd in Chief there is no

more striking example of how to seize the initiative against superior forces and with it threaten their prompt destruction.

b. Availing Opportunities. During the course of any battle, many opportunities might arise for either side. At such times quick analysis, timely decisions coupled with prompt action are req to eff avail these chances.

Several chances were presented to the French who were unable to benefit from them, Such as :

In the afternoon Jun 16th, at ligancy Napoleon was able to defeat Blucher after an action lasting three hrs. At twilight the Prussians withdrew, because of D'Erlons's failure to enter the fighting, however. The main body of Bluchers army, about 70, 0000 men, was able to return in good order.

At quatre-Bras. Ney had unaccountably waited several hrs to begin his attk on the anglo-Dutch posn, and this delay enable Wellington to reinforce Quatre-Bras with several divs of cavalry and inf.

On wellington retreat from Quatre Bas, Napoleon sent msgs to Ney at Frasnes ordering him to engage Wellington immediately. Ney, who was not aware of Wellington retreat, failed to obey these orders. This was an ideal opportunity to eff destroy Wellington forces, which were not ready for def.

Napoleon's preoccupation with the Eastern flank cost him a decisive attk to Wellington center when Ney had finally succeeded in making a headway.

c. Sound Planning. Napoleon's rapid assy of forces, camouflaging the conc of his army, surprise breakout; all these reflected a sound plan. It was exactly how a weaker force confronted by a stronger en should act : trying to

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prevent Wellington and Blucher joining up forces and aiming at the defeat of their two armies singly.

d. Eff Comd and Con. While it is not the resp of the comd in chief to interfere excessively in the details of the battle at tac lvl. His overall supervision is vital to ensure that the master plan is put into exec with a min delay and confusion. A high deg of con was possible on such a restd B fd as Waterloo, but throughout the battle Napoleon failed to ex sufficient con over his subordinates. This resulted in:-

Jerome turned a feint attk into a maj effort.

(2) D'Erlon's adopted an outdated fmn.

Ney threw away the cavalry.

Grouchy mov away beyond recall.

e. Maint of Aim. Napoleon's use of the army was, at the beginning, completely in accordance with his principle. But the final phase of the battle shows Napoleon doing the complete opposite to what required for success. The opponent who should have been broken up was able, despite defeat, to unify his forces and bring them into action to his own op advantage. The attacker, on the other hand, had divided his forces and was unable to reunite them. Consequently, Napoleon found himself at a disadvantage and in no posn to recover him.

f. Correct use of Gr and Weather. In any tac sit correct evaluation and use of gr and weather are of prime imp.

Terrain.

Wellington had set his positions after careful deliberation and minute examination of the ground and detailed considerations of advantages it could afford.

In addition to these, Wellington also placed some troops in advanced positions occupying the chateau of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte as strong points, which had many well-built farms and barns with short encircling walls.

g. Weather. Rain on the previous night of the battle had caused the ground to become sodden. While careful choice of ground gave the advantage of weather to Wellington, the opposite was true for Napoleon.

h. Concentration.

Wellington had detached 17,000 of his troops to his right at Hal and Tubize, thereby willfully reducing his Army to a numerical inferiority to that of Napoleon.

Napoleon's calculation was erroneous in not having brought against Wellington every man and horse that it was possible for him to collect.

It was not absolutely necessary to make such a large detachment under Grouchy and affect the numerical balance of forces.

The contingent of men left at Charleroi should have been concentrated with the main force.

j. Speed. The time available to the enemy to prepare his defenses must be kept to a minimum. Moreover time lost in attack is time gained for strengthening of defenses for the opponent, and time lost in pursuit is time taken to consolidate the position.

The battle was delayed from hr to hr to allow for drying of of the gr while Prussians came closer and closer.

Gropuchy's delay to make contact with Blucher Proved fatal for the French, and Blucher was able to arrive and save the day for the Allied.

Delay in the attk of Imperial Gds in assistance of Ney was delayed and this caused the chance of victory to vanish.

k. Fire Power. The imp of conc firepower when req should not be undermined:

(1) At Waterloo, the English possessed a considerable advantage over their opponents. The British had recently adopted the two rank firing systems in place of the older three rank firing systems. This eff firepower by 50%.

(2) The French after experimenting with the two rank system had stuck with the older three rank system. The British muskets were motre accurate than the French.

(3) Furthermore, the British were in passion of mob fd arty guns which were superior in fire power than those possessed by the French.

l. Coop and Coord. When the gr and tac site permit, Inf-armr coop and coord between sp arms is a maj deciding factor in favour of the attacker.

An abundance of good cavalry was aval for D'erlon's attk, but was p[poorly used. Where the horsemen did appear, their success underlined the mistake of not sending them in force. Had they arrived there just before the inf,

Wellington's men would have had to form sqs fro def and their fire power would have been reduced to a fraction.

The French inf went fwd unprotected, and were confronted with every musket in line to meet them.

m. Correct Assessment of sit. Prior to any battle, correct aprc is nec. Also, accurate assessment of tac sits as and when they arise during the battle is vital.

(1) Accurate Vis. On the French side Napoleon as well as his subordinates, showed an inc deg of mistaken assessment, uncertainty and negligence which, under such testing conditions, had serious consequences.

(2) Under Estimating The En. Napoleon underestimated the powers of his opponents. He ignored Blucher's sense of loyalty and discounted Wellington's ability as a gen.

Maint of Momentum. The successes of the attk on the French flank, and the achievements of bringing up the exhausted Prussian tps to the B fd were largely due to Blucher's energy.

o. Morale. By comparison, the allied armies seemed as if they had suddenly shaken out of a deep sleep. For all their losses and exhaustion, there was no loss of morale in the Allied and Prussian Armies; rather there was a will to cont the fight.

CONCL

35. The overall mil sit facing France after waterloo was not as poor as it has sometime been represented. Both sides had taken a severe pounding during the pd 15th -18th Jun and although the French naturally suffered most in terms of case, morale and prestige, the allies had by no means escaped lightly. Napoleon passed his remaining days of life at St-Helena. The flt of the eagle was over at last, and an exhausted Europe settled down once more to attempt a return to former ways of life and govt. But the shade of Napoleon lingered on irresistibly for many yrs after his death in 1821.