

Perceptive text and stunning images

a review of *Waterloo: Napoleon's Last Army*

by Jonas De Neef

Much ink has been dedicated to Napoleon's final effort to stay in power in 1815, especially concerning the (military) campaign that followed in Belgium. How the struggle unfolded is fairly well-known, but its uniformology, especially for the French perspective, can still trigger a lively debate more than 200 years after the events. Paul Dawson, Keith Rocco and Dana Lombardy therefore joined forces to try and fill this gap through the publication of *Waterloo: Napoleon's Last Army*.

This large volume, both in content and actual size (a coffee table book that is worth displaying in a room), combines the lifetime knowledge of Dawson—an expert on the French forces that were present at Waterloo through extensive archive research—with the artwork of Rocco, undoubtedly one of the greatest military artists of our time, worthy to rank alongside, for instance, famous gentlemen such as Détaillé, Rousselot and Meissonier. The result presents us a reconstruction of Napoleonic history, through perceptive text and stunning images, that has not often been achieved before.

As J. David Markham mentions in the introduction, “wars, battles, the soldiers who fought them and what those soldiers wore and carried have been subjects of great interest throughout history.” The Napoleonic period stands out in this regard due to the vibrant dress of the troops. The combination of Rocco's lavish compositions, dozens of paintings which were commissioned exclusively for this volume, with Dawson's scholarly descriptions, whilst also presenting over 150 photographs of surviving uniform pieces and arms found in many European depots and collections (such as the one found in the Musée de l'Empéri), therefore are a joy to behold and read, as well as confirming the (colourful) appearance of these soldiers. Additionally, the production standard, with its superb binding and paper quality, really adds up in the (visual) experience while going through the book.

As the French emperor sought to assemble his army for the upcoming clash with the Allies in 1815, resources were limited and this would have consequences the way French soldiers looked like and with which weaponry they would engage in battle. The book here does an excellent job of portraying these matters.

The makeshift appearance of several units, where Royalist and Imperial elements were often combined, result in fascinating depictions. The uniform of the 1st Horse Chasseur Regiment is a great example of this, whose helmet type was introduced by the Bourbons. Individual lives are also considered: the portraits of Captain Putigny of the 33rd Infantry Regiment, Lieutenant Noel of the Horse Grenadiers and Colonel Clary of the 1st Hussars stand out and provide insights of their experiences and bearing during their services in the field. Furthermore, plenty of poignant eyewitness accounts have been included to support analyses that were made in each chapter. If you are looking for details (numbers of equipment, unit strengths, casualty ratings, ...) of a specific unit, the index is a useful tool to find the regiment you need to then conduct research on quickly.

The wish of the authors, which was to succeed in providing a new understanding of the perception of the French Imperial forces that marched towards their downfall in June 1815, has definitely been achieved in *Waterloo: Napoleon's Last Army*. On my end, there are no complaints to formulate on what could have been done better. The attention to detail on every front is to be admired, and this will certainly result, for many of us, in frequent sessions of consultation of this brilliant piece of work. The book is simply a must have for every Napoleonic enthusiast, historian and/or wargamer. You will not be disappointed.