

# Honest Truth



THIS year is the 200th anniversary of one of the world's most famous battles, Waterloo. Robert Kershaw, a former Parachute Regiment colonel, reveals the battle from an ordinary soldier's perspective in new book *24 Hours At Waterloo* (Ebury). Robert told Bill Gibb *The Honest Truth about Waterloo*.

## The carnage and courage of Waterloo

### When did the battle take place?

On June 18, 1815, from about 11.20am until 9pm, ending with the French Army in full retreat.

It was staged nine miles south of Brussels after Napoleon had invaded Belgium three days before.

### Tell us how the day unfolded.

The soldiers' day began with about four hours of fitful sleep in the pouring rain after 72 exhausting hours of fighting and counter-marching.

The format for the next 9½ hours of savage fighting across the mud-spattered landscape was simple.

The British and Allied troops stubbornly clung to the higher Mont St Jean ridge, desperate to see the delayed Prussians arrive, while the French tenaciously attacked from the ridgeline opposite to get them off.

### How bloody was the battle?

Pretty grisly really. Nearly 180,000

soldiers fought face-to-face in an area four miles wide by two miles deep. By dusk, 54,000 bodies carpeted this small area.

Soldiers fell at the rate of 5,400 men an hour or one or two per second.

Cannon-fired solid metal balls which knocked soldiers over like

ninepins and musket balls that could tear off limbs.

### Any amazing tales of heroism?

As a modern soldier it is difficult to believe the naked courage required to withstand close range cannon fire.

Men stood their ground and after colleagues were blown away they moved forward to replace them.

This sort of guts is almost incomprehensible today.

### What surprised or shocked you?

One of the first surprises, having forced-marched many a mile during my military career, was that

soldiers at Waterloo did not have a

left or right boot. There was only large and small.

The next shock was the miserable lot of army wives and camp followers.

Martha Deacon was married to Ensign Thomas Deacon, wounded with the 73rd Regiment at Quatre-Bras. She had to walk over 20 miles to Brussels via Waterloo, in a thin dress, with three kids in tow during a freezing summer rainstorm, to look for her wounded husband. She was also nine months' pregnant!

### Was the battle a foregone conclusion or a surprise victory?

Neither actually. Wellington

described the battle as "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life".

At first, Napoleon thought he was only facing Wellington's rearguard and need only to brush them aside.

The massive French infantry

attack conducted in the morning nearly settled the issue.

The outcome was, as Wellington suggested, close and unpredictable.

**What was the scene at the end of that day?**

An awful scene really.

When Wellington ordered the general advance at the end of the day, a grim red line of piles of dead and wounded was left behind.

There was no great fanfare of

victory on the battlefield, simply the thrill of the advance.

The men were spent.

It took two days for the news to reach London.

Napoleon abdicated in Paris the next day and the face of Europe had irrecoverably changed.

**What was the impact afterwards?**

No soldier forgot the visceral carnage.

Many of the characters identified in 24 Hours at Waterloo suffered combat stress disorder for the rest of their lives.

Nobody at home understood and it was never spoken about other than in terms of strange behaviour.

