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**Andrew Uffindell**, *The Eagle's Last Triumph: Napoleon's Victory at Ligny, June 1815*. London: Greenhill Books, 2006. 272 pp. Plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-85367-688-8.

Review by Wayne Hanley, West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

Following his return from Elba in March 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte readied France for war and embarked upon what was arguably his most famous campaign, which culminated at Waterloo on 18 June 1815. Of course, the mere mention of that climactic battle so dominates the imagination that many forget that the emperor won a major battle against the Prussians two days earlier. The keys to understanding what happened at Waterloo, however, are the events and the battles that preceded it. As Andrew Uffindell ably argues in this reissue of his 1994 *The Eagle's Last Triumph* [1], the shortcomings of the French army and Napoleon's generalship which led to the emperor's ultimate defeat can be seen during the twin battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras. This critical examination of the three armies which participated in Napoleon's last military campaign is the true value of this work: Uffindell conclusively demonstrates that Napoleon and his imperial army were no longer the forces they had been in 1805, but shadows of their former selves.

The work begins with a brief discussion of the political situation in Europe and France before and during the period of Napoleon's Elban exile. It then analyzes the opposing forces on the eve of the Waterloo campaign. Uffindell examines first the command structure and key leaders in each army, and then discusses the states of the three opposing armies. Drawing heavily on primary sources and informed by numerous secondary works, the author's analysis makes apparent the great challenges facing Napoleon. As one of his generals noted, "The Napoleon we knew is no more" (p. 25). The decisiveness and tireless energy that left the emperor without equal in his prime had given way to lethargy and erratic moments of indecision. Even more problematic was what informed many of Napoleon's key decisions on the eve of the campaign. As Uffindell notes: the emperor had come "to believe in his own infallibility and fatally underestimated at least the tenacity if not the skill of Wellington and Blücher...[and] tended, over-optimistically, to believe all was going according to his plan, not crediting evidence to the contrary unless he were on the spot to see it for himself" (p.25).

While the morale and the individual quality of the French soldiers were superior, Uffindell contends that their effectiveness was hampered by an inferior supporting cast of key generals: Marshal Grouchy "lacked dash and imagination in the realm of strategy" (p. 27); Marshal Ney "lacked the intellect for an independent command" (p. 27); and Marshal Soult, a competent field commander was miscast as the emperor's chief of staff (indeed, faulty staff work would become the bane of the *Armée du Nord* of 1815). Napoleon had assigned his best commanders to other duties: Marshal Davout was minister of war and Marshal Suchet commanded the French army at Lyons. While it is true that some key players of past victories were absent (most notably the irreplaceable Marshal Berthier as chief of staff), Uffindell's assessment that "Napoleon had only four, second-rate, marshals with him for his last military campaign" (p.26) may be a bit too harsh and at times glosses over other challenges created by the emperor's postings. In his *Armies at Waterloo*, for example, Scott Bowden has previously argued that considering the circumstances Napoleon faced in 1815, his choice of senior commanders and their assignments was the best he could have made [2]. Uffindell, however, does allude to the emperor's role in magnifying leadership shortcomings, most notably his last minute assignment of Ney to command the army's all-important left wing which seriously undermined the marshal's effectiveness at Quatre Bras, a conclusion also reached by the military theorist Jomini [3].

While Uffindell argues that the challenges facing and the mistakes made by Napoleon ultimately proved to be his undoing, the allies faced serious challenges of their own. The Prussian forces, lacked adequate cavalry, were of disparate quality, and included soldiers from newly acquired territories, including some of Napoleon's former allies (p. 36). The system of Prussian seniority meant that Blücher's corps commanders were not necessarily the best available, and as for Blücher himself, while no one could doubt his personal bravery, his tenacity, or his ability to inspire his soldiers, he was "nearly illiterate" (p. 30). What compensated for these shortcomings were the brilliance of his chief of staff, Gneisenau, and the Prussian General Staff in general. The net result of these qualities, Uffindell summarizes, was that the Prussian army was more resilient than Napoleon had anticipated. Wellington's inexperienced multinational army, although more balanced in terms of cavalry, suffered from similar challenges, but benefited from Wellington's cool generalship and his ability to inspire the trust of his men.

As the campaign opened the apparent strengths of the French army took center-stage. Morale of the soldiers was high-almost frighteningly so. The emperor's initial plan for seizing the strategic initiative could be "regarded as a model" and the French army had crossed the Sambre before the allies knew Napoleon had left Paris (p. 50). In Wellington's now-famous words: "Napoleon has humbugged me...[and] gained twenty-four hours' march on me" (p. 61). As Napoleon struck the gap between allied deployments, the decentralized allied forces struggled to unify and their leaders tried to decipher the emperor's true intentions. The Napoleon of legend seemed to have returned.

As the three armies jockeyed for position, however, the weakness of the French army and the resiliency of the allies became more obvious. Instead of falling back away from each other, Blücher and Wellington attempted to unite their forces and overwhelm Napoleon with their superior numbers. Initially the emperor refused to acknowledge reports of these movements, but by the morning of 16 June realized that the Prussians had taken up positions and intended to offer battle near the village of Ligny. He planned to defeat the two allies in detail, beginning with Blücher. What he failed to realize was the speed with which Wellington concentrated his forces at Quatre Bras (only seven or so miles away) and the degree to which Wellington and Blücher were willing to support each other. The resulting conflict was not the succession of battles Napoleon envisioned, but a double battle.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the battle of Ligny, Uffindell sets events in their proper perspective, by showing the relationships between what happened at Ligny and at Quatre Bras. Events at one battlefield affected events at the other and with less than ideal results for the French forces. As a set battle, Ligny lacks any of the dash and brilliance of Napoleon's earliest victories-it was a straightforward, bloody slugfest. Napoleon engaged the Prussians, and through attack and counterattack (the village of Ligny changed hands a half a dozen times or more during the course of the day) gradually wore down the Prussians and forced Blücher to commit his reserves. It was a struggle without quarter-none was asked for, none was given. According to one eyewitness, "This was not a battle...it was a butchery" (p. 108). By evening, with the Prussian forces pushed to their limits, Napoleon ordered his Imperial Guard to advance. Nothing could withstand their onslaught, and the Prussians broke (despite the last minute heroics of Blücher's desperate cavalry charge, which left the Prussian marshal unhorsed and trapped beneath his mortally wounded mount). Napoleon had driven the Prussians from the field, employing only 63,000 men against Blücher's force of 83,000. But the Prussians were merely beaten, not defeated, as the events of 18 June would show.

What happened elsewhere that day prevented the battle at Ligny from being the decisive victory that the emperor sought. Even as Napoleon launched his first regiments against the Prussian lines, Marshal Ney found himself in a rapidly escalating battle against Wellington's forces at Quatre Bras. It is in his description and analysis of this complementary battle and its impact on Napoleon's activities at Ligny that Andrew Uffindell shines as a military historian. For nearly two hundred years, Ney has been a scapegoat for the emperor's failed campaign of 1815 [4]. His detractors pose a series of "what if" theories: if only Ney had followed the emperor's orders, if only Ney had displayed his normal

impetuosity and attacked Wellington's detachments at Quatre Bras early on the morning of 16 June, the emperor would not have been defeated two days later.

While Ney committed errors in his conduct of the battle against Wellington at Quatre Bras, many of the problems that prevented the emperor's decisive victory at Ligny were beyond his control. According to Uffindel, "nothing indicated to him [Ney] the necessity for speedy action" during the morning of 16 June (p. 124). In fact, Napoleon's orders arrived only at 11:00 am. The true culprits that hampered the effectiveness of both French commanders were faulty staff work throughout the day and the emperor's failure to realize Ney's tactical situation. The most glaring of these errors involved the erratic movements of d'Erlon's corps. As Uffindell notes, "explanations of d'Erlon's almost inexplicable failure...range from Napoleon's poor handwriting and Marshal Ney's pig-headedness in recalling d'Erlon, to d'Erlon's crass stupidity in obeying that recall." The author, in fact, devotes an entire chapter to the subject, and making superb use of published memoirs to recreate a timeline, offers what may be the definitive explanation for what occurred.

By late afternoon of 16 June, a crucial moment arose simultaneously on both battlefields. Both Napoleon and Ney had pushed their opponents to a breaking point and found themselves in need of reinforcements—for Ney, to seize the crossroads at Quatre Bras, and for Napoleon, to flank and destroy the Prussian army. By this time, the emperor finally began to realize that Ney was unable to complete the encirclement of the Prussians because of Wellington's staunch defense of Quatre Bras. He also remembered that D'Erlon's I Corps (nominally part of Ney's left wing) remained unengaged and could be diverted to Ligny. At 3:15 pm, Colonel Forbin-Janson delivered orders to that effect to d'Erlon. The inexperienced staff officer, however, failed to deliver the duplicate orders to Ney (p. 154). In fact, it would not be until 5:00 pm that the marshal discovered the fate of his long-awaited reinforcements. By that time, Wellington's counter-attack threatened Ney's position, and the marshal issued his own orders, recalling d'Erlon to Quatre Bras. This situation was compounded by the fact that I Corps had just appeared on Napoleon's flank near Ligny, causing momentary confusion because it had not arrived where expected. It was at that moment that Ney's recall arrived. D'Erlon ignored the pleadings of an imperial aide-de-camp to proceed with the attack on the Prussian flank and ordered his corps to reverse its march (which arrived at Quatre Bras after the day's fighting had ended). The net result of the faulty staff work was that I Corps, which would have proven decisive on either battlefield had it been engaged, marched uselessly between them.

Instead of ending his coverage of the battle of Ligny with the close of day on 16 June, the author continues with a summary of the events that followed, culminating with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. This coverage, however, is not in the form of an epilogue, but is intimately connected to his analysis of the earlier battle. Uffindell clearly demonstrates that the problems that contributed to the emperor's less-than-decisive victory over the Prussians proved to be key to the emperor's decisive defeat two days later. The most important factor was Napoleon himself. After showing flashes of his former genius prior to and during the battle at Ligny, he was overcome by a bout of lethargy and indecision following the battle. Having driven the Prussians from the field, the Napoleon of old would have initiated a pursuit to transform their retreat into a rout. In June 1815, nothing of the sort occurred—despite the urging of Marshal Grouchy (who has, perhaps unjustly, been criticized for his lack of initiative). Instead, during the morning of 17 June, the emperor toured the battlefield and only issued movement orders at 11:00 am. By that time, the Prussians had broken contact (moving toward, not away from Wellington as Napoleon thought) and had begun to rally. As Uffindell noted, "it was a fatal delay" (p. 166). The French pursuit of Wellington was likewise delayed, allowing the Iron Duke to take up position at Mont St. Jean outside Waterloo, setting the stage for the campaign's finale.

Rounding out *The Eagle's Last Triumph* are several interesting features: an analysis of the battle at Ligny, a discussion of the casualties, a detailed case study of the garrisoning of Ligny village by the Prussians, a guide to the battlefield, and several appendices of key documents (including an eyewitness

account of d'Erlon's movements). As with the rest of the book, Uffindell does not burden the reader with the minutia of unit placements, but uses such details only to further his arguments and always to elucidate the bigger picture (the same could be said of his use of maps, tables, and graphs). Uffindell, for example, concludes that Napoleon won the battle "by imposing his will on the enemy and by making the enemy conform to French moves. Napoleon wore down the Prussian army, exhausted its strength and made it use up its reserves" (p. 214). The close, detailed case study demonstrates how this occurred, while suggesting the tenacity and the resiliency of the Prussian forces that enabled them to play *the* key role in Napoleon's defeat two days later [5].

In laying out the comparative assets of and challenges faced by all three armies, Andrew Uffindell sets not only the battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras, but also the battle of Waterloo into their broader context while shedding light on several controversial aspects of campaign (such as the seemingly inexplicable movements of d'Erlon's corps on 16 June). Such analysis demonstrates the resilience and determination of the allies while showing Napoleon's *Armée du Nord* of 1815 as it was—a potent, but flawed instrument of war. These virtues, combined with the well-documented, thesis-driven narrative, make *The Eagle's Last Triumph* an excellent read, suitable for scholars and amateurs alike.

## NOTES

[1] Andrew Uffindell is the author or co-author of eight books on the Napoleonic era: the two editions of *The Eagle's Last Triumph* (London: Greenhill Books, 1994 and 2006), *On Wellington: The Duke and His Art of War* (London: Greenhill, 1998), *On the Fields of Glory: The Battle Fields of the 1815 Campaign* (London: Greenhill Books, 2002), *Great Generals of the Napoleonic Wars and Their Battles* (Kent: Spellmount, 2003), *Waterloo* (Aberdeenshire: Pen and Sword, 2003), *The National Army Museum Book of Wellington's Armies: Britain's Triumphant Campaigns in the Peninsula and at Waterloo, 1808-1815* (Pan Books, 2004), *Waterloo Commanders: Napoleon, Wellington, and Blucher* (Aberdeenshire: Pen and Sword, 2007), and *Napoleon's Immortals* (Kent: Spellmount, 2007). He also contributed to *Napoleon: The Final Verdict* (London: Arms and Armour, 1997) and to two edited volumes of "alternate history," *The Napoleon Options: Alternate Decisions of the Napoleonic Wars* (London; Greenhill, 2000) and *Dixie Victorious: An Alternate History of the Civil War* (London: Greenhill, 2006).

[2] See Scott Bowden's *Armies at Waterloo* (London: Empire Games Press, 1983).

[3] See Antoine-Henri Jomini, *Campagne de 1815, Correspondance entre le lieutenant-général Baron Jomini et M. le duc d'Elchingen* (Paris: Imprimerie de Bourgogne et Martinet, 1841), pp. 124-25. Few knew Ney's thoughts and capabilities better than Jomini, who (until 1813) served as Ney's chief of staff.

[4] See, for example, David G. Chandler's classic *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1966). Chandler devotes an entire chapter to "The Errors of Marshal Ney."

[5] While Uffindell does not cite Peter Hofschroër's two volumes on the Waterloo campaign in his notes (although calls special attention to them in his bibliography), Hofschroër's assessment of the key role played by the Prussians informs Uffindell's conclusions. See Hofschroër's *1815-The Waterloo Campaign: Wellington and his German Allies in the Battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998) and *1815-The Waterloo Campaign-The German Victory: From Waterloo to the Fall of Napoleon* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999).

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