

“The Bloody Fields of Waterloo”

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The Battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday 18 June 1815, around 15 miles south of the Belgian capital. Around 100,000 Allied troops hastily assembled and commanded by Arthur, the 1st Duke of Wellington. Facing him was the Armée du Nord of 125,000 committed French soldiers - many of them veterans - commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte. Each commander must have wondered what was to be the outcome of this titanic struggle, since neither had ever faced each other in combat. The battle started at around 1130hrs and lasted until about 2000hrs. After a series of determined assaults by the French Army, the Allied line held and the Prussians under Prince Marshal Blücher arrived, as part of the planned strategy, thus finally ending the hopes of the defeated Emperor. The battle will be explained by stages, including particular medical problems. The Army Medical Department (the forerunner of the RAMC) was ill-prepared for the Waterloo Campaign. Over the long Peninsular War (1808-14), it had been honed into an efficient and well-motivated force, by Sir James McGrigor and his ‘Medical Gentlemen’, as Wellington called them. But many of these surgeons had dispersed and were worn out - less than half of the medical staff at this battle had served in the Peninsula. Various aspects of wounds and surgical treatment will be addressed, including some anecdotal injuries and challenges for surgeons working without antisepsis and anaesthesia.

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