

# THE BUSINESS TIMES



## *Remembering Waterloo*

by

Neil Behrmann [btworld@sph.com.sg](mailto:btworld@sph.com.sg)

Tourists will be fascinated by the numerous events held to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo.

IF you're a traveller with a yen for European history a new museum to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo is destined to be on your to-do list when you're next in the UK.

Near the town of Waterloo, 20 kilometres south of Brussels, the museum, 1815 Memorial, has been built on the site of the terrible battle which occurred on June 18, 1815. From Brussels south station, the regular train only takes 15 minutes to Braine-l'Alleud, which is about a 10-minute drive to the battlefield.

The museum, which is interactive and also has a 3-D film of the epic struggle, shows the events that led up to the battle. Linked to the museum is a magnificent panorama depicting the battle between the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of France and the Duke of Wellington, commander of the British, Dutch, Belgian and German allied army.

Until June 21, Waterloo 200's events have included a re-enactment of the battle. In the days and months ahead, there will be plenty of opportunities for foreign tourists to get involved.

For those who have a scant knowledge of the history and the battle, it could be a good idea to start at the museum. The interactive tour begins with the French Revolution in 1789 and the meteoric rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, a poor Corsican soldier who became a brilliant general. Napoleon initially fought for the revolution's liberty, fraternity and equality against reactionary European monarchs, who were worried about their own potential uprisings. Napoleon, who married well-connected Joséphine de Beauharnais, became consul and then literally crowned himself emperor in 1804. During the brief periods of peace, in the 20 years he was in power, France's greatest but most flawed French leader introduced the civil Code Napoleon, which European nations are still applying, established the Bank of France, universities and schools.

Unfortunately, Napoleon suffered from hubris and his arrogance and ruthlessness led to numerous wars in which more than a million French soldiers and civilians died. Indeed, during a retreat from a failed invasion of Russia in 1812, the severe Russian winter took the lives of some 500,000 French, Polish and other soldiers. That abortive campaign weakened Napoleon. After being defeated in 1814, he was exiled to Elba, an island off the coast of Italy, only to escape and become emperor again. The powers of Europe vowed to fight Napoleon specifically rather than France. To swiftly divide his opposition, Napoleon rushed to attack and after two battles, eventually met Wellington for the big one at Waterloo.

### **Delayed attack**

Except for Butte de Lion, a huge man-made hill to commemorate the fallen Dutch soldiers, the battlefield is almost the same as it was on that fateful June day in 1815. Nowadays, it is enjoyable to walk around the lovely green fields of the site, but back then about 140,000 men fought on a Sunday - about two football field crowds pitted against each other. Subsequent Victorian and French paintings are colourful and romantic, but the night before the fighting began, heavy rain drenched soldiers. Napoleon had to delay his attack because cannon wheels were caught in mud. The delay gave the Prussians time to eventually help Wellington.

Napoleon's cannons began firing just before noon and by 9pm that night, about a third of the soldiers and some 10,000 horses were either dead or wounded. Men lay on the field in agony crying out for water and food. Later, looters stripped the dead and teeth were extracted and sold for dentures.

When you ramble across the various vantage points, you will appreciate how Wellington outsmarted his opponent who had a reputation as a brilliant commander. The Duke had inspected the Belgian countryside the previous autumn and deliberately chose his defensive position on a high ridge. His troops ducked behind the ridge, reloaded, stood up and fired at the advancing French infantry. Marshall Ney impetuously ordered his cavalry to attack, but many were killed when they failed to break Wellington's defensive squares.

Despite the uphill climb, Napoleon's elite Imperial Guard almost penetrated Wellington's lines, but Marshal Blucher's Prussian forces arrived in the evening and attacked Napoleon's right flank. The French army retreated in disorder. Napoleon lost the battle and was exiled to the remote island of St Helena, where he wrote self-justification memoirs that helped create the Napoleonic myth.

Wellington, who eventually became UK prime minister, admitted that the Battle of Waterloo was "a near run thing, the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life".

- **The writer's anti-war children's novel, *Butterfly Battle - The Story of the Great Insect War*, begins with a scene from Waterloo.**