

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

THE Waterloo Medal of 1815 is the best starting-point for new collectors who set out to compile a collection of the campaign medals of the British Army.

This medal is the first to be awarded to all personnel present at a battle (the Dunbar Medal had been given to officers and men but not to *all* taking part).

It was the first campaign medal to have the recipient's name impressed on the edge by machine and it was also the first campaign medal to be given to next of kin. (The Highland Society Medal was not a Government Campaign Medal but a private one.) The new collector might be confused on being told that the Waterloo Medal was the first Government medal to all troops when he comes up against a Military General Service Medal with a bar for an earlier battle—but the Military General Service Medal was not awarded until 1848 and was back-dated to 1793 but even then only awarded to survivors. (See medal illustrations on pages 17 and 19).

Experts argue the toss about many earlier 'campaign' medals, and often contend that such-and-such was a commemoration medallion rather than a battle award, etc. There is no doubt about the Waterloo Medal and it is therefore an excellent starting-point. The collector can always work backwards later on once he has gained the knowledge necessary to form his own opinions of the experts' assessments on earlier awards.

Also, of course, few battles can match Waterloo for importance in modern British history. Waterloo was a turning point; it established the supremacy of the British at a time when the domination of Europe was very much a matter of the toss of a coin.

The collector must expect these medals to be fairly expensive, but they are by no means out of reach. Generally they can be obtained from about £30. General Colville's reserve division which was not

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committed to battle naturally gave rise to the cheaper medals. This division comprised: 2/35th, 1/54th, 2/59th and 1/91st Foot.

A little-appreciated fact is that the Waterloo Medal was awarded for other battles, namely the battle of Ligny and the battle of Quatre Bras, both of which took place on June 16, two days before the main conflict at Waterloo.

Because the medal was awarded very soon after the action (early in 1816) it was worn on the breast and suffered the wear and tear of a soldier's life, so that these medals seldom turn up in condition better than Very Fine and more often are only found in Fine condition.

Whereas collectors become very sceptical about 'unofficial' suspenders, etc. on other medals, private forms of suspension on the Waterloo Medal do not adversely affect the value of the medal. When issued it had what is probably the most ugly form of suspension of any British award—a heavy steel ring which quickly became rusty, and marked the resplendent uniforms of the wearers. Officers in particular soon took the ring off and replaced it with a more attractive and less cumbersome form of suspension.

Fifty thousand-odd fought under the Duke of Wellington, while Napoleon, who discounted Blücher's ability to rally his forces for a further three days, moved to his battle positions with 75,000 men, full of confidence. Looking at a scant patrol of British troops, Napoleon is supposed to have said: "I have them there at last, these English!" General Foy, who had ample experience of 'these English' in Spain, retorted: "Wellington never shows his troops; but if he be yonder, I must warn your majesty that the English infantry, in close fighting, is the very devil!"

And so they were. The price they paid for victory was terrible—fifteen thousand dead and wounded. Some regiments were virtually wiped out and after the battle the Duke of Wellington rode the field able to trace the 'squares', marked clearly by the dead. At the time the Duke wrote: "The losses I have sustained have quite broken me down, and I have no feeling for the advantages we have gained". But it was the salvation of British interests and the end of the Grande Armée.

Small wonder that the medal of this battle is highly prized and marks the starting-point of many collections. Each medal is named to its owner on the edge in machine-impressed serif letters. The machine was the invention of Thomas Jerome and Charles Harrison, who were

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employed at the Mint. Where the new collector comes across such a medal with an engraved name it means that the medal has been re-named. It is then of little real value.

Although no forgeries of the medal are known there was a replacement medal produced and new collectors should be careful not to buy one as an original. They are easy to distinguish as, apart from being smaller in size, the name of the designer, T. Wyon, is omitted from the replacement on both obverse and reverse. Sometimes bars are met with. These are not official, but may well have been produced contemporarily as an added embellishment to the medal when being worn in civilian clothes.

SAMPLE