

Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852)

by Wu WenJie



INTRODUCTION

Arthur Wellesley was an Anglo-Irish general and statesman, victor of the Waterloo Campaign and twice British Prime Minister. Known as the 1st Duke of Wellington or, Duke of Wellington, he is most famous for his major role in the Napoleonic wars during the 19th century.

EARLY LIFE

Arthur Wesley was born in Dublin on 1st May 1769 to the 1st Earl and Countess of Mornington. In 1798, he changed his surname to Wellesley.¹ As the third son in the family, he was not as exemplary as his brothers. The young duke was not a promising student at Eton back then; he was withdrawn and sent to private classes in Brussels, followed by a military school—the French Royal Academy of Equitation in Angers.² During his time in Angers, he was taught various skills such as riding, fencing, mathematics, literature, as well as French. Wellington also expressed interest in music and he took up violin as a specialisation.

Following his mother's advice, Wellington joined the army in March 1787 and with the help of his brother, Richard Wellesley, Wellington was attached to the 73rd (Highland) Regiment of Foot

as an aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, before being promoted to Lieutenant in the same year. During that period, Wellington was involved in social activities with his superior, playing with his violin and unfortunately, indulged in gambling.³ Wellington's life took a complete change when he fell in love with Catherine Pakenham, daughter to the 2nd Baron Longford. In 1793, Wellington's proposal was turned down by Catherine's brother, Thomas Pakenham, who considered him a poor man who had no goals in his life, unfitting to the status of Catherine and the Pakenham family.⁴ This spurred the young duke to reconsider his current lifestyle and thus began to pursue his military career.

MILITARY CAREER

Defeat in Flanders

Having purchased lieutenant colonelcy in September 1793, Wellington set sail for Flanders in his very first battle experience against the French forces. During the campaign, assisting the Duke of York, he realised that the communications and order of the troops and its generals were very disorganised. Wellington treated this as a lesson on 'what one ought not to do. The British eventually lost the battle.⁵

FOURTH ANGLO-MYSORE WAR

Following the defeat in Flanders, Wellington returned to England in March 1795 before setting sail for India in May 1796. His brother, Richard, was then the Governor-General of India. To extend the rule of the British East India Company (EIC) over India, Richard ordered the capture of Seringapatam, a city located north of Mysore. Wellington took part in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War against Tipu Sultan, ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore. During the preparation for the war, Wellington took charge of logistics and understood the importance of managing and securing supply lines.⁶

War broke out on Mallavelly, where the Sultan's army tried to attack the invaders. Fortunately, they failed. Wellington's 33rd regiment assisted the forces of General George Harris against the Sultan's army and drove them to retreat from Mallavelly, back into Seringapatam. The forces of General Harris and Wellington arrived at Seringapatam in 1799 and began their siege on the outlying village of Sultanpettah. The attack proved to be unsuccessful due to the fact that it was utter darkness when they commenced the attack and the soldiers were fighting against the Sultan's forces that were already prepared for their attack.⁷ Wellington was decisive and made the right choice—to retreat and scout his enemies' positions

before attacking again. By the following day, Wellington's forces managed to secure Sultanpettah and the forces marched towards Seringapatam. Wellington was then deployed as a reserve to support the siege of Seringapatam. On 4th May, Tipu Sultan was killed and Seringapatam was captured.

When Seringapatam was taken over, the troops were given the liberty of plundering the town and the native citizens cowered in fear as the whole town was in chaos. In response to this, Wellington instilled order and discipline as he called for troops to be stationed in the town and hanged some of the plunderers.⁸ The plundering soon stopped and the people returned to their homes in peace. Within days, the town became lively once more, with thriving businesses and crowds filling up the streets. Wellington displayed excellent attributes of a commander and along with the recognition of his contributions, he was made the Governor of Seringapatam and Mysore.⁹

Battle of Assaye

In 1802, rivalry between factions of the Maratha Confederacy initiated a war.¹⁰ The Holkars attacked Scindia and Peshwas, forcing Baji Rao II, Peshwa of Pune to flee. Baji Rao II sought the help of the EIC to restore his throne and agreed to submit to the EIC's authority in exchange. The Peshwa then signed a treaty with the British, known

as The Treaty of Bassein. While the EIC was negotiating with the Marathas, Wellington's army marched towards the Scindia's stronghold in Ahmednagar. The Marathas felt that the British should not be involved in their affairs and refused to submit to the EIC. When negotiations fell, Wellington's forces took over Ahmednagar.

Wellington then received intelligence about enemies stationed at the village of Assaye. He personally scouted the Maratha camp and discovered a huge army. The Scindia had allied with the Raja of Berar, forming an extensive force of an estimated 40,000 to 200,000 men.¹¹ Though severely outnumbered, Wellington fought the Marathas Army on 23rd September 1803.

The Marathas Army deployed artillery and cavalry units at the front line against Wellington's forces. Using the terrain to his advantage, Wellington's forces concealed themselves on the reverse slopes of the grounds to avoid taking damage from the artillery. At close range, Wellington's infantry charged and broke through the Marathas front line. As Wellington's forces advanced, some of the Marathas gunners feigned death. They surprised the British by attacking from the rear. In response to this, Wellington deployed his cavalry to break apart their gun line and ensured that no gunners were

left alive. The battle of Assaye only lasted for a few hours. Despite being outnumbered by the Marathas, Wellington's forces managed to drive the Marathas army to retreat and emerged as the grand victor, with casualties of his army close to 1,600, out of 6,000 men, while the Marathas Army had 5,000 men.¹² Wellington's experience in the field, along with his leadership qualities and calmness, led his men to believe that victory was possible. By the end of 1803, Scindia and Berar surrendered to the EIC. The Battle of Assaye was said to be finest achievement for Wellington and his first major victory in battle history.

Throughout his years in India, Wellington gained the experience and qualities of a commander that would later allow him to excel in his future battles—leadership, decision-making, discipline, care for soldiers, careful planning and preparations, military strategy and maintaining diplomatic relations with civilians. When Wellington requested to return to England in 1804, he was made Knight of The Bath for his contributions.

Peninsular Wars

Back in England, Wellington was elected as a Member of Parliament for the Rye parliamentary constituency.¹³ Within a year, he was appointed the Chief Secretary of Ireland by the Duke of Portland. However, his political career was

short-lived as he was called back to active service against Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France.¹⁴ France had allied with Spain and invaded Portugal in 1807. In response to the attacks, the British decided to intervene to stop Napoleon from expanding. In 1808, Wellington's forces defeated the French army in the Battle of Vimeiro and with England and Portugal joining forces, the Anglo-Portuguese Army was formed with Wellington as its Commander-in-Chief.

In 1809, France once again invaded Portugal. Wellington, in command of the Anglo-Portuguese Army, engaged the French forces in the Battle of Porto. The battle ended with Wellington's victory and the French forces retreated into Spain. With Spain, England and Portugal fighting against France, Wellington led the Allied Army and liberated Portugal and Madrid, the Spanish capital. In 1812, the Sixth Coalition was formed—this included Austria, Prussia, Russia, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden, Spain and several other German States. The allies claimed back their territories and invaded France, defeating Napoleon. Wellington achieved remarkable victories during the Peninsular Wars, winning almost every battle against the French.

During the battle of Toulouse, the United Kingdom and France incurred huge amount of casualties.¹⁵ News of Napoleon's abdication finally reached Wellington and his opponent, Marshal General of the French Army, Jean-de-Dieu Soult. The battle was put to an end by Marshal Soult who realised that there was no longer a purpose to continue fighting. Napoleon was then sent to exile on Elba in 1814 while Wellington returned to England and was granted a dukedom, making him the first Duke of Wellington.

Battle of Waterloo

Napoleon, who was unwilling to spend the remainder of his days on Elba, escaped and landed in Cannes, France on 1st March 1815. Troops who were still loyal to Napoleon defected to him and they marched into Paris on 19th March where he took command and drove out Louis XVIII, King of France, in an attempt to regain power. At that point of time, Wellington had already been sent to the Congress of Vienna as an Ambassador of Great Britain. Upon hearing the news, the ambassadors of the allied countries declared Napoleon as an outlaw.¹⁶ Leaving Vienna, Wellington became the Commander of the allied armies that would form the Seventh Coalition, leading over 112,000 soldiers to battle Napoleon's force of 72,000.¹⁷

Wellington and Napoleon would have their encounter at Belgium, where the last battle of

the Napoleonic Wars took place. Napoleon knew that if the coalition forces manage to join up, their huge army would overpower his own army. Thus, Napoleon's first target was to eliminate the British and Prussian forces. Napoleon divided his army into three forces, one under the command of Marshal Michel Ney, another under Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy and finally the third force under his own command. On 15th June 1815, Napoleon's forces engaged the Prussian forces who were under the command of Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blucher in the Battle of Ligny. The Prussians were defeated and Marshal Blucher retreated. However, instead of retreating eastwards, Marshal Blucher decided to retreat northwards instead, allowing the Prussian forces to support Wellington at a safe distance. Wellington retreated from Quatre Bras after the Battle of Ligny, to the low ridge near Mont Saint Jean, south of Waterloo. Securing a defensive line, Wellington also deployed troops to the Chateau of Hougoumont, the farmhouse of La Haye Sainte and to the east, where the Prussian forces were.

Napoleon and Marshal Ney headed towards Mont Saint Jean while Marshal Grouchy pursued the retreating Prussian forces. Despite their advance, the French could not engage Wellington's forces. Napoleon believed in the heavy usage of artillery and its capability of incapacitating large

forces. Wellington, however, had learnt from his battle in Assaye, which was to use terrain slopes as a defence from the artillery. Making the troops lie down on the reverse slope of the ridge hindered the French forces from observing and targeting Wellington's troops. More commonly known as Reverse Slope Defence, the French cannons and skirmishers were rendered ineffective against the concealed troops.¹⁸ Wellington then launched a surprise attack on the French forces with volleys of muskets at close range. The French, who could not counter this tactic, repeatedly charged forward, only to be gunned down by musket fire. On 18th June 1815, Napoleon ordered Marshal Comte d'Erlon and Marshal Honoré Reille to break through Wellington's front line. Wellington's forces, however, were able to break Marshal Comte d'Erlon's attack with cavalry and rode past La Haye Sainte to attack the French artillery. Wellington's attack proved to be unsuccessful when the French counterattacked and the coalition forces suffered huge casualties.

The French artillery managed to inflict heavy casualties on Wellington's forces after the counterattack and captured La Haye Sainte. In the meantime, Prussian forces marched west and split into two forces that would reinforce Wellington and attack the French forces from the rear. Lieutenant General Hans von Zieten's Prussian I Corps arrived

to assist Wellington's forces while General Friedrich von Bulow's IV Corps captured Plancenoit, forcing Napoleon to send his elite Imperial Guards to defend the rear. The battle was over as the coalition forces surrounded and overwhelmed the French army. Napoleon was escorted out of the battle field and abdicated on 22nd June. His plan to flee was thwarted and he surrendered on 15th July before being exiled to the island of St. Helena.

POLITICAL CAREER

Arthur Wellesley was more famous as a military figure than as a politician. In 1818, Wellington was given a post in Lord Liverpool's Tory government. Wellington then became the Commander-in-chief of the British Army in 1827 and within a year, his influence in the Tory party increased. Wellington was finally invited by King George IV to form his own government and he resigned as Commander-in-Chief to become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Unfortunately, he was known for his measures to repress reform and his popularity sank during his time as the Prime Minister. The Duke did not have positive views on parliamentary reform and his opposition to them were not well received. Angry crowds protested outside his London home, Apsley House, and began throwing objects, shattering windows. Wellington then earned the nickname 'Iron Duke', when

iron shutters were instilled on the windows to prevent further damage. Riots and sabotage ensued as rural unemployment increased and the citizens hated the 'Iron Duke' even more.¹⁹

Ultimately, Wellington's government collapsed in 1830. He continued to fight reform in opposition, before finally giving in to the Great Reform Bill in 1832. In 1834, Wellington refused a second invitation to form a government and instead joined Sir Peel's ministry as Foreign Secretary. Wellington became the Leader of the House of Lords from 1834 to 1835 and when Sir Peel resigned in 1846, he retired from politics.

DEATH

Arthur Wellesley died on 14th September 1852, aged 83, due to the effects of a stroke after a series of seizures. He was then given a monumental state funeral and buried in St Paul's Cathedral, London.

LEGACY

To this day, Arthur Wellesley is still a controversial figure in military history. His leadership qualities, along with his intelligence and experience have been recognised on the battlefield. Even against much bigger and tougher enemies, he was able to utilise his resources and advantages skilfully. As the first Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley was commonly referred

to as the Duke of Wellington as his legacy overshadowed his descendants.

In honour of his contributions, many monuments were built during his time. The Wellington Arch was planned in 1825 by King George IV to commemorate Britain's victories over the Napoleonic Wars. The monument was built between the year 1826 and 1830 and it still stands today in London's Hyde Park. Equestrian Statues of Wellington were also erected in Hyde Park,²⁰ which were later moved to Aldershot and Glasgow, Scotland. The Wellington boots, modified Hessian boots worn by Arthur Wellesley into battle, have also become popular footwear that lasted throughout the 19th century. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Marjie Bloy, "Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington (1769-1852)," www.historyhome.co.uk/pms/wellingt.htm
2. Norman Gash, *Wellington: Studies in the Military and Political Career of the First Duke of Wellington* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 6.
5. Marjie Bloy, "Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington (1769-1852)," www.historyhome.co.uk/pms/wellingt.htm
6. Norman Gash, *Wellington: Studies in the Military and Political Career of the First Duke of Wellington* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 13.
7. John Gurwood, *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington: During His Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France, from 1799 to 1818, Volume 1* (London: John Murray, 1834), 23
8. Ibid, 37.
9. Ibid, 39.
10. The Maratha Confederacy is an Indian imperial power existed from 1674 to 1818. It consisted of different clans such as; the Peshwas, Gaekwads, Puars, Holkars, Scindias and Bhonsales. The Battle of Poona occurred when the Holkars attacked the Scindia and Peshwa forces near the city of Pune.
11. Richard Cavendish, "The Battle of Assaye," <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/battle-assaye>
12. British Battles, "The Battle of Assaye," <http://www.britishbattles.com/second-mahratta/assaye.htm>
13. Wikipedia, "Rye UK Parliament constituency," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rye_%28UK_Parliament_constituency%29
14. In 1807, The French Empire allied with the Spain Empire and both forces invaded Portugal. However, in 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, seeing that Spain was in chaos and corruption, turned on his ally and ordered his forces to capture Spanish fortresses.

15. Norman Gash, *Wellington: Studies in the Military and Political Career of the First Duke of Wellington* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 18.
16. Jeremy Black, *The Battle of Waterloo* (New York: Random House, 2010).
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Alfred Webb, "Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington," <http://www.libraryireland.com/biography/ArthurWellesleyDukeofWellington.php>
20. The London Pass, "Wellington Arch on Hyde Park Corner," <https://www.londonpass.com/london-attractions/wellington-arch.html>