



By Professor Tony Pollard

MAKING THE BIGGEST WARGAME THE MOTHER OF ALL BATTLES

Over recent months I've heard a few rumours of big wargames being record-breaking. The reality is that as yet there is no official Guinness World Record for the greatest number of figures deployed in a tabletop wargame (and before anyone rushes off to set up their 6 mm armies on a couple of Subbuteo pitches, we are talking 28 mm here). I would, along with a number of friends, like to change that, and all for a very worthy cause. Before we cut to the chase, though, it might be useful to provide some background, which includes my own history of almost being a wargamer.

It was a motley crew of sloppily painted 25 mm English Civil War figures arrayed across the carpet of a school friend's bedroom. Not too much to capture the imagination, you might think, and indeed, as well as being my first wargame, it was also my last. However, the bug had bitten, and before long I was ordering my own mini *impi* of Peter Laing 15 mm Zulus (probably no more than 40 or 50 of them) and a fittingly lesser number of their pith-helmeted and red-coated foes, as that was where my historical interest lay at the time. They weren't particularly well cast, but I enjoyed painting them, wagons, oxen, and all. However, for some reason lost to the mists of time I never played them in a wargame. It didn't help that when I moved to Scotland in the late 70s, I was too busy not getting punched in the playground of Oban High School to admit to having an interest in toy soldiers, as I am sure my all-too-real protagonists would have regarded them.

For many years I put my undeveloped interest in wargaming behind me, at times limiting it to a surreptitious flick through a copy of a magazine in the newsagents while picking up my latest pre-painted Del Prado 52 mm Napoleonic figure, which came with a fact-filled Osprey supplement (these still fill a glass case in the hall of my home in Glasgow, where they are just about tolerated by my wife). In the meantime, I went through university and trained as an archaeologist, with the end result that I am now Professor of Conflict History and Archaeology at the University of Glasgow.

In 2014, I was invited to lead a team of archaeologists working with military

veterans on the site of the iconic Battle of Waterloo, which was fast approaching its bicentenary. That invitation came from Mark Evans and Charlie Foinette, the first a retired captain in the Coldstream Guards and the second a serving major in that same regiment, which had acquitted itself so well at Waterloo. Both of these old friends had studied archaeology at university and it was their shared experience, as soldiers and archaeology students, that led to the idea of setting up an archaeological project at Waterloo involving military veterans and serving personnel who had incurred injury or were suffering from PTSD. Archaeology had already proven itself as an activity with therapeutic qualities, thanks to the work of Operation Nightingale, but deploying a mixed team of archaeologists and veterans on a historic battlefield was quite a new development. Now, after three annual two-week seasons of fieldwork, Waterloo Uncovered, as the project became known, is well established, and in 2017 saw a 70-strong team of veterans, archaeologists, historians, and students make further advances in our knowledge of the battle through the investigation of its material remains.

This year we had an added activity, alongside the digging, metal detecting, finds recording, and mapping that are part of our daily round on





the battlefield. Thanks to a very generous donation from Warlord Games, via our finds officer Hillery Harrison, we were in possession of a good number of their fabulous 28 mm Napoleonic figures, and even the model of Hougoumont (which is where our work has been focussed). As soon as I heard about this, all my suppressed interest came to the fore once more, and I was immediately buying paints and brushes so that we could spend time during the evenings bringing this mix of plastic and metal soldiers to life. So it was that, on many an evening during those two weeks last July, a group of us met in a function room in the hotel to take part in what became known as "Painting Club". It was a great opportunity to wind down and have some quiet time after a hectic day, and the amount of interest shown by veterans and students, males and females, was really quite a surprise. Some had never even seen a wargames figure before, let alone painted one; some, like myself, hadn't tried it for decades; while one or two were practised painters – and we were fortunate here to have RAF

veteran and accomplished model-maker David Ulke to provide us with some much-needed tips.

I settled for a French officer, with his bicorn and cloak appealing to my eye for the latest Paris fashions, and from the outset found the entire exercise a delight. It was therapeutic after the stresses of helping to run a big archaeological site during the day, but it was also reassuring that, despite degraded eyesight and a lack of practice, I could still make a respectable job of my man. The problem was that it took me about an hour or more every other night or so to finish him. It was going to take me a long time to paint anything like a unit! So it was that, when it came to the end of our two weeks, I made sure to pack a small selection of the many men still unpainted and a sample of the paints so that I could continue the task at home. I wasn't sure how my wife would react to this, and she had already requested via Facebook that my bags be searched before we left. Fortunately my smuggling skills were up to the challenge, and even Maria

The Battle of Waterloo, painted by Jan Willem Pieneman in 1824. This painting shows Wellington signalling the general advance. The wounded Prince of Orange is carried off on the left. From the collection of the Rijksmuseum, The Netherlands.





was pleased to see how calming the exercise was

when I started painting French infantry figures on my return home. It wasn't quite Painting Club, but I was pleased to be able to continue with my rediscovered pastime, and its effectiveness as a form of stress reduction was still apparent.

ously noted, an official Guinness World Record does not yet exist, but there are stories out there of games with 15,000+ 28 mm figures, and any information on mega-big games will be gladly received). It is here that again the collaborative nature of the activity would come to the fore: could we recruit troops, both full-scale humans and 28 mm figures, from the standing armies of the many wargames clubs across the UK – and, as we are talking about Waterloo, why not from the other countries that were involved? Fresh figures could be painted, and we could perhaps unite the clubs with veterans groups, and even schools, setting up Painting Clubs across the UK (promoting the educational benefits of wargaming would be a further motivation here – e.g. craft skills, history, and even basic maths). Who wouldn't enjoy painting a figure with the knowledge that it was going to take part in a World Record attempt? Another major challenge would be finding a space big enough to host a game on this scale, but here my own place of work, the University of Glasgow, might be a possibility. Putting this together would require the labour and passion of a good many people, and it would also take financial support, with private sponsorship being one possible source.

While we had been painting as a group in Belgium, I had always had in my mind the idea of deploying our troops, small in number as they might be, in a wargame – what else were we going to do with them? Maybe it was the trauma of having to return to the day job, or the wrench away from my Waterloo Uncovered chums, but very quickly on my return I was starting to think a lot about the wargame, which would unquestionably have to be a rerun of Waterloo. Before I knew it I was thinking in terms of breaking some sort of World Record for the largest tabletop wargame ever played (or is that fought?). The idea grew as I entered into daily communication with Midge Spencer, a veteran team-mate on the project, who had also become obsessed with what I have for a long time referred to as “wee men”. He loved the idea of the world's biggest game using 28 mm figures, and so a small group of Painting Club members set up a Facebook group (including the editor of this illustrious periodical) dedicated to exploring how this could become a reality.

The ideal would be to meet on a tabletop, a very, very big one, over a weekend close to the anniversary of the battle (18 June) in 2019. If we took this forward, would you take the King's Shilling and get involved – mustering troops, leading painting groups, working with veterans and school kids, raising funds, and of course taking part in the event itself? If so, then please get in touch. With your help, 2019 could be the year of the “Mother of All Battles”! **WS&S**

Right from the get-go, I saw this “Mother of All Battles” as a charity event, with people sponsoring units and then receiving reports on how their troops had performed in the battle. The proceeds would go to Waterloo Uncovered, which does wonderful work with military veterans and is now a registered charity. Despite our enthusiasm, there would be some serious challenges to meet, not least being the need to pull together enough figures to qualify for a world record (as previ-

If you are interested in helping Tony Pollard with the Mother of All Battles Project, please contact him at:

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(Clockwise from top left) Students, archaeologists and veterans from Waterloo Uncovered unwind at Painting Club after a hard day on the battlefield; Full house for a painting session led by model maker David Ulke (ex-RAF); Masters in Conflict Archaeology and Heritage Students from the University of Glasgow hard at work; Serving soldier Rachel Willis discovers her inner nerd, thanks to figures provided by Warlord Games.