



IMAGINE PAINTING 250,000 TEENY-TINY SOLDIERS FOR 20 YEARS,
WITH MORE STILL TO GO.

ONE MAN'S WATERLOO.

BY TOM DUNKEL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE MORGAN

Flowers are in full spring bloom outside Bruce Weigle's Alexandria home, but inside it's the dead of winter: January 1871 to be exact.

Weigle is refereeing a step-back-in-time battle from the Franco-Prussian War being waged by Bob Williams and Tim Tilson — pretend Prussian commanders — and Steve St. Clair and Dave Cashin — their faux French counterparts. Dice rolls and data cards determine troop move-

ments and casualties. War without gore.

Occupying a table top in the center of Weigle's "gaming" room is a 6-by-7 foot swatch of 19th-century France: a Styrofoam-and-cloth scale model of the village of St. Quentin and environs that he built himself. The soldiers in play are smaller than a thumbnail, just 6 millimeters tall. Each of them represents 40 men, a practical concession made so the gaming action doesn't spill onto the floor and into the kitchen: Some 70,000 people collided at

the real St. Quentin. St. Clair knows it would be a Herculean task to muster comparable toy armies.

"I've done Waterloo," he says.

"Wow!" Williams exclaims.

"All of it!"

By "all of it" St. Clair means he has spent 20 years re-creating one of the world's epic clashes, hand painting each individual 6-millimeter Waterloo combatant in precise historical detail, right down to the colors of the cuffs on the



Previous pages: Three miniature French battalions advance on the British, part of Steve St. Clair's hand-painted collection. **These pages, from left:** Storage drawers hold his soldiers; St. Clair paints a tiny artillery battery; St. Clair places his Waterloo soldiers on a friend's terrain model.

● To see video of Steve St. Clair's Waterloo, go to washingtonpost.com/magazine.

soldiers' teeny regimental jackets.

"Wow!" Williams repeats.

The project has eaten up \$30,000 in out-of-pocket expenses and "probably 20,000 man-hours" of St. Clair's time. In 40-hour-workweek parlance, he's close to qualifying for a 10-year Waterloo service pin; this from a guy who scoffs at the notion of painting his own house. He has several thousand figures yet to go because he's doing some in multiple battle poses, but vows to finish long before next June's bicentennial celebration.

Then what? He guesses he'd need an area the size of a volleyball court to put everything on display.

"It's obsessive," admits St. Clair, a divorced father with three adult children. "I'm not sure it's *compulsive*."

An estimated 200,000 soldiers fought at the Battle of Waterloo, the public spanking that Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, gave Napoleon Bonaparte on June 18, 1815.

Waterloo fascinates St. Clair in part because of "the wide array of uniforms and troops"; about 400 distinct units were involved. Also, the geopolitical stakes couldn't have been higher. In one bloody day an empire came crashing down, bidding adieu to any thoughts of a unified Europe. "There were larger battles, but nothing anywhere this decisive," St. Clair says. "It ended Napoleon's France. Game over!"

Bruce Weigle, a retired Air Force lieutenant

colonel, shares his friend's passion for military history and gaming. He has 31 homemade tabletop terrains stashed in his attic. He sweated the details of the St. Quentin landscape to the point of visiting the battlefield in person. Even Weigle is awed by the "sheer magnitude" of St. Clair's Waterloo accomplishment and patience. If all those soldiers were ever assembled in one place, "it would be the biggest military diorama in the world. Nothing comes close."

Maybe "compulsive" *is* the right word.

The military courses through his veins. Two of St. Clair's uncles fought in World War II, as did his father, who wound up making the Army a career. St. Clair's oldest son served in Army Special Forces. He himself retired from the Army in 1994 as a lieutenant colonel, then temporarily un-retired in 2007 at age 58 and logged 28 months in Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division. At night he decompressed by ... painting soldiers. He made sure to bring along plastic bags stuffed with itty-bitty metallic Prussians, a key component of the Duke of Wellington's allied coalition.

St. Clair painted soldiers as a kid and got involved in war gaming while attending Purdue University in the late 1960s. He's drawn to the "black-powder era" that lasted almost to the end of the 19th century, when single-shot muskets and

cavalry charges were the currency of war, when tidal waves of men in tight formation would stoically press forward into a fusillade of bullets. "Once we get to the modern stuff," he explains, "it gets too much like what I did for a living."

The soft hills of Waterloo are about 10 miles south of Brussels. They hosted a classic heavyweight bout. The Duke of Wellington, the master defensive tactician, vs. Napoleon, a knockout-punch offensive genius. Defense prevailed that rain-soaked Sunday. The fighting progressed in fits and starts on multiple fronts, from roughly 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Napoleon napped during the afternoon, possibly weakened by a stomach bug. While he rested, his senior officers failed him, launching an ill-advised cavalry attack that saw the fearsome French Imperial Guard decimated by enemy fire. For the first time in its storied existence, the Guard retreated. That sight spooked the rank-and-file grunts, who high-tailed it all the way back to Paris.

Both sides used heavy-gauge (.69 caliber and higher) ammunition. The battlefield measured only five square miles, less than a quarter the dimensions of Gettysburg's hallowed ground. Net result: more than 70,000 killed, wounded or missing. "The casualties were rather horrendous," says St. Clair. Yet rendering that mayhem in miniature puts his mind at ease. He often will hunker down in the living room

of his Fairfax County split-level, sitting on the sofa by a coffee table that faces his wide-screen TV. On that table you'll find a gooseneck lamp, fine-tipped brushes and a small cardboard box stuffed with tubes of paint (Maple Syrup brown, Calypso Blue, Granite Gray). No magnifying glass. St. Clair can focus on toy soldiers for hours on end with just the naked eye.

His supplier is Heroics & Ros, a British manufacturer with a catalogue that runs the gamut from ancient Egyptian archers to World War II Romanian fighter planes. A pack of tiny pieces costs about \$4. According to the Heroics & Ros Web site, each pack "contains approximately 48 infantry, or 20 cavalry, or 3 wagons or horse drawn guns, or 6 guns, or 5 elephants or 5 chariots or 15 camels or 18 mounted generals or 2 pontoons as otherwise noted."

A company in Sri Lanka will paint figures to spec for about 15 cents apiece, but St. Clair has perfected his own assembly-line technique. If he's doing infantrymen, he'll begin by gluing 25 to a popsicle stick, not too time consuming since they're cast in clusters of five. Then he applies a base coat that matches their uniform pants, usually gray or white. Next comes the sequential coloring of face and hands, coats, cartridge belts, bedrolls, ornamental badges, maybe bearskin hats. (The Scottish Highlanders, with their checkered stockings and kilts, were the peacocks of Waterloo. There are 20 parts to

that painting process.) Once the painting is done, he removes figures from the popsicle stick and mounts them on plastic bases in groups of 50. For a finishing touch, green flocking material that resembles shredded parsley gets glued to the bases, simulating ground cover. The final step is to apply an acrylic spray that acts as a preservative.

St. Clair fact checks all the details, two favorite sources being "The Face of Battle" by John Keegan and "The Waterloo Companion" by Mark Adkin. On a good day St. Clair can knock off 250 soldiers. Some minor liberties are taken. He paints a half shade lighter than true color to enhance visibility. He cuts the occasional corner, ignoring minutiae such as epaulets and bedroll straps. "I'm not going to paint straps on a quarter-million figures," he says with a snort. "I can do it. I have the capacity. But let's not be ridiculous."

Painting goes well with half-watching football on television, St. Clair says. Apparently he has caught a lot of games over the years. He has cranked out 6,000 soldiers from the English civil war, 30,000 from the American Civil War, and 100,000 from assorted armies active during the Napoleonic era. That's in addition to his ongoing Waterloo magnum opus.

The Waterloo pieces — including a mini Napoleon with signature long, gray coat — are bivouacked in a downstairs furnace

room, tucked inside a thin-drawer cabinet normally used to store topographical maps.

Tom Garnett, another local war gamer, met St. Clair when they both were stationed at Fort Myer 40-some years ago. He doesn't know of anyone who has ever attempted to reproduce "the whole footprint" of a major battle. "Steve does not blow his whistle," Garnett says. "He's pretty low-key about his hobby." Consequently, Bruce Weigle blows St. Clair's whistle for him, using contacts in military and war-gaming circles to try to find a permanent home for St. Clair's Waterloo collection, insisting "it deserves somehow to be more broadly appreciated."

St. Clair would gladly donate his quarter-million (and counting) soldiers to a worthy recipient. So far, no takers. The National Army Museum in London, the Wellington Museum in Waterloo, and the battlefield visitors center have passed on the offer, citing concerns about space requirements, as well as lighting and maintenance costs.

If no benefactor surfaces, Steve St. Clair will be disappointed, but not defeated. "I may paint another 15,000 Prussians who didn't make it to the battlefield, but were marching toward it." ■

Tom Dunkel is the author of "Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line." To comment on this story, e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.