Napoleon was a military genius. Even his enemies recognized his incredible ability. The Duke of Wellington once remarked “I used to say of Napoleon that his presence on the field made the difference of forty thousand men.”

I was an infantryman in Napoleon’s army starting with his Egyptian campaign in 1798. Right from the start we knew the guy was something special. He had such charisma and was so bold – all that backed up with unbelievable creativity on a battlefield quickly earned him the respect and loyalty of the soldiers like me.

I guess he had to learn his military through the school of hard knocks. His first campaign in Egypt was an utter disaster – British Lord Horatio Nelson completely destroyed him. He may have taken out his rage on some POWs in the Ottoman Empire, but, hey, that’s war. Fortunately, our great leader managed to arrange it so that only his accomplishments had been reported to the French press, so when we came back into Paris we were treated like heroes.

When Napoleon instigated the coup of 18 Brumaire, it was the best thing that had happened in France in a very long time. The Directory was weak, corrupt, ineffective and unpopular. The only reason people had accepted them was they were a lot more stable than the psycho Robespierre before them. So in 1799 when he offered a new Constitution making himself “First Consul” and effective single leader of France, people cheered. We all knew were finally getting someone who was going to restore the glory days of France, which is why in the plebiscit of 1800 we overwhelmingly voted to accept his new constitution. Then in 1804 he ordered another constitution to be voted on by plebiscite. In this one, Napoleon made himself an Emperor, thereby ensuring his male heir would inherit his title. The constitution was approved by plebiscite and in December of 1804 Napoleon crowned himself emperor. Obviously we adored Napoleon - of the 3,400,000 voted, only 2,569 voted against the New Constitution.

Once he had real power, he used it for the best of France. He won battle after battle, enhancing France and his empire. I mean, seriously, if it was an open battlefield there was no defeating him. He used maneuverability and infantry like no other general before him. My personal favorite battle was the Battle of Austerlitz. I got to be in this one as one of his infantryman. This was known as “the Battle of the Three Emperors” because we were fighting against Russia’s Tsar Alexander I and Metternich in Austria. Of course we won, which gave France Italy (Napoleon became King of Italy too!) Napoleon considered this his “masterpiece” as “the most perfect battle in History.”

He made a bunch of good moves for Europe too, like abolishing the Holy Roman Empire (technically the Holy Roman Emperor dissolved his own title, probably because he was scared Napoleon would kick his butt if he didn’t) and creating the Confederation of the Rhine. He also brought back Poland (in the
form of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw). The Polish guys, needless to say, loved that.

By 1812, at the height of his reign, he covered most of Europe. I thought it was hilarious in 1803 when those idiots in St. Domingue (Haiti) revolted for their independence—why would you want to be independent from a country that was clearly headed in the right direction? Fortunately, Napoleon acted quickly and sold some ridiculously useless land to the US for quick money. Yup, that was called the Louisiana Purchase from the American side.

But my leader Bonaparte was not only a warrior; he was crazy good with the propaganda. During his first campaign in Italy, he carefully crafted reports from the battlefield, designed to increase his glory while masking the ruthlessness with which he plundered the country. His strategy included commissioning paintings of himself. He brilliantly created a mythical image of himself—an infallible hero, destined by God to rule over France. After every major battle he commissioned a painting making himself look awesome. That, my friends, is leadership.

Napoleon rose up in the ranks of the French military the hard way—through dedication, work, sweat, and tenacity. His family were minor Corsican nobles, but that wasn’t enough to earn him a privileged position in the army. No, Napoleon earned his greatness on the battlefield. I guess that’s why he was so tied the idea of meritocracy. Napoleon had a policy of “Careers Open to talent,” where promotions in government were based on merit and service to the state. He did reinstitute the old feudal system of noble titles, but you actually had to earn your title under Napoleon. None of this hereditary nonsense. I guess he figured he had to fight for everything he had, so it made sense to make people work for what they had.

Yes, we were brilliant on an open battlefield, but we had a lot of trouble with the English navy. We totally lost at the Battle of Trafalgar, which made Napoleon all the more resolute that, since we clearly could not invade Britain, we will get her economically. Stupid Britain. Although it was pretty obvious that we weren’t going get the upper hand on “the nation of shopkeepers” militarily, we figured we could beat them in the game of mercantilism by not allowing our buddies in Europe to trade with them. Enter the continental system. Unfortunately, this kinda backfires, because the main effect was to worsen the economic condition of about every country under his control. Britain responded by saying that all ships going to Europe had to stop by Britain first. Yeah, like we were totally gonna let that happen.

Like I said, Napoleon was unstoppable on an open battlefield. However we had a few problems with the Spanish, who refused to fight like honorable men. When we went in to enforce the continental system, the Spanish cowards used guerilla warfare and basic hit and run tactics. Seriously, how is anyone supposed to defend against that? This frustrated Napoleon to no end. Then the Russians started violating the Continental system, so we had to split our army and go make them obey. But they were gutsless chickens as well and burned their own capital city when we got there. So there
was nothing to live off of. On our retreat, we lost well over half of our guys to starvation and cold. So okay, we couldn’t win against the despicable Spanish guerillas or the Russian sub-zero winter. This was the series of events that forced our great leader back into Paris, where the fifth coalition forced him to resign his position and put him on house arrest on the island of Elba.

Napoleon was forced back into Europe and eventually he was exiled off the coast of Italy in Elba and Louis XVIII took over. Thank goodness he came back and took over again. The Hundred Days, where he came Every time troops were sent against Napoleon, he would go, stand unarmed in the middle of the battlefield, and make a speech that ended with an invitation for the opposing forces to join with him. You know what, it worked every single time. That’s how well loved this guy is.

My greatest regret is not being able to participate at the Battle of Waterloo, where I wanted so much to help my general. However, I was waylaid with a broken arm so I couldn’t properly hold my musket. Napoleon had planned our battle carefully, but he apparently didn’t expect that the Prussians had anything left in them to fight with. Also, instead of being on the battlefield and directing the troops, Napoleon was inspecting us wounded and giving us encouraging words. Sadly, he lost that one and was captured and put on St. Helena.

Napoleon did a lot of good stuff for France. He instituted the Legion of Honor, which was kind of like a brotherhood that rewarded exceptional accomplishments in public and military affairs. Clearly this helped those who longed for a new aristocracy. His economic reforms were long overdue. He established a national bank, he launched a system of government programs that provided jobs for those who needed work. Fortunately, because we were pretty constantly at work, there was a fair number of jobs. Because of military needs, certain industries thrived, thereby creating more jobs.

Considering his war record, his military genius, and his economic reforms, how on earth could he be considered anything less than a great patriot and true hero?