Sharpe's Siege: Richard Sharpe and the Winter Campaign, 1814 Study Guide

Sharpe's Siege: Richard Sharpe and the Winter Campaign, 1814 by Bernard Cornwell

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Major Richard Sharpe takes command of three companies of men during a diversionary attack on a French fortress and environs. Under Sharpe's resolute leadership the men fight a series of engagements with decisive results until falling back on a largely-destroyed fortress where they discover they have been abandoned. They defend the fortress during a bloody but abbreviated siege that ends in an unusual surrender.

Sharpe is summoned by Colonel Wigram and Colonel Elphinstone and given a new command. He is to land a small contingent of British army forces on the French coast and capture a poorly-defended fortress. Sharpe is then to lead his men inland toward Bordeaux where it is supposed the local populace will rise in rebellion against Napoleon. Privately, Elphinstone cautions Sharpe against the mission and urges him not to become entangled in a fool's errand to Bordeaux. Sharpe and his forces are conveyed to France by Captain Horace Bampfylde's squadron. At the last moment, Sharpe is joined by Comte de Maquerre, a Frenchman serving in the British army.

Sharpe's mission is complicated by several things, including his wife's sickness on the morning of his departure, de Maquerre's voluble insistence that Bordeaux is teetering on the edge of rebellion, and Bampfylde's inexperienced optimism of the possibilities of land-based warfare. Further, it gradually develops that the entire mission is based around the fallacy that the marines, due to widespread illness, were not available to capture the fortress. In fact, the marines land in force and Bampfylde directs Sharpe to proceed on his dangerous fool's errand—a march to Bordeaux to incite rebellion.

Sharpe begins his journey but quickly discovers all is not right. Bampfylde leads the marines in a bumbling march that fails to keep schedule with a naval attack on the fortress. Sharpe diverts his own march to quickly capture the fortress as the naval attack wanes. He also dispatches men to warn Bampfylde that Bampfylde is marching the marines into an ambush, and then maneuvers his men such that a counter-attack of the enemy troops waiting in ambush is possible. Only then does Sharpe begrudgingly set off toward Bordeaux.

On the road to Bordeaux, Sharpe's troops encounter and overcome a French contingent. Next they meet de Maquerre, putatively returning from Bordeaux, who claims the city has rebelled and Sharpe must hurry on his way. De Maquerre, however, is a French spy—Bordeaux has not and will not rise in rebellion. As Sharpe vacillates, de Maquerre returns to Bampfylde's position and reports Sharpe's troops completely annihilated. Bampfylde, fearing a strong French counterattack, abandons his position and returns home. Sharpe returns the next day only to find the rendezvous deserted—and to deduce he has been abandoned. He assumes a defensive position in the now-ruined fort and resists a bloody but concise assault by French forces before surrendering to an American privateer. The unorthodox maneuver allows his men to board the American ship and avoid French capture. In exchange for certain privileges, the American Captain Cornelius Killick later sets Sharpe and his men ashore and at liberty. Sharpe's forces march south and rendezvous with the main British invasion

forces. Sharpe encounters and kills a surprised de Marquerre and then learns that his wife Jane has recovered her health.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Major Richard Sharpe takes command of three companies of men during a diversionary attack on a French fortress and environs. Under Sharpe's resolute leadership, the men fight a series of engagements with decisive results until falling back on a largely-destroyed fortress where they discover they have been abandoned. They defend the fortress during a bloody but abbreviated siege that ends in an unusual surrender.

In early 1814, British forces led by Wellington have completed the invasion and conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and have pushed into southern France. Napoleon's armies are unbalanced and the dictator rushes fresh troops towards the new front. The British army advances to the southern bank of the Adour River and there is stopped by a natural barrier. The English decide a temporary bridge must be constructed, using dozens of small ships as a system of support. To this end, the British Navy begins to capture dozens of small vessels. A large number of suitable craft is located near Gujan, and a naval expedition led by Captain Horace Bampfylde is organized. The British army decides that a diversionary action is also needed to divert French forces from the river crossing site; to this end, they decide on a military feint near Gujan; the two missions will be launched simultaneously. British intelligence manipulates a known spy—the Comte de Maquerre—to bolster the appearance of a large invasion.

Major Richard Sharpe's rank status is in some dispute and his acting rank of Major will not be confirmed. For this reason he is transferred from his command and appointed to lead the meager invasion infantry. A sympathetic superior officer, Colonel Elphinstone, bluntly states that Sharpe has been selected as a sacrificial lamb. Sharpe prepares for the mission by visiting his particular friend, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Hogan, who is terminally ill with a contagious fever. Hogan, who knows about de Maquerre and the greater purposes of the mission, is unfortunately delirious. Sharpe spends his last few peaceful hours dining with his new wife, Jane, at an officer's club in St. Jean de Luz. Their relaxing time is interrupted by a brash and crude naval officer, Bampfylde, who curses and rails against the French as the group watches a daring raid on British shipping transpire within easy view of the shore. A few hours later, Sharpe is called on board Bampfylde's ship where a planning and orders meeting occurs. Bampfylde and a Colonel Wigram eagerly plan a large invasion and march on Bordeaux—believed to be ripe for rebellion. Elphinstone is far more reserved. Sharpe is ordered to capture a fortress that is said to be ill-guarded and under-manned. Following the capture, Sharpe is to march inland toward Bordeaux. Wigram explains that Sharpe will lead two companies of infantry and explains that the navy cannot complete the mission because the Marines are all sick with fever. Later, Elphinstone confides privately with Sharpe and states that any march on Bordeaux would be a fool's errand likely to end in disaster.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The initial two chapters introduce most of the primary characters and establish the setting and primary plot elements for the novel. Clearly, the book is intended to be a historically accurate portrayal of the Napoleonic War era invasion of southern France. Many of the referenced events are historic events and some of the people mentioned are historic people. Within this historic framework, the fictional career of Sharpe is detailed. Sharpe's character is mentally anchored to his new and beloved wife Jane. Hogan's untimely demise causes Sharpe to not know vital information, and it also introduces a secondary tension into the narrative when Sharpe becomes convinced that Hogan has infected Jane with the fatal fever. Although Hogan knows of de Maquerre's treachery, other characters do not—thus, Bampfylde, Elphinstone, and Wigram are all unaware that de Maquerre is a spy until the novel's closing pages. Although Hogan's fever and eventual death is not focused on in a dominant way, the credibility of the basic plot relies heavily on this intelligence officer's information being withheld due to illness. In other words, Sharpe will go to war believing he is to act a certain way while in point of fact his mission was intended to be something else entirely.

The portrayal of Bampfylde as a crass and conceited young man of little experience is done quite effectively by his appearance in the officer's club. There, he acts like a boor in front of women and otherwise makes his presence regrettable. His subsequent enthusiasm for a real march on Bordeaux alerts Sharpe—and the reader—that Elphinstone's warning to avoid marching on Bordeaux is good advice. The technical discussion of the fortress' construction is interesting and precise, though the large amount of jargon makes an appreciation of the fortress' strength difficult to assess without reference to a military dictionary. However, a full understanding of the layout is not necessary to the novel—instead the general feeling that the fortress is well-designed and difficult to penetrate is sufficient. The military adventure established in Chapters 1 and 2 fills the remainder of the novel and the execution of the mission forms the primary plot.

Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In France, Commodore Henri Lassan reviews his command of the garrison forces at the Teste de Buch. He is aware that the fortress is a sturdy redoubt but also knows that he is so undermanned that he can only defend the fortress from sea or by land—a combined assault could not be defended against. He gathers local information, trying to determine whether the British will attack by land or sea and believes rather tenuously that an attack by sea is more likely. Lassan also confers with Cornelius Killick, an American privateer—the Americans are allied with France against Britain. Killick is the captain who carried out the raid that so enraged Bampfylde in Chapter One. Killick believes the British will attack by sea but admits to his near-complete ignorance regarding land warfare—at sea he is a master, but on land he is an amateur. Killick frets about his ship—Thuella, which is laid up in a state of disrepair. If the British capture the fortress they will likely locate and burn Thuella.

Sharpe assumes command of the Royal American Rifles. His command is comprised of two companies, led by Captain Frederickson and Lieutenant Minver. The 60th Rifles wears green and brown uniforms and is equipped with rifled muskets and sword bayonets. They are highly-skilled combat veterans and have been trained to take independent initiative. Sharpe and Frederickson immediately like and trust each other and appear to have a prior history although such is not described in the novel. One of Sharpe's long-time friends, Regimental Sergeant Major Patrick Harper, requests permission to join the new unit and serve under Sharpe. Sharpe declines the request, noting he hardly has authority to approve it; Harper is much dismayed but concedes he must remain behind to nurse a severely-infected tooth. Sharpe then boards a transport ship, saying goodbye to Jane who has developed dysentery and a coughing fever. Sharpe fears she has contracted the contagious fever from Hogan, but Jane insists it is simply a winter cold complicated by bad food. At the last moment the Comte de Maquerre joins Sharpe's forces, insisting that two horses and a great deal of baggage be boarded. De Maquerre causes great delay. Sharpe learns that Wigram has attached de Maquerre to the expedition to force the issue of a march on Bordeaux. De Maquerre is a tall, thin man who thinks overmuch about his own importance. On the voyage Sharpe frets about Jane's health and very survival, while de Maquerre volubly and repeatedly informs him that France is ripe for rebellion.

After a brief transit the forces are landed near the fortress but out of sight so the element of surprise is not lost. Sharpe is flabbergasted to see hundreds and hundreds of fit Marines being landed. Sharpe then learns that Wigram and Bampfylde have circulated the rumor of fever among the Marines as political intrigue; in fact, the Marines are not ill. Bampfyle assumes command and issues a battlefield directive saying he will lead the Marines to capture the fortress while Sharpe proceeds directly toward Bordeaux. Sharpe remembers Elphinstone's warning and fears for the safety of his troops, but an order is an order. When news of the land forces reaches the fortress,

Lassan is worried. However, Killick decides that he will strip his ship of cannon and crew and prepare an ambush site on the land road. It is hoped his ambush will so cripple the land forces they will be unable to mount an effective attack on the fortress. Lassan and Killick are unaware that a second, small force is led by Sharpe.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

These chapters begin the plot development that leads to a prolonged series of military engagements. To this point, Sharpe has planned on making a showy march toward Bordeaux followed by a quick return with negative news regarding any rebellion—he has decided to heed Elphinstone's warning. But he has been bamboozled by the navy; instead of being the primary forces landed, the Royal American Rifles are a secondary force. Bampfyle leads a large number of Marines to capture the fortress and leaves the dangerous fool's errand to Sharpe. Bampfylde believes the fortress to be virtually unmanned and an easy plum to be picked. He sees his personal leadership of the capturing forces to be a sure road to promotion and fame. At this point, Sharpe technically outranks Bampfylde as long as Bampfylde is ashore, though neither man makes much of the situation of command. Once again, Hogan's untimely fever seriously endangers Sharpe—rather than knowing he is simply to create the ruse of an invasion and attempt to incite rebellion in Bordeaux, he believes that he must actually try. As he looks at his relative handful of men, he believes—quite correctly—that he has been asked the impossible.

The narrative provides interesting parallels between the respective leaders of the opposing forces. Lassan and Sharpe are both qualified military leaders for land operations; they both operate with limited forces and rather stringent constraints, and they both make essentially correct tactical decisions. On the other hand, Killick and Bampfylde are qualified naval commanders but rather bumbling and incompetent commanders of land-based operations—their limits will become grossly apparent when they run into Sharpe on different occasions. RSM Harper's request to accompany Sharpe begins one of the more risible minor plot arcs presented in the narrative. Even as Sharpe says Harper must remain behind, he wishes he could say otherwise.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary

Killick moves his cannon and men to an ambush site suggested by Lassan. He finds the site admirable and emplaces his ambush. His intervention is motivated by a desire to preserve his damaged ship more than his desire to help France, though his patriotic streak also requires him to fight against England. As his ambush is readied Bampfylde's Marines are landed and detailed. They then begin their long march north. The Marines are out of shape, however, and unpracticed on land. Their pace is sluggish and they fall behind schedule almost immediately. Bampfylde himself quickly tires and his feet hurt, so he further slackens the pace. As the Marines march away the longboats land Sharpe's companies. As Sharpe begins to detail his men, he is astounded and angered to see RSM Harper among them. Sharpe demands an explanation. Harper explains his presence at length—suffering from toothache he had called upon the military surgeon for relief. The surgeon contemplated extraction but told Harper to get drunk first, to dull the pain. Harper had become legally intoxicated on duty but in his seriously inebriated state had been putatively mistaken for one of the departing riflemen. He had been carried to the ship in a stupor and woke up only after it had departed. Sharpe is glad to have Harper and accepts the obviously ridiculous tale as valid. Sharpe and his men then set off on their own march—parallel to the Marines but on a different road. The Rifles are exceptional marchers and make astoundingly good time.

At the appointed hour, an English frigate closes with the Teste de Buch and commences a naval bombardment. Lassan sends his men to the seaward wall, leaving only a wounded soldier to watch the landward approaches, knowing that Killick's ambush will alert the fortress to any land attack. However, the Marines do not appear on schedule; they lag far behind. The frigate takes a severe beating from the fortress' large guns. Sharpe arrives near the fortress ahead of schedule and watches the unequal dual. He also scouts the area and quickly discovers Killick's ambush—and sees the Marines bumbling toward it. Sharpe sends messengers to warn the Marines of the ambush and then concocts a rather bizarre ploy to gain entrance to the fortress. He causes Harper to draw out his own infected tooth. Harper does so and lets the blood and pus drain freely down his chest. Harper is then loaded onto a handcart and pushed, by Sharpe and Frederickson, toward the castle. The men make no attempt to conceal their approach and call out in French, asking for a surgeon. The wounded soldier mistakes them for Americans, believes Harper to be a casualty, and opens the gate—Sharpe kills the sentry and flings open the gates. His men pour into the fortress and come upon Lassan's men who are taken by surprise. A brief fight ensues and Lassan, with most of his men, abandons the fortress. Sharpe has captured the formidable redoubt with only one man killed, and that man killed by friendly fire from the frigate. During the hot exchange, however, Sharpe is shot across the forehead, a painful but ultimately minor wound.

Sharpe remains at the fortress with a corporal's guard and orders his men, led by Frederickson, back to Killick's ambush site. The Marines make a feint attack and draw ineffectual fire from Killick. Having botched his ambush, Killick momentarily believes he has achieved a great success—such is his ignorance on land. Frederickson quickly disabuses Killick of his mistaken notion, and Killick's men are captured from behind. Killick surrenders because Frederickson extends his word of honor that the Americans will be treated fairly. Sharpe's rifles have not only captured the fortress, they have prevented an ambush and captured the privateer's crew. Meanwhile Lassan takes his men to Gujan where he plans to burn the town's various ships, but he is again foiled by the British navy who has already landed men and seized the ships. Lassan therefore retreats to Bordeaux.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, feature a large amount of combat action and generally encompass the basic mission envisioned during the military planning phase described in Chapter Two. Thus, this section of the novel completes the initial plot arc while Chapters Eight and Nine, following, provide a turning point in the narrative. Throughout this section of the novel, Bampfylde demonstrates his near-complete incompetence ashore while Sharpe proceeds to execute his professional duty with aplomb. Sharpe not only reaches the fortress ahead of his schedule, but he beats the Marines by perhaps two hours. During his march he also discovers the Americans' ambush site and warns Bampfylde about the ambush before it is sprung. Note particularly that Bampfylde has declined to send forward pickets (the text uses the archaic spelling of picquet) such that his main body of men would have fallen into the ambush had not Sharpe warned them. This failure illustrates Bampfylde's complete lack of experience in infantry operations—he is advancing with a large body of men through enemy territory on a clearly-defined roadway during a period in which attacking troops are expected, yet he inexplicably declines his subordinate officer's request to throw out a forward picket. Sharpe avoids, for Bampfylde, an ambush almost as an afterthought. It is indeed lucky for the British that the American ambushers are also inexperienced and thus show themselves from Sharpe's vantage point.

Sharpe's "assault" on the fortress is a masterstroke of restraint. Realizing the fortress is preoccupied by fighting the seaward frigate, Sharpe attempts a stratagem. Seizing upon Harper's infected tooth (literally), Sharpe disguises Harper as a wounded infantryman and approaches the fortress calling out for a surgeon. In an unforeseen but advantageous development, the watchman mistakes the British troops—dressed in green and brown and not the expected scarlet—for the ambushing Americans, and opens the door. Sharpe's men seize the fortress without a loss—their single fatal casualty is caused by friendly fire from the frigate. All that remains for Sharpe to do to complete his orders is to march inland and investigate Bordeaux's putative readiness for rebellion. Sharpe's injury appears serious but proves somewhat minor. He is shot in the forehead but receives only a glancing blow that furrows through the skin and knocks him down but does not cause a concussion. Sharpe's wound bleeds profusely and causes a hampering headache but is not incapacitating. Sharpe worries about suddenly

dropping dead from the wound as he has heard of a soldier receiving a similar wound making a brief recovery before sudden death.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

A footsore Bampfylde finally arrives at the fortress several hours late. His Marines occupy the fortress and Bampfylde orders the riflemen to sleep and ready for their inland excursion on the next day. After Sharpe and his men have retired, Bampfylde interrogates the American prisoners. He uses brutal means—torture, by the modern definition—to interrogate Killick and some of the other officers. Killick protests the treatment and presents a valid letter of marque and citizenship American papers for his entire crew. Bampfylde considers Killick a pirate, burns the papers, and continues with the aggressive interrogation, stating his intent to hang all the Americans on the following day. Frederickson learns of the interrogation and appears, attempting to stop the mistreatment. He explains he has tendered his word as a gentleman for fair treatment; Bampfylde dismisses him out of hand. Frederickson appeals to Sharpe who then personally intervenes. Bampfylde attempts to dismiss Sharpe, but Sharpe counters by quoting the regulations governing the Byzantine command structure of the British Empire which appears to give Sharpe theater command so long as Bampfylde is ashore. Bampfylde discontinues the interrogation, planning to let Sharpe march away and then to hang all of the Americans as pirates. Later, Sharpe speaks with Killick, and both men realize Bampfylde's intentions. Sharpe feels a great distaste for hanging men; Killick responds by fabricating a tall tale about hanging sailors in still air being akin to dooming their spirits to eternal unrest. The night is a dead calm.

In the early morning hours Bampfylde pens his official report to the Admiralty, in which he claims personal honors for capturing the fortress, capturing the chasse-marées, and avoiding the American ambush. He declines mention of Sharpe or anyone else. He is interrupted by the news that Sharpe has freed the entire American contingent of prisoners. Bampfylde confronts Sharpe and learns the news is true. After extracting an oath that the Americans would never again engage in hostilities with British forces, Sharpe has freed them and discharged them into the early morning darkness upon their own recognizance. Sharpe then marches inland with his men, and Bampfylde dispatches Marine Captain Palmer with a company of Marines with orders to track down and recapture Killick and his men.

Meanwhile de Maquerre meets up with Major Pierre Ducos. Ducos is a French intelligence agent and has had personal dealings with Sharpe before; in brief, Ducos hates Sharpe with a burning passion. When Ducos learns that Sharpe is leading the small invasion force he immediately concludes that the landing is not a feint, and he begins to exert his considerable personal power to arrange for Sharpe's capture or destruction. He sends de Maquerre back to the British with instructions to first call upon Sharpe and tell him Bordeaux has already risen and urge him to hurry forward. De Maquerre is then to continue on to the Bampfylde and tell Bampfylde that Sharpe's men have been utterly destroyed by a huge French force that is marching upon the Teste de

Buch; the men believe that a frightened Bampfylde will vacate the position, leaving Sharpe abandoned.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

Bampfylde continues to display his lack of ethics by writing an official report in which he claims all the glory and declines to even mention Sharpe or other participants—while in point of fact he contributed more-or-less nothing to the entire mission, beyond transportation. Bampfylde's strenuous interrogation of Killick and other officers would, by today's standards, be considered torture. Frederickson had previously extended his word of honor for acceptable treatment and he obviously feels that one officer—Bampfylde—should respect another officer's—Frederickson's—word as sufficient. Bampfylde declines. Frederickson then appeals to Sharpe, who confronts Bampfylde and the issue becomes one of command—who is the ranking officer at the moment. Because Bampfylde is not on his ship, he assumes a temporary and inferior rank ashore. Thus, technically, Sharpe outranks Bampfylde. This issue may be in doubt because Sharpe's actual rank is something of an unknown, but for the moment Sharpe's quoting of the regulations stymies Bampfylde and the interrogations cease. What follows is a lengthy introspection by Sharpe where he weighs various factors and decides that he cannot simply leave Killick behind, knowing full well that as soon as Sharpe is out of sight, Bampfylde will begin hanging the Americans. He is also haunted by the specter of Jane's death and involves himself in some superstitious speculation; Killick's yarn about sailors being hung in still air sends chills down Sharpe's spine and he somehow—quite illogically—conflates the story with Jane's survival. Sharpe comes to the conclusion that sparing Killick somehow guarantees Jane's survival. Such reason is obviously spurious but entirely credible. It is ironic that while Jane's survival has nothing to do with freeing Killick, Sharpe's own survival in fact does.

Sharpe's decision to free Killick might seem incredible in the modern world, but Sharpe and Killick are not modern men. They both take honor seriously, and they both take oaths seriously. Killick takes an oath not to engage in hostilities with British forces and both men understand that Killick will operate henceforth in good faith. In effect, Killick has been removed from the war as a military factor. The oath's terms rankle Killick who, as captain of a privateer, has by it lost his means of livelihood. But yet he is still alive to be rankled by it. Of course Bampfylde, knowing nothing of honor, believes Sharpe's actions to be a form of betrayal. This section of the novel forms a narrative bridge between the initial combat mission and Sharpe's subsequent march inland. The meeting between de Maquerre and Ducos heavily foreshadows future developments.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 Summary

After releasing Killick and the American sailors, Sharpe leads his two companies of riflemen inland toward Bordeaux. They march for one day and then overnight in the open. Sharpe's head wound bothers him but is not incapacitating. They come to the tiny town of Facture and cross a toll-bridge over the River Leyre. Sharpe is much amused by the toll-keeper's insistence that he pay the toll. He crosses the bridge and scouts the area and selects a suitable ambush site. He is also joined by Captain of Marines Palmer with a company of Marines. Palmer is ostensibly searching for Killick, but he instead wisely decides that traipsing through enemy territory on a fool's errand is pointless. Instead he attaches his command to Sharpe, having learned that the infantry Major knows a thing or two about land warfare. The ambush site is situated on the roadway leading west and then south out of Bordeaux. After several hours a convoy moves down the road. The convoy is composed of about twenty cavalry, five companies of infantry, and a group of supply wagons. Outnumbered about four-to-one, the British forces execute a perfect ambush. The French forces are largely green recruits without experience or much training and are taken entirely by surprise. The British forces are aggressive and professional. The enemy forces exchange several volleys of musket fire and then engage in hand-to-hand fighting and bayonet charges. At one point Sharpe uses somewhat unorthodox tactics in causing his men to fire and the lie prone behind the concealing musket smoke—the French responding fire passes overhead. After twenty-five minutes of intense combat, the issue is decided in favor of the British.

Frederickson leads an expeditionary force after the routed French while Sharpe causes the wagons and captured equipage to be stockpiled on the toll-bridge. Meanwhile, the Facture town authorities attempt to surrender to Sharpe, but he waves them off, noting he will shortly be leaving. While all this is going on, a Marine named Robinson sexually assaults a local girl named Lucille who is hysterical over the event. Sharpe threatens to hang the man but lets Harper beat the Marine on the lame explanation that the rape had not actually been consummated. Ducos' plot then unfolds as de Maquerre arrives and informs Sharpe that Bordeaux has risen in open rebellion to Napoleon. Sharpe is suspicious of de Maquerre's manner and vacillates as de Maquerre rides away to the Teste de Buch. Sharpe then decides to return to the Teste de Buch. Over the obnoxious toll-keeper's objection he detonates the supply wagons, seriously weakening the bridge. He then gathers his men and begins to march back to the Teste de Buch. A few miles down the road, Lucille, her attitude much changed, joins Robinson and expounds on her love for him, and a few hours later they desert into the countryside.

Meanwhile, Bampfylde has sent out search parties to find Killick's privateer Thuella. Killick has stripped the ship of rigging and spars, careened it over sharply on the beach, and made it appear as a derelict. Smoky fires in pots in the hold make the ship appear a smoldering wreck and the British ship that finds it concludes it to be a hopeless wreck without coming near the shore. Bampfylde is incensed. Then de Maquerre arrives and

informs Bampfylde that Sharpe's and Palmer's companies have been annihilated to a man by a huge French force that is even now marching hastily toward Teste de Buch. The cowardly Bampfylde looks out to sea at a storm that is gathering and decides to abandon his position. Over the next few hours his men strip the fortress of all supplies, spike and destroy the cannons and other armaments, and then leave the fortress. Bampfylde then causes the main magazines to be detonated, nearly wrecking the fortress, and then sails away. Several hours later Sharpe arrives to discover a stripped, smoking, wrecked fortress and a storm brewing. He quickly surmises that he has been abandoned, and sets about preparing defensive positions within the wrecked fortress.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 Analysis

During Chapter Ten Sharpe concludes his official mission—his sortie into France has resulted in a raid upon a military transport, preventing reinforcements to the South and seriously weakening a bridge on the major supply route. Chapter Ten presents a lengthy account of combat operations, similar to that provided in Chapter Seven, but with much more intensity and far more casualties. Sharpe's tactical leadership is flawless and he inspires Palmer, Frederickson, and Minver. He uses the Marines as a blocking force, realizing that their scarlet uniforms and lack of training for independent action make them unsuitable as flanking forces in an ambush. The riflemen attack from a medium distance, making the French smoothbore musket fire ineffectual but allowing their superior accuracy to be telling. The disciplined Marine volley fire is also telling as the British outshoot the French three-to-two during the initial moments of combat. Sharpe characteristically eschews a rifle for his backsword, a sturdy sabre. As usual, he leads from the front and finds himself engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy.

Killick's situation has become desperate; wanted as a pirate, he is further without benefit of an ally as Ducos has failed to honor any promises, and his ship Thuella is seriously damaged. Killick refits the ship with local woods as best he can and then realizes that Bampfylde will be searching for him. He therefore disguises Thuella as a wreck, hauling her over and carefully lighting smoky fires within pots inside the hull. When the British find her, they see her smoking, apparently wrecked, and stripped of cordage, spars, rigging, and even the figure head. They conclude she is a smoldering hulk. Instead of going ashore to verify it, they jump to a conclusion, doubtless the result of Bampfylde's style of leadership. Thus, when Bampfylde stands out to sea to weather the storm Killick is left with a functioning privateer.

Bampfylde's presence in the novel draws nearly to a conclusion; he appears again, but only momentarily. Aboard his ship, he is once again the superior theater commander. But instead of gathering intelligence and prosecuting the war effort he looks to his own financial security—stripping the fortress of wine and valuables and using his naval forces to scout for Thuella, which he hopes to capture for prize-money. That he accepts de Maquerre's word as true, without any verification, speaks volumes of the man's bravery. He flees a fully-manned and virtually impregnable position, supported by strong naval guns and abundant supplies, on no more than the passing statements of one man. Bampfylde's action nearly dooms Sharpe and his men. They now find themselves

over one hundred miles behind the front in enemy territory with no means of escape and an alerted enemy. Not only that, but Bampfylde has left them supply less and with only a wrecked fortress, en flûte, for defense. This clearly marks a major turning point in the novel, just as Killick's ship's survival heavily foreshadows later events.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Summary

Ducos and the local military commander, General Calvet, rendezvous, and Ducos orders a massive attack on Teste de Buch. Calvet is a veteran of the Russian front and has not yet fought the English. He is a vicious man of great appetite who, like Sharpe, has risen through the ranks. Calvet's wife is rumored to sleep on a pillow stuffed with the hair taken from men Calvet has personally killed in combat. Although Calvet outranks Ducos, Ducos' political influence is considerable and puts him in charge of the situation. As they meet, a powerful storm system moves over the area. Meanwhile Sharpe has his men scavenge powder and armament and establish defensive positions within the fortress. Harper manages to repair one cannon. Killick then calls on Sharpe and the two men have a brief conversation. Killick tells Sharpe there is a huge stockpile of quicklime nearby—later Sharpe's men recover several barrels of the caustic powder. Killick asks Sharpe to release him from the oath, but Sharpe declines. Killick then tells Sharpe that the tale about sailors hanging in still airs was entirely fabricated. The superstitious Sharpe is much troubled by this. Later, the French forces arrive and begin the siege of the fortress. The first night the French forces prosecute a light harassing fire, and Frederickson leads a British sortie that claims dozens of French soldiers' lives. Calvet considers his tactics and surmises that a frontal assault will carry the fortress. He spends more time worrying about his breakfast than the military situation.

In the morning one Colonel Favier parlays with Sharpe and demands surrender, but Sharpe declines. Sharpe and Frederickson plan the defense, and both men agree the situation looks hopeless. Sharpe is much troubled by thoughts of Jane dead or dying and frets about superstitious beliefs. Calvet brings up howitzers and starts shelling the fortress. Sharpe is angry with himself for not foreseeing a prolonged shelling. Calvet then brings up artillery and scours the fortress walls with cannisters, concentrating on the embattled parapets. The French make several feints against the fortress, scoring several casualties and suffering many.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Analysis

This section of the novel acts as a narrative transition from British offense to British defense. Sharpe has brilliantly concluded his official mission and returns to find he has been abandoned. While marching inland his men had carried only light, portable supplies. Their main supply store, of both food and more importantly powder, had been left at the fortress where Bampfylde had exploded it along with the fortress magazines. Thus, Sharpe's men have only a few score of shots apiece and the cannon that Harper repairs can be fired only a few times for want of ammunition. Even so, Sharpe sets about to make the fortress as defensible a position as possible given the circumstances; he clearly does not intend to roll over. His weapons are augmented with several barrels of quicklime, courtesy of Killick. Quicklime is a caustic powder that can blind men if it

gets in their eyes—a primitive sort of chemical warfare. Although not decisive, the quicklime is used to effect later during the siege.

Much of Chapter Thirteen is devoted to Calvet's biography, which has little impact on the narrative. He is established as fully competent, aggressive, and brutal officer—exactly the kind of general that one would wish to avoid. He is spurred on by Ducos' personal hatred for Sharpe and thus the besieged British can expect no quarter. Much of Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen consist of Sharpe's various preparations for defense; in summary they are appropriate given the circumstances and several of them appear nearly prescient as events develop. Sharpe and Frederickson are clearly in their element. Sharpe and Killick's concise conversation foreshadows a later conversation they will have. The two men, though formally enemies, see eye-to-eye and develop a genuine if rudimentary friendship that will end up serving them both well indeed. Chapter Fifteen contains a large amount of combat action and the writing is notably crisp and accurate.

Chapters 16 and 17

Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

The earnest assault begins and massed French forces move forward into withering British fire using brute-force tactics. The French place fascines—huge bundles of sticks—into the moats and then use them to approach the redoubt itself. They are repulsed with great loss of life—but the fascines are in place. A second assault is mounted a few hours later, using better tactics involving a feinting action and harassing fire. This assault is nearly successful, and several French soldiers enter the fortress compound and engage the British in hand-to-hand fighting. They are repulsed with sword bayonets and axes; other advancing elements are driven off with accurate rifle fire. The British take several casualties, but the French suffer much slaughter. The second attack is thus driven off.

Calvet and Sharpe both realize the issue is simply a matter of time. The British must soon succumb to attrition and the British wounded and dead continue to mount. British supplies dwindle so alarmingly that Sharpe orders the men to withhold fire unless sure of a kill. Calvet briefly argues that a pinning force should be left behind and he should lead the main force south—Ducos, blinded by hatred, refuses. Lassan joins the assaulting troops and offers to lead them in battle. The French command thus holds various motivations and argues about command authority, but in the end their superior numbers and supplies must tell. Calvet then enjoins Killick to enter the fray by using the repaired and fitted Theulla to prosecute a naval bombardment the main breach in the walls can be cleared of defenders. Killick declines on grounds of his oath, and Ducos threatens him with incarceration, and worse, if he does not attack the British. Ducos, in fact, repeatedly threatens everybody if the assault should fail. Meanwhile the French artillery concentrates roundshot on a place noted by Lassan as having weak construction and much damage. After several hours a huge segment of defensive wall collapses, opening a giant breach for the next day's assault. Sharpe considers the cause lost and schemes how to save his men—to this end, he slips out of the fortress, alone, during the night.

Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen continue the narrative style of Chapter Fifteen inasmuch as they are combat-focused and deal with the siege upon Teste de Buch—Sharpe's Siege. The French leadership is fractured and argumentative, but their position is so superior that this has little impact. They will capture the fortress, with greater or lesser loss of life, and this fact is so obvious that even Sharpe knows it to be true. The collapse of the curtain wall under French bombardment marks the tactical turning point in the siege that causes Sharpe to look for an atypical solution to the situation. He knows that the next assault will bring hundreds of French soldiers within the fortress walls where his men will be overwhelmed and slaughtered. He has only one cannon

with one or two shots of ammunition and a few barrels of quicklime to use as defensive weapons—insufficient for any but a minor delaying action. His men are reduced to a relative handful of shots apiece before relying only on bayonets. Casualties are high and the fortress is seriously compromised. He knows the next assault will bring defeat and death. Calvet knows it too, and Ducos fairly salivates over it. Lassan hopes that by leading the final assault he will somewhat redeem himself of the loss of the fortress; his intimate local knowledge proves valuable in speeding the end.

Ducos' primary mistake is in his manner of handling Killick. Rather than a subtle approach, he simply attempts to strong-arm the man. Ducos is apparently used to cowing subordinates with fear of political reprisals—after all, such works with even Calvet. But Killick is a fiercely independent American who will not be cowed by French threats. And why should he be? At the worst, he can simply board ship and sail away. His involvement is tangential, anyway—Calvet wants his ship to provide perpendicular scouring fire to hold the British away from the breach until the last moment. Calvet's guns cannot accomplish the feat with precision because their line of fire would be interrupted by the advancing French forces. Killick's only objection lies in his oath—not only would he be breaking his oath, but he would be attacking the very man who saved his life. Ducos sees no problem in the situation, but Killick is another man altogether. Sharpe's solitary nocturnal foray foreshadows the British escape from the siege.

Chapter 18 and Epilogue

Chapter 18 and Epilogue Summary

The storm continues to pound the region with heavy rain, making most black powder weapons unreliable—this rather favors the British because it stills the howitzers and field guns, and the British have little powder anyway. Calvet prepares a massive assault as Killick's Thuella takes up station and begins a preliminary bombardment—by design, the canister shot is aimed high. After just a few shots Sharpe orders the British flag cut down as a symbol of surrender. Ducos and Calvet are caught off guard and wonder what is happening—they figure it out when the fortress unfurls a huge American flag. Sharpe has surrendered to Killick. Killick's longboats quickly take off Sharpe's wounded and soldiers. The remaining rifles and Marines fight a delaying retreat to Killick's longboats as an outraged Ducos presses the attack—technically illegally. The retreating screen defends down to the water and Sharpe hangs on to the last boat as it pulls away. Sharpe has released Killick from his oath in exchange for the staged surrender.

Killick sails the British south several score miles and then puts the men ashore. They march south toward the British front lines, taking several French prisoners on the way. The men then reach the comparative safety of the main British army and seek medical service. Sharpe continues south, alone, until he sees the bridge. It is comprised of dozens of anchored ships, acting as supports, over which is laid a series of giant cables and planking, forming a temporary but serviceable roadway. The bridge is loaded with heavy traffic of military stores and men, all heading north and deeper into France. Sharpe crosses south to report and finds Bampfyle conversing gaily with young women and nearby are Elphinstone and Wigram. A furious Sharpe accosts Bampfylde and insults him to his face. The cowardly Bampfylde is so taken aback that he merely stammers and withdraws. Sharpe then sees de Maquerre who immediately flees knowing his cover is blow. Sharpe pursues him onto the bridge and de Maquerre finally turns in despair as Sharpe runs him through. De Maquerre's corpse falls into the river and washes away. Sharpe returns to Elphinstone and Wigram and delivers his verbal report. Elphinstone mentions that Jane is well; her illness was a common winter cold after all. Much relieved, Sharpe realizes that his latest military adventure has concluded.

Chapter 18 and Epilogue Analysis

The concluding segments of the novel wrap up loose threads and provide the overall narrative's closing action. The massive French assault planned by Calvet and Ducos is thought by all, including Sharpe, to prove decisive. Killick's apparent participation guarantees an easier success. Yet Sharpe's nocturnal mission has concluded an understanding between Killick and the British forces. Killick's untenable position of being under a non-aggression oath is withdrawn by Sharpe in exchange for being on-hand to accept surrender. Killick is thus simultaneously freed from his oath and Ducos' threats should he not participate in the assault. After a few poorly-aimed discharges, Sharpe

surrenders to Killick—the French forces having not yet entered the fray. The French artillery is silent because of the rain, and Ducos' earlier sarcastic comment about Naval forces knowing how to keep their powder dry proves his technical undoing. Indeed, Killick's naval guns are the only guns firing, making Sharpe's surrender technically correct. Killick thus "captures" Teste de Buch and transiently claims it as an American prize. He then immediately takes off his prisoners-of-war. Ducos is technically bound to honor the surrender and Killick's decision; after all, Killick is a legal representative of America and America is France's ally. Of course violating this trust does not overly concern Ducos, and he orders an immediate attack. But it is too late—Sharpe has escaped.

The epilogue is largely formulaic in tone. Sharpe returns, his men seek medical attention, and he makes his report. Bampfylde is put in his place and withdraws, and the traitorous de Maquerre receives the just desserts of all wicked spies. That Sharpe's final revenge comes aboard the bridge he indirectly helped to construct is symbolically compelling. Jane's survival is the icing on the cake—never mind that within months the relationship ends in unhappy divorce.

Characters

Major Richard Sharpe

Major Richard Sharpe is the principle protagonist of the novel and is present in most—but not all—of the scenes in the narrative. Sharpe is described as a large man with dark hair and a face disfigured by scarring. A combat veteran of numerous campaigns, Sharpe is in excellent physical condition, possesses superior tactical and strategic reasoning, and rarely makes substantial battlefield mistakes. Outside the sphere of infantry warfare, Sharpe is fairly normal in most respects. Recently married again, Sharpe spends most of his quiet moments fretting about the health of Jane, his distant bride. Occasionally, Sharpe becomes superstitious about Jane's survival—he imagines her infected with an epidemic fever—and he behaves somewhat erratically as a result. Throughout the novel Sharpe demonstrates flawless command, decisive leadership, and a solid grasp of the tactical situation. Possessed of an almost supernatural intuition regarding his opponent's tactics, Sharpe is always one step ahead in matters military. Sharpe also takes advantages of extant situations and is more of a pragmatist than an idealist—as shown by his ready use of quicklime as a combat weapon.

Sharpe is the son of a prostitute, conceived during her course of business by an unknown father. Raised as a self-proclaimed guttersnipe, Sharpe joins the army at an early age and rose through the ranks due solely to merit. In conjunction with his military service Sharpe has traveled widely and married several times. An inveterate womanizer, Sharpe finds the occasional lulls between campaigns enjoyable periods. At the time of the novel, Sharpe's nominal regimental rank is Major, though this has not been confirmed by the army, as pointed out by Wigram. At any rate, Sharpe's rank's status is not of great importance in the remainder of the novel as Bampfylde appears largely ignorant of the Byzantine regulations governing British military rank. After successfully defending the fortress in the latter portion of the novel, Sharpe contrives to have his men taken to safety—genuine concern for his men's welfare being one of Sharpe's more unusual characteristics.

Regimental Sergeant Major Patrick Harper

Regimental Sergeant Major Patrick Harper is a long-time friend and fellow soldier of Sharpe, and the two men have fought together in many previous campaigns. Harper is described as a huge man, 6' 4", and heavily muscled. He is Irish and his battle cry is "God Save Ireland"; nevertheless, he is a loyal British subject. As Sharpe is reassigned to the Royal American Rifles for the operation detailed in the novel, Harper should be left behind with his proper unit. However, Harper is entirely dedicated to Sharpe and contrives to accompany Sharpe regardless of official unit assignments. Harper begins the novel with a terribly infected tooth and later claims that the medical surgeon had given him instructions to drink heavily prior to having an extraction. In his legally drunken state, Harper had somehow fallen in amongst the Royal American Rifles and

been mistaken for a replacement—by the time he woke up, the outfit was already at sea. At least, such is Harper's tale. Harper is possessed of nearly suicidal bravery and on several occasions in the novel exposes himself to enemy fire during critical moments; on one occasion he single handedly counter-attacks an advancing French squadron—driving them back with an axe wielded one-handedly. This display is so magnificent that even General Calvet is suitable impressed. Harper owns a curious firearm described as a "seven-barreled gun"; it is apparently discharged through a single trigger-pull, acting like a miniature artillery piece. Slow to load and cumbersome, the weapon is wielded with much precision and is devastating in close quarters. Harper frequently uses the gun and always with much effect. Sharpe notes that Harper has a newborn child during the opening chapters of the novel. Unlike Sharpe, Harper is entirely unsentimental about his distant wife and child.

Captain William Frederickson

Captain William Frederickson is a company commander of the Royal American Rifles. He has enjoyed a long association with the 60th Rifles and is well-liked—indeed, admired—by the men serving in his company who have given him the ironic nickname of Sweet William. He is missing his left eye, most of his right ear, and several of his front teeth. He wears a moldy patch and a few poorly-fitting false teeth, altogether having what is described as a villainous appearance. Indeed, several times in combat Frederickson's appearance alone causes the enemy to falter. Sharpe finds in Frederickson an entirely competent, brave, and dependable second-in-command and quickly comes to trust the man. Throughout the novel, Frederickson executes his duty with diligence and performs flawlessly as a company commander. Frederickson's individual combat prowess probably is surpassed only by Patrick Harper. The commanding officer of the second company of the Royal American Rifles is Lieutenant Minver, who shares Frederickson's many positive characteristics but is not as charismatic.

Captain William Bampfylde

Captain William Bampfylde is the senior British captain presented in the novel, and throughout much of the narrative he vies with Sharpe for seniority ashore where complex inter-service regulations ultimately favor Sharpe unless Bampfylde is standing upon his ship. Bampfylde is described as youngish, plump, very over-confident, pale, and possessed of glaucous eyes. Bampfylde appears early in the narrative when he behaves in a most unpleasant and ungentlemanly way in front of mixed company at an officers' club where Sharpe and his wife are dining. Later, Bampfylde happily uses Sharpe at peril to further, as he supposes, his own political ambitions. Bampfylde leads a large marine column ashore and on an overland march where he proves entirely incapable; however, he attempts to claim all the credit for Sharpe's various military activities. Later, Bampfylde accepts rumor as fact and abandons Sharpe and his men on the unsubstantiated news that they have been killed to a man—Bampfylde fears a large French attack. Although Bampfylde appears nominally competent as a naval

commander and has the respect of at least his Lieutenant Ford, he is in general self-serving, overweening, somewhat cowardly, and possessed of many of the worst qualities of people who consider themselves to be of high station.

Captain Cornelius Killick

Captain Cornelius Killick is the American captain of the privateer Thuella. He is described as deeply tanned with dark golden hair and a handsome, weather-beaten face. Killick is confident—usually overly-so—and notable for his height and physical proportion. He is an insightful sailor and naval tactician but entirely out of his element on land. Early in the novel, Killick pulls off a masterful raid on a British port veritably under the nose of the British navy; later in the novel he evades capture and manages to repair his ship with extemporized materials. Thus, he makes no mistake on the water or pertaining to things nautical. During the middle portion of the novel, however, he undertakes to assist Commandant Henri Lassan in the defense of the French fortress Teste de Buch. To this end, he lands his sailors and some field guns and attempts an ambush of the British marines. Sharpe's dedication uncovers the ambush and alerts Bampfylde's marines to the danger, but in the actual event Killick launches a premature and fairly pointless attack, surrendering his surprise and being quickly surrounded. His forces are captured and then paroled by Sharpe. Later, Killick returns the favor by accepting Sharpe's surrender—thus saving him and his men from being taken captive by the French. Killick is an enterprising American officer, very interested in profit and actively engaged in prosecuting the war against the British. Even so, he is a fair man and likes to assist the underdog when practicable. Note that a Killick is a small nautical anchor and thus the man's name is somewhat ironic.

Comte de Maquerre

The Comte de Maquerre is described as a tall, slender man with a narrow face, over-powdered hair, and a somewhat unsuccessful attempt at a high-brow presentation. He is presented as a stereotypical Frenchman, blustering about his personal belongings, insisting upon his own self-importance, and slightly effeminate in demeanor and physical action. His apparent nickname in the British intelligence office is the near homonym maquereau, meaning pimp. He is a double agent; a Frenchman loyal to Napoleon and taking orders from Major Pierre Ducos while successfully posing as a soldier loyal to the French crown and serving in the British military as a member of the Chasseurs Britannique. However, his traitorous nature is suspected by some in the British intelligence service—the exact details are not forthcoming in the novel. The English successfully utilize de Maquerre to deliver a "poison pill" of information to the French, regarding a supposed major British invasion near Bordeaux. The raid is actually small and intended to be a transient diversion from the real military efforts far to the south. Later in the novel, de Macquerre's mission is changed by Ducos, and the French spy contrives to have Sharpe abandoned by Bampfylde's supporting naval forces. After Sharpe survives this situation, he encounters de Macquerre behind British lines and

chases him down with a sword. De Macquerre runs away, frightened, until Sharpe brings him to bay and kills him by running him through.

Major Pierre Ducos

Major Pierre Ducos is a French intelligence officer of vitriolic temperament and wide-ranging influence. He is widely said to have easy and direct access to Napoleon and for this reason even his superior officers—such as General Calvet—treat him with a certain deference while his inferior officers are little more than bootlicks. Ducos has encountered Sharpe several times before the present novel and the two men have a long history of antagonistic exchanges in which—at least morally—Sharpe has always been the victor. When Ducos learns Sharpe is afoot at Teste de Buch he contrives a large entrapping plot, the unsuccessful execution of which consumes much of the latter novel. While Ducos is normally a fearsome opponent, his blind hatred of Sharpe makes his machinations rather clumsy. Ducos is the driving force behind both de Maquerre and General Calvet, and is known to Sharpe's particular friend Michael Hogan. For his own part, Sharpe is largely unaware of Ducos' presence for most of the novel and appears fairly nonplussed with Ducos' personal involvement in the final assault on the fortress.

General Calvet

General Calvet is the highest-ranking French general officer presented in the novel, and he leads the final French assault on the Teste de Buch, held by Sharpe's three companies. Calvet is portrayed as an aging veteran, corpulent but strong and active. During the novel Calvet spends more time worrying about eating bacon for breakfast than he does planning assault strategy—then again, his enormous numerical superiority and limited tactical options largely explain his unimaginative frontal attacks. Nevertheless, Calvet likes to lead from the front and has risen from soldier through the ranks on his own merits. It is rumored that his wife sleeps on a pillow stuffed with hair taken from men Calvet has personally killed, and he is overly fond of remembering one battle in which he killed two enemy soldiers with a single thrust of his sword. Prior to fighting Sharpe, Calvet's entire military experience has been directed against Russians on the Eastern front.

Commandant Henri Lassan

Commandant Henri Lassan is the commander of the fortress Teste de Buch, a strong emplacement with numerous guns. He is described as middle aged but vigorously active and a strong and dedicated supporter of Napoleon. Although he sometimes lightly and privately questions Napoleon's leadership decisions, he is fully committed to a defense of France against all her enemies. He is held in high regard by the men he commands and allows them a large amount of leeway in their garrison service. For example, he allows the men's wives and children to live within the fortress even though the regulations prohibit such. Lassan is very religious and spends much time each day

in prayerful contemplation of God's will; after the war ends he desires to become a priest. Lassan leads the fortress garrison in a spirited defense of the stronghold, but ultimately loses the battle when his men mistake Sharpe's forces for friendly Americans. Lassan subsequently is plagued by guilt and actively participates in the latter siege against the captured fortress, even at great peril of his own life.

Jane Sharpe née Gibbons

Jane Sharpe is the wife of Major Richard Sharpe. She appears in the opening chapters of the book where she and Sharpe are described as newly married and in the blush of happy romance. Sharpe describes her in positive terms and she is found to be attractive and well-bred by all who meet her. Jane shows loyalty to friends bordering on the foolhardy, visiting a friend sick with contagious fever on a daily basis until the man dies. On the eve of Sharpe's departure, Jane eats some bad food and on the morning of Sharpe's departure develops a winter cold. The combined effects of nausea, cramping, and fever convince Sharpe that Jane has contracted her friend's fever, and he spends his entire deployment worrying about Jane's very survival. After Sharpe leaves England, Jane does not reappear directly in the narrative though Sharpe thinks of her often. Jane reappears in subsequent novels in the series though her marriage to Sharpe does not long endure.

Objects/Places

Royal American Rifles

The Royal American Rifles, comprised of two companies, are led by Sharpe during military operations described in the narrative. For most of the novel they are joined by a company of Marines. The two rifle companies are commanded by Frederickson and Minver, and the men are resolute, well-trained, and deadly. The rifle companies are armed with rifles—greatly superior in accuracy to muskets, but slower to load—and sword bayonets.

Canister

Canister is a type of ammunition used in field and naval guns instead of the more-traditional cannonball. Canister is composed of a thin metal or wire wrapping that holds together numerous smaller projectiles, usually lead balls similar to a musket ball. When fired, the wrapping disintegrates and the multiple balls begin to spread apart rapidly. Against hardened targets, canister is not effective. Against infantry, canister is far more deadly than roundshot. General Calvet uses canister against Sharpe's fortress during the siege.

Harper's Seven-barreled Gun

Patrick Harper carries and uses a so-called seven-barreled gun. The weapon is exceptionally effective at close range. Intended to fictionally represent the historic Nock's Volley Gun, the weapon discharges seven 13.2mm balls simultaneously—something akin to a gigantic shotgun. The weapon is heavy, cumbersome, and delivers fearsome recoil. It is much beloved of Harper. Historically, volley guns were withdrawn from service prior to the time of the novel suggesting that the gun is Harper's personal property.

Bayonet

A bayonet is a blade or spike that is designed to be attached to the end of a rifle or musket, converting the weapon into a type of spear. The Royal American Rifles use a sword bayonet—a long, fully-bladed weapon. The marines use a smaller bayonet that is more akin to a spike than a dagger. In any event, bayonets are fearsome weapons used during close-quarters combat as they make a fired single-shot musket into a deadly weapon.

Small Arms

Several types of small arms are discussed in the novel; indeed, the novel's accurate portrayal of small arms and their use is one of its most-enjoyable elements. During the historic period discussed in the narrative, small arms were nearly all smoothbore, muzzle-loading, single-shot weapons capable of receiving a bayonet. With a single exception, every small arm discussed in the book is ignited by a flintlock—one French officer uses a percussion lock pistol to great effect during wet conditions. The Royal American Rifles are armed with rifled weapons, giving them great accuracy and the capability of effective fire at great distances—all at the expense of slower loading.

Quicklime

Quicklime is a naturally-occurring material composed of calcium oxide. It is often also known as burnt lime or simply lime. Quicklime is a white, caustic, alkaline solid and is often found as powder. In the novel, a vast stockpile of quicklime has been created by burning oyster shells. Sharpe gathers several barrels of quicklime and uses them as a sort of chemical weapon, hurling the powder toward the French troops. Soldiers getting quicklime in their eyes are effectively blinded. Historic uses of quicklime as a weapon are known.

Privateer

A privateer is a privately-owned warship authorized by a given country's government to attack foreign shipping. During the period discussed in the narrative, privateers were commonly employed by nations without an extensive navy—such as the United States of America. British naval authorities frequently considered privateers little better than pirates.

Frigate

A frigate was a type of warship used by England and France during the period of time in the novel. Frigates were square-rigged on all three masts—full rigged—and were considered light and fast vessels. They bore lighter armament than typical ships-of-the-line and were widely used. In the novel, the frigate Vengeance prosecutes a naval bombardment against Teste de Buch while a larger ship-of-the-line stands off the coast, unable to approach the fortress due to its deeper draft.

The Floating Bridge

Colonel Elphinstone constructs a huge floating bridge over the Adour River, allowing British forces to march across the river. The bridge is constructed while Sharpe's forces fight General Calvet's forces in the north. The bridge is composed of scores of ships

tethered together by bundles of fibers over which planks are laid down. The ships hold their relative positions with their capstans spooling their anchor rodes. The main bridge span cables are attached to massive capstans on land that keep tension and allow the bridge to rise and fall with the tide. Similar bridges are known to have been constructed during the period of time consider in the novel—they were extemporized and temporary structures, as in the novel.

Bassin d'Arcachon

Bassin d'Arcachon is a natural inlet on west coast of France near the effluent of the Leyre River. The bay covers an area of about 150 square kilometers at high tide. Most of the novel is set on the shores and environs of the bay, and it is into the bay that Sharpe makes good his escape from the French by surrendering to the American privateer Cornelius Killick.

Teste de Buch

Teste de Buch is a fortress located on the shore of the Bassin d'Arcachon. The fortress' technical construction is much considered in the novel by various British officers as they plan an assault and by a few French officers as they plan a defense. The fortress is captured by Sharpe, destroyed by Bampfylde, and then defended by Sharpe after he and his men are abandoned by Bampfylde. Most of the combat action of the novel occurs in Teste de Buch. Frederickson interprets the name for Sharpe, claiming somewhat erroneously but sarcastically that the name means "head of wood" or, perhaps 'blockhead'.

Themes

Combat

The book's dominant theme is combat. The opening chapters present the setting of the military theater and develop the rationale for the ensuing combat activity. The British Empire has invaded Southern France after prolonged and successful military operations in Spain. Napoleon's forces are unbalanced and undergoing strategic realignment. England hopes to prosecute the war effort and conquer France. In order to continue the advance, a river must be bridged and a new bridgehead established. The British generals fear that such action will not be successful without a major diversion to reduce French actions. To this end they contrive a false mission to the Bay of Arcachon; the forces landed will putatively march on Bordeaux and seek to incite rebellion in that city. Sharpe is selected to lead the diversionary and abortive invasion and the remainder of the novel deals with Sharpe's military adventures and combat between British and French forces.

Although Sharpe's personal background is lightly developed, it is not the dominant theme of the novel. Likewise, the overarching political situation is described but only insofar as to present the rationale behind Sharpe's military actions. No discussion of the greater strategic situation is offered, and political intrigues are not particularly considered. From the moment Sharpe boards Bampfylde's boats until the conclusion of the novel, the dominant theme is combat and the dominant action is military. Nearly all characters are developed solely in conjunction with their military capabilities; most objects presented are directly involved in combat, and the setting is most-fully developed when it impinges upon combat outcomes. The dominant theme of combat is supported by a rich and descriptive narrative that lends excitement to the military action presented.

Honor

Sharpe is much concerned with honorably discharging his duties and acting appropriately in all situations. He is not overly-given to flamboyant notions of honor but instead relies upon a commonsense interpretation of honor that is appreciated by his men but often misunderstood by his superior officers. For example, during one fierce combat, American troops led by Killick surrender to Frederickson on terms that include Frederickson's promise of fair treatment. Hours later, Bampfylde begins to torture the captured officers to extricate information about citizenship. Such treatment obviously flies in the face of Frederickson's promise, and he takes his complaint to Sharpe. Sharpe accepts Frederickson entirely at face value and moves decisively to intervene. In point of law, Bampfylde is most likely correct, but in point of honor, Sharpe obviously is correct. Sharpe becomes aware that upon his pending departure, Bampfylde will hang all the prisoners as pirates, and Sharpe's sense of honor will not allow him to simply walk away from such a situation. He therefore releases the prisoners with the

agreement that they will not subsequently raise arms against England. Killick, an honorable man, intends to honor his word, and Sharpe expects that this will be the case. Bampfylde, a man without real honor, assumes that Killick will simply discard the oath and return to hostile activity.

The theme of honor is supported by other characters in the book. General Calvet, for example, is essentially an honorable, if otherwise amoral, man. Killick and his sailors behave with honor; Sharpe's men are honorable and the Marine company fights honorably. Even the French commandant Lassan is honorable. The theme, though, is supported by examples of men entirely lacking in honor—men such as Ducos and de Maquerre. The theme comes full circle at the novel's conclusion when Sharpe kills de Maquerre for treason.

Love and Devotion

Sharpe is presented in the novel as a doting and devoted husband—a portrayal notably at odds with the man's previous career detailed in previous novels. Even so, in the blush of a new romance and the heady love of new marriage, Sharpe finds his thoughts often drifting to his wife Jane. Upon his departure, Sharpe leaves a friend at death's door with a contagious fever and Jane with a sick stomach and a feverish cough. He fears she has contracted the disease and he often imagines her dead and buried. Sharpe even superstitiously believes that his personal actions might influence Jane's survival and thus believes Killick's tall tale about sailors being hung in windless airs as suffering eternal damnation. To avoid damning sailors, but even more to spare Jane's life, Sharpe decides he must intervene to save Killick. While his intervention does not help Jane, ironically, it saves Sharpe's life.

The theme of love and devotion is developed in other ways throughout the novel. Patrick Harper has a new child and Sharpe thinks of the infant more than Harper does. Even the ruthless General Calvet is noted as having a wife. Besides romantic love, the novel presents other types of devotion. Lassan is devoted to France with a strongly emotional component; he is even more devoted to God. Ducos is wholly given over to Sharpe's destruction, a type of negative devotion; Sharpe responds by surviving and taking most of his men with him. Romantic love, strong friendships, and devotion to duty all play a significant role in the novel and serve to heighten the stresses and emotions of combat.

Style

Point of View

The novel is presented in the third-person, omniscient viewpoint, traditional for fiction and particularly suited to the narrative structure presented. Major Richard Sharpe, the primary protagonist of the novel, is present in most scenes of the novel but occasionally the scene varies so that alternative viewpoints can be presented. The most-prevalent of these concerns the military headquarters of General Calvet and a few brief meetings between Major Ducos and the Comte de Marquerre. The narrator divulges frequent internal thoughts of the protagonist and some of other characters. The majority of the story is told through action and dialogue; revealed thoughts are frequent but generally are used for characterization rather than plot development.

The third-person point of view allows Sharpe to be presented in a highly-sympathetic manner. For example, the narrative structure portrays Sharpe's brooding introspection as personal concern rather than a failing. The narrative also allows portrayal of Sharpe's life situations as difficult but not pathetic. In this way, the choice of narrative view is appropriate and successful. Indeed, the structure of the novel and the method of plot development nearly require the use of a third-person point of view. Finally, the frequent appearance of minor characters is allowed through the point of view selected; it is carried throughout all the novels of the series and is accessible and successful.

Setting

The novel is set in southern France and the opening sentence dates the events quite precisely in early 1814. The novel's chronology spans a period of time of about one week during the British invasion of France. The Napoleonic wars have ravaged Europe for a decade and more, and the British Empire has survived only because of its superior naval forces. Under Wellington, the British have invaded Spain and subjugated most of the Iberian Peninsula, formerly aligned with France. The British forces have pushed into southern France as far as Bayonne. British plans call for a march north to Bordeaux, but the Adour River forms a barrier. The British engineer corps, led by Colonel Elphinstone, has determined the river can be bridged by using a type of floating bridge with dozens of small ships acting as supports. While obviously fairly temporary, the bridge will allow the British army to cross further into France. For several weeks the British Navy has been capturing small vessels to supply the bridge construction effort. A large number of suitable vessels has been located in the town of Gujan on the coast of Arcachon Bay, and a British naval force led by Captain Bampfylde has been sent to capture the vessels. Wellington determines that this last mission can also be used as a diversionary attack to draw French forces off the beachhead. To this end, British intelligence has manipulated a suspected French spy, the Comte de Maquerre, into believing a real invasion is planned. The pretext is Bordeaux's putative readiness to rise in rebellion. Thus, Sharpe is assigned to lead a tiny contingent of soldiers from the beaches of

Arcachon Bay to Bordeaux where, supposedly, they will be welcomed with open arms. The setting is thus completed in a fairly complex political situation, made further difficult by Sharpe's complete ignorance of the greater goals of his mission.

Language and Meaning

The novel is presented in standard British English, using British spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Such is familiar enough to any American reader that they should pose no special obstacle to comprehension. In general the writing is accessible to high-school level readers. Sentence and paragraph construction are typical and present a fairly even texture throughout. The language of the novel is generally informal and very readable—for example, a "musket ball snicked the wall" (p. 258) captures the exciting essence of close-quarters combat without placing undue stress on grammatical correctness. Language occasionally wanders into the technical aspects of early nineteenth century infantry combat—a fortress is described in highly technical terms; small arms are described in methods assuming passing familiarity, and naval cannon are discussed in fairly technical terms, but such descriptions are not central to the narrative and form an exceptionally enjoyable aspect of the book's realistic and historic texture. Indeed, were such passages absent, the book's tone of authenticity would suffer markedly.

Meaning within the book is derived through traditional means, and subtle interpretation of nearly the entire narrative is not required. The characters presented are largely simple men who hold concrete notions of things such as duty, honor, and valor. For example, when men are afraid, they cower or run away; brave men act with great distinction and valor and are highly valued for it. There is little posturing and men portray themselves honestly—excepting, of course, Horace Bampfylde, who is a regrettable example of the then-emerging modern man. Even the despicable Ducos presents himself in a forthright manner; likewise Comte de Maquerre behaves in a perfidious way, but then of course the profession of spy requires such.

Structure

The 318-page novel is dived into eighteen enumerated chapters, an epilogue, and a historical note. While the epilogue is a component of the fictive narrative, the historical note is an authorial explanation, or apology, of certain events described. The novel presents two maps in the front matter—one a theatre map of the French Biscay Coast and the other a smaller tactical map of the Bassin D'Arcachon and Hinterland, including the road to Bordeaux. The larger map is not particularly useful throughout most of the narrative, where the action is nearly entirely contained by the smaller map. The novel is written using standard British spelling and punctuation, which may not be immediately familiar to American readers, but such should pose no special problems to reading.

The novel is constructed in a typical and accessible fashion that aids materially with understanding the narrative plot and elements. Each enumerated chapter is presented

in chronological order. Of course, characters occasionally remember the past or speculate about the future but these events are obvious and clarified. Thus, the construction follows a rigidly chronological presentation. Scenes occasionally shift between characters and locales, and occasionally scenes occur roughly simultaneously. The construction makes such shifts obvious and presents to special obstacle to comprehension.

Quotes

"It was ten days short of Candlemas, 1814, and an Atlantic wind carried shivers of cold rain that slapped on narrow cobbled alleys, spilt from the broken gutters of tangled roofs, and pitted the water of St Jean de Luz's inner harbor. It was a winter wind, cruel as a bared sabre, that whirled chimney smoke into the low January clouds shrouding the corner of south-western France where the British Army had its small lodgement." (p. 9)

"Elphinstone had been piqued by Bampfylde's discourteous treatment and thus chose to use the technical language of his trade, doubtless hoping thereby to annoy the bumptious naval captain. 'It's an old fortification, Sharpe, a square-treace. You'll face a glacis rising tot en feet, with an eight counterscarp into the outer ditch. A width of twenty and a scarp of ten. That's revetted with granite, by the way, like the rest of the damned place. Climb the scarp and you're on a counterguard. They'll be peppering you by now and you've got a forty foot dash to the next counterscarp.' The colonel was speaking with a grim relish, as if seeing the figures running and dropping through the enemy's plunging fire. 'That's twelve feet, it's flooded, and the enceinte height is twenty.
'The width of that last ditch?' Sharpe was making notes.
'Sixteen, near enough,' Elphinstone shrugged. 'We don't think it's flooded more than a foot or two.' Even if the naval officers did not understand Elphinstone's language, they could understand the import of what he was saying. The Teste de Buch might be an old fort, but it was a bastard; a killer.
'Weapons, sir?' Sharpe asked.
Elphinstone had no need to consult his notes. 'They've got six thirty-six pounders in a semi-circular bastion that butts into the channel. The other guns are twenty-fours, wall mounted.'
Captain Horace Bampfylde had listened to the technical language and understood that a small point was being scored against him. Now he smiled. 'We should be grateful it's not a tenaille trace.'
Elphinstone frowned, realizing that Bampfylde had understood all that had been said. 'Indeed.'
'No lunettes?' Bampfylde's expression was seraphic. 'Caponiers?'
Elphinstone's frown deepend. 'Citadels at the corners, but hardly more than guerites.'" (pp. 33-34)

"'You lying bastard,' Sharpe said.
'Maybe, sir, but it's the truth so help me God.' Patrick Harper, delighted with both his exploit and explanation grinned at his officer. The grin spoke the real truth; that the two of them always fought together and Harper was determined that it should stay that way. The grin also implied that Major Richard Sharpe would somehow avert the righteous wrath of the Army from Harper's innocent head.
'So your tooth still isn't pulled?' Sharpe asked.
'That's right, sir.'
'Then I'll damn well pull it now,' Sharpe said.

Harper took a step backwards. He was four inches taller than Sharpe's six feet, with muscles to match his size, while on his shoulders was slung a rifle and his fearful seven-barrelled gun, but over his broad, swollen face there suddenly appeared a look of sheer terror. 'You'll not pull the tooth, sir.'
'I damn well will.' Sharpe turned to Frederickson. 'Find me some pincers, Captain.'" (p. 78)

"The musket banged and flamed and the ramrod, which could have impaled Sharpe like a skewer, cartwheeled across the inner courtyard to clang against the stone ramp.
'Non! Non!' The man was backing away now as Sharpe, unscathed, rose from the stones with his sword in his right hand.
'Non!' The guard dropped his musket, raised his hands, and Sharpe accepted the man's surrender by the simple expedient of tipping him over the ramparts into the flooded ditch twenty feet below. Minver's Riflemen, pouches, scabbards, canteens and horns flapping as they ran, were on the road now; the fastest men already close to the glacis." (p. 104)

"Killick licked dry lips, tested the surprising thought, and decided it must be the truth.
'We've beaten the bastards, lads!'
'Not these bastards, you haven't.'
Killick turned with the speed of a snake, then froze. Standing behind him was a one-eyed man whose face would have terrified an imp of Satan. Captain William Frederickson, in grim jest, always removed his eye-patch and false teeth before a fight and the lack of those cosmetics, added to the horror that was his eye-socket, gave him the face of a man come from a stinking and rotting grave. The Rifle officer's voice, Killick noticed in stunned astonishment, was oddly polite while, behind him and moving with fast confidence, green-jacketed men whose guns were tipped with long, brass-handled bayonets slipped between the trees.
Killick put a hand to his pistol's hilt and the one-eyed man shook his head. 'It would distress me to kill you. I have a certain sympathy for your Republic.'
Killick gave his opinion of Frederickson's sympathy in one short and efficacious word." (pp. 109-110)

"'If I were to let you go,' Sharpe spoke so quietly that, even in this night's uncanny silence, Killick and Docherty had to lean forward to hear his voice, 'would you give me your word, as American citizens, that neither of you, nor any man in your crew, here or absent, will take up arms against Britain for the rest of this war's duration?'
Sharpe had expected instant acceptance, even gratitude, but the tall American was wary. 'Suppose I'm attacked?'
'Then you run.' Sharpe waited for a reply that did not come, then, to his astonishment, found himself pleading with a man not to choose a hanging.
'I can't stop Bampfylde hanging you, Killick. I don't have the power. I can't escort you into captivity; we're a hundred miles behind enemy lines! So the Navy has to take you away from here and the Navy will string you up, all of you. But give me your word and I'll release you.

Killick suddenly let out a great breath, the first sign of the tension he had felt. 'You have my word.'" (pp. 133-314)

"The conscripts primed their pieces. Some had forgotten to take their ramrods out of their musket barrels, but it did not matter.
'Aim low!' Sharpe's voice was harsh. He knew most troops fired high. 'Aim at their balls! Fire!' The word swept down.
The volley smashed out, the sound of the muskets deafening as the heavy weapons leaped back into bruised shoulders. The smoke, stinking of rotten eggs, made its fog.
'Lie down!' Sharpe shouted. He saw astonished faces and his voice rose in anger. 'Lie down! Lie down!' The Marines, puzzled, dropped flat. Sharpe knelt to one side of the rolling, poisonous cloud of musket smoke. The French Company had shaken as the volley struck home. Just like a man punched in the belly the whole Company seemed to fold, then the officers and sergeants, shouting orders, pushed the ranks back into place and Sharpe saw how the rear files had to step over the writhing and the dead left by the Marine's well-aimed volley.
The French commander ignored the Riflemen on his flank. They could be dealt with after the redcoats. 'Tirez!' For a new Company, unblooded, it was a good response. Sixty or seventy muskets fired at the gunsmoke, but the Marines were flat and the conscripts fired high." (p. 165)

"Sharpe's last sight of the bridge over the Leyre was of the powder billowing flame and smoke outwards, of stones from the balustrade making vast splashes in the shallow water, of the toll-keeper's windows smashing inwards, and of four toppling stone urns. The bridge still stood, but it was weakened and no artilleryman would dare take the weight of guns over the stone roadway until a competent engineer, fond of life, volunteered to stand beneath he blackened arch as the guns trundled overhead." (p. 190)

"General Calvet sat in a miserable hovel in a miserablevillage on the miserable edge of an increasingly miserable France. 'You say this Sharpe is good?'
'Lucky,' Ducos said scornfully.
'The Emperor,' Calvet said, 'will tell you a soldier needs luck more than brains. He came up from the ranks?'
'Like yourself, General,' Ducos replied.
'Then he must be good.' Calvet rubbed his hands in gleeful anticipation. The general had a broad, scarred face, burned with powder stains like dark tattoos. He wore a bushy, black veteran's moustache. 'Favier! You've fought the English, what are they like?'
Favier knew this was a time for truth, not bombast. 'Unimaginative in attack, rock-solid in defence, and quick with their muskets, very.'" (p. 215)

"One of the Marines with Harper seemed untroubled by the shelling. He drew a stone along the fore-edge of a cutlass, doing it again and again in search of the perfect cutting

blade. Another, leaning against the abandoned timber slide of one of Lassan's guns, read a small book with evident fascination. From time to time he looked up, saw that his services were not yet required, and went back to the book. Captain Palmer, staring north and east from his allotted station, thought he saw movement in the dunes but when he examined the place with his spyglass he saw only sand and grass." (p. 244)

"A man wept and could not be consoled. His right leg was gone at the thigh, taken by a howitzer shell. He wanted his mother, but he would die instead. The other wounded men, shivering in the foul tunnel that led to the makeshift surgery, wished he would stop his blathering. A Marine corporal, his shoulder mangled by a bayonet, read St John's gospel aloud and men wished that he too would be silent.
The Marines who had volunteered as surgeons wore clothes that were soaked in blood. They cut, tied and sawed, helped by lightly wounded men who held the badly wounded down while legs or arms were crudely butchered off and arteries tied and raw flesh cauterized with fire because they did not know if all the blood vessels were safely blocked." (p. 266)

Ducos sneered at Sharpe. 'And you think a privateer captain honours his promise?'
'I honoured the promise I made you,' Killick said. 'I fired till the enemy surrendered.'
'You have no standing in this matter!' Ducos snapped the words. 'You are not a military officer, Mr Killick; you are a pirate.'
Killick opened his mouth to reply, but Ducos scornfully wheeled his horse away. He spoke to the general, chopping the air with his thin, gloved hand to accentuate his words.
'I don't think they're impressed,' Frederickson said softly.
'I don't give a damn,' Sharpe growled. The boats must already be taking the wounded to the Thuella, and the Marines would be following. The longer the French argued, the more men would be saved.
Favier looked down sadly at Sharpe. 'This is unworthy, Major.'
'No more so, Colonel, than your own feeble effort to make me march to Bordeaux as a Major General.'
Favier shrugged. 'That was a ruse de guerre, a legitimate manouevre.'
'Just as it is legitimate for me to surrender to whom I wish.'
'To fight again?' Favier smiled. 'I think not. This is cynical expediency, Major, not honour.'" (p. 291)

"A gun banged over the river and a rocket wobbled into the sky to plunge uselessly into the river's mud. A French cavalry trumpet sounded the retreat, but Sharpe did not care. He wept. He wept because a friend had died, and he wept with joy because Jane lived. He wept because at least it was over; a battle that should never have been fought, but a battle that, through stubbornness, pride, and an American enemy's promise, had come to both this victory on a river's edge and to this vast relief. It was over; Sharpe's siege." (p. 316)

Topics for Discussion

Favier refers to Sharpe's surrender to Killick as "cynical expediency" (p. 291) while Sharpe considers it a valid ruse de guerre. How do you view Sharpe's decision to surrender, on pre-arranged terms, to the American privateer?

Through much of the first part of the novel, Sharpe worries that being happily married will make him less effective as a soldier. As if to drive home the point, he spends much time worrying about his distant wife instead of worrying about potential tactics. Do you think that a professional soldier, such as Sharpe, can allow room for a personal life without becoming less effective?

Harper uses a seven-barreled gun to great effect in the novel, yet such guns were exceptionally rare and definitely not standard issue. As the gun is so effective, why do you think they were not standard-issue for the British forces?

A musket was a smoothbore weapon, quick to reload but not particularly accurate beyond perhaps 100 meters. A rifle was a rifled weapon, slower to reload but much more accurate than a musket at any distance. Which would you rather have in the type of combats described in the novel? Why?

The Marines carried a "spike" bayonet that allowed a musket to be used as a type of spear. The Rifles carried a much heavier "sword" bayonet that allowed a rifle to be used as a type of glaive. Which type of bayonet would you rather carry? Why? Would your preference depend upon whether you were a Marine or a rifleman?

Sharpe obtains and uses quicklime as a primitive type of chemical weapon—it is used to blind attacking soldiers. Do you think that Sharpe's use of quicklime was dishonorable or unethical? Why or why not?

During the novel, Sharpe and Killick make two alliances based on expediency. On the first occasion, Sharpe releases Killick after he takes an oath. On the second occasion, Sharpe releases Killick from the oath in exchange for a particular favor. Do you think that the Sharpe-Killick alliances of expediency are particularly credible? Why or why not?

The novel presents three men that act with great dishonor in various ways—Bampfylde, de Maquerre, and Ducos. Of the three men, whom do you consider the most dishonorable, and why?

The novel concludes with a historical comment by the author that acts as an apology for several of the incidents related. How does this historical note retroactively alter the meaning of the narrative?

The novel is part of a series of novels and short stories by the same author dealing with the same principle protagonist—Sharpe—and featuring several recurrent characters

(the present novel is intended to be the ninth in a series of eleven novels). How does the fact that the novel is part of a larger series impact the narrative construction of the novel?

The novel considers the nature of command but varies from the modern conventional theme of the "isolation" of command by presenting a reliable supporting character for nearly every character in command. For example, Bampfylde relies upon his second Ford; Ducos relies upon his second Favier; and Sharpe relies upon his second Frederickson. Discuss how this multi-tiered command structure, as presented in the narrative, allows individual leaders to accomplish far more than they could on their own.