

## The Battle of Waterloo

### Background

In 1809 Wellington gained his first significant victory in Spain at the Battle of Talavera but the French had three armies in that country, each larger than his own. In order to establish a serious force and to wear Marshal Massena down, he retired behind the well-prepared lines of Torres Vedras, near Lisbon.

The French were unable to force these defences and in 1811, Wellington felt strong enough to issue forth from his fortifications and after three years' hard fighting worked his way through Spain, and step by step beat back the Napoleonic forces across the Pyrenees into France. He won the great battles of Salamanca, Vitoria, and Orthez; stormed the cities of Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajos, and San Sebastian; fought for six days amidst the rocks passes of the Pyrenees; and at last, on the 10th of April 1814 gained decisive victory at Battle of Toulouse. He had trained and created an experienced army with which "he could go anywhere and do anything"; and now he stood with it upon "the sacred soil of France".

Only six months before, Napoleon, who had lost four hundred thousand men between Moscow and the Niemen on his disastrous retreat from Russia, had been defeated by the Allies in the great Battle of Leipzig and the Emperor of Russia and the King of Prussia had already entered Paris at the head of their victorious armies

Napoleon was compelled to abdicate, the Bourbons returned to the throne of France, and the beaten Emperor was banished to the little island of Elba, of which he was made king. The long French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were it seemed finally over.

When Napoleon stood on one of the hills or Elba, he could take in at one glance the whole extent of his dominions "Ah" he said, "it must be confessed that my island is somewhat small".

Napoleon's restless spirit could not be caged within that petty state for long. He had made his escape from Elba and landing in France on the 1st of March, 1815, marched with very few troops through the south of France. When the Governor of Grenoble sent out a force to arrest him, Napoleon advanced alone to meet them. "I am your Emperor" he said, "fire on me if you will" The soldiers threw themselves on their knees with the cry of " Vive l'Empereur".

This was the beginning of The Hundred Days. Louis XVIII stole out of Paris and fled to Ghent.

Napoleon returned to Paris in triumph and proclaimed that he would rule as a constitutional monarch and to abide fully by the treaties of 1814.

The Allied powers were meeting at the Congress of Vienna to plan the post Napoleonic Europe, when informed of their enemy's escape. They did not trust Napoleon and rapidly declared him an outlaw and Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia, each committed large forces. The British parliament voted the extraordinary and, until then unheard of, budget of £90,000,000 for expenses and the Duke of Wellington - for this had been his title since the Battle of Toulouse - went to meet Bonaparte at the head of a rapidly assembling polyglot force of eighty thousand men. Marshal Blücher, at the head of more than one hundred thousand Prussians, advanced to the fray from the east.

### Into Position

Napoleon determined not to wait for France to be invaded by four massive armies but to take the offensive. He reckoned that if he could take on the Allied (British and Prussian) forces separately in Belgium before they could join up, then he could defeat them - the Prussians fleeing eastwards and the British to the coast and England. He could then sue for peace on his terms or turn his armies to meet the Austrian and Russian forces massing in the east.

Accordingly Napoleon, having collected a vast army, marched into Flanders, crossing the frontier near Charleroi to meet the Prussians and the British. "I go," he said, " to measure myself against Wellington. " Napoleon generally spoke disparagingly of Wellington as "that general of sepoy." For the first and only time in their lives the two leaders were to meet in battle.

The French marched to position themselves between Wellington's army to the north-west and Blücher's to the north-east.

There were two significant battles fought before Waterloo, the battle of Ligny, at which the Prussians were severely mauled and the Battle of Quatre Bras, a holding action, involving the Allies and French. After Ligny the Prussians withdrew, not eastwards but north in order to regroup and rejoin the fray. Blücher's men were down but not out.

The Prussian defeat at Ligny meant that that it was no longer tenable for Wellington to make his stand at Quatre Bras. Accordingly on the 17th June Wellington fell back north towards Waterloo. Napoleon had hoped to force the two armies to retreat back to their respective supply bases, which were in opposite directions. Instead they retreated north, in parallel and soon communications were restored

between the two armies. If Wellington could hold his position long enough, the Prussians would come to his aid. His entire battle plan depended on that. True to Blücher's word, the link up was to be made although it was to be at the 11th hour.

### The Battle Site

Wellington, meanwhile, spent the 17th falling back to Mont St. Jean, a low ridge south of the village of Waterloo. Wellington had surveyed this site previously as a good defensive position, at which to block an attack on Brussels. He was closely followed by the left wing of the French Army under Marshal Ney. Napoleon joined up with Ney, bringing with him with the victors of Ligny. The Emperor was doubtless in confident mood. On the 17th of June Napoleon had ordered Marshal Grouchy, to pursue the Prussians with some 30,000 men, and so stop them joining up with Wellington. Lack of clarity and delay in the orders, coupled with Grouchy's rather cautious attitude meant that the Prussians were able to disengage and to reform at Wavre. Grouchy's 30,000 troops achieved little. Had they effectively engaged the Prussians or had been available to Napoleon at Waterloo the result might have been very different.

The Allied position at Waterloo was strong. The ridge was about two miles long, slightly drawn back in the centre and at its right extremity descended abruptly into the valley in front of a small hamlet called Braine Merbes, and at its left flank turned almost at right angles towards the enemy. It was protected by the hamlet of Smohain, the chateau Frischemont, and two farmhouses - Papelotte and La Haie Sainte, which were about three hundred yards in front of Wellington's left centre line. In front of the right extremity was the Chateau Hougomont, having a farm-house attached to it, with court-yards surrounded by lofty walls, and a large garden, also walled on two sides and protected on the others by a thick hedge, while in front it was a thick wood and plantation covering several acres. The road from Nivelles to Brussels crossed the British line just within its right extreme and that from Charleroi to the same capital cut it, as well as the line occupied by the French, nearly in the centre, passing close by the farm of La Haie Sainte.

Along the crest of the ridge on the road from Wavre to Braine l'Alleud, which, though not paved, was in good condition, and greatly facilitated the movements of the troops, and especially of the artillery during the battle. Wellington had chosen his ground well. To try to turn his right flank would mean taking Hougomont. Any attack on his right centre would mean the enemy would have to pass through flanking fire from Hougomont and La Haie Sainte. On the left, any attack would also be met by fire from La Haie Sainte. An attack with the intent of turning the left flank would mean close fighting through the narrow and defensible streets of the village of Papelotte.

Napoleon decided against a battle of manoeuvre, to drive Wellington off the ridge, considering that would take too long given the risk that given time the Prussians might be able to join the fray. He therefore decided upon a diversionary attack on Hougomont, with the expectation that Wellington would draw off troops to protect his natural line of retreat to the coast. With Wellington's reserves committed to the right flank, he would then launch an overwhelming attack on Wellington's weakened left and centre. It was not subtle and led to what Wellington described as a "pounding". However had Napoleon been successful in draining away forces from Wellington's centre and left, a further gap would have opened up between the British and the Prussians, who would then caught between Napoleon and Grouchy.



### The Armies

Napoleon had 73,000 men all of whom were French and mainly veterans and a considerable advantage in artillery. The arrival of the Prussians would eventually give the allies a numerical superiority. However the French Army was not what it once was. While it was composed of veterans many of the best units had been decimated in the retreat from Moscow and at the Battle of Leipzig. It was an army hurriedly assembled. Many officers had not worked with their immediate superiors. Further many senior officers had only very recently been serving the Bourbons so there must have been inevitable doubts about loyalties.

Wellington had around 27,000 British troops. Many of Britain's most experienced troops, veterans of the Peninsular, were in or on their way to America to take part in the war against the new American nation. The 52nd Regiment, which was to play such a crucial role in repulsing the Imperial Guard, was actually in Ireland waiting to sail to America when it was suddenly recalled.

Wellington also had under his command some 40,000 foreign troops, Dutch, Belgian and German, some of who were of unproven loyalty to the Allied cause.

Of the 26 allied infantry and 12 cavalry brigades in Wellington's army, only nine and seven were British respectively. Half the 29 artillery batteries were Hanoverian and Dutch. In many instances it was the British units which proved to be the bedrock of the force and it was Wellington dominant personality and close involvement which provided throughout the day, the inspiration and steadying hand for the often hard pressed Allied soldiers.

### The Battle Phase One: 11.30

The battle began at about 11.30 with a diversionary attack upon Hougoumont, led by Prince Jerome Bonaparte. However the Hougoumont diversion developed into a battle in its own right which drew in increasing numbers of French troops, until nearly half the French left was committed, while Wellington drip fed in just sufficient Allied troops to hold the position. For eight hours the battle for Hougoumont raged but the defended farm was never taken. It was however a close run thing and the problems occasioned by the loss of La Haie Sainte later on in the battle proved just how important these outlying farmhouses were.

### 13.00 The Battle - Phase Two

The main attack was to be preceded by a ferocious artillery bombardment of some eighty guns, from Bonaparte's right, but this had had to be delayed for several hours until the ground had sufficiently firmed up, after heavy overnight rain, to bear the weight of the artillery pieces. When the French artillery did open up at around 13.00, the soft muddy ground fortuitously absorbed the impact of many of the cannon balls. In addition, Wellington's "reverse slope defence", left the French with little in the way of targets to aim or fire at.

At about 13:30, Napoleon ordered Marshal Ney to send d'Erlon's infantry forward against Wellington's centre left, La Haie Sainte and the crossroads beyond which was Wellington's command post. D'Erlon

had four divisions, totaling some 18,000 men. He advanced in battalion lines behind one another rather than the usual columns, so as to bring more guns to bear at one time. There was fierce hand to hand fighting during which Bylandt's Dutch-Belgium unit which had not been on the reverse slope and had suffered badly from French artillery fire, retired. The French assault was slowed and the Allied line, principally Picton's division, comprising Kempt's and Pack's brigades, was hard pressed and soon its outnumbered soldiers were in difficulties.

At this crucial moment in the Battle the British heavy cavalry, ready to be deployed and hidden behind the ridge, were ordered by Lord Uxbridge to relieve the pressure on the Allied infantry lines. They comprised the Household Brigade, made up of the 1st and 2nd Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards and First Dragoon Guards and the Union Brigade consisting of the Royals, North British Dragoons (later to be known as the Scots Greys) and Inniskillings. This force of some 2,600, moving through gaps in the allied lines, then charged and crashed into d'Erlon's men. The French had no time to form into defensive squares and broke, losing up to 5,000 men, killed wounded and taken prisoner and two eagles. Carried away with exuberance, the British heavy cavalry galloped across the battlefield in pursuit, ignoring or not hearing the bugle recall. They rode on into the French lines and up to the French guns. Now with their horses exhausted and units scattered and in confusion, they were in turn attacked by fresh French cavalry, and all but destroyed as an effective fighting force. The first great crisis in the battle had been met but at a heavy price.

The Prussians had now begun to appear on the French right flank, approaching the village of Plancenoit and Napoleon was forced to send, Lobau's VI corps and 2 cavalry divisions, some 20,000 troops, to protect his right flank and rear. With this, Napoleon had committed all of his infantry, except the Guards regiments.

#### 16.00 The Battle - Phase Three

It was around this time that the French and Marshal Ney perceived activity in the Allied lines. Wellington was simply bringing his infantry back behind the ridge but Ney mistook it for a retrograde movement. Ideally he would have sent French infantry in but apart from Napoleon's Imperial Guard all the infantry were committed either to the futile assault on Hougoumont on the French left flank or on defending the French right against the increasingly visible Prussians. What lay in anticipation was the, as yet uncommitted, French heavy cavalry. Thousands of cavalry pushed up the slope to the British centre. Preceding this was another French artillery bombardment. In the lull between bombardment and assault, the Allies hurriedly formed infantry squares. These were three to four men deep and were vulnerable to artillery and infantry but lethal to cavalry. Horses were reluctant to go straight into a solid infantry wall, outwardly protected by kneeling infantrymen with raised bayonets; Ney was about to decimate the French heavy cavalry as the British had wasted theirs.

The cavalry repeatedly charged at and were repelled by the infantry squares, aided by fire of British artillery and the counter-charges of the Allied light cavalry regiments, the Netherlands heavy cavalry, and some of the few remaining effective units of the British Heavy Cavalry. After many heroic but failed assaults, the French cavalry gave up its attacks. The squares, though ravaged by French artillery fire, had not broken.

#### 18.00 The Battle - Phase Four

Finally with the use of infantry, artillery and cavalry, La Haie Sainte fell to the French. All day the 400 strong garrison of light companies of the King's German Legion, under Major Baring, held the enemy at bay but finally they ran out of ammunition and abandoned the farm. At the end, there were only around 40 men left in the buildings. The French then moved artillery closer up to the Anglo-Allied centre and began to pound the Allied position.

Now had the French have the manpower, they could almost surely have broken the Allied centre. The Prussians, however, were now causing the French increasing concerns and no infantry could be spared. This was fortunate since Wellington was unwilling to commit his few reserves. The Prussians, having forced the French out of Plancenoit, to the rear of the French right, compelled Napoleon to send in the 10 battalions of the Young Guard to retake the village. This they did but were counterattacked and driven out in turn. Napoleon then committed two battalions of his Old Guard and after ferocious hand to hand fighting, they recaptured the village once more. The Prussians with some 30,000 troops doggedly attacked Plancenoit once more. Facing them were some 20,000 French troops, who managed to hold for about another hour.

While until late in the day the French were able to stop the Prussian assaults on their right flank, this was at the cost of committing large forces, denied to them for the main assault on the main Allied lines. However they were never capable of defeating the Prussians, who maintained their pressure

until the 11th hour. They were then finally in a position to push the French back, with the rest of the Allied force.

#### 19.30 The Battle - Phase Five

With Wellington's centre position vulnerable to artillery attack from La Haie Sainte and Plancenoit secure, this was the moment for Napoleon to bring up his last reserves, units of the relatively undefeated Imperial Old Guard but he hesitated for a good half hour. During this period Ziethen's Prussian Corp began to stream into the battlefield from the west, driving the French from La Papelotte and filling the gap between the Prussians at Plancenoit and Wellington's extreme left. In the final hours of daylight the great crisis in the battle had now come. Wellington was standing right centre of the allied lines with the Foot Guards when from down in the valley, after an artillery bombardment, the French Imperial Guard, - Chasseurs and Grenadiers - emerged. Rapidly the situation became critical. On the left, the first French column almost broke though and was only pushed back by a brilliant flanking attack by Chasse's Belgians. The second column advanced on the position held by Maitland's Foot Guards. The Guards were crouching in the crops to shelter from artillery. On the orders of the Duke they rose as one and poured a devastating volley into the French second column, and some three hundred of the enemy fell. The French chasseurs deployed to answer the fire but after 10 minutes, outnumbered and outgunned they began to waver. Now had come the moment for a decisive bayonet charge but then a fresh French chasseur battalion came up. The Guards, low on ball cartridge, were forced back but the French were then brought to a halt by enfilade fire from the 52nd Light Infantry, under Sir John Colborne, who wheeling from the front at right angles to the advancing French fired into their flanks. Recoiling from frontal and flank volleys, and the advance of Colborne's men, the Guard hesitated, then retreated and broke. Sudden alarm spread through the French Army with cries of "La garde recule. Sauve qui peut!" - "The Guard retreats. Save yourself if you can!".

#### 20.00 The Battle - Phase Six

Wellington sensing that the decisive moment had come, waved his hat in the air towards the French and gave an order for the advance of the whole allied line; and the vast array of the exhausted British, German and Dutch/Belgian troops army poured down upon the French forces in one irresistible force. At about same time as the Imperial Guard were repulsed, the Prussians had finally pushed the gallantly defending French out of Plancenoit and poured through the gap between d'Erlon and Lobau, to take the French from the rear.

The French Guard managed to rally their reserves just south of La Haie Sainte for a final desperate stand. However a charge from Adam's Brigade and part of the 5th Brigade forced them back in a fighting retreat to La Belle Alliance. The entire French Army now began a progressive and escalating collapse as the Allies pushed on and through the French. The last effective French force was two battalions of the Old Guard positioned around La Belle Alliance. This was Napoleon's personal bodyguard. For a brief moment he hoped that they could form a focus around which the French Army could rally. But as the rout continued, and the army became a rabble, occasionally forced into defensive squares. As darkness crept over the battlefield a few units retreated in some order, but much detritus of war was left on the field. Shortly after 21:00 Wellington and Blücher met briefly at Belle Alliance. British and Hanoverian and Dutch cavalry continued to harass the French until about 23:00 hours. The Prussians, being fresher and with scores to settle continued the pursuit and slaughter throughout the night

#### Aftermath and Conclusions

Napoleon considered a flight to America but in the event surrendered himself to the captain of HMS Bellerophon. He was banished by the allied Powers to the island of St. Helena, in the south Atlantic where he died, probably of a mixture of arsenical poisoning and a perforated gastric ulcer, in the year 1821.

Allied casualties at Waterloo were around 15,000 dead and wounded, 7,000 of whom were British, and the Prussians some 7000. Napoleon lost around 25,000 dead and injured. Eight thousand Frenchmen were taken prisoner.

On the 16th, 17th, and 18th of June 1815 - almost seventy thousand men, of whom only ten thousand were British, were killed and wounded upon the fields of battle.

Despite his early success in driving apart the British and Prussians and the self-evident bravery of the French troops, why did Napoleon fail? Tactical errors, his underestimation of his superior opponent a lack of some of his more able commanders and the strength of the Allied defence, all played a role. There was however a deeper reason for ultimate failure of the campaign.

Why was this? They had suffered defeats before and there were more troops available. It is likely that

Waterloo was perceived by many French as a final throw of the dice rather than one battle in a campaign. It was such a decisive blow, resulting in a catastrophic and unarguable defeat. Also while the mass of the army was apparently for Napoleon, many French were wearied by over twenty years fighting and upheaval and now longed for stability. They probably did not mind whether that stability came from Napoleon or the Bourbons, but after Waterloo Napoleon had finally lost his grip. Deserted by Napoleon, there was no longer a leader to rally about. So Waterloo led to a march on and occupation of Paris and the restoration of the Bourbons

The importance of Waterloo can scarcely be exaggerated. The long running Peninsula campaign and the victories in the east, vitally important though they were, had not ended the war. Just one day at Waterloo finished Bonaparte's ambitions forever.

Castlereagh, the British foreign secretary, and Wellington stood firm against demands for revenge in favour of security and stability in Europe. They persuaded Government to support this policy against the popular clamour of the time by many, including the Prussians and Russians, who were not showing magnanimity in victory but a desire for vengeance. In so doing so it was hoped to avoid the creation of an embittered France. The outcome of Waterloo produced a relative peace in Europe, which was not to be seriously disturbed for nigh on one hundred years. When massive conflict broke out once more, it was again to be France and Germany (including Prussia), who would divide Europe once more into a massive war zone. This time however the British in consistent pursuit of their centuries long policy of not allowing one county to dominate Europe, were to be on the side of the "old enemy".

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