

The Waterloo Secret Revealed

By Nigel Sale

For the past 190 years, history's perception of the end of the battle that freed Europe from Napoleon's despotism is that the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Foot Guards, who had been sheltering behind the crest of the Allied position, had come under attack by the French Garde Impériale. Wellington ordered the Guards to stand up, form into line and "see them off". The relatively inexperienced men of the Foot Guards had then fired a volley and charged, improbably causing at least four thousand of Napoleon's elite troops to flee in confusion. Wellington had then ordered a general advance and defeated the French, before handing over the pursuit to the Prussians under Marshal Blücher.

However, some histories relate how the 52nd Light Infantry had also attacked and routed the Garde Impériale, independent of the British Guards. Other accounts have the Guards and the 52nd attacking simultaneously. Even allowing for the confusion that arises in battle is it not strange that such a crucial moment in the battle has not been clarified? For crucial it certainly was: before the final rout of the Garde, Napoleon might still have won the battle but, after the Garde's rout, he had completely lost it. Since this was the crux of the battle - known as the 'crisis' - it seems important to know the truth.

So much has been written about the 'crisis' that an initially unclear situation has been totally confused by theories being repeated as fact. So I determined, as far as possible, to consult only eyewitness accounts or those from disinterested witnesses, such as the French, in order to reach the truth. What I discovered is almost unbelievable. But the evidence is there.

The first question to resolve was who actually routed the Garde Impériale; whose action had turned the Garde's advance into full retreat? A subsidiary question was if the 52nd defeated the Garde, why was the credit given instead to the 1st Foot Guards?

The second question was what happened next? As he described in his famous Waterloo Despatch, did Wellington, seeing the French 'in confusion', order a general advance and defeat them? Or was the end of this long slogging match even more dramatic?

The earliest accounts of the battle I could find were in a compendium first published in 1815 by John Booth of Duke Street, London. They were from three officers of the 3rd/1st Guards and none were dated later than 22nd June, just three days after the battle. The only trustworthy accounts are those dated before 23rd June 1815 – for reasons that will shortly become apparent. There was no doubt that their battalion had repulsed a unit of the Garde, but they had not routed the entire Garde force. The British Guards had themselves retired in some confusion back to the British line.

Two Guards General Officers – Byng and Maitland - confirmed this in their post-battle reports and the 3rd/1st Guards' Regimental Sergeant Major was absolutely clear on this point. Of the six accounts, none claimed to have achieved the rout that gave Wellington the opportunity to attack. Instead three of the accounts specifically say that a subsequent attack was 'entirely dispersed' by some other unit before the 3rd/1st Guards could even approach them.

So, if the Guards had not achieved the rout of the Garde - the iconic act, which earned them the title 'Grenadiers'- who had? What had actually happened?

The latest research suggests that Napoleon's last attack was general, along the whole Allied Line.

On the French left eight battalions of the 'invincible' Garde had formed up in the French front line in an echelon formation, in squares against the threat of cavalry, with the right flank battalions forward. Napoleon led them initially but handed over to Marshal Ney. The ground was a morass of churned mud and trampled crops with dead men and horses in profusion. The two right-hand, leading, battalions went roughly straight ahead and reached the British line in what may be termed the first wave of a poorly co-ordinated attack. The left hand of these two units was probably the 4th Grenadier Regiment, but only one battalion strong – 500 men. The remaining six battalions – the second wave - drifted to their left, following a re-entrant and, by the time they neared the British line, this column was in a line-ahead formation and an appreciable time behind the first wave.

The 4th Grenadier's battalion confronted the 1000 men of the 3rd/1st Guards and was repulsed by volleys and a brief charge. The survivors fell back and attempted to form at the head of the second wave's column. The British Guards, in some confusion upon the false cry of 'cavalry', retired to the Allied Line behind the ridge and took no further part in the battle.

The second wave – about 3000 men - had approached the Allied Line by a different route but, nevertheless, was also aimed at the 1st Guards, despite the latter being out of sight behind the ridge. At this moment Wellington is reported by the Earl of March, one of his staff officers, to have been 'very anxious'. He himself admitted after the battle that he had never been so close to defeat as he was then. He had no infantry left in reserve and could only wait for the onslaught and hope. The 52nd was the middle of the three battalions of General Adam's Light Brigade. On the 52nd's left was the 2nd/95th, the Rifle Brigade, and on its right the 71st of Foot, the Highland Light Infantry. Adam's Brigade stood immediately to the right of 3rd/1st Guards.

Colonel Colborne, commanding the 52nd, had watched the Garde form up and approach. Recognising the seriousness of the threat and acting entirely on his own initiative, he ordered two companies forward as skirmishers to delay the advancing French, while he led the rest of the 52nd some three to four hundred yards down the forward slope and wheeled them to a position parallel with the Garde column. Only Peninsular veterans, such as the 52nd, could have been trusted to carry out such a manoeuvre. General Adam dashed up and asked what Colborne intended to do: he received a suitably succinct reply. The 52nd then advanced, fired a volley on the move, and went in with the bayonet. The Garde battalions, caught by surprise, nevertheless managed to return fire and caused about 140 casualties to the 52nd, but then wavered and broke. All, bar perhaps the tail-end two or three battalions, fled in panic. Their panic, maintained by the energetic pursuit, spread instantly to almost the entire French Army, which fled the field in complete disorder. Many present noted a sudden inexplicable silence when the firing ceased.

That is how the French Army was defeated, according to William Leake, Ensign in the 52nd and carrying the Regimental Colour. But if any doubt about the 52nd's terminal effect on Napoleon's hopes still lingers, there are at least three French accounts that confirm Leake's evidence. All three attribute defeat to the attack on the Garde's left flank; one account correctly names the 52nd Regiment. Another describes how 'At the end of the day, a charge directed against their flank...put them in disorder...a complete panic at once spread itself throughout the whole field of battle...In an instant the whole army was nothing but a mass of confusion...

What happened next was crucially important both to the success of the 52nd and to proving the truth about the 52nd's feat of arms.

In a move that can only be described as tactically inspired, Colborne did not advance straight

towards the French Lines leaving French troops in force behind him but, instead, led his Regiment half way across the battlefield roughly in parallel with the Allied Line, threatening the flanks of other attacking units and, thus, sweeping the French away to the south, their line of retreat. As the 52nd reached the road that ran through the centre of the British line, at a point just south of the farm called La Haye Sainte, Colborne halted to straighten his formation before turning south to continue his pursuit.

At this moment the Duke of Wellington, Lord Uxbridge and a staff officer galloped up, having left the Allied Line several hundred yards behind them. "Well done Colborne, well done!" cried the Duke, "Go on, don't let them rally".

Three Squares of the Garde, with guns, were standing firm and the 52nd advanced to see them off. Both squares and guns fired at the 52nd before retiring southwards to melt into the general confusion. One unlucky shot struck Lord Uxbridge on the knee. Wellington's rather offhand but famous response to the news - "Egad, so you have" - has been attributed to his antipathy to Uxbridge, who had run off with Wellington's sister-in-law some years before. No one until now seems to have realised that Wellington was, in fact, concentrating on ensuring the French were kept on the move at this crucial moment.

If evidence could be found to prove Lord Uxbridge lost his leg when he was with Wellington south of La Haye Sainte, it would not only confirm the veracity of William Leeke's whole account but it would also prove that Wellington was fully aware of the 52nd's achievement. What is more, it would almost certainly prove the French Army had already dispersed: La Haye Sainte and its enclosures - until the Garde's flight - had been in French hands and would have been too dangerous for senior commanders to bypass if it were still occupied by the enemy.

Sure enough, such evidence exists. As Lord Anglesey records in 'One-Leg', the biography of his illustrious ancestor, thirty seven years after the event Lord Uxbridge wrote that he had been wounded 'in the low ground beyond La Haye Sainte'. From the British position to its north, 'beyond' must indicate 'south of', precisely where Leeke had specified, well out in front of the Allied Army.

The 52nd continued its advance, heading south now through the French position, taking the surrender of a large body of artillery and infantry in a slightly sunken road but, with fine tactical sense, leaving them and continuing the relentless pursuit of the disordered french mass. As night fell, the 52nd literally came to rest at Rossomme on the straw used by the Garde Impériale the night before.

The 2nd/95th and the 71st, the 52nd's brigade companions, both of which had been surprised by the 52nd's sudden departure, had nevertheless followed in support and bivouacked on either side of the 52nd.

Wellington, meanwhile, must have galloped back to the British line and ordered a general advance. But this was by no means the fighting attack he claimed - twice, for emphasis in the Waterloo Despatch - had defeated the French. In fact the French had already gone, driven off by the 52nd and its supporters. There is unambiguous, independent evidence that the general advance was 'unimpeded'.

Was Wellington not telling the whole truth? And what did he have to say in his despatch about the 52nd? There was absolutely nothing, yet he had undoubtedly witnessed its unique feat of arms. It was at this point that I began to suspect a cover-up and examined the Waterloo Despatch with a jaundiced eye. Even allowing for his being exhausted when writing it, the despatch contains too many inaccuracies, ambiguities and omissions for them to be anything but intentional.

Just one example may give a clue to what was in his mind. He says he met Blücher, the Prussian Commander, at the village of Genappe, well south of the battlefield. But other evidence firmly places their meeting at the farm, La Belle Alliance. Blücher suggested 'La Belle Alliance' would be an appropriate name for the battle, as it is still known in Germany. Wellington refused. Some suggest he did not want 'his' battle to have a French sounding name, or that he felt it should not be named after Napoleon's Headquarters. To my suspicious mind the real reason was quite clear: he did not want to share the glory with the Prussians.

And then it struck me, as it may have struck him: Wellington could not claim the glory anyway. The Battle of Waterloo had, effectively, been won by the 52nd Light Infantry acting solely on its commanding officer's orders. Wellington had actually been rescued from potential defeat by a 'mere' colonel and his veteran light infantrymen. Were all the years of struggle in the Peninsula to be negated by his failure to win his only battle against Napoleon? For someone who had achieved so much, this must have been a bitter blow. It would certainly account for the air of black depression he had after the battle.

His agony of mind after the battle is well known. Was it really caused by the loss of so many officers and men or was it the mental turmoil of a man trying to reach a decision that could make or break him? On the one hand, if he admitted he had been 'rescued' by a colonel of light infantry he might face derision. On the other hand, if he engineered a cover-up and claimed the winning stroke for himself, and then the truth was revealed, he could face not only derision but shame and dishonour too.

He must have realised he had several factors in his favour. It would be his word against a 'mere' colonel. Thanks to his well known policy of placing his troops behind a defensive ridge very few officers would actually have seen the 52nd's action. Those, who had, might be persuaded or instructed to keep silent. Moreover he himself had been involved in the early stage of the 'crisis' and – with his authority behind it – this incident could be magnified far beyond its actual importance, to be hailed as the coup-de-grâce.

He determined to put nothing in writing that would compromise him but, by suggestion and through the mouths of others, he would establish an alternative version of the 'crisis' that would put him in the best light and suppress the fact of the 52nd's feat.

But for the rest of his life, he would have to avoid discussion of the 52nd's action, and discourage the writing of histories of the battle, which might discover and reveal the truth.

First he had to establish the myth that it was the 3rd/1st Guards who had put the French into confusion and that he had won the battle by his general attack. To this end the Waterloo Despatch contained no reference to the actions of any specific infantry regiment other than the Guards. First the Guards were congratulated, with good reason, for their tenacious defence of Hougoumont and, later in the despatch; Wellington stated 'The division of Guards...set an example that was followed by all'. No detail was given. He must have backed this up by briefing his messenger, Major the Honourable Henry Percy, to fill in the detail. Although no evidence for this is likely ever to be found, how else could Lord Bathurst, Secretary for War, announce in the House of Lords only five days after the battle: "Towards the close of the day Bonaparte himself, at the head of his Guards, made a desperate charge on the British Guards, and the British Guards immediately overthrew the French." There are accounts by other officers close to Wellington, who repeat the same story. Some even have the Duke leading the Foot Guards in their charge. Wellington made sure everyone accepted him as the victor with his twice-repeated claim, in his despatch, to have beaten the French by his general attack.

Perhaps the most inspired way of establishing the myth of the Guards' dealing the death blow to the Grenadiers of the French Garde was the granting of the title 'Grenadiers' to the British 1st Guards and the award of promotional privileges to junior officers of all Guards Regiments.

So the myth was created. Now the Duke had to silence the six senior officers who knew the truth. A detailed analysis of the distribution of Honours after Waterloo is very revealing. There is not space for all the detail but some examples should suffice to make the point. Remember, these honours supposedly rewarded distinction throughout the campaign, including the heroic stand at Quatre Bras, not just at Waterloo.

First, one Marquisate was created: Lord Uxbridge. Lord Hill, the Corps Commander of Adam's Brigade was made a Baron, the only one so honoured. Out of eleven infantry officers mentioned in the Waterloo Despatch for the Prince Regent's special approbation, four were of the six; of three nominations for Knight Commander of the Bath, two were of the six. The same imbalance occurred in the Allied Nations' awards: the same names appear repeatedly.

There is also the question of missing documents. William Leeke knew, from other correspondence, that General Adam submitted a report immediately after the battle, a report that must have dealt with the 52nd's action in some detail, because Adam rode with the 52nd until wounded. This report was submitted via Lord Hill expressly for Wellington to read. Yet, when searching the archives, Leeke could not find it, although other brigadier-generals' reports were safely on file. Why had it disappeared and who was best placed to destroy it?

From as early as August 1816 Wellington is on record as trying to keep the truth from being discovered. He actively discouraged any writing that was not based on 'the official sources and reports'. When asked specifically about the 52nd's role in the battle it is recorded 'that it was a subject which always excited great impatience'. On the last attempt the Duke said, "Oh I know nothing of the services of particular regiments; there was glory enough for us all". In other words, he wanted, at all costs, to avoid having to discuss the 52nd's action.

What motives could the Duke have had in suppressing the facts and committing this monstrous injustice against a man and a regiment that had served him so brilliantly in the Peninsula and had now beaten Napoleon for him? Was it purely pique; anger that not he but a mere colonel had dealt the final blow to Napoleon's ambition after all the years of struggle that Wellington had endured. Perhaps he wanted, above all else to be the General who defeated the mighty Napoleon. He may have hoped at long last to shed the sobriquet of the 'defensive general'. He might have been punishing insubordination in that Colborne had acted without orders (albeit with General Adam's last minute sanction) and his initiative could have seriously jeopardised the entire Allied position, had his manoeuvre failed.

Yet Wellington could so easily and justifiably have claimed that Colborne's initiative and confidence stemmed from the repeated success of his – Wellington's – tutelage in the Peninsular War. Instead, he seems to have concluded that his reputation would suffer irretrievably if it became known that he had been saved from near-defeat by the decisive actions of a relatively junior officer. In all fairness to the Duke, he may even have justified his action by assuming that any diminution of his reputation might undermine his authority both at home and abroad when his standing with other leaders might be crucial to successful negotiations on behalf of Great

Britain, even to the future of Europe.

There is a growing body of evidence that Wellington was determined to keep all possible credit to himself. Regrettably too he seems to have been obsessed by the aristocracy and may have seen some advantage in crediting 'The Gentlemens' Sons' with the victory, rather than a Line regiment even though the latter's reputation was firmly established by its membership in the Peninsula of the Light Division known as 'The Division' – a sobriquet that says it all.

Whatever his motives, the evidence points unquestionably to a consummate deception by the Duke of Wellington.

Although the 52nd's feat should rightly rank with such epic military achievements as the defeat of the Persian Army by the Spartans at Marathon, no such fame has come. But let us be quite clear: this was no drill-manual manoeuvre. In its defeat of a force numerically far superior, in its dash across the front of its own army, in its rout and pursuit of the opposing army and in its effect on the history of Europe this feat was truly unique. The truth about the 52nd's winning of Waterloo deserves to be widely acknowledged so that its glory can live on to sustain the spirit of the light infantrymen and riflemen of the future. Such spirit will surely be needed.

The author served in the 1st Green Jackets 43rd and 52nd and its successor the 1st Royal Green Jackets in the 1960's. Copies of 'Wellington's Waterloo Secret' by Nigel Sale, priced at £3.50 plus £1.00 UK postage and packing, can be obtained from the Royal Green Jackets Museum Peninsula Barracks, Romsey Road, Winchester, SO23 8TS, Tel 01962 828549; email museum@royalgreenjackets.co.uk