

## Waterloo - 18 June 1815

*What follows is the script used by Giles Orpen-Smellie at the Public Schools Lodges Conference that took place at Wellington College on 30 May 2015.*

Ladies and Gentlemen

Waterloo is a rather English sounding name for a bit of Belgium. The name comes from the Flemish: it means 'Damp Pasture'; and, at dawn on Sunday 18 June 1815 it was very damp! It had rained heavily during the night and Sgt William Wheeler of the British 51<sup>st</sup> Regiment recalled how:

"We sat on our knapsacks until daylight without fires. There was no shelter against the weather. The water ran in streams from the cuffs of our jackets. In short we were as wet as if we had been plunged overhead in a river. We had one consolation. We knew the French were in the same plight."

Neither Wheeler nor the other 67,000 British and Allied soldiers around him, would have had much idea about why they were sitting in the rain, in a muddy field, in that particular corner of Belgium. They knew that there would be a fight at some stage but not where or when. As the dawn broke that morning they shivered, they grumbled, they cleaned their weapons and equipment as good soldiers do, they ate what food they could find, and they waited for someone to tell them what they were going to do. They had no idea that they stood at the dawn of, arguably, the most decisive day in European military history.

Meanwhile, a few miles to the south, led by their emperor, Napoleon, some 80,000 Frenchmen were preparing to resume their march northwards up the road to Brussels.



Napoleon Bonaparte was not actually French: he was born in Corsica, then part of the Italian state of Genoa; Italian was his first language; he only started learning French at the age of nine.

Nevertheless, he had been commissioned into the French artillery and the conditions of revolutionary France - the French Revolution had begun in 1789 - enabled him to enjoy a meteoric rise: by 1793, at the age of 24, he was commanding an army; and in 1799, at the age of 30, he had seized political power in France, power that he then cemented with a run of spectacular military campaigns waged across Europe; and in 1804, notwithstanding the French revolutionary idealism of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*, he proclaimed himself Emperor of France.

Six coalitions were formed against France between 1789 and 1814. The first five were defeated but in 1812 Napoleon over-reached himself in Russia. He marched 500,000 men into Russia but he brought out fewer than 50,000. By 1814, Europe's Sixth Coalition had defeated Napoleon. He was forced to abdicate and was exiled on the Mediterranean island of Elba. Europe breathed a huge sigh of relief: the monster was caged!

But the monster escaped! On 1 March 1815, Napoleon landed in southern France and was soon back in Paris. The unpopular Bourbon king, Louis XVIII, departed in haste to Brussels.

Napoleon recognised that he could not fight all of Europe once again but his pleas for peace were rejected. Europe formed a seventh coalition and declared war, not on France, but on one man. As far as the ruling elites of Europe were concerned, the issue at Waterloo was not France the nation but Napoleon the man.

Napoleon faced a huge military threat. He could muster about 250,000 troops but France was surrounded by about 800,000 troops of the Seventh Coalition: the British, allies and Prussians in Belgium; Austrians in Germany with Russians on the march to join them; more Austrians in Italy; and Spanish and Portuguese on the other side of the Pyrenees.

Napoleon's only option was to take on and defeat his opponents one at a time in quick succession before they could mount a concerted effort against him.

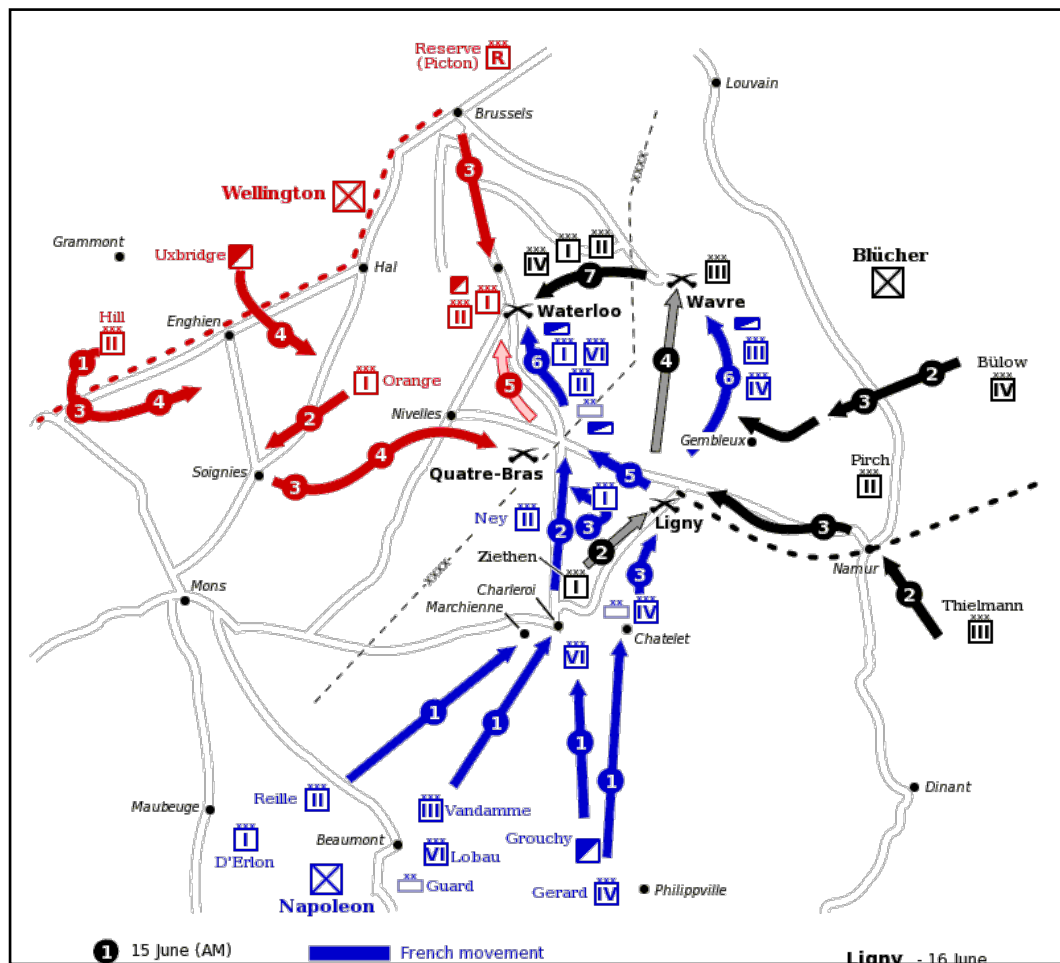
On 15th June 1815, eleven weeks after restoring himself to power, Napoleon led half his army, 125,000 men, to attack the British, allies and Prussians in Belgium, because the Allied and Prussian armies were the most battle-ready armies of the coalition. Napoleon needed to defeat them quickly and decisively before returning to Paris to prepare to launch against the next threat as this developed.

Napoleon's concept was: first, to defeat the Prussian Army under Field Marshal Blucher, while holding off the Allied army under the Duke of Wellington; and then to defeat the Allied Army while completing the rout of the Prussians.

To use a boxing analogy: Napoleon would use his right to throw a solid punch at Blucher's chin while jabbing with his left to occupy Wellington. Having put Blucher down he would continue to jab with his right to keep Blucher down while using his left to put Wellington down.

The Prussians took a good hit on the 16th June 1815 in a battle at Ligny. Blucher was knocked back but the Prussians were not knocked down. They withdrew in good order. More importantly, they withdrew northwards toward Wavre rather than eastwards toward Namur and Prussia. This decision was probably the decisive call of the campaign as it allowed the Prussians to continue to cooperate with Wellington. Had the Prussians withdrawn eastwards, Wellington, who was not strong enough to

take on the French army alone, would have abandoned Brussels and withdrawn westward to the Channel, probably to evacuate his army to Britain.



Wellington, who had fought his own battle on the 16th June at Quatre Bras, also withdrew. He went back to a position on a low ridge-line just south of the village of Waterloo, nine miles south of the centre of Brussels.

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Wellington, or “our Nosey” as his troops called him, had been born in 1769 and, like Napoleon, was 46 years old at Waterloo.

He made his name as an army commander in India before commanding the Anglo-Portuguese forces in the Iberian peninsula for most of the Peninsula campaign of 1808-1814.

Sergeant Wheeler had commented at the end of the Peninsula Campaign that:

“If England should require the service of her army again, and I should be with it, let me have Old Nosey to command. There are two things we should be certain of: first, we should always be well supplied with rations. The second is we should be sure to give the enemy a damned good thrashing. What can a soldier want more?”.

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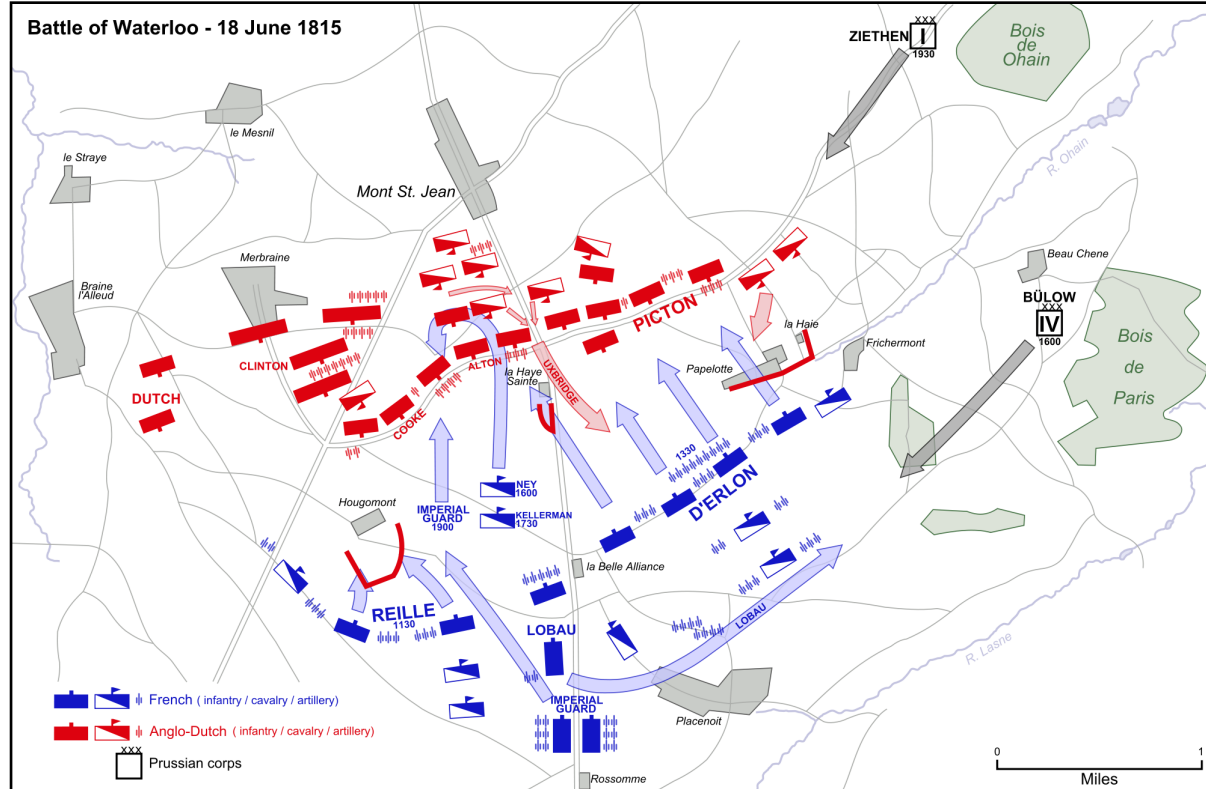
The Brits often claim Waterloo as a British victory because Wellington was a Brit, but Wellington's army was not a British Army. Only 27% of his strength at Waterloo was British. The remainder were a mix of Germans, Dutch and Belgians, many of whom had served in the French army up to 1814. Wellington's army was very much an Allied Army.

We should also not forget the Prussians who committed the best part of 60,000 troops to the battle that day.

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Napoleon sent Marshal Grouchy and 40,000 men to pursue Blucher while he marched 80,000 men to Waterloo. He had intended to attack at 9.00 in the morning. However, because of the rain, he had to wait for the ground to dry sufficiently for him to move his artillery into place.





The battle eventually began at about 11.00 with a French diversionary attack on the farm of Hougomont.

Napoleon's intent was to force Wellington to commit reserves to Hougomont and so weaken him elsewhere. However, French commanders misunderstood or forgot the purpose of their orders and it was the French who were drawn in, in increasing numbers, until the best part of General Reille's corps of 18,000 men was involved. Meanwhile, Wellington held Hougomont all day with only about 2000.

Napoleon's first assault on Wellington's main position began at about 1.30 in the afternoon.

Napoleonic attacks tended to follow a pattern: first you bombarded your opponents with artillery. Then you sent in your infantry in seemingly overwhelming columns of troops; and then, when the enemy wavered, you sent in your reserve to finish the job. The cavalry would pursue the defeated army to turn an orderly retreat into a rout and thus secure a decisive victory.

The French artillery opened fire in earnest at about 1.30 and Wellington's army was subjected to near-continuous artillery fire for the best part of six hours thereafter. It wore down the army both physically and psychologically.

Sgt William Lawrence of the 73rd Regiment wrote how he

"saw a cannon ball cut my sergeant-major in half and take off the head of a soldier nearby. A young soldier close by called out in distress saying that he was taken ill and must fall out of rank. "Why, it's the smell of this little powder that has caused your illness. There's nothing the matter with you. But the boy fell down and would not move. "Cowardice – ought to be shot".



At about 2.00 o'clock, some 15-18,000 French troops of General D'Erlon's corps advanced in four columns towards General Picton's division of 5000 British and German troops.



The scale of the infantry assault was intended to overawe the defenders so that they broke before the attack was driven home. However, French officers who had fought Wellington in Spain were concerned: French attacks in large columns of troops did not work in the face of British steadiness.

A French general who had fought in Spain, Marshal Beaugard, described how British discipline unnerved French columns:

“Some of our men hoisted their shakos on their muskets, the march became a run; the ranks began to be mixed up; the men's excitement became tumultuous, soldiers began to fire as they ran. The red English line, silent and motionless, even when we were only 300 yards away, seemed to take no notice of the storm that was about to break upon it. 200 yards. 100 yards. At this moment of painful expectation the English line would make a quarter turn, their muskets going up to the ready. An indefinable sensation nailed many of our men to the spot, who halted and opened a wavering fire. The enemy's return: a shattering volley of simultaneous precision and deadly effect. Decimated, we reeled back. Then three formidable hurrahs and with the third they were on us with the bayonet, driving us back in disorderly retreat.”

British commanders seemed confident that D'Erlon's attack could be defeated. As Picton apparently remarked to Wellington as he waited to repulse D'Erlon's attack:

“They are coming on in the same old style so we shall have to drive them off in the same old style!”

Picton's troops had been lying down out of sight on the reverse slope of the ridge. As the French approached the crest of the ridge the British stood up. From the French perspective they seemed suddenly to rise up out of the ground. A shattering British volley was fired into the French columns and then 5000 British infantry charged. The French infantry reeled back.

If there was to be any doubt in the outcome of this clash it was decided by the British heavy cavalry.



I am sure that you have all seen races like the Grand National so you will have an idea of the power of 30 horses at full gallop. So, imagine 1500 horses at the gallop, shoulder to shoulder, with the jockeys wielding heavy cavalry sabres with lethal effect. Lady Elizabeth Butler's famous painting, *Scotland Forever, the Charge of the Scots Greys at Waterloo*, captures the idea well. The Union Brigade, three regiments of British cavalry, the Greys for Scotland, the Inniskillings for Ireland and the Royals for England, crashed into the French infantry. The Household Cavalry Brigade, another 1500 horses, also charged to defeat the French cavalry that might otherwise have supported the French infantry attack.

By about 3.00 or 3.30 pm, 5000 British infantry, supported by 3000 cavalry, had stopped and broken 15-18,000 French.

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The battle continued with a number of smaller actions with particular pressure being brought to bear on the farm of La Haye Sainte and the centre of Wellington's line. However, next major set-piece of the battle was the French cavalry attack.

Napoleon is reported to have been unwell at Waterloo and by mid-afternoon he had left the battlefield to have a lie down. He left his army in the care of his second-in-command, Marshall Ney.

At about 4.00 o'clock, Wellington directed his line to fall back 100 paces. He wanted to withdraw his troops from the crest of the ridge, where they were visible to the French artillery, to the reverse slope of the ridge, where they would be in relative shelter from the continuous French artillery fire.

Ney, when he saw the Allied line disappear from the crest of the ridge, assumed that Wellington was withdrawing. Ney committed the French cavalry in pursuit to reduce an orderly withdrawal to a rout and so inflict a decisive defeat on Wellington's army.

I talked about 30 horses in the Grand National, or 1500 horses in the earlier charge of the British Union Brigade. Now imagine a charge of 8000 to 10,000 horses.

However, Wellington's army was not retreating from the battlefield. They were halted and facing their front in good order just over the crest of the ridge. They knew that the cavalry were coming and were ready for them, formed in square formations, four ranks deep, presenting a hedge of bayonets to the attacking cavalry. The French cavalry coming toward them did not know they were there.





Ensign Gronow of the 1st Foot Guards wrote later:

“At about 4.00 in the afternoon the enemy’s artillery in front of us ceased firing all of a sudden, and we saw large masses of cavalry advance: not a man present who survived could have forgotten in after life the awful grandeur of that charge. You saw at a distance what appeared to be an overwhelming, long, moving, line, which, ever advancing, glittered like a stormy wave of the sea when it catches the sunlight. On came the mounted host until they got near enough, whilst the very earth seemed to vibrate beneath their thundering tramp. One might suppose that nothing could have resisted the shock of this terrible moving mass. But the battalion was steady. The word of command, “prepare to receive cavalry” was given, every man in the front rank knelt, and a wall bristling with bayonets, held together by steady hands, presented itself to the infuriated French cavalry”.

Meanwhile, the British gunners had a field day! Captain Cavalie Mercer of the Royal Horse Artillery described the effect his battery of guns had on the packed ranks of horses:

“The men were reloading, ramming and firing again. [The French] Now at a few yards distance every shot of case hit something: the leaders hesitated, turned aside and rode away to the flanks. But the mass of horsemen could not suddenly retreat. Some tried to turn and ride back through the body of the column. The guns fired again and again. The men who had ridden up so superbly became a mob struggling with each other, using the pommels of their swords to fight their way through their own comrades, still falling in scores at every blast of shot.”

The French are thought to have made twelve charges in total over a period of about 90 minutes. It was all very gallant but it achieved very little: the French cavalry did not break any of Wellington’s squares, they did not rout Wellington’s army.

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Napoleon had returned to the field during the French cavalry attacks. He now had only one more card to play: an attack by his reserve, the Imperial Guard.

*La Garde* had never been beaten in battle and Napoleon’s assessment was that one last effort would break Wellington. Had he attacked at 6.00 o’clock he might have been right as Wellington’s army was at breaking point. But by 7.30, when his Guards advanced, the situation had changed.

A second Prussian corps had arrived on Wellington's eastern flank allowing him to move troops to reinforce his centre.

The first Prussian corps had arrived mid-afternoon and had already been involved in a savage fight in the village of Plancenoit to the French right-rear. Napoleon had detached Marshal Grouchy with 40,000 men after Ligny to prevent the Prussians from joining up with Wellington. Clearly, Grouchy had failed and Napoleon now desperately needed Grouchy's 40,000 men but knew that they were not available to him. However, Napoleon needed to know that the Prussian threat to his lines of communication had been dealt with before his Guards could advance.



*La Garde* thought they were advancing into a gap in Wellington's line. However, hidden in the rye on the reverse slope of the ridge, rye that stood five feet tall, were the British Foot Guards.

Captain Powell of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards described how the French:

"continued to advance till within 50 or 60 paces of our front, when the Brigade were ordered to stand up. Whether it was from the sudden and unexpected appearance of troops so close to them, which must have seemed as starting out of the ground, or the tremendously heavy fire we threw into them, *La Garde*, who had never before failed in an attack, suddenly stopped."

As before, a shattering British volley was followed by a bayonet charge. The Imperial Guard wavered and then began to fall back.

Battles are contests of will. The Imperial Guard's defeat shattered the will of the French Army. At one moment they were almost victorious; then suddenly and catastrophically, French will collapsed completely. The French army streamed to the rear as a disorganised mob.

It was over!

The exhausted Allied army had held on long enough, one moment on the verge of defeat, the next advancing victorious, driving all before their bayonets. As Wellington said, "it was the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life".

The cost had been high on both sides: 48,000 men and 20,000 horses lay dead and wounded on the field.

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Napoleon fled first to Paris, hoping to muster another army, and then to Rochefort when he found that there was not another army to be mustered. He had hoped to find a passage to America and seek asylum there. However, he could not find a ship and so, on 29 June, he surrendered to Captain Frederick Maitland RN of HMS Bellerophon.



The monster had finally been caged! He was exiled on the Atlantic island of St Helena where he died in 1821.