CHAPTER 3

THE COMMANDERS

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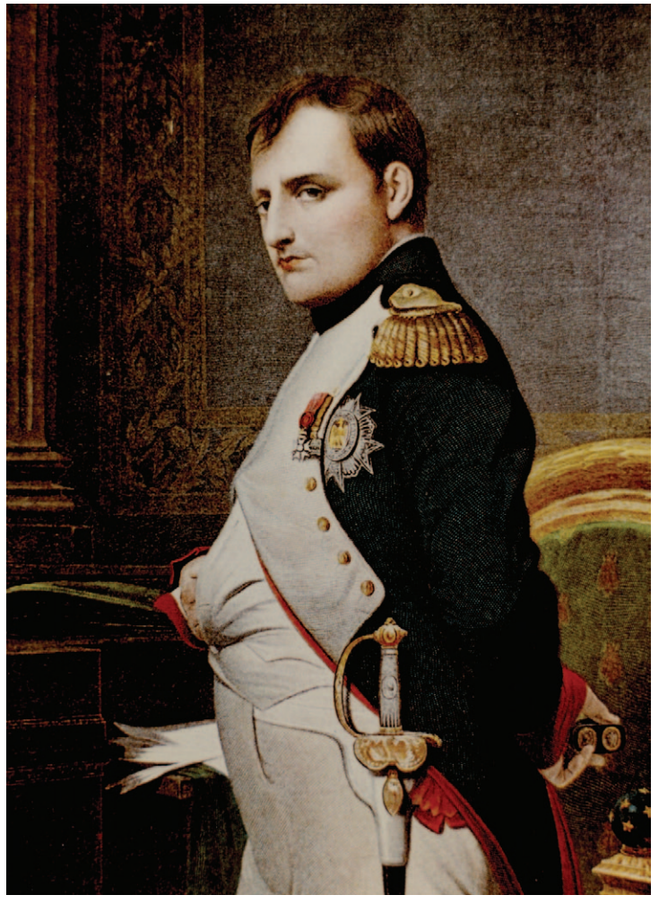
PREVIOUS
On the field of Waterloo, Napoleon returns the salute of the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard. His guide on the day, the Belgian civilian Jean-Baptiste De Coster, is under escort alongside Napoleon's staff. (Print after Ernest Crofts)

Napoleon in his study, wearing the coat of the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard. (Print after Paul Delaroche)



At least two of the three principal commanders in the Waterloo campaign were regarded in their own time as the greatest generals of their age, reputations which still endure, and whose influence on the campaign could not have been more profound: Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington. They were almost the same age, born in 1769 only about 106 days apart: Wellington on or about 1 May[1] and Napoleon on 15 August. Both had attained their respective positions on merit, but the paths that led to their first and only confrontation on the field of Waterloo had been considerably different.

Napoleon Bonaparte, the dominant figure of the entire age that was to be named after him, was born at Ajaccio, Corsica, the son of a lawyer of minor aristocratic background and little fortune. He was commissioned into the French Army as an officer of artillery, a branch of the service that under the *Ancien Régime* had held little attraction for the aristocracy and was thus more the preserve of the dedicated professional. Napoleon always held that luck played an important part in a general's success, and some evidence of this may be seen in his own career. He was possessed of prodigious military talents, but had the fortune to exercise them in the era of the French Revolution, a time of political upheaval and ferment, conditions conducive to rapid progress in his military and political career, despite his original lowly rank. From his first notable military success at Toulon in 1793, at the age of only 24, he displayed not only his immense military talents but also a high degree of political acumen, not to say ruthlessness and cunning, and an aptitude for unremitting toil.

A stunningly successful campaign in Italy forged Napoleon's military reputation; and in a very few years he had attained the highest political office, initially as one of the three Consuls

appointed after the coup of Brumaire (November 1799), subsequently as First Consul for life and in December 1804 as Emperor of the French, with all power concentrated in his own hands. For almost a decade thereafter he was the dominant political and military personality in Europe; he defeated his main continental rivals (Austria, Prussia and Russia) and much of the continent fell under his sway. It did not endure: he over-reached himself with his invasion of Russia in 1812 and never recovered from his losses; his allies deserted as his enemies took their opportunity for revenge, and he was compelled to abdicate in April 1814. His ambition exerted a terrible price: as Sir John Seeley commented, 'he had stooped to pick up a crown but having held it in his hands, he dropped it'.[2] Napoleon had been consigned to the tiny Mediterranean island of Elba by his enemies, but with the restored Bourbon monarchy in France proving highly unpopular, he found widespread support among his old followers when he returned in the spring of 1815, and in an attempt to forestall his enemies, he marched against their nearest military forces in the Netherlands.

The most celebrated of those who opposed Napoleon's advance was Arthur Wellesley, a product of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. His rise to high command had been less stellar than Napoleon's, and while the latter owed his initial success almost entirely to his own talents, Wellesley's family connections were of assistance in the early part of his career. Service in the Netherlands as a battalion commander in 1794 showed him, as he said, 'what one ought not to do'[3] and the lesson was taken to heart: successful campaigns in India led to his appointment to the chief command in the Peninsular War, the successful conclusion of which depended heavily upon his prodigious military (and indeed diplomatic) talents. Awards followed: successive steps in the peerage to the highest rank, a dukedom, using the title 'Wellington' chosen for him by his brother, and promotion to field marshal, the highest honours that could be bestowed by his sovereign and country. He was sent to the Congress of Vienna to exercise his diplomatic talents, but upon Napoleon's return was directed to command the Anglo-Allied force in the Netherlands.

Certain aspects of the style of command of the two generals were similar, including the confidence that their abilities imbued in their followers; but in many respects they were very different.

Although one of the greatest generals of all history, Napoleon was not really an innovator in the field of minor tactics, but rather built upon a system that was already in use. Tactical developments often depended upon circumstances and on the quantity of resources available, and Napoleon had the capacity to assemble large quantities of artillery and cavalry that were denied to some other armies. He tended to use both as offensive tools rather than as support elements, hence

Wellington in India, 1803.
(Print after Robert Home)

the deployment of huge quantities of artillery to soften an enemy line in preparation for an infantry or cavalry attack, while massed charges of heavy cavalry became a primary striking-force to the extent that Wellington commented that Napoleon:

> gained some of his battles by the use of his cuirassiers as a kind of accelerated infantry, with which, supported by masses of cannon, he was in the habit of seizing important parts in the centre or flanks of his enemy's position, and of occupying such points till his infantry could arrive to relieve them. He tried this manoeuvre at the battle of Waterloo, but failed because we were not to be frightened away.[4]

At a more strategic level, Napoleon devised or adapted a number of manoeuvres which he used to considerable effect, including one utilised in the Waterloo campaign, which has been described as the 'strategy of the central position'. This was used when Napoleon was opposed by two enemy armies, or wings, which together might outnumber him. As in the case of the Anglo-Allied and Prussian Armies he confronted in the Waterloo campaign, he would attempt to interpose himself between them, and allocate a minority portion of his own army to contain one of the enemy formations. The greater part of his own army he would then throw at the second enemy, achieving 'local superiority' in numbers and overwhelming it; and having put it to flight, would use a small force to pursue and with the remainder switch his attention to the first enemy, and defeat that in the same way. The effectiveness of this manoeuvre was facilitated by the organisation of his army into semi-autonomous *corps d'armée*, self-contained miniature armies including infantry, cavalry and artillery, able to sustain a fight unaided for some time. Because

Napoleon could not be present on both battlefields involved in such a strategy, it demanded an able subordinate to conduct one action, freeing Napoleon to lead at the other. Such a dual battle had been most decisive at Jena-Auerstädt in 1806, when Napoleon had utilised the very considerable talents of Marshal Louis-Nicolas Davout; but as in 1815 it worked less well with subordinate commanders of more limited ability. In this case, Napoleon used Marshal Michel Ney to occupy Wellington's attention at Quatre Bras, while he engaged the Prussians at Ligny; and then, having detached Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy to follow the retreating Prussians, he switched the remainder of his army onto a major drive against Wellington.

A crucial factor in Napoleon's system of command was his relationship with his troops, of all ranks. A master of psychology when dealing with his army, he had fostered a culture of personality, in which he was the fount of all. His name was carried upon the flags of his army; all rewards and promotions were in his gift, and the cry taken up with such enthusiasm by his troops did not relate to their nation but was '*Vive l'Empereur!*' One of his great skills was in relating to the ordinary soldiers; he had a phenomenal memory but there was a degree of artifice in his apparent ability to recollect individual private soldiers, to some extent the result of careful preparation by his aides. A typical example was recorded in which a sergeant approached him and asked to be awarded the *Légion d'Honneur*, a decoration that Napoleon had instituted and was in his personal gift, and thus regarded as the most precious award in the eyes of his troops. The sergeant was notably ugly which perhaps helped fix him in Napoleon's memory, but he told the man that he remembered him precisely and that he had promised him the decoration ten months before at the bakery at Vilna. The recounting of such anecdotes reinforced the aura of Napoleon's infallibility and the belief that he cared for, and remembered, every one of his men, which bound them to him ever closer. A few words spoken to a regiment before battle could take on the aspect of a near-divine pronouncement and elevate morale. Although not all were susceptible, the cult of personality had electrifying effects, as Napoleon himself described:

Napoleon in his customary undress coat of the *Chasseurs à Cheval* of the Imperial Guard; the breast-star, ribbon and first medal are those of the *Légion d'Honneur*, the second medal that of the Italian Order of the Iron Crown. (Print after Horace Vernet)

Napoleon on campaign: a classic image. (Print after Jean-Louis Meissonier)

> When, in the heat of battle, passing along the line, I used to exclaim, 'Soldiers, unfurl your banners, the moment is come', our Frenchmen absolutely leaped for joy. I saw them multiply a hundred-fold. I then thought nothing impossible.[5]

Unlike the commanders he faced in the Waterloo campaign, Napoleon possessed a considerable advantage in that he alone was the master of his course of action, a supreme commander responsible to no other. He had complete freedom of command in every aspect of his strategy, in his selection of subordinates and in the positions they occupied. He had lost a number of his most trusted deputies, and in 1815 it could be argued that perhaps he did not make best use of those he had left. A most grievous loss was that of his invaluable chief of staff, Marshal

Louis-Alexandre Berthier, who having accepted the Bourbon restoration in 1814 had remained loyal to them, and who had fallen to his death from a window on 1 June 1815, conceivably suicide (he had been watching Russian troops marching past on the way to enter France). In his place Napoleon appointed Marshal Nicolas Soult, one of the best of his generals who might have been employed more effectively in a field command. Two of his remaining most capable subordinates were not even with his Army of the North: Marshal Louis-Nicolas Davout had been appointed minister of war and governor of Paris, important duties but a waste of his battlefield abilities; and Marshal Louis-Gabriel Suchet, who had enjoyed success in virtually independent command in Spain, had been appointed to lead the Army of the Alps in 1815. Instead, Napoleon put great reliance on two generals of lesser talent: Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy, who was to attract much criticism (some probably unjustified) by his handling of Napoleon's right wing in the pursuit of the Prussians in their withdrawal after Ligny, and for not marching to Napoleon's assistance on the day of Waterloo; and Marshal Michel Ney.

Ney was renowned for courage, notably in Russia in 1812 – Napoleon had termed him 'bravest of the brave' – and he had joined Napoleon in 1815 under unusual circumstances. Having pledged his allegiance to the restored Bourbon monarchy, Ney had declared his intention to take the field against Napoleon, but then relented and joined his old chief. Napoleon was conciliatory, declaring that:

> he had behaved very ill to me; but how could I forget his brilliant courage, and the many acts of heroism that had distinguished his past life! I rushed forward to embrace him, calling him the 'bravest of the brave' – and from that moment we were reconciled.[6]

For all his bravery, however, Ney was not a great tactician, and was criticised for his conduct of the battle at Quatre Bras; yet

Napoleon in his usual campaign uniform, protected by sentinels of the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard. (Print after Jean-Louis Meissonier)

Napoleon wearing his usual undress coat of the *Chasseurs à Cheval* of the Imperial Guard. (Engraving by H. Meyer after Jean-Baptiste Isabey)

Napoleon was content to allow him to conduct much of the Battle of Waterloo as well, within the emperor's broad tactical plan. Like Napoleon himself, he displayed little subtlety in his handling of the battle.

Other factors were significant in Napoleon's conduct of the campaign, including his health. At times in the previous few years he had exhibited periods of uncharacteristic lethargy, even though in the 1814 campaign he had displayed much of his old skill and vigour. In the Waterloo campaign it has been stated that he was suffering from attacks of haemorrhoids and cystitis, though these painful conditions were not made known until many years later, and then not with great certainty. If he were unwell, Napoleon concealed any malady from those around him, though it may have been a factor in his conduct of the campaign. Certainly he never made illness an excuse for what occurred, but then he never seems to have acknowledged that he had made any mistakes in his direction of the campaign.

This would seem to exemplify another factor in the campaign: Napoleon's self-confidence. On the morning of the battle Napoleon breakfasted at the farm of Le Caillou, and then held a conference with some of his commanders, who urged caution or perhaps just expressed a realistic appreciation of the situation. Soult advocated that at least part of the force allocated to Grouchy on the right

A characteristic pose: Napoleon reviews the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

Napoleon on the battlefield. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

be used instead to bolster that part of the army in direct opposition to Wellington. Napoleon was dismissive: 'You think,' he declared, 'because Wellington defeated you, that he must be a great general. I tell you that he is a bad general, that the English are poor troops, and that this will be the affair of a *déjeuner*.' Soult replied, 'I hope so!'[7]

Lieutenant General Honoré Reille, who had fought Wellington in the Peninsula and now commanded II Corps, also advocated caution; he stated, from experience, that the British infantry, posted as Wellington knew how to post them, were usually impregnable when attacked because of their calm tenacity and firepower; but that he considered the French superior in terms of manoeuvre, and that manoeuvring might be the way to success. Napoleon liked this no better than Soult's opinion, which recalls his reported dismissal of a similar plan proposed by Davout in 1812, that might have avoided the butchery of the frontal assault at Borodino: 'Ah! You are always for turning the enemy: it is too dangerous a manoeuvre!'[8] Napoleon was equally dismissive of the belief of his brother Jérôme Bonaparte, who commanded a division under Reille, that Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher and Wellington intended to unite in front of the Forest of Soignies, i.e. around Wellington's position (although this was founded on nothing more than a conversation between British officers overheard by a waiter in the inn at Genappe). Napoleon rejected this idea, believing that after their mauling at Ligny the Prussians would not be able to execute such a union with Wellington. (With the benefit of hindsight, during his exile at St Helena Napoleon declared that if he *had* manoeuvred to

Napoleon and his staff (1813). (Print after Auguste Raffet)

turn Wellington's right, he would have succeeded, but that he had preferred to pierce the centre and attempt to separate the two enemy armies.)

Napoleon's refusal to consider the advice of those who knew the enemy and his declaration that it would be a *déjeuner* could be seen as an attempt to hearten nervous subordinates; but both Soult and Reille were battle-hardened and talented generals not likely to exhibit trepidation. Instead, it may have been an example of Napoleon's over-confidence, as described by Armand de Caulaincourt, an experienced soldier, Napoleon's chief diplomatic advisor and his foreign minister in 1815. He observed that Napoleon always had antipathy to any opinions he disliked, and that, 'Once he had an idea implanted in his head, the Emperor was carried away by his own illusion. He cherished it, caressed it, became obsessed with it.'[9] Indeed, on his return to Paris after Waterloo, Napoleon remarked to Caulaincourt that the day had been won and that the enemy had been defeated at every point save Wellington's centre, when his own army had inexplicably been seized with panic and all was lost.

Caulaincourt's opinion seems to be reinforced by subsequent remarks. Comte de Las Cases, Napoleon's companion on St Helena, recorded how

CONVERT TO MONO

Napoleon disliked to speak of Wellington, until on one occasion he burst out with a tirade that Las Cases found astonishing: 'His gestures, his features, his tone of voice, were all expressive of the utmost indignation.' He declared that 'Wellington's troops were admirable, but his plans were despicable; or, I should rather say, that he formed none at all… His glory is wholly negative. His faults were enormous … he has no ingenuity; fortune has done more for him than he has done for her', so that it was inconceivable that he and Blücher should have defeated 'an enemy so prompt and daring as myself'. Napoleon claimed that in the three days fighting he had had victory snatched from his grasp on three occasions: by a general who deserted and revealed his plans to the Allies (presumably Lieutenant-General Louis Bourmont, who had commanded Napoleon's 14th Division until his defection on 15 June, and whose information was probably actually of little value); by Ney's mishandling of the action at Quatre Bras; and by Grouchy's conduct on 18 June which 'instead of securing victory, completed my ruin, and hurled France into the abyss'.[10] Napoleon seems to have accepted no personal responsibility for the crushing defeat, exhibiting self-confidence taken to a dangerous level.

Napoleon's rapport with his ordinary soldiers is exemplified in this scene in which he is greeted by members of the Young Guard. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

PREVIOUS
Napoleon works upon his maps in the camp of the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

Contrary to Napoleon's somewhat uncharitable view of his opponent, Wellington had no doubts about Napoleon's abilities as a general: 'There was nothing like him. He suited a French army so exactly! Depend upon it, at the head of a French army there was never anything like him … I used to say of him that his presence on the field made the difference of forty thousand men';[11] and 'Napoleon was the first man of his day on a field of battle, and with French troops'. He added, 'I confine myself to that. His policy was mere bullying, and, military matters apart, he was a Jonathan Wild',[12] referring to the notorious organiser of robberies hanged at Tyburn in 1725. Nevertheless, Wellington expressed some disappointment at Napoleon's apparent absence of imagination at Waterloo. Sir Andrew Barnard recalled that during the battle the duke had remarked of Napoleon, 'Damn the fellow, he is a mere pounder after all'.[13] He also commented on Napoleon's failure to manoeuvre in a letter to William Beresford a couple of weeks after the battle:

> Never did I see such a pounding match. Both were what the boxers call gluttons. Napoleon did not manoeuvre at all. He just moved forward in the old style, in columns, and was driven off in the old style. The only difference was, that he mixed cavalry with his infantry, and supported both with an enormous quantity of artillery. I had the infantry for some time in squares, and we had the French cavalry walking about us as if they had been our own. I never saw the British infantry behave so well.[14]

However, in fairness it is conceivable that Napoleon did intend something more sophisticated than a simple frontal assault: the attack on Hougoumont was probably pressed so strongly in an attempt to draw in Wellington's reserves, leaving his centre weakened and more vulnerable to the French attack.

In contrast to Wellington's great activity during the battle, once his tactics had been decided Napoleon seems to have been largely content to allow his senior commanders, mainly Ney, to conduct the minutiae of the fight, instead of exercising total personal direction himself. An account of Napoleon's conduct during the battle was given by a Belgian civilian, Jean-Baptiste de Coster, who was picked up by Napoleon's staff and kept at Headquarters as a guide to the local terrain. This allowed him to observe Napoleon throughout the action at Waterloo:[15]

> At noon, Buonaparte[16] went out with his staff, and placed himself on an eminence by the side of the causeway, at a very little distance in rear of the farm [Rossomme], from whence he had a view of the whole field of battle. Persons very soon came

Napoleon reconnoitring on campaign, wearing his characteristic grey greatcoat; his horse is held by a member of his escort of the *Chasseurs à Cheval* of the Imperial Guard. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

to tell him, that the attack on the farm and chateau of Hougoumont, which he had ordered to commence at eleven o'clock, had not succeeded.

At one o'clock the battle became general. Buonaparte remained in his first station, with all his staff, till five o'clock. He was on foot, and walked constantly backwards and forwards, sometimes with his arms crossed, but more frequently with his hands behind his back, and with his thumbs in the pockets of his slate-coloured great-coat. He had his eyes fixed on the battle, and took out alternately his watch and snuff-box. De Coster, who was on horseback near him, frequently remarked his watch [sic]. Buonaparte, perceiving that he also took snuff, and that he had no more, frequently gave him some.

When he saw that his attempts to carry the position of the chateau of Hougoumont had been vainly reiterated, he took a horse, quitted the farm of Rossum [sic] at five o'clock, and, moving forward, placed himself opposite to the house of De Coster, at the distance of a gun-shot from La Belle Alliance. He remained in this second station till seven o'clock. It was at that moment that he first perceived, by means of his glass, the arrival of the Prussians… Some fifteen minutes afterwards [he] gave orders that his guards should make a movement on the centre of the English army. He himself, again moving forward at the gallop, went and placed himself, with his staff, in a ravine formed by the causeway, half way between La Belle Alliance and La Haye Sainte. This was his third and last position. Buonaparte and his suite had been in great danger before arriving at this ravine: a

ball even carried away the pommel of the saddle of one of his officers, without either touching him or his horse. Buonaparte merely told him coldly, that he ought to keep within the ravine.

De Coster recalled one incident in which Napoleon's old training as an artillery officer impelled him to action:

> Perceiving that one of the guns of the battery on the left was not making good fire, he alighted from his horse, mounted on the height at the side of the road, and advanced to the third gun, the firing of which he rectified, while cannon and musket-balls were whistling around him. He returned with tranquillity, with his hands in the pockets of his great-coat, and took his place among his officers.

Having witnessed the defeat of the last attack, de Coster heard Napoleon say to General Henri-Gatien Bertrand, 'All is now over – let us save ourselves.' Passing with difficulty through Genappe, the streets of which were choked with vehicles, at Charleroi Napoleon rested and took a glass of wine before mounting again and continuing his ride. De Coster was released there and left to make his own way home on foot, with just a gold Napoleon for his trouble.

Protected by the *Grenadiers à Pied* of the Imperial Guard, Napoleon surveys the wreck of his army towards the end of the Battle of Waterloo. (Print after Auguste Raffet)

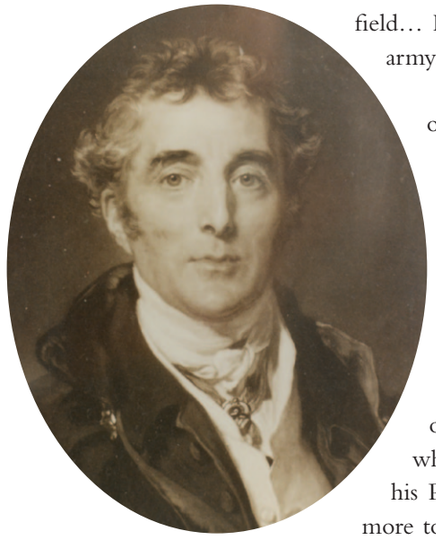
Wellington's temporary Headquarters at the time of the battle. (Print by and after James Rouse)

De Coster observed that Napoleon 'did not appear at all moved by the dangers of the battle', unlike de Coster himself who often crouched over his horse's neck as balls flew overhead, while Napoleon:

> repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction at this, telling him, that these movements made the officers believe he was hit; and added, that he would not shun the balls any better by stooping down than by keeping upright … during the whole action [Napoleon] displayed the same calmness and *sang-froid*, that he never manifested any ill humour, and spoke always with great gentleness to his officers.

The Duke of Wellington, wearing the 'state' coatee of a field marshal. (Print by W. Say after Thomas Phillips)

When he arrived to take command of the Anglo-Allied Army in the Netherlands in April 1815, the Duke of Wellington was acknowledged as the most successful British general since Marlborough, a judgement that is arguably still valid. He had earned that position by the scale of his success in the Peninsular War, founded not only upon his military talents but an ability, like Napoleon, for prodigious labour and a desire to oversee everything himself. This he clearly regarded as a necessity, as his subordinates in general had not proved especially adept in independent command; conversely, it might be argued that his constant superintendence may have inhibited the development of their abilities. There was, however, probably truth in his complaint of January 1813 concerning officers 'incapable of performing service in the



The Duke of Wellington c.1820. (Print after Sir Thomas Lawrence)

field… It is impossible to prevent incapable men from being sent to the army; and, when I complain that they are sent, I am to be responsible.'[17]

A number of significant factors characterised Wellington's conduct of a campaign. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he was acutely aware of the necessity of feeding his troops, with not only an adequate ration but also one that was delivered regularly, despite the difficulties that this often entailed on campaign, and with hardly any militarised transport service. Wellington frequently made reference to the importance of logistics; for example, when recommending William Beresford as his successor should he be incapacitated in the Peninsula, despite Beresford's limited tactical ability, he remarked that 'what we need now is some one to feed our troops, and I know of no one fitter for the purpose'.[18] Similarly, when praising the great improvement that had been effected among his Portuguese troops, he stated that, 'I believe we owe their merits more to the care we have taken of their pockets and bellies than to the instruction we have given them.'[19] That this concern was appreciated by his troops is evident in Captain John Kincaid's comments that follow.

One of Wellington's characteristic organisational methods was to integrate veteran troops with novice or less reliable elements, so that the latter could gain confidence from the former. This was evident in the Peninsular War, when the British and Portuguese military were almost entirely integrated at divisional level,

Before the Battle of Quatre Bras: Wellington (right) with the Duke of Brunswick. (Print by S. Mitan after Captain George Jones)

with British and Portuguese brigades serving within the same division. The same method he applied in the Waterloo campaign; although for political reasons the Dutch-Belgian troops had to serve in their own divisions, the novice Hanoverian troops he united with British brigades in his divisions, so that the less experienced troops usually had veterans alongside them from whom to derive inspiration.

Like Napoleon, Wellington introduced no radical tactical theories but adapted those already in place. His most notable practice was probably that of the 'reverse slope', in which, when the terrain permitted, his troops were positioned on the rear of rising ground, with only skirmishers thrown forward and visible to the enemy. This deployment had a dual advantage: being hidden from the enemy's view, the troops were less likely to suffer from long-range fire; and as the French customarily attacked in column, deploying into line as they came within musket-range, when their target was hidden behind a hill crest they were unable to gauge the moment for deployment. As they ascended the rising ground, Wellington's 'hidden' troops would ascend to the crest and use all their muskets against French troops still in column and thus only able to fire from their first two or three ranks; this unequal contest usually led to the rapid repulse of the attacking French column as the British seconded their fire with a limited counter-charge.

Wellington in the costume he wore at Waterloo. (Print by R. G. Tietze after Sir Thomas Lawrence)

Wellington's own assessment of his method of operation was to emphasise its flexibility; he stated that his French opponents:

> planned their campaigns just as you might make a splendid set of harness. It looks very well; until it gets broken; and then you are done for. Now I made my campaigns of ropes. If anything went wrong, I tied a knot; and went on.[20]

In the event, whatever plans he had formulated for facing Napoleon in 1815 were disrupted severely by the speed of Napoleon's advance, which caught the Allied armies completely

The Duke of Wellington wearing the uniform of a field marshal, with the cloak he wore at Waterloo. (Print by Ryall after Sir Thomas Lawrence)

off-balance. Wellington is supposed to have remarked, 'Napoleon has humbugged me, by God! He has gained twenty-four hours' march on me.'[21] Doubts have been placed upon the veracity of this remark, but it was true: Napoleon had seized the initiative, taken his opponents by surprise, and the situation was only stabilised by good fortune and the sterling resistance of the Dutch-Belgian troops at Quatre Bras prior to the hurried arrival of Wellington's leading British elements.

Unlike Napoleon, Wellington did not have a free choice of his subordinates, though he did have many reliable officers from the Peninsula Army. Before his forces were assembled fully he made his famous statement that, 'I have got an infamous army, very weak and ill equipped, and a very inexperienced staff.'[22] He complained that:

> I might have expected that the Generals and Staff formed by me in the last war would have been allowed to come to me again; but instead of that, I am overloaded with people I have never seen before; and it appears to be purposely intended to keep those out of my way whom I wished to have.[23]

He was able to make some changes, rejecting, for example, the services of Sir Hudson Lowe (subsequently Napoleon's gaoler at St Helena) and replacing him with Colonel Sir William Howe De Lancey as deputy quartermaster general, in effect his chief of staff. Most awkwardly, the Earl of Uxbridge was appointed to lead his cavalry, with whom Wellington had not served previously because of family enmity, Uxbridge having eloped with Wellington's sister-in-law.

An exchange on the night before Waterloo reveals the duke's style of leadership. Knowing that he might have to take command on the morrow should Wellington be incapacitated, with some trepidation Uxbridge plucked up courage to ask about the duke's plans. Wellington replied calmly, 'Who will attack first tomorrow, I or Bonaparte?' 'Bonaparte,' said Uxbridge.

Wellington and his staff at Waterloo. The officer in hussar uniform on the left is presumably the Earl of Uxbridge, colonel of the 7th Hussars, who wore cavalry uniform at Waterloo. (Print by S. Mitan after Capt. George Jones)

'Well,' continued the duke, 'Bonaparte has not given me any idea of his projects: and as my plans will depend upon his, how can you expect me to tell you what mine are?' Then, patting Uxbridge on the shoulder, he added, 'There is one thing certain, Uxbridge, that is, that whatever happens, you and I will do our duty.'[24]

It has been said that Wellington was primarily a defensive general, and during the Peninsular War it is true that circumstances compelled him to act on the defensive until he had the resources to initiate offensive operations; but on the battlefield his mode of defence was never purely static. As in other cases, he was forced to fight in a defensive role at Waterloo, and indeed he acknowledged his own mastery of it. Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Mackinnon, a distinguished officer who fought at Hougoumont, recounted 'a truly characteristic trait' from the morning of the battle, involving the Spanish representative at Allied Headquarters, Wellington's friend General Miguel Alava:

> General Alava went from Brussels to join his Grace, and found him in a tree observing the movements of the French army. On the Duke turning round and seeing General Alava, he called out, 'How are you, Alava? Buonaparte shall see to-day how a General of Sepoys can defend a position!' – a remark which showed at once his contempt for an opinion given of him by Buonaparte, and a confidence in himself and in his troops, accompanied with a degree of cheerfulness almost amounting to an assurance of victory.[25]

Wellington and his staff at Waterloo. The Duke wears his cloak over his customary civilian frock-coat, and while most of his companions wear the staff uniform, the officer to the right of Wellington, wearing his light dragoon uniform with shako, is presumably his aide de camp Lieutenant Lord George Lennox of the 9th Light Dragoons. (Print by S. Mitan after Capt. George Jones)

Although merited, Wellington's reputation for skill in defence should not conceal his wider skills. Colonel Sir Augustus Frazer, commander of the horse artillery in the Waterloo campaign, gave his assessment two days after the battle:

> Where, indeed, and what is not his forte? Cold and indifferent, nay, apparently careless in the beginning of battles, when the moment of difficulty comes intelligence flashes from the eyes of this wonderful man; and he rises superior to all that can be imagined.[26]

The description of 'cold and indifferent' represents another facet of Wellington's character and style of command that had a crucial effect: relations with his men. One of his best-known, and most misinterpreted statements, concerned his view that his troops were 'scum of the earth', which might be taken as the patrician disdain for those of the lower strata of society. In reality, this remark was made in relation to the British system of recruiting, which drew most of the ordinary soldiers from the labouring classes, in contrast to the French conscription that brought together men from all levels. Wellington certainly had

no illusions about the private soldier in general: 'you can hardly conceive such a set brought together', but then added, 'it is really wonderful that we should have made them the fine fellows they are'.[27]

At least overtly, Wellington was undoubtedly aloof and unemotional, never courting the adulation of his troops, unlike Napoleon. A characteristic moment occurred at Waterloo as he passed the 33rd Foot, his old regiment, at a crucial stage of the battle. A veteran who had served with him in India called out, 'Let us have three cheers for our old Colonel'; Wellington just held up his telescope and said 'Hush, hush, hush', as if he feared that an outburst of emotion would cause disorder within the battalion.[28]

Nonetheless, the trust that the troops reposed in his abilities was a major factor in maintaining morale during the stress of combat. To the old Peninsula hands he seemed invincible, which bred the confidence demonstrated by the reception of the news that he was to take command of the Army in the Netherlands; Sergeant William Wheeler of the 51st stated that 'I never remember anything that caused such joy, our men were almost frantic', drinking his health and declaring that they gave not a damn for France even if every man were a Napoleon, so that the celebratory alcohol 'caused a general fuddle'.[29]

Captain John Kincaid of the 95th, who had served under Wellington in the Peninsula, provided a memorable assessment of his qualities as perceived by the soldiers:

> … he was not only the head of the army but obliged to descend to the responsibility of every department in it. In the different branches of their various duties, he received the officers in charge, as ignorant as schoolboys, and, by his energy and unwearied perseverence, he made them what they became – the most renowned army that Europe ever saw. Wherever he went at its head, glory followed its steps – wherever he was not – I will not say disgrace, but something near akin to it ensued… Lord Wellington appeared to us never to leave anything to chance. However desperate the undertaking – whether suffering under momentary defeat, or imprudently hurried on by partial success – we ever felt confident that a redeeming power was at hand, nor were we ever deceived. Those only, too, who have served under such a master-mind and one of inferior calibre can appreciate the difference in a physical as well as a moral point of view – for when in the presence of the enemy, under him, we were never deprived of our personal comforts until prudence rendered it necessary, and they were always restored to us again at the earliest possible moment … it is astonishing in what a degree the vacillation and want of confidence in a commander descends into the different ranks.

'Stand up, Guards!': Wellington prepares the Foot Guards to repel Napoleon's final attack at Waterloo. (Print by S. Mitan after Capt. George Jones)

And, Kincaid added, 'we would rather see his long nose in the fight than a reinforcement of ten thousand men any day … and I'll venture to say that there was not a bosom in that army that did not beat more lightly, when we heard the joyful news of his arrival'.[30]

Writing of the time that Wellington ordered the final advance at Waterloo, another Peninsular veteran, Major Harry Ross-Lewin of the 32nd, recalled how he was cheered, and gave another reason for the army's trust:

Wellington encourages the final advance at Waterloo, with the 52nd Light Infantry and 95th Rifles. (Print by S. Mitan after Capt. George Jones)

> I am confident that there was not a man in the army who did not feel elated at the sight of their victorious chief, safe and unhurt after this perilous and bloody day. Never did any general share the dangers of a battle in a greater degree than did the Duke of Wellington on the field of Waterloo. He was frequently in the hottest of fire; almost every individual in his staff was either killed or wounded, and even he himself took refuge at one time in the midst of a square, when charged by the enemy's cavalry. One would have thought that, throughout this memorable conflict, the commander vied with his troops, and the troops with their commander, in giving evidence of their mutual confidence.[31]

Contrasting with Napoleon's conduct of the battle, Wellington was continually on the move, appearing wherever the situation was most critical, and intervening in person. Captain James Shaw, assistant quartermaster general attached to the 3rd Division, recalled an example, when he informed Wellington that a gap had opened in the line:

> This very startling information he received with a degree of coolness, and replied to in an instant with such precision and energy, as to prove the most complete self-possession; and left on my mind the impressions that his Grace's mind remained

Wellington and his staff directing the final Allied advance at Waterloo. (Print published by R. Bowyer, 1816)

> perfectly calm during every phase, however serious, of the action; that he felt confident of his own powers to being able to guide the storm which raged around him; and from the determined manner in which he spoke, it was evident that he had resolved to defend to the last extremity every inch of the position.

Wellington responded with typical calmness and clarity of vision: 'I shall order the Brunswick troops to the spot, and other troops besides; go you and get all the German troops of the division to the spot that you can get, and all the guns that you can find'; and then he personally led the Brunswickers to plug the gap. Shaw added:

> In no other part of the action was the Duke of Wellington exposed to so much personal risk as on this occasion, as he was necessarily under a close and most destructive infantry fire at a very short distance; at no other period of the day were his great qualities as a commander so strongly brought out, for it was the moment of his greatest peril as to the result of the action.[32]

Sir Augustus Frazer concurred:

> Several times were critical; but confidence in the Duke, I have no doubt, animated every breast. His Grace exposed his person, not unnecessarily but nobly: without his personal exertions, his continual presence wherever and whenever more than usual exertions were required, the day had been lost.[33]

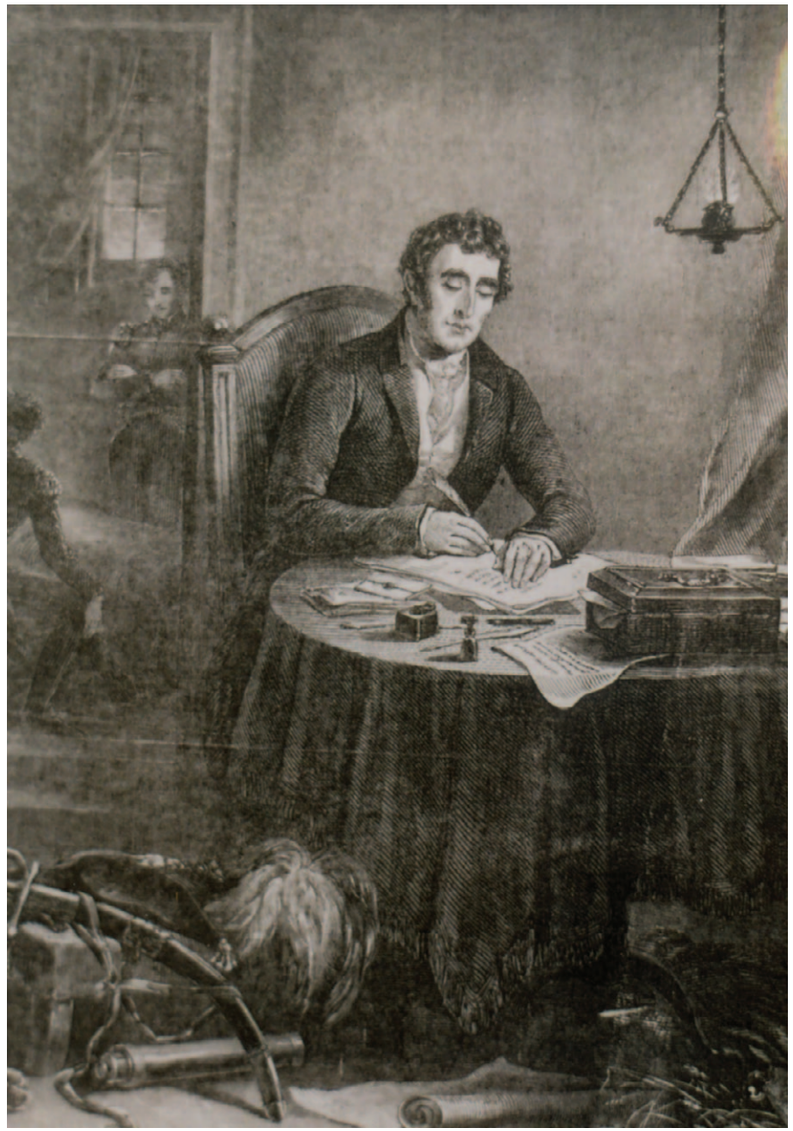
Sir William Fraser, whose father had fought at Waterloo as aide de camp to Uxbridge, thought that Wellington had deliberately placed himself in danger:

> … to inspire confidence in his soldiers. His calmness of demeanour, his methodical way of dealing with the various Regiments during the day, all of which was visible to his men, gave them unbounded confidence in the success of his orders … he also felt that he would show to the brave men who fought under him that, however great were their risks, however much he exacted from their courage and endurance, he exacted the same qualities and conduct from himself… There was not one, from the chief of his staff to the last-joined recruit, who did not know [that he] was jeopardising his life to at least the same degree as the poorest outcast who had become a soldier from starvation.[34]

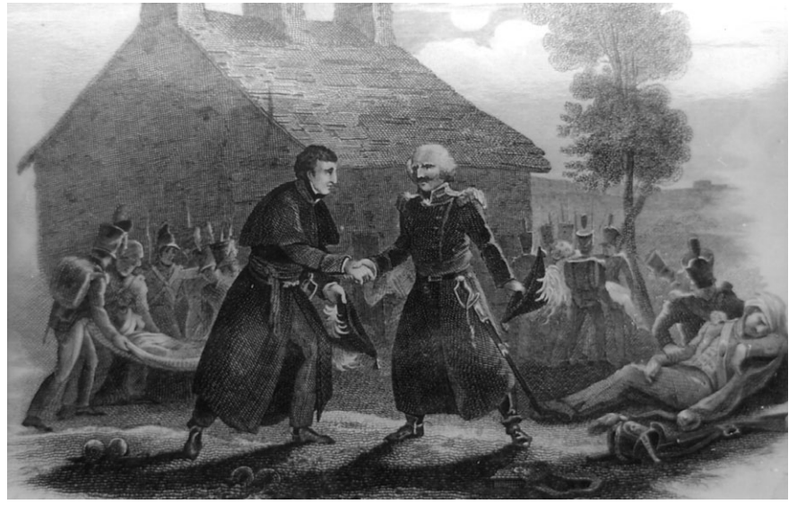
Towards the end of the battle one of Wellington's staff remonstrated with him for risking his life, which elicited an alarming response: let them fire away,

reportedly replied the duke, for the battle was won and thus his life was no longer of consequence.

The famed Scottish novelist, Sir Walter Scott, visiting the army shortly after Waterloo, reported further evidence of Wellington's effect:



Wellington writing the Waterloo dispatch on the evening of the battle; his aide Sir Alexander Gordon lies dying in the room behind him. (Engraving after Lady Burghersh)



The meeting of Wellington (left) and Blücher on the evening of Waterloo, supposedly at La Belle Alliance, though it may actually have been nearer Genappe: one of the earliest depictions of the event. (Print published by Thomas Kelly, 1817)

> There was scarcely a square but he visited in person, encouraging his men by his presence, and the officers by his directions. Many of his short phrases are repeated by them, as if they were possessed of talismanic effect … when many of the best and bravest men had fallen, and the event of the action seemed doubtful even to those who remained, he said, with the coolness of a spectator, who was beholding some well-contested sport, 'Never mind, we'll win this battle yet'. To another regiment, then closely engaged, he used a common sporting expression; 'Hard pounding, gentlemen; let's see who will pound the longest'. All who heard him issue orders took confidence from his quick and decisive intellect, all who saw him caught mettle from his undoubted composure.[35]

Another aspect of Wellington's command was the need to act in concert with his allies, for unlike Napoleon, who had complete control over his strategy, Wellington had to co-operate: the Prussian contribution in the campaign was to prove vital for its successful outcome. Wellington had been used to working with allies in the Peninsular War, but at a political level: militarily he had been in complete command of his own army and of the Portuguese and Spanish troops under his control. In 1815, relations with King William I of the Netherlands and his administration initially were somewhat strained, until on 4 May the king placed all his troops under Wellington's command and appointed the duke a field-marshal in Netherlands service. It was, however, a matter of political expediency that the young Prince of Orange, who had commanded the Allied troops in the region before Wellington's arrival, was given command

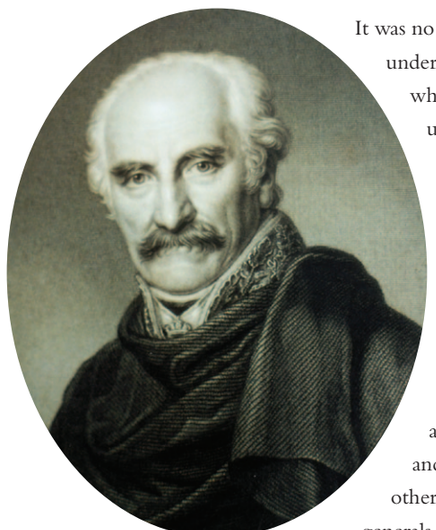
of the army's I Corps. The young prince had served in the Peninsula and held the rank of lieutenant general in the British Army, but in terms of independent command he was entirely inexperienced, to the extent that the British Colonel Sir John Colborne stated that the British government had urged him 'to prevent the Prince from engaging in any affair of his own before the combined operations'.[36]

Although Wellington had control over his own forces, the Prussians were allies upon an equal footing. Their commander was one of the most celebrated Prussian soldiers of his generation, Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, Prince of Wahlstadt, who had been one of Napoleon's most implacable opponents. Born in 1742, he had served in Frederick the Great's army, had commanded a hussar regiment and to some extent retained the élan of the typical hussar mentality. He had fought on for as long as possible after Napoleon's defeat of Prussia at Jena-Auerstädt, and had been implacably opposed to any Prussian collaboration with the French. In the 'War of Liberation' in 1813–14 he commanded the Army of Silesia where he exhibited his tenacity and refusal to countenance defeat, and came to be idolised by his troops who gave him the appropriate nickname of '*Marschall Vorwärts*' ('Marshal Forward').

Unlike Napoleon and Wellington, Blücher was not greatly experienced in truly independent command. The Army of Silesia, while autonomous, had operated as part of a united strategy involving a number of Allied formations; and even within his own army, Blücher had been the head of a command partnership with his chief of staff, Lieutenant General August Neithardt von Gneisenau. They were ideally matched: Gneisenau's calculating intelligence combined with Blücher's fire and determination to produce a most effective collaboration. Gneisenau was clear-sighted in a strategic sense, Blücher the inspirational head who had a direct appeal to his men which served to maintain their morale. Wellington's opinion was that Gneisenau was 'not exactly a tactician, but he was very deep in strategy… In tactics Gneisenau was not so much skilled. But Blücher was just the reverse – he knew nothing of plans of campaign, but well understood a field of battle'; and, he added, Blücher 'was a very fine fellow, and whenever there was any question of fighting, always ready and eager – if anything too eager'.[37]

The two Allied commanders each posted an intelligence officer at the other's Headquarters to act as liaison; the Prussian officer with Wellington was Baron Carl von Müffling, who passed a somewhat harsh opinion on Blücher:

Lieutenant General August Wilhelm von Gneisenau, wearing the form of rank-marking introduced into the Prussian Army from mid-1814. (Print after F. Kruger)



Blücher. (Engraving by T. W. Harland after F. C. Gröger)

It was no secret to Europe that old Prince Blücher, who had passed his 70th year, understood nothing whatever of the conduct of a war; so little, indeed, that when a plan was submitted to him for approval, even relating to some unimportant operation, he could not form any clear idea of it, or judge whether it were good or bad. This circumstance made it necessary that some one should be placed at his side, in whom he had confidence, and who possessed inclination and skill to employ it for the general weal. Gneisenau had proved himself to be such a man during two campaigns, and since it was by these very campaigns that Blücher had gained his European renown, there was no reason for not entrusting him with the command of the Prussian army precisely as in the two past years. But the more it became known that Gneisenau really commanded the army, and that Blücher merely acted as an example as the bravest in battle and the most indefatigable in exertion, understanding only to stimulate others by fiery speeches, the louder became the discontent of four senior generals who had commanded armies in 1814, and were senior in commission to Gneisenau.[38]

Although collaboration between the two Allied armies was to bring about the defeat of Napoleon, apparently there were some issues of trust. Müffling recalled that:

> On my departure General von Gneisenau warned me to be much on my guard with the Duke of Wellington, for that by his relations with India, and his transactions with the deceitful Nabobs, this distinguished general had so accustomed himself to duplicity, that he had at last become such a master in the art as even to outwit the Nabobs themselves.

Duplicity was probably not something that would have been recognised by those familiar with Wellington, and Müffling's relations with him were entirely cordial: 'The Duke soon perceived that, on every point discussed… I told him the simple truth, whether it concerned the Prussian army or relations between the two, and that he could meet me with perfect confidence.'[39]

Müffling recognised Wellington's position in the need to co-ordinate the actions of the two armies, explaining how:

> The Duke was accustomed to direct *alone* all the strategical operations of his army; and in defensive battles to indicate from his central point of operation the moment for assuming the offensive… The Duke, more than any one in Europe,

> had reason to know the value of a command which, proceeding from one master-mind, directs great operations and battles. He was necessarily sensible that the manner of conducting business to which he had become accustomed could not now be continued.

In discussing the co-operation with Blücher, Müffling stated that he told Wellington:

> You may depend upon this: when the Prince has agreed to any operation in common, he will keep his word, should even the whole Prussian army be annihilated in the act; but do not expect from us *more* than we are able to perform; we will always assist you as far as we *can*; the Prince will be perfectly satisfied if you do the same.[40]

This determination was tested in the aftermath of the mauling of the Prussian Army at Ligny, especially as Blücher was temporarily incapacitated. During the

Blücher unhorsed at Ligny; his aide, Count August-Ludwig von Nostitz, prepares to rescue him. (Print published by Thomas Kelly, 1817)

battle he had reverted to the hussar of old and very unwisely had attempted to lead a cavalry charge; his horse fell heavily upon him and he was ridden over. His aide managed to get him up and away, but for some time Gneisenau had to take command. As the Prussians withdrew, perhaps suspicious because Wellington had not aided them in the fight, Gneisenau considered retiring to reorganise instead of supporting his ally directly. Wellington's liaison officer at Prussian Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Hardinge, not present in person but recovering from the amputation of a hand, stated that:

> I was told that there had been a great discussion that night in [Blücher's] rooms, and that Blücher and Grolmann[41] carried the day for remaining in communication with the English army, but that Gneisenau had great doubts as to whether they ought not to fall back to Liege and secure their own communication with Luxembourg. They thought that if the English should be defeated, they themselves would be utterly destroyed.[42]

Gneisenau's misgivings were reasonable under the circumstances; shortly after the battle he stated that their ammunition was low and that it had almost been impossible to march to Wellington's support, but the determination of the indomitable old Blücher convinced him that they had to keep their word. Despite his ordeal Blücher never considered surrendering command; with potions rubbed into his bruises and fortified by champagne, he visited the wounded Hardinge:

> … calling me *Lieber Freund*, &c., and embracing me. I perceived he smelt most strongly of gin and rhubarb. He said to me, *Ich stinke etwas*, that he had been obliged to take medicine, having been twice rode over by the cavalry, but that he should be quite satisfied if in conjunction with the Duke of Wellington he was able now to defeat the old enemy.[43]

The decision to aid Wellington was crucial, for despite the later opinion of some British survivors of the battle that it could have been won without the Prussians, their appearance on Napoleon's right flank had been vital, and indeed was acknowledged by Wellington in his first account of the battle:

> I should not do justice to my own feelings, or to Marshal Blücher and the Prussian army, if I did not attribute the successful result of this arduous day to the cordial and timely assistance I received from them. The operation of General Bülow upon the enemy's flank was a most decisive one; and, even if I had not found myself in a

> situation to make the attack that produced the final result, it would have forced the enemy to retire if his attacks should have failed, and would have prevented him from taking advantage of them if they should unfortunately have succeeded.[44]

Blücher's role in the outcome of the campaign, and his iron will, had been crucial, and despite the tendency of some later Anglo-centric sources not to emphasise the Prussian contribution, many at the time had no doubt, like Sir Walter Scott, when at a ball in Paris he observed Wellington and Blücher shake hands: 'Look at that!', he declared; 'A few weeks ago these two men delivered Europe!'[45]

The experiences of the three leading commanders on the evening and night of the battle were very different. As the French retired, Wellington met Blücher, the duke recalling that the old Prussian had embraced him, exclaiming '*Meine lieber Kamerad*' and '*Quelle affaire!*' which, Wellington claimed, was almost the only French Blücher knew. (It is usually asserted that this meeting took place near the inn of La Belle Alliance, an apt name for their co-operation, though less than a year after the battle Wellington stated that it was actually near Genappe.) Blücher

A medal by Brandt commemorating Blücher and featuring the dates of his birth and death; on the reverse he is depicted as a Roman general, hurling thunderbolts from his chariot, an image that might have appeared to '*Marschall Vorwärts*', while the eagle of Prussia flies overhead.

Napoleon in defeat.
(Engraving by J. François after Paul Delaroche)

being exhausted, Gneisenau began to pursue the defeated French, until darkness and fatigue called a temporary halt. Wellington retired to his temporary Headquarters at Waterloo to write his dispatch to the government in London. The cool facade slipped when he received news of the death of his aide de camp, Sir Alexander Gordon, and the first casualty returns; brushing away tears, he said that he had never known what it was to lose a battle, but that nothing could be more painful than to win one with the loss of so many friends. For Napoleon, the night saw the beginning of his road into exile at St Helena, as described in the account of Jean-Baptiste de Coster. It was said that his aide Auguste-Charles-Joseph Flahaut de La Billarderie remarked to him, 'Is your Majesty not surprised?' (by the defeat); Napoleon replied, 'No, it has been the same thing since Crecy.'[46]

Of the three generals, Blücher, the oldest, survived the shortest time after his victory. He was feted throughout Europe, but the last time Wellington saw him he was labouring under a strange delusion, the recurrence of which Wellington attributed to a blow on the head sustained by falling from his horse while showing off before some ladies in Paris: that he was pregnant, expecting an elephant fathered by a French soldier. He died on 12 September 1819. Napoleon lasted less than two years longer; he ended his days on the isolated island of St Helena, consigned there by the Allied powers who dared not risk him returning again to France. He died there on 5 May 1821. Wellington, conversely, lived for some 37 years after Waterloo, in which period he became acknowledged as the greatest Englishman of his generation. He survived a period of political unpopularity, serving as prime minister, and became a national icon; but for all his success in the Peninsular War, it was for Waterloo that he was most celebrated, a measure of which was the fact that, uniquely, his name was carried with that of the Prince Regent on the Waterloo Medal, the first British campaign medal to be awarded universally to all participants, regardless of rank. By the time of his death on 14 September 1852 he was known universally as just 'the Duke', as if there had never been another holder of such a peerage. Many would have agreed with his friend and fellow Peninsular veteran Reverend George Gleig, who described him as 'the grandest, because the truest man, whom modern times have produced. He was the wisest and most loyal subject that ever served and supported the English throne.'[47]