CHAPTER 5

WATERLOO EYEWITNESSES

Different Perspectives

Natalia Griffon de Pleineville

PREVIOUS
The Life Guards charge at Waterloo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The perception of a battle by its participants is influenced by a variety of factors. Dependent on rank, the position on the battlefield, political convictions or personal experience, the exact same event can be perceived in an entirely different manner. The number of the recollections often depends on the importance of the battle or campaign and is proportional to its long-lasting consequences. It is particularly true for the Napoleonic period; indeed the Battle of Borodino in 1812 generated more first-hand accounts than the Battle of Rivoli in 1797.

History has recorded a great number of eyewitness accounts of the Battle of Waterloo, which definitively ended Napoleon's rule, from the lowest ranks to the most senior commanders. These accounts can be divided into two main categories. The first – and the most precious for a historian – are diaries or letters written during the immediate hours or days after the fighting, which forcibly reflect the real impressions of the participants. However, even these are not perfect, because it was usually not until some days after the events that the participants could put down their recollections on paper, writing from a sometimes imperfect memory. Secondly, there are a great number of narratives written or dictated many years after the events; of these, numerous accounts contain few personal details but instead many excerpts from books published in the decades after the battle. For example, numerous British memoirs on the Peninsular War are largely compiled from William Francis Patrick Napier, the author of the acclaimed *History of the War in the Peninsula*. They are, therefore, less reliable than direct contemporary evidence, although some of them may be taken into account as they are short personal anecdotes incorporated throughout the text. Many French histories of the battle are based on Napoleon's not very credible accounts and may therefore twist the facts.

Differences can also be ascertained in the perception of the same event by the participants according to their national character. Accounts by British soldiers frequently evoke God's name, whereas their French counterparts generally reflect little or no religious feeling owing to the collapse of the influence of the church during the French Revolution and the anti-clerical ideas of the French philosophers of the Age of Reason. Rather than a judgement by God, an element of fatality is sometimes evoked: *Chef d'escadron* Jean-Baptiste Lemonnier-Delafosse of the II Corps wrote that '24 hours of a thunderstorm destroyed all the combinations of a military commander'.[1] Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for an English audience even the very name of the battle is recalled differently by those involved. For the British, the name of Waterloo is, of course, sacred. As for the French, Louis-Vivant Lagneau, a surgeon major of the 3rd Grenadiers of the Old Guard, calls it 'the battle of

Waterloo or of Mont-Saint-Jean'.[2] *Adjudant commandant* Auguste Petiet, a member of the French General Headquarters under the orders of Marshal Nicolas Soult, stated: 'I would have wished, like my comrades, to see this disastrous day of 18th June be called Mont-Saint-Jean, after the name of this miserable hamlet which is now so famous.'[3]

British memoirs, unless they are of an immediate nature (such as letters or diaries), usually glorify Wellington and the British Army, leaving aside the other nationalities present, especially the crucial and decisive participation of the Prussian Army. Another key aspect of British memoirs is that they tend to focus on the individual. On the other hand, French memoirs, usually written long after the events, tend to dwell at length on Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy's alleged mistakes and Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher's unexpected arrival on the battlefield. Also, French memoirs tend to not be all that specific about personal details – a consequence both of the time elapsed when writing and also of the trauma of the defeat.

The degree of sincerity is generally not the same in the memoirs of private soldiers and superior officers. Soldiers and NCOs are usually more spontaneous and genuine, but they lack an overview. Senior commanders wrote for posterity's sake and their sincerity is calculated; some facts are simply omitted or distorted. Furthermore, some of them embroidered the facts to justify their own conduct, or avoided telling the truth in order to spare individual feelings and interests.

CONVERT TO MONO

GNMX1043_116 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT, HI RES TO COME]
Captain John Blackman of the Coldstream Guards wrote many letters to his parents describing the progress of Wellington's army during the Napoleonic Wars, through Spain, France and into Belgium, before his death at Waterloo in June 1815. (National Army Museum)

PART I.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL DETAIL

PREVIOUS, DURING, AND AFTER

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO,

Containing also

FURTHER PARTICULARS COLLECTED FROM THE COMMUNICATION AND CORRESPONDENCE OF SEVERAL OFFICERS OF RANK AND DISTINCTION,

Who were occupied in different Parts of the Field of Action,

INCLUDING

A FRENCH OFFICER'S DESCRIPTION,

WHO WAS AN EYE WITNESS, &c.

On the evening of Thursday the 15th of June, a Courier arrived at Brussels, from Marshal Blucher to announce, that hostilities had commenced. The Duke of Wellington was sitting after dinner, with a party of officers, over the desert and wine, when he received the dispatches containing this unexpected news. Marshal Blucher had been attacked that day by the French; but he seemed to consider it as a mere affair of outposts, which was not likely to proceed much further at present, though it might probably prove the prelude to a more important engagement.* It was the opinion of most military men in Brussels, that it was the plan of the Enemy by a false alarm to induce the Allies to concentrate their chief military force in that quarter, in order that he might more successfully make a serious attack upon some

* The first intelligence of the commencement of hostilities was known in London, at four o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, June 20, 1815. *(Vide Part 2, p. 156.)*

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There were many accounts of Waterloo after the battle, including this one by 'a near observer' who collects communication and correspondence from a range of officers to depict the fighting. (Courtesy Osprey Publishing)

Undoubtedly, political changes sometimes also exerted influence on the accounts of the Battle of Waterloo. A good example of this is an account of the Waterloo campaign by Major General François-Étienne Kellermann who commanded the III Reserve Cavalry Corps at Waterloo; now in the Vincennes military archives, it is a veritable diatribe against Napoleon as Kellermann needed to gain favour with the Bourbon family in order to preserve his rank in the army and his titles. As Andrew Field wrote, 'the major failing of French accounts is their lack of objectivity. They are either unapologetically pro- or anti-Napoleon, and this seriously detracts from their value.'[4]

The accounts differ in their usefulness depending on the time of writing and the degree of the personal experience recorded. Some authors speak only about the events which happened to their unit or in the immediate vicinity. Others try to provide an overall review of military operations, but are valid only for the events that the diarist personally witnessed.

Globally, one finds many details in the memoirs of participants. The same event is often perceived in a different manner, depending on the rank, the personality and the situation of the diarist. Indeed, different phases of the battle, particularly the numerous cavalry charges which occurred throughout the course of the day, are frequently regarded entirely differently. Sometimes the facts are misrepresented because of memory lapses. Notwithstanding their imperfections, these primary sources are extremely precious for a historian and 200 years after the battle the richness of the sources, from the lowest ranks to the most senior commanders, is remarkable. By comparing the numerous accounts, it is possible to arrive at an overview of the Battle of Waterloo.

Undoubtedly rank played a huge part in how any battle was perceived and subsequently presented. Senior officers often try to justify themselves in their memoirs about their performance. Junior officers dwell on their own personal experience and sometimes discuss tactical considerations. NCOs and soldiers talk honestly about their feelings and remember their comrades killed in the battle. But it should be remembered that NCOs, soldiers and junior officers are simply unable to give a complete account of the battle as their position on the battlefield and on the front line means that their perspective is immediately limited. Alexander Cavalié Mercer, an artillery captain and famous British diarist of the Waterloo campaign, wrote lucidly:

> He who pretends to give a general account of a great battle from his own observation deceives you – believe him not. He can see no further (that is, if he

Lieutenant General Kellermann commanded the III Reserve Corps during the battle, and wrote a detailed account of the action which is conserved in the French military archives. (akg-images)

be personally engaged in it) than the length of his nose; and how is he to tell what is passing two or three miles off, with hills and trees and buildings intervening, and all enveloped in smoke?[5]

With these considerations in mind let us now examine various eyewitness accounts of the Battle of Waterloo itself and attempt to draw out the relevant historical evidence from the multitude of surviving first-hand accounts.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE BATTLE

Kellermann stated in his aforementioned account of the Waterloo campaign: 'Enough attention is never paid to the influence that excessive tiredness, bad weather, a lack of food and of rest, can exert on a human body. A physical weariness necessarily affects the morale, generating disgust and despondency.'[6]

The bad weather experienced the night before Waterloo is well known. Officers and soldiers had to sleep in the mud, without shelter, with their stomachs empty. Sergeant Major Louis-Marie-Sylvain-Pierre Larreguy de Civrieux of the 93rd *de ligne* recalled:

The night of 17th–18th June was awful. Heavy rains had soddened the soil. It was impossible for us to light a fire, even to cook. Our bivouacs were strewn with beef and mutton cut up by our sabres, but we were unable to cook them. The distribution of bread was still awaited; we lay in the water. Though we were so tired that we slept deeply under a torrential rain.[7]

In the words of Lemonnier-Delafosse:

The night of 17th–18th seemed to be an omen of the misfortunes of the following day. A violent and continuous rain prevented the army from taking any moment of rest. To add to our trouble, the bad state of roads delayed the arrival of the provisions, so that the majority of the soldiers and officers were deprived of food.

Lieutenant Jacques-François Martin of the 45th *de ligne* subsequently recalled:

The night was black like an oven, the water was continuously falling in torrents; to cap it all, our regiment was stationed in a wet ploughed field, where we had to take the pleasures of rest. No wood, no straw, no victuals and impossible to procure them.[8]

The British were no better provided for. Captain William Tomkinson of the 16th Light Dragoons recalled:

The rain had fallen through the night without ceasing; the army had no tents; consequently there could not be a dry thread left to us. The fires were attempted to be kept up at the commencement of the night, but from the rain and want of fuel not many were continued through the night.[9]

Captain Joseph Thackwell of the 15th Light Dragoons wrote in his diary on 17 June:

At three this afternoon the rain fell in torrents, which continued at intervals. The Thirteenth and Fifteenth bivouacked in a field of rye on the right of the village of Mont-Saint-Jean; fortunately there were some infantry huts standing, which afforded a little shelter from the torrents of rain which fell during the night. No rations or supplies of any description.[10]

In the words of Private William Wheeler of the 51st:

GNMX1043_119 high res to come
Napoleon making plans on the eve of battle. The emperor tended to formulate his plans alone before issuing orders to his corps commanders.
(Philip Haythornthwaite)

It would be impossible for anyone to form any opinion of what we endured this night. Being close to the enemy we could not use our blankets, the ground was too wet to lie down, 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 over head in a river. We had one consolation, we knew the enemy were in the same plight.[11]

Sergeant Major Thomas Playford, 2nd Lifeguards recalled:

We passed an uncomfortable night exposed to a cold wind and to heavy rain. There we stood on soaked ploughed ground, shivering, wet, and hungry; for there was neither food for man nor horse.[12]

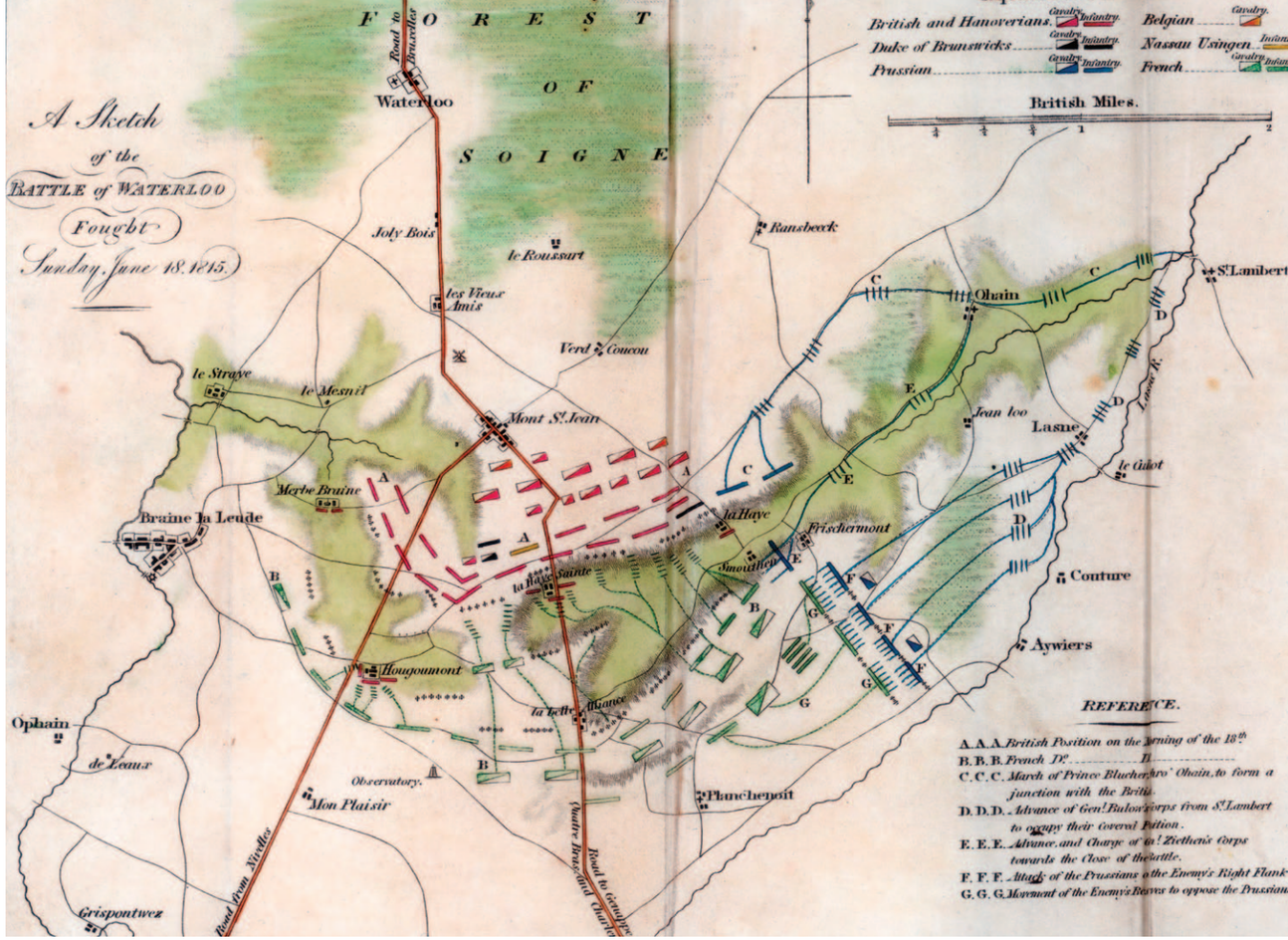
Similarly Lieutenant James Hope of the 92nd recounted the miserable conditions:

When we took up our ground on the position of Waterloo, not one of us had a dry stitch on our backs, and our baggage was no one knew where. To add to our miseries, we were ordered to bivouac in a newly ploughed field, in no part of which could a person stand in one place, for many minutes, without sinking to the knees in water and clay; and where, notwithstanding the great quantity that had fallen, not one drop of good water could be procured to quench our thirst.[13]

Private Dixon Vallance of the 79th also remembered the terrible weather conditions on the eve of battle:

The rain continued to pour on us in torrents. We were exposed to the fury of the storm all night without any shelter. Our regiment was stationed in a field of rye. Some of us pulled bunches of it and lay on it to keep us out of the water that flooded the ground. We were all as wet as water could make us, and shivering with cold. We could not lie on the bunches of rye. We rose and tried to dance and leap about to warm ourselves with exercise. The ground was so flooded, soft and miry that, when we tried to leap and dance, we stuck in the mud and mire, and had to pull one another out. We had a miserable night and we were happy to see the first dawning of the morning light.[14]

Finally dawn arrived as Ensign and Quartermaster William Gavin of the 71st noted in his diary on the morning of 18 June:



The plans for Waterloo, showing French and British positions at the outset. (Topfoto)

Cows, bullocks, pigs, sheep and fowls were put into requisition and brought to camp. Butchers set to work, fires made by pulling down houses for the wood, camp kettles hung on, and everything in a fair way for cooking, when the word 'fall in' put everything to the route. Men accoutring, cannon roaring, bugles sounding and drums beating, which put a stop to our cooking for that day.[15]

It is easy to see that bad weather conditions and lack of food were common for both armies, and that most of the soldiers started the battle weary and hungry.

But the vast array of eyewitness accounts also clearly show that at the start of the battle both armies, despite the appalling weather conditions and logistical problems, were enthusiastic about the approaching engagement. Some of the British soldiers even regarded the bad weather as a good omen, as Wheeler explained:

We had often experienced such weather in the Peninsula on the eve of a battle, for instance the nights before the battles of Fuentes de Oñoro, Salamanca and Vittoria

were attended with thunder and lightning. It was always the prelude to a victory.

The morale of the French is sometimes described as rather low at the beginning of the campaign of 1815 because of the universal suspicion towards senior officers; nevertheless, the testimony of *Adjudant commandant* Toussaint-Jean Trefcon, chief of staff of General Bachelu's 5th Division, gives a different view:

> The enthusiasm of the soldiers was great, the music played, the drums beat and a shiver agitated all these men for many of whom this was to be their last day. They cheered the Emperor with all their might.[16]

From the low ranks, Corporal Louis Canler of the 28th *de ligne* had the same impression:

A typical French foot chasseur of the guard, 1815. (Anne S. K. Brown)

> The Emperor passed along the front of all the corps, and by a spontaneous movement that resembled an electric shock, helmets, shakos, fur caps, were put onto sabres or bayonets with frenetic shouts of *Vive l'Empereur!!!*[17]

It clearly shows that the French firmly believed in victory.

On the British side, the enthusiasm was also palpable. Lieutenant Simmons of the 95th noted in his diary:

> Many old warriors who had fought for years in the Peninsula were proud of being pitted with our gallant chief against Buonaparte and the flower of France.[18]

He went further in a letter to his parents:

> If you could have seen the proud and fierce appearance of the British at that tremendous moment, there was not one eye but gleamed with joy.

Corporal John Douglas of the 1st Foot also eloquently summarised the mood as dawn broke and battle approached:

> The morning of the 18th was ushered in, both armies drawn up in order of battle, and viewing each other with a determination not to yield up their former hard-earned labours. The French no doubt were confident of success, having the conqueror of Lodi, Marengo and Austerlitz to dwarf them, and their ranks filled up with old veterans from the hulks now turned to avenge the former defeat; whilst the British, equally confident of Wellington, stood cleaning out their pieces, preparing their ammunition, and getting all things in order for the conflict which was to decide the fate of Europe.[19]

Both armies cheered their commanders, the most famous military men during this period, and during the last hours before the contest recalled their previous victories. It was the first time that Napoleon and Wellington faced each other. The issue was still uncertain, although the universal glory of Napoleon played for him; indeed Wellington said that Napoleon was worth 40,000 men on the battlefield. But the British commander was confident and hoped to be supported in time by his Prussian ally.

A French drummer on the morning of Waterloo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

HOUGOUMONT – 'A FATEFUL PLACE'

The feint attack on Hougoumont, which opened the battle, quickly descended into a bloody full-scale action. Trefcon underlines the fierceness of the fighting in this sector: 'The fighting was violent and lasted till the evening; the opponents were taking and losing alternately their positions. It was a battle of giants!' Lieutenant Philippe-Gustave Le Doulcet de Pontécoulant of the Guard artillery believed that the action there was badly handled:

> The attack on the château of Hougoumont, behind the walls of which were entrenched the best shots of the English army, should have been an affair of artillery rather than a badly directed infantry battle that killed our bravest soldiers without

Wellington on the battlefield of Waterloo. Many diarists expressed their confidence in his leadership during the battle.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

profit. This episode of the great battle would then have lasted half an hour instead of dragging on for several hours.[20]

Tomkinson considered that the defence of Hougoumont had been 'entrusted to too weak a force, and would have been carried but for the determined courage of the troops'. Lieutenant John Sperling, Royal Engineers, remarked in a letter to his father: 'Hougoumont was the scene of animated contest and great loss of life, but we kept possession of it or rather what remained of it.'[21]

Some units were not engaged but still suffered some loss by artillery fire. Larreguy de Civrieux noted:

> My regiment remained in a critical position for a long time. Though out of range of the musketry, it suffered from the enemy artillery. The cannonballs reached us after a ricochet provoked by a fold in the ground, that allowed us to see the curve the projectile made before decimating our ranks. Our devoted courage was put to a difficult test; and it was extremely distressing to wait for death in most complete inaction, surrounded by dying comrades and horribly mutilated bodies.

His regiment advanced shortly afterwards: 'Our feet bathed in blood. In less than half an hour, our ranks diminished to more than a half.'

Private Wheeler recalled his own impressions of the fighting at Hougoumont in a letter dated from 23 June 1815:

> A little to the front and to the left stood the farm of Hougoumont, on which the enemy was pouring a destructive fire of shot, shell and musketry. The house was soon on fire and the battle increased with double fury. Never was a place more fiercely assaulted, nor better defended, it will be a lasting honour and glory to the troops who defended it. So fierce was the combat that a spectator would imagine a mouse could not live near the spot, but the Guards, who had the honour to be posted there, not only kept possession but repulsed the enemy in every attack. The slaughter was dreadful.

D'ERLON'S ATTACK

The attack of the I Army Corps commanded by General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count d'Erlon was impressive. It was directed predominately against the farm of La Haye Sainte and the British centre. As recalled by Lieutenant Martin:

> We were in column by battalions and *en masse* at the moment that the order arrived to climb the position and to seize *à la baïonnette* the English batteries and anything else that offered resistance. The ridgeline bristled with their cannons and was covered with their troops; it appeared impregnable. No matter, the order arrived, the charge was beaten, the cry of *Vive l'Empereur!* came from every mouth, and we marched ahead, closed ranks, aligned as on a parade.[22]

In the words of Corporal Canler:

> The columns were formed, General Drouet d'Erlon took position in the middle of his army corps, and with a strong and clear voice pronounced these few words: 'Today it is necessary to vanquish or die!' The cry of *Vive l'Empereur!* came out of all the mouths in reply to this short speech, and carrying our arms at ease, to the sound of drums beating the charge, the columns moved off and directed themselves towards the English guns without firing a single musket-shot.

The sight was undoubtedly magnificent, as Captain John Kincaid of the 95th recalled:

> The whole of the enemy's artillery opened, and their countless columns began to advance under cover of it. The scene at that moment was grand and imposing.[23]

The French advanced steadily under artillery fire, as Martin remembered:

> Death crept up on us from every side; entire ranks disappeared under the grapeshot, but nothing was able to stop our march; it continued with the same order as before and the same precision. The dead were immediately replaced by those who followed; the ranks, although becoming fewer, remained in good order.[24]

Canler too recalled the devastating effect of the enemy artillery fire:

> Then the enemy batteries, which until then had only fired balls and shells, turned against our columns and decimated them with grapeshot.

From the opposing ranks Kincaid also witnessed the carnage wrought by the artillery fire but the ceaseless advance of the French infantry nonetheless:

> When the heads of their columns shewed over the knoll which we had just quitted, they received such a fire from our first line, that they wavered, and hung behind it a little; but, cheered and encouraged by the gallantry of their officers, who were

French accounts of Waterloo tended to focus on the mistakes of officers, such as Grouchy, and the surprise arrival of Blücher. (akg-images)

dancing and flourishing their swords in front, they at last boldly advanced to the opposite side of our hedge, and began to deploy.

Captain Pierre-Charles Duthilt, aide de camp to General Bourgeois, described the obstacles encountered by the French:

The 2nd brigade, which stationed in a hollow, formed a column of attack by battalions and set off at the *pas de charge*, preceded by skirmishers, and urged on by excited cries; but this haste and enthusiasm had disastrous consequences, because the soldier, who still had a long march before encountering the enemy, was soon tired by the difficulty of crossing the greasy and water-logged ground, in which he broke the straps of his gaiters and even lost his shoes, weighed down by the amount of dirt that attached itself to them and stuck to the soles and to the ground, and because commands could not be heard, lost in the thousands of repeated cries and drumming. There was soon some confusion inside the ranks.[25]

Canler was one of those who suffered from this misfortune:

After a course of about twenty minutes, we arrived near an earthwork where the English artillery was placed, and we began to climb it. The rain having fallen during all the night softened the soil already originally slimy, in such a way that in the course of my ascent, the strap of my right gaiter broke and the heel came off my shoe. I quickly bent down to sort this out; but at the same moment, I felt a violent shock that threw my shako back, it would probably had fallen without the chinstrap that held it on my head. It was a ball that had struck it.

The steadiness of the attack was highlighted by all the eyewitnesses, as well as the action of the artillery on the 'blue' ranks advancing to their death. But worse was still to come.

OPPOSITE
Imperial Guard artillery on horseback during an attack. (akg-images)

COUNTER-ATTACK BY THE BRITISH CAVALRY

D'Erlon's attack was followed by one of the most famous cavalry performances in the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, the charges of the Household and Union Brigades were a tremendous feat. The shock of impact between Lord Edward Somerset's cavalry regiments and the French cuirassiers was terrific; swords clashed upon the casques and cuirasses prompting Lord Somerset to observe: 'You might have fancied that it was so many tinkers at work.'[26] At the same time, the Union Brigade drove into the infantry.

Captain Tomkinson was another eyewitness:

> It was one of the finest charges ever seen. On going over the ground the following morning, I saw where two lines of infantry had laid down their arms; their position was accurately marked, from the regularity the muskets were placed in.

Sergeant Anton of the 42nd gave high praise to his fellow countrymen, the Scots Greys:

> What pen can describe the scene? Horses' hooves sinking in men's breasts, breaking bones and pressing out their bowels. Riders' swords streaming in blood, waving over their heads and descending in deadly vengeance. Stroke follows stroke, like the turning of a flail in the hand of a dexterous thresher; the living stream gushes red from the ghastly wound, spouts in the victor's face, and stains him with brains and blood. There the piercing shrieks and dying groans; here the loud cheering of an exulting army, animating the slayers to deeds of signal vengeance upon a daring foe. Such is the music of the field! Neither drum nor fife is here to mock us with useless din, but guns and muskets raise their dreadful voice, throw out the messengers of death to check a valiant foe, and bid him turn before the more revolting shock of steel to steel ensues. It was a scene of vehement destruction, yells and shrieks, wounds and death; and the bodies of the dead served as pillows for the dying.[27]

This graphic description of the slaughter is supported by another narrator, but in this case a French one, the aforementioned Corporal Canler:

> Hardly had we reached the summit of the plateau, than we were received by the Queen's Dragoons, who fell on us with savage cries. The first division did not have time to form square, could not meet this charge and was broken. Then started a veritable carnage; each found himself separated from his comrades and fought only

> for his own sake. The sabre, the bayonet, opened a passage in the thrilling flesh, for we were too close to each other to use a firearm. But the position was unbearable for foot soldiers fighting individually in the midst of cavalrymen.

Adjudant Dominique Fleuret fought in the 1st Division of d'Erlon's Corps:

> We were charged by a mass of cavalry, and so far that we had jumped over the ditches, we had no time to rally properly. Some of us were sabred and others made prisoner.[28]

Martin too recalled the desperate situation of the French foot soldiers:

> In vain did our soldiers try to get to their feet and raise their muskets; they were unable to strike these cavalrymen mounted on powerful horses with their bayonets, and the few shots that were fired in this confused crowd were as likely to hit our own men as the English. We were thus defenceless against a fierce enemy, who, in the excitement of battle, sabred without pity even the drummers and fifers.[29]

Lieutenant John Hibbert of the 1st King's Dragoon Guards also recognised in a letter to his mother that in the heat of battle mistakes were made by the British cavalry units:

> Our brigade, never having been on service before, hardly knew how to act. They knew they were to charge, but never thought about stopping at a proper time, so that after entirely cutting to pieces a large body of cuirassiers double their number, they still continued to gallop on instead of forming up and getting into line; the consequence was that they got among the French infantry and artillery, and were miserably cut up… The Greys, I believe, acted in the same manner and of course got off as badly as we did.[30]

Major George de Lacy Evans, aide de camp to Major General Sir William Ponsonby, commander of the Union Brigade, remembered in his letter written on 1 September 1839:

> The remainder of the enemy fled as a flock of sheep across the valley – quite at the mercy of the Dragoons. In fact, our men were *out of hand*. The General of the Brigade, his staff & every officer within hearing, exerted themselves to the utmost to reform the men – but the helplessness of the enemy offered too great a temptation to the Dragoons, & our efforts were abortive.[31]

The charge of the 1st Life Guards against d'Erlon's infantry at Waterloo. (National Army Museum)

It is easy to see that the British cavalry once again 'galloped at everything'. Lord Henry William Uxbridge, commander of the Allied cavalry, himself later admitted:

> The pursuit had been continued without order and too far… I had in vain attempted to stop my people by sounding the Rally, but neither voice nor trumpet availed.[32]

Uxbridge recognised that:

> … the French were completely surprised by the first cavalry attack… These 19 squadrons pouncing downhill upon them so astonished them that no very great resistance was made, and surely such havoc was rarely made in so few minutes. When I was returning to our position I met the Duke of Wellington, surrounded by all the *Corps diplomatique militaire*, who had from the high ground witnessed the whole affair. The plain appeared to be swept clean, and I never saw so joyous a group as was this *Troupe dorée*. They thought the battle was over. It is certain that our squadrons went into and over several squares of infantry, and it is not possible to conceive greater confusion and panic that was exhibited at this moment. This forces from me the remark that I committed a great mistake in having myself led the attack. The *carrière* once begun, the leader is no better than any other man; whereas, if I had placed myself at the head of the 2nd line, there is no saying what great advantages might not have accrued from it.

His biographer says that 'for the rest of his life Uxbridge was haunted by this error'.[33]

The French cavalry attacked their British counterparts who had gone too far. Colonel Bro commanded the 4th *chevau-légers lanciers* and charged at its head:

> I took the head of the squadrons shouting: 'Come on, my children, we need to overturn this rabble!' The soldiers answered me: 'Forward! *Vive l'Empereur!*' Two minutes later, the shock took place. Three enemy ranks were overturned. We crashed into the others! The *mêlée* became terrible. Our horses crushed dead bodies, and the cries of the injured arose from all parts. For a moment I found myself lost in the smoke of the gunpowder.[34]

In the words of Canler:

> The French cavalrymen attacked the English dragoons with fury, sabring and playing the lance in all directions, in such a way that the latter were forced to retreat. They left a good number of their men on the battlefield.

Hibbert says that his brigade realised their mistake too late:

> A few (that is about half the regiment) turned and rode back again; no sooner had they got about five hundred yards from the French infantry than they were met by an immense body of lancers who were sent for the purpose of attacking them in the way. Our men were rendered desperate by their situation. They were resolved

This illustration of the Scots Grey's attack on 18 June includes details of an eyewitness account from a British officer: 'The Duke of Wellington now ordered the whole line to move forward – nothing could be more beautiful. The sun which had hitherto been veiled, at this instant shed upon us his defrosting rays, as if to smile upon the efforts we were making and bless them with success.' (Anne S. K. Brown)

either to get out of the scrape or die rather than be taken prisoners, so they attacked them, and three troops cut their way through them; about a troop were killed or taken prisoners.

His fellow officer Captain James Naylor wrote in his diary:

> Our attack was most completely successful, but our men were too sanguine in the pursuit of the fugitive cuirassiers and at the moment our horses were blown we were attacked by a multitude of lancers who did us considerable injury.[35]

Adjutant Fleuret and his comrades had been rescued by the lancers, but they found themselves again amidst the British dragoons:

> The majority of us threw themselves down in the cornfield. The English cavalrymen rode over us and did not fail to sound out our backs with their big swords, like doctors use to feel one's pulse to see if one is dead.

The priority for d'Erlon was then to rally as many soldiers as possible. *Chef d'escadron* Victor Dupuy of the 7th Hussars witnessed the rout of the I Corps and helped to rally the troops:

> Panic seized several regiments of infantry of the 1st Army Corps and the *sauve-qui-peut* was uttered. They fled in the greatest disorder. I rushed over with a platoon of hussars to stop them. Seeing amongst them a standard-bearer with his Eagle, I asked him to give it to me; he was ready to do it, when the thought came to me: 'I do not wish to dishonour you, *Monsieur*', I said to him, 'display your flag and move ahead calling *Vive l'Empereur* with me.' He did it immediately, the brave man! Soon the soldiers stopped, and, in a short time, thanks to his efforts and ours, almost 3,000 had been collected and turned around.[36]

At this stage, the battle was fierce at every point. In the words of Trefcon:

> At 3 p.m., the battlefield was like an oven. The thundering of cannon, the noise of musketry, the shouts of fighters, all this combined with a burning sun, resembled a damned hell!

Marshal Michel Ney commanded the left wing of the French Army during the 'Hundred Days' campaign. *Chef de bataillon* Octave-René-Louis Levavasseur was his aide de camp and could get an overview of the battlefield:

> The battle was raging everywhere, but our army was not making progress. Our efforts to push through the English line were unsuccessful. However, the enemy's resistance seemed to diminish on numerous points.[37]

Tomkinson's account provides the same overall perspective:

> The cannonade continued along the line through the day. Whenever the enemy made an attack, they covered it with all the artillery they could thunder at us, and we again worked their columns in advancing with every gun we could bring against them.

Mercer noted:

CONVERT TO MONO

> The roar of cannon and musketry in the main position never slackened; it was intense, as was the smoke arising from it. Amidst this, from time to time, were to be seen still more dense columns of smoke rising straight into the air like a great pillar, then spreading out a mushroom-head. These arose from the explosions of ammunition waggons [sic], which were continually taking place, although the noise which filled the whole atmosphere was too overpowering to allow them to be heard.

Vallance too vividly recalled the ferocity of the battle:

> The battle now raged with awful fury, bombshells and balls of all sorts flying amongst us thick as hail. The noise was dreadful, a continued deafening roar of musketry. The earth shivered under our feet whilst three hundred pieces of artillery on each side were vomiting their death-dispensing charges. The work of death was making rapid progress.

Jean-Michel Chevalier, an NCO (*maréchal des logis-chef*) of the mounted chasseurs of the Imperial Guard, who took part in the counter-charge of the Guard cavalry against the British, recalled:

> The *mêlée* became atrocious, it was a terrible slaughter; the ground was covered with dead or dying men and horses; the terror was at its height.[38]

Alexander Mercer was a famous diarist of the campaign, having served as an artillery captain during the battle. (Officer RHA © MarkChurms.com 1998)

Sergeant Anton echoed his thoughts:

> Thus toiled both armies through the day, and the guns never ceased their dreadful roar, save amidst some slaughtering charge, when sword or bayonet did the work of destruction.

The horrific losses inflicted on both sides later caused Captain Kincaid to comment:

> I had never yet heard of a battle in which everybody was killed; but this seemed likely to be an exception, as all were going by turns.

Ensign Edmund Wheatley of the King's German Legion shared a similar view:

> I took a calm survey of the field around and felt shocked at the sight of broken armour, lifeless bodies, murdered horses, shattered wheels, caps, helmets, swords, muskets, pistols, still and silent. Here and there a frightened horse would rush across the plain trampling on the dying and the dead.[39]

This artwork by Denis Dighton depicts how the fighting at Waterloo descended into a mêlée as both sides clashed. Here, British infantry charge against French horse artillerymen. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The farm of La Haye Sainte in the centre of the battlefield was, in the words of Anton, just 'one pool of blood'. Lieutenant George Drummond Graeme of the King's German Legion recalled:

> The ground was literally covered with French killed and wounded, even to the astonishment of my oldest soldiers, who said they had never witnessed such a sight. The French wounded were calling out *Vive l'Empereur*, and I saw a poor fellow, lying with both his legs shattered, trying to destroy himself with his own sword, which I ordered my servant to take from him.[40]

The participants tend sometimes to amplify and exaggerate the atrocity of the contest, but one thing is sure: the Battle of Waterloo was one of the bloodiest in which they took part, and the use of emphatic terms to underline its bloody nature is understandable. The number of the losses, in killed and wounded, supports the eyewitnesses. Even people who remained some kilometres away from the battlefield

on 18 June 1815 could make out the sound of battle: the French writer Chateaubriand was walking in the countryside near Ghent and remembered having heard 'a dull rumble' that he took firstly for an approaching storm.[41]

Amidst serious matters, we find in the recollections of simple soldiers and NCOs some trivial details which give a taste of the 'truth' to their narrative. Sergeant Anton remembered a particular circumstance caused by the Scottish national dress:

> We might have forced ourselves through as the Belgians had done, but our bare thighs had no protection from the piercing thorns; and doubtless those runaways had more wisdom in shunning death, though at the hazard of laceration, than we would have shown in rushing forward in disorder, with self-inflicted torture.

Another soldier, Private Friedrich Lindau of the King's German Legion, openly recognised his inclination for plundering:

> I saw not far from me the officer whom I had shot; I rushed up to him and took hold of his gold watch chain; I had scarcely got it in my hand when he raised his sabre by way of reprimand, I gave him a blow on the forehead with my rifle butt so that he fell back and dropped dead, when I noticed a gold ring on his finger. I first cut the little bag from his horse and was just about to take the ring off him when my comrades called out, 'Get a move on and come away, the cavalry are making a fresh charge.' I saw some thirty riders spring forward and I ran very quickly with my booty to my comrades.[42]

Lindau was made prisoner soon after, and the French plundered him in return:

> One of them snatched away my breadbag and found in it the purse of gold coins, whereupon another grabbed at it at once but the first held it fast and a violent quarrel instantly developed. Next my knapsack was torn from my shoulders. Others pulled at my equipment, feeling for the watches, and finding them – I had one gold and two silver watches.

Canler was crossing the battlefield to join his unit when he saw a British officer of dragoons killed in the charge, as he later recalled:

> A splendid gold chain was hanging from his waistcoat pocket. Notwithstanding the rapidity of my move, I stopped a moment to take this chain and a beautiful golden watch. The English having seized my bag and my arms, I just applied the law of retaliation.

Plunder was sorely suffered by the killed and wounded throughout the Napoleonic Wars, and Waterloo was no exception.

INFANTRY SQUARES *VERSUS* CAVALRY – 'A HURRICANE OF FLASHING SWORDS'

The first news of the arrival of the Prussians reached Napoleon, who committed his reserve against this new foe. For the French observers, Wellington's Army was seemingly shaken and ready to abandon the ground. Then came the moment of the great charges of the French cavalry, led by Ney. Waves of cavalrymen beat 'against the immovable squares, sweeping round their sides, and suffering appalling casualties to no purpose'.[43] Petiet recalled: 'We were watching anxiously this admirable charge. All our reserve of cavalry was being engaged, while the battle was far from being over!' Colonel Pierre-Agathe Heymès, aide de camp to Marshal Ney, explains this spontaneous movement of the French cavalry by the universal belief in Napoleon's Army that the British had begun their retreat.

Ensign Rees Howell Gronow, 1st Foot Guards, wrote in his recollections:

> About 4 p.m., 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 discovered 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. They were the famous cuirassiers, almost all old soldiers, who had distinguished themselves on most of the battlefields of Europe. In an almost incredibly short period they were within twenty yards of us, shouting *Vive l'Empereur!* The word of command, 'Prepare to receive cavalry,' had been given, every man in the front ranks knelt, and a wall bristling with steel, held together by steady hands, presented itself to the infuriated cuirassiers.[44]

Lord Uxbridge reported:

> The cuirassiers attacked our squares of infantry with a desperation that surpasses all description, but no power of language can ever give an idea of the determined gallantry and real intrepidity of our infantry.

The casualty rates at Waterloo were high as all sides were engaged throughout the day. Here a wounded French soldier looks exhausted. (Anne S. K. Brown)

In the words of Trefcon:

The charges of our fine cavalry were certainly the most admirable thing I have ever seen. More than ten times they launched themselves on the English, and despite the fire, they reached their bayonets. They came back to reform near the small wood where we were and then charged again. I was more excited than I can express and despite the dangers that I ran myself, I had tears in my eyes and I cried out my admiration to them!

Tomkinson too was in awe of the ferocity of the French cavalry attacks although more inclined to regard them as a kind of 'suicide attack':

These attacks were made at intervals for nearly two hours; they were the most singularly daring attempts ever heard of, and in many instances appeared like an inclination to sacrifice themselves sooner than survive the loss of the day.

Corporal Douglas was in one of the infantry squares that faced the massed French cavalry:

> Masses of cavalry rushing forward to force the adamantine squares fell in heaps beneath the British fire. Though their pigeon-breasted armour was of use if struck in a slanting position, where the well-rammed ball struck fair, through it went.

Private Thomas Morris of the 73rd was in another one:

> A considerable number of the French cuirassiers made their appearance, on the rising ground just in our front, took the artillery we had placed there, and came at a gallop down upon us. Their appearance, as an enemy, was certainly enough to inspire a feeling of dread, – none of them under six feet; defended by steel helmets and breastplates, made pigeon-breasted to throw off the balls. Their appearance was of such a formidable nature, that I thought we could not have the slightest chance

> with them. They came up rapidly, until within about ten or twelve paces of the square, when our rear ranks poured into them a well-directed fire, which put them into confusion, and they retired; the two front ranks, kneeling, then discharged their pieces at them. Some of the cuirassiers fell wounded, and several were killed; those of them that were dismounted by the death of their horses, immediately unclasped their armour to facilitate their escape.[45]

The steadiness of the British infantry was exemplary. Lieutenant Colonel James Stanhope, 1st Foot Guards, wrote on 19 June to the Duke of York:

> When the French cavalry attacked us in squares, which they did with the utmost persevering gallantry (never retiring above 100 or 150 paces, and charging again), our men behaved as though they were at a field day, firing by ranks & with the best possible aim. Under a most destructive cannonade & having several shells burst in the middle of us, not a man moved from his place.[46]

Sergeant William Lawrence, 40th Foot, confirmed:

British troops form a square to repel attack, bayonets at the ready. (akg-images)

> Our numbers became terribly thinned by the successive charges, and by the enemy's cannon during the short intervals in between, yet we did not lose a single inch of ground the whole day. The men were very tired and did begin to despair, but the officers cheered them on.[47]

Other regiments of French cavalry joined in the charge although the charge itself seemed to be regarded as foolhardy by some French officers. In the words of Lemonnier-Delafosse: 'Marshal Ney's impetuosity made us lose everything; for his last charge, he had carried away even the Guard cavalry… It was not the Emperor's intention.' General Claude-Étienne Guyot commanded the heavy division of the Guard cavalry:

> I received the order to put my division forward and to act under Marshal Ney's command. He immediately had me execute a charge on several squadrons that masked the artillery until on our approach they retired behind the squares. This retrograde movement exposed me to artillery fire and the fire from the squares that protected it and we suffered heavy losses. Our two divisions charged this line of artillery alternately, seizing it each time but always being obliged to retire quickly because we only had sabres to oppose to the musketry of the squares and to the volleys of grapeshot that we received as we approached.[48]

Chef d'escadron Georges-Nicolas-Marc L'Étang of the 7th Dragoons points out that the squares held their fire until point-blank range, which had a terrible effect on the morale of the French cavalry:

> Realising that they would be exposed to a fire that would be much more murderous from being at point-blank range, fright seized them, and probably to escape such a fire, the first squadron wheeled to the right and caused a similar movement by all the following squadrons. The charge failed and all the squadrons rallied next to the fortified farm of La Belle-Alliance [most probably La Haye Sainte], that was still occupied by the English whose fire killed and wounded many in an instant.[49]

This last circumstance is confirmed by Kellermann, who deplored the ineffective coordination of the charges and the imbecility of one of his subordinates:

> They all arrived mixed up, in disorder and out of breath, on the ridge that was occupied by the English artillery line. The guns were actually abandoned for a short time, but we did not have the horses to take them off. Besides, behind them was a double line of infantry formed in square. It was necessary to stop, to re-impose order,

> somehow, under enemy fire, but it was no more possible to force the cavalry, excellent as it was, into new charges: it found itself in the cruellest of positions, without infantry or artillery support.

According to Kellermann, his cavalry remained for several hours between the Hougoumont wood and La Haye Sainte, unable to retire or to charge, 'receiving death without being able to fight back, and, besides, exposed to the fire of our own batteries'. Is his account entirely fair? Kellermann possibly wanted to absolve himself of all responsibility. On the whole the French low-ranking participants naturally try to explain their failure by attributing it to bad handling, while the British emphasise the firmness of their infantry in face of the enraged cavalrymen.

Wheeler took a look at the battlefield after the charges had been concluded:

Drawing of a French field gun of the Gribeauval type, crewed by the Imperial Guard, 1815. (Topfoto)

> I went to see what effect our fire had, and never before beheld such a sight in as short a space, as about a hundred men and horses could be huddled together, there they lay. Those who were shot dead were fortunate for the wounded horses in their struggles by plunging and kicking soon finished what we had begun. In examining the men we could not find one that would be likely to recover, and as we had other business to attend to, we were obliged to leave them to their fate.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that none of the first-hand accounts display contempt for the enemy. Remarkably, all diarists give praise to the opposing troops. However, in many instances this was undoubtedly in order to underline their own heroism, as stated honestly by General Kellermann: 'In the very interest of one's own glory, the enemy's courage is usually exalted.' To quote Trefcon: 'Under a terrible impetus of our army, the English showed tenacity and remarkable courage.' Speaking about the fighting at Hougoumont, Tomkinson remarks: 'The defence, as well as the attack, was gallant.' Hibbert too praises the enemy but no doubt with a clear intention to exalt the success of the British Army: 'No men but the English could have fought better than the French.' The last word on this subject should go to the ever-eloquent Sergeant Anton:

That man who brands our foe with cowardice deserves the lie; he advances to our cannon's mouth, and seeks death from the destructive bayonet; but he meets with men inured to war, animated with an equal share of national pride, confident in the success of their leader, and thus rejoicing in the ambitious strife, protract the raging fight.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE PRUSSIANS – 'THE BATTLE CHANGED SOUL'

If we follow the eyewitnesses from the French side, in the late afternoon, the French firmly believed that they were at the point of winning the battle. Certainly this was a view shared by Chevalier, who expresses a general feeling in the French Army at this period of the battle about the state of the British Army, just before the great cavalry charges and even a mistaken belief that Wellington himself had fled the battlefield:

Blücher's fast march to Waterloo, where he saved the day and prevented an Allied defeat. (akg-images)

It was yet 4 p.m., and it looked like we had gained a decisive victory; the English army … terribly routed, was fleeing in all directions. It was jumbled in disorder on the Brussels road, tumbrils, artillery, baggage, cavalry, infantry, wounded, etc. Senior commanders, officers, soldiers, everybody was in full flight, the English army was nearly lost. Taken in the rout, Wellington fled like the others, and without the jam which formed on this road, we would have probably never seen again neither Wellington nor the English. Unfortunately, the Prussians under Bülow's orders arrived on the battlefield. These Prussians were supposed to be engaged by Marshal Grouchy, and here they fell on us, they were 30 thousand.

As such, and notwithstanding Ney's ineffectual cavalry attacks, the Prussian arrival came as a complete surprise to the majority of the French Army who were firmly under the impression that the Prussians were being driven east by Grouchy and that the battle was theirs for the taking.

Petiet also recalled the undoubted effect the arrival of the Prussians had on the battlefield and Napoleon's desperate attempts to counter it:

Wellington, in despair, had lost 10 thousand men; his army's baggage was fleeing towards Brussels. The commander of the Anglo-Belgian army was anxiously waiting for the arrival of the Prussians, and he thought that everything would be lost if Blücher had not come... But the Prussians gained some ground. At this moment, Napoleon, who knew without doubt that Blücher had escaped from Grouchy and had joined Wellington's left wing via the Ohain crossroad, committed the error to spread in the ranks that the cannonballs which crossed with those fired by the English over our heads were fired by Marshal Grouchy's army corps, whose arrival had caught the enemy in the middle. This news produced at once an immeasurable effect on our troops, who doubled their vigour and courage. But later, they remembered it and the retreat transformed itself into a rout, because the soldiers no more believed Napoleon's hitherto so sacred word!

In his recollections, *Chef d'escadron* Marie-Élie-Guillaume-Alzéar de Baudus, aide de camp to Marshal Soult, blames Napoleon for this lie, and states that this circumstance produced a very bad effect and destroyed the spirit of the army. To Ney it was subsequently clear that the emperor had been searching for a psychological impact to induce his army to make the last effort; the only thing he achieved was to enhance the demoralisation when the truth became known. As the day drew to a close Lemonnier-Delafosse too regarded the arrival of the Prussians as the moment the battle was truly lost for the French:

> It was 5.30 p.m., and all the advantage was for the French army, when the good fortune, which had abandoned Wellington only temporarily, came to his aid. The arriving Prussians announced their presence by the sound of cannon.

Surgeon Major Lagneau recalled:

> We fought with some advantage during the whole day, but after 3 or 4 p.m., the enemy attacked us in the flank; then, the Prussians, whom we believed to be still far away at Wavre bridge, fell on our rear and threatened our line of retreat. We were obliged to retreat in the evening, which was not done without disorder.

Captain Pierre Robinaux, from the II Corps, fought near the farm of Hougoumont. He wrote in his journal:

> About 6 p.m., Marshal Ney came to our position and shouted to us in a strong voice: 'Courage, the French army is victorious, the enemy is beaten on all points!' The Emperor, seeing a body that arrived in the plain, immediately announced the arrival of General Grouchy, commander in chief of the cavalry; immediately he ordered to attack the position of the so-called Mont-Saint-Jean… The supposed body of General Grouchy was none other than a strong Prussian body of fifteen thousand men commanded by Blücher that came to cut our army and to take it in flank; terror became general; the most sinister noises spilled in all ranks and soon the discomfiture was all about, in the whole army.[50]

It is clear that some in the French Army had desperately hoped until the last possible moment that Grouchy was indeed arriving, not the Prussians. *Chef de bataillon* Jean-Baptiste Jolyet of the 1st *léger*:

> It was about 7 p.m., when an ADC came to tell us, on behalf of the Prince [Jérôme Bonaparte], that Grouchy had debouched onto the English left wing, and that consequently the battle was won.[51]

Levavasseur was one of the aides de camp asked to announce Grouchy's arrival:

> Breaking into a gallop, raising my hat on the tip of my sabre, I passed along the front of the line and shouted: '*Vive l'Empereur!* soldiers, here is Grouchy!'. This sudden cry was repeated by a thousand voices; the excitement of the soldiers was indescribable; they all cried: '*En avant! En avant! Vive l'Empereur!*'

The soldiers' reaction was understandable when the truth became clear. In the words of Levavasseur:

> The greatest silence, the surprise, the anguish succeeded to this enthusiasm. The plain covered itself with our carriages and with this multitude of non-combatants who always follow the armies. The cannonade continued and approached. Officers and soldiers mingled with the non-combatants.

The context was especially dramatic for those elements of the French Army that firmly believed that Wellington's Army was by then exhausted and ready to retreat. Certainly, they were correct in the perception that the British Army was exhausted, as Kincaid recalled:

> I shall never forget the scene which the field of battle presented about seven in the evening. I felt weary and worn out, less from fatigue than anxiety. Our division, which had stood upwards of five thousand men at the commencement of the battle, had gradually dwindled down into a solitary line of skirmishers.

Numerous eyewitness accounts, mostly French, do indeed corroborate that the Battle of Waterloo was not only a 'near-run thing' but that the British came very close to defeat. Many French participants' accounts claim that the English were in full flight and ready to surrender, when the Prussians appeared on the battlefield. Their opponents are more reserved on this point, but somehow they recognise the extreme difficulty in which Wellington found himself at this stage. Gibney, Assistant Surgeon of the 15th Light Dragoons (Hussars), possibly expresses the general feeling in the British Army when he states that, having joined his regiment at approximately 7 p.m.:

> To me, coming fresh on this part of the field, it seemed as if the French were getting the best of it slowly but surely, and I was not singular in this view, for a goodly number of experienced officers thought the same, and that the battle would terminate in the enemy's favour.[52]

Significantly, however, the French Army (and indeed small elements of the Allied force) did not realise that the majority of the Anglo-Dutch Army was in the dead ground behind the ridge and out of the line of sight. Wellington's skilful use of terrain and his reverse-slope tactics proved once again their utility.

The vast majority of surviving French accounts blamed Marshal Grouchy for the defeat. Chevalier wrote:

Upon reaching the battlefield, Blücher's final attack formed the conclusion of Waterloo as he routed the French forces. (akg-images)

> Marshal Grouchy was to arrive at Gembloux before the Prussians, in order to prevent them from joining Wellington; but, fatality or else, the marshal had marched so slowly that the Prussians arrived three hours before him and could open their communications with the English. Thus the army corps of 35,000 men commanded by Marshal Grouchy, which could certainly assure our victory, became totally useless, and it was the marshal's fault.

In an extract of the famous letter written by Colonel Jean-Baptiste-Antoine-Marcelin de Marbot of the 7th Hussars on 26 June, which gave his relatively fresh impressions on Waterloo:

> I cannot get over our defeat!… We were manoeuvred like so many pumpkins. I was with my regiment on the right flank of the army almost throughout the battle. They assured me that Marshal Grouchy would come up at that point; and it was guarded only by my regiment with three guns and a battalion of light infantry – not nearly enough. Instead of Grouchy, what arrived was Blücher's corps… You can imagine how we were served![53]

Some days later, Marbot visited Bro, another aforenamed diarist, in Paris and spoke indignantly about the battle:

> Waterloo, what a sad and deplorable affair! The Emperor should have won the battle. His plan was good, infallible, but Drouet engaged his infantry divisions with timidity and left them be sabred and forced to retreat, while he could take a formidable run-up and try to crush Lord Wellington's right… Our centre saw this retreat and was frightened. This fear communicated itself to the French right, and the divisions ran for their life, leaving the Imperial Guard to save at least the honour.

For the French, who had been assured by Napoleon himself that Grouchy was arriving, the apparition of the Prussians came as an emotional shock. Some of them believed that they had been betrayed. In contrast, their opponents congratulated themselves on the arrival of their allies, which changed the course of the battle. To quote Gibney once again:

> Whether we should have won the day without the aid of the Prussians I know not; but of this much I am certain, that if the French had retired, we were too much exhausted to follow them up.

The arrival of Blücher's troops was a surprise for the French, but not for their opponents. The British indeed had expected to see the Prussians arrive in time for the contest. Tomkinson: 'We were told very early in the day that a corps of Prussians were on their march to join us. Being on the left, we were constantly looking out for them.' When the Prussians did arrive the relief was intense. Undoubtedly the British Army was grateful for their support as Tomkinson also recalled:

> Such a reinforcement during an action was an occurrence so different from former days in the Peninsula, where everything centred in the British army, that it appeared decisive of the fate of the day.

Sperling added:

> The Prussians had been expected all the afternoon to make an attack on the right of Bonaparte's position. They had, however, been delayed, and it was not till towards evening that the effect of their approach was made manifest on his flank and rear.

Colonel William Maynard Gomm, quartermaster general of Picton's Division, praised Blücher's determination to support his ally:

It deserves to be stated, to the honour of the Prussian leader, that on learning, at an advanced period of the day, that the enemy had pushed a column by Wavre, threatening his rear, he expressed little concern, and took no precautionary measures, judging well that the fate of the day depended upon the success of the operation he was conducting, and could be little influenced by the success of any detached corps.[54]

THE SACRIFICE OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD – NAPOLEON'S 'FINAL HOPE AND FINAL THOUGHT'

One of the most dramatic episodes of the battle was the participation of the Imperial Guard. All the British eyewitness accounts detail a sense of pride at having defeated these famous warriors. Lieutenant Colonel Stanhope wrote to the Duke of York:

The most gratifying event of the whole day was the desperate attack, made about seven o'clock by the Imperial Guard, headed by Bonaparte in person. The Grenadiers attacked the Guards and had soon cause to find that they would not sup in Brussels, as the Emperor had told them.

Napoleon shielded by the ranks of the Old Guard during the final stages of battle. (akg-images)

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander George Fraser of the 1st Foot Guards wrote to his wife on 22 June:

About ½ past six, Napoleon made his last desperate attack at the head of his Old Imperial Guard upon our brigade. It was a thing I always wished for and the result was exactly what I have often said it would be. To do them justice, they came on like men, but our boys went at them like Britons and drove them off the field in less than ten minutes. From that moment the day was our own and the French were completely routed and fled leaving their artillery, stores, baggage and an immense number of prisoners.[55]

It was an impression shared also by more lowly ranks. In the words of Private Thomas Jeremiah of the 23rd (Royal Welch):

At this critical juncture the attention of our brave Wellington was directed to our right wing which was all but destroyed by those chosen cohorts of the French Imperial Guards and led on by their most distinguished generals whose names had been a terror to all Europe for more than 15 years, and whose ability and bravery in the field was inferior to none, their master, Napoleon, alone excepted. However, notwithstanding their invincibility, they found for the first time their victorious career put a stop to by the almost matchless and consummate ability of our commander and the able assistance of his brave officers famous in history.[56]

Of course French accounts also testify to the brave but ultimately futile efforts of the Imperial Guard. Levavasseur:

Then 150 bandsmen marched off at the head of the Guard, playing the triumphant marches of the Carrousel.[57] Before long the road was covered by this Guard, marching by platoons behind the Emperor. The cannonballs and grapeshot struck them down, leaving the road scattered with killed and wounded. Another few paces and Napoleon would have been alone in front.

Sergeant Hippolyte de Mauduit of the 1st Regiment of Grenadiers of the Old Guard:

This column suffered the fate of the formidable and victorious English column at Fontenoy, with the only difference that here a hundred of guns, instead of *three*, decimated our soldiers.[58]

For the French, the defeat of the Imperial Guard sounded the death knell. Chevalier later recalled the hour of defeat:

> Our eight battalions of the Old Guard were swept along by the mass of fugitives and crushed by numerous enemies. Nonetheless, these old warriors stayed united in battalions of iron, unconquerable and inaccessible. The rout was terrible.

THE END OF THE BATTLE – 'MOURNFUL PLAIN'

Then came the time for the general advance of the British line. Douglas was certainly one British infantryman who itched to close with the enemy:

> The British so long on the defensive were impatient for close quarters, longing and even calling out for the order to advance, eager to put an end to this glorious day of destruction, in which the patience, bravery and fortitude of the British soldier was put to the utmost trial. Four deep we advanced with 3 British cheers, while the sun, hitherto obscured, now shone forth, as if smiling on the last efforts of Britain for the liberties of Europe. We were supported by the cavalry, while the enemy gave way in the utmost confusion, abandoning their guns, and everything they possessed.

Anton also clearly remembered the moment of victory as the French forces were routed:

> The charge is given from right to left, and all Napoleon's columns and lines, foot and horse, in one mingled mass of confusion, fly over the field, while on our left the hardy Prussians come in to share the toils of the hard-fought day, and push the disorganised enemy over the face of the country, till midnight gives a respite to the pursuer and the pursued.

For the French, confusion reigned. In the words of Petiet:

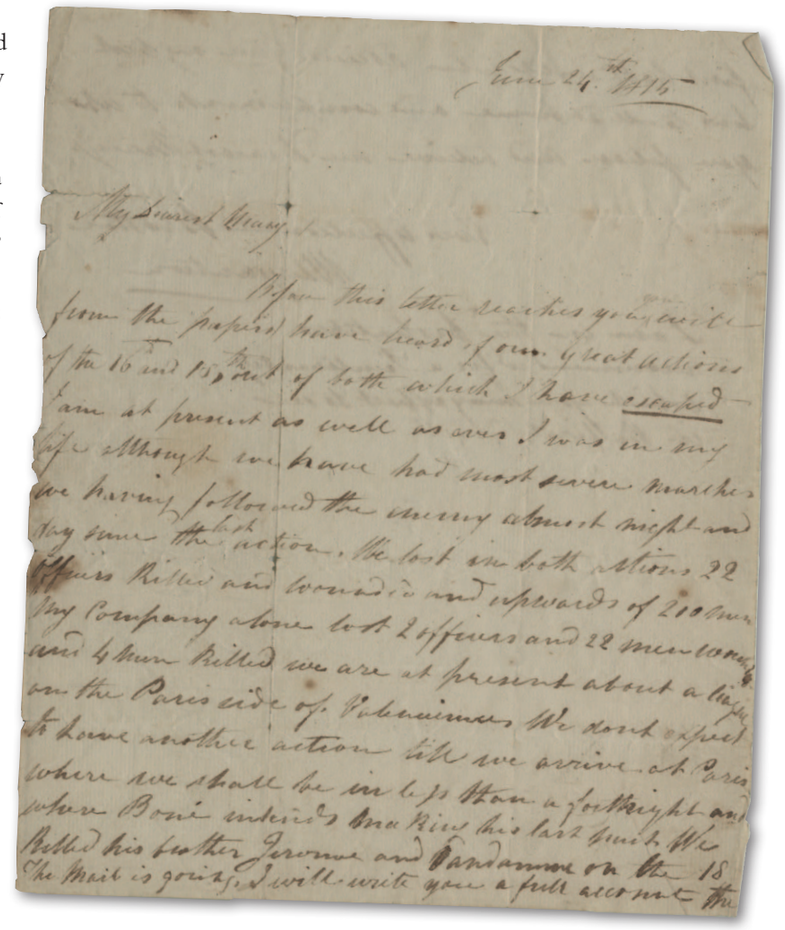
> Several enemy squadrons appeared, and the rout became total. We marched with incredible speed until daylight, hoping to cross the Sambre and to stop there waiting for orders. But nobody commanded. Our generals, lost in the crowd, were swept along and separated from their troops. It was rumoured that the Emperor had been killed and that the Major General [Soult] had been taken. There was talk about treason, whereas nobody suggested a rallying place.

Larreguy de Civrieux too recalled the chaos that immediately followed the defeat:

> The army was struck with a sudden demoralisation. Cries of '*Sauve qui peut!*', '*À la trahison!*' were heard; the rout became general. All discipline disappeared; the regiments fell into an inexpressible disorder, forming shapeless masses of men that were ploughed in all senses by the enemy's cannon.

Kincaid remembered the British order in comparison to the French disorder:

> It was a fine summer's evening, just before sunset. The French were flying in one confused mass. British lines were seen in close pursuit, and in admirable order, as far as the eye could reach to the right, while the plain to the left was filled with Prussians.



A letter from William Serjeantson, Ensign in the 18th Gloucestershire Regiment, to his sister after the Battle of Waterloo. (Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum www.glosters.org.uk)

However, Captain Duthilt later recalled that Old Guard alone retained some sense of order:

> Except the Old Guard, everybody flied [sic] through ammunition waggons, broken cannons and baggage of all kind. Carried along and insensitive, the men crossed over the heaps of dead bodies and trampled on the wounded without hearing their moans and groans; these miserable victims of the war were crushed without pity and expired under the wheels of waggons and cannons. The soldiers of all arms fled in disorder and without their chiefs, and the chiefs fled in despair without their soldiers. The last pushed the first; cannons, waggons, carriages, squashed up, unhorsed, blocked the roads; they became the prey of the greedy robbers.

But distressing scenes were not only the fate of the vanquished army, as follows from contemporary letters. Hibbert wrote to his mother on 13 July:

> The most melancholy thing is that no sooner were our poor men wounded than the Belgic troops, who were without exception the greatest set of cowards and rascals in the world, stripped them of everything but their shirts and left them in this miserable way all night. Our officers were only known by the name on the shirts; I daresay many died of cold in the night. Our brigade was so totally cut up that a party could not be mustered that night to go over the ground and consequently the wounded men and officers were left to shift for themselves. Such a scene of misery was never seen before; the action took place about eighteen miles from Brussels, and the road was strewed with dead men the whole way, who had been trying to crawl to the town from the field and had died on the road, some through cold, others through hunger and thirst.

Gibney recalled:

> Nothing could exceed the misery exhibited on this road, which, being the highpave [sic], or I might say the stone causeway leading to Brussels, was crowded to excess with our wounded and French prisoners, shot and shell meanwhile pouring into them. The hardest heart must have recoiled from this scene of horror; wounded men being re-wounded, many of whom had received previously the most frightful injuries.

The pursuit was mainly led by the Prussians. Gavin:

> The enemy began to retreat about seven in the evening. We followed them to Nivelles and took a great number of cannon. The road was actually blocked up with cannon and waggons deserted by the French. We bivouacked this night outside the village, up to our knees in mud.

Kincaid:

> After pursuing them until dark, we halted about two miles beyond the field of battle, leaving the Prussians to follow up the victory.

Hibbert again in the letter to his mother:

> I fancied it was in the time of the Romans, for all the French were clad in complete armour of steel, and were lying in piles one on the other; this was two days after


THE BATTLE
OF WATERLOO

The Battle of Waterloo

The Battle of Waterloo

Buonaparte's Downfall.

WATERLOO.

Just one example of the battle reported in a newspaper. (Anne S. K. Brown)

CONVERT TO MONO

> the battle, for the French were not pursued by the English after the battle, but the Prussians who came up just as the battle was finished. The Prussians kept up a continual fire on the retreating French and consequently killed as many English prisoners as French.

The Battle of Waterloo was over.