CHAPTER 7

THE CAVALRY CHARGES

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PREVIOUS
The famous charge of the Scots Greys at Waterloo by Lady Butler. One of the most famous and iconic images of the Battle of Waterloo it erroneously depicts the Greys in full flight whereas in reality they had charged up the muddy reverse slope, had cut their way through the French infantry and had moved up yet another muddy slope to attack the Grand Battery. Not quite the story that is depicted in this oft-used painting. (akg-images)

The Battle of Waterloo is not only one of the most written about battles in history but is also one of the most painted, with scores of artists taking to their brushes and pens to produce some truly famous paintings depicting various incidents during the battle and the whole campaign. These range from Napoleon's return from exile on Elba to the Allies' entry into Paris. But perhaps the most enduring and iconic images of the Battle of Waterloo relate directly to two phases of the battle involving the charge by the British heavy cavalry early on the afternoon of 18 June 1815 and that by the massed squadrons of Napoleon's cavalry a few hours later. There are few students of the campaign, for example, who have not set eyes upon Lady Elizabeth Butler's depiction of the charge of the Scots Greys, or Denis Dighton's painting of Charles Ewart capturing the eagle of the French 45th Regiment. Nor can they have failed to see any one of numerous paintings depicting squares of Allied infantry, standing solid and defiant in the face of waves of charging French cavalry, a 'boiling surf' as one eyewitness put it.[1]

These two particular episodes continue to be not only the most painted of the various phases of the battle but also the subject of much controversy and dispute, largely around their command and control but also around their effectiveness. Indeed, both the charge by the British heavy cavalry and that by the French cavalry afterwards are usually considered to have been little short of disastrous for both commanders. However, whilst one of the charges was indeed an unmitigated disaster the other was largely successful, although this is usually dismissed by historians who have misinterpreted the casualty figures upon which they based their verdict.

BRITISH CAVALRY UNITS AT WATERLOO

The British cavalry at Waterloo – and this chapter refers specifically to British cavalry and not Allied cavalry – was very much a pale shadow of the cavalry which had done so much good work in the Iberian Peninsula and southern France between 1808 and 1814. Naturally, it had its off days – Vimeiro, Talavera and Maguilla spring instantly to mind – but there had been many more good days, beginning with Benavente, Sahagún and Mayorga, through Campo Maior, Fuentes de Oñoro, Villagarcia, Usagre and Los Santos, and continuing with Salamanca and Morales de Toro, to name just a few. Unfortunately, mud sticks, as they say, and having seen two examples of 'break failure'[2] in his first two major battles, Vimeiro and Talavera, Wellington seems to have taken a very dim view of his cavalry; consequently he was loathe to use it unless circumstances were decidedly in its favour. After receiving news of General 'Black Jack' Slade's

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misadventure at Maguilla in June 1812 Wellington accused Slade's cavalry of 'galloping at everything', an unfortunate tag that has largely stuck ever since, although recent efforts to rehabilitate his cavalry have, I am glad to say, appeared to have succeeded.[3]

But despite the improvement in the performance of the British cavalry in the Peninsula between 1811 and 1814 Wellington went into the Waterloo campaign still harbouring fears of a repetition of Vimeiro and Talavera, fears that were heightened by the regiments of British heavy cavalry that were sent to join his army in the Low Countries in the early spring of 1815. For whilst the regiments of British light cavalry in Wellington's Anglo-Dutch Army were almost all veterans of the Peninsular War – the 11th, 12th, 13th and 16th Light Dragoons, and even the 7th, 10th, 15th and 18th Hussars – the regiments of British heavy cavalry were, for the most part, untried. Gone were the magnificent veterans of the 3rd and 4th Dragoons and the 3rd, 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards. In their place were the 1st (King's) Dragoon Guards, the 2nd (Royal North British) Dragoons, otherwise known as the Scots Greys, and the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons. True, the arm was bolstered by the Household regiments, such as the 1st and 2nd Life Guards and the Royal Horse Guards, but even these regiments had seen only limited service towards the end of the Peninsular War where the unsuitable nature of the ground dictated they were not to play any sort of important role in the fighting. Only the 1st (Royal) Dragoons could be considered to have been real veterans, the regiment having done magnificent work in the Peninsula. Indeed, it is ironic that by far the most iconic regiment of British heavy cavalry at Waterloo, and a regiment that has featured in more paintings than any other, namely the Scots Greys, had not seen any overseas service whatsoever since 1795.[4] The King's Dragoon Guards was a regiment that had likewise seen no active service overseas for many years.

In his bid to capture the French Imperial Eagle at Waterloo, Sergeant Charles Ewart of the Scots Greys cut down the four escorts accompanying the eagle bearer and rode away with the standard. He received a commission as a reward for his gallantry. (Courtesy of René Chartrand)

The regiments that were destined to make the great charge on 18 June were brigaded thus; the 1st British Brigade, under Lord Edward Somerset, consisted of the 1st Life Guards, the 2nd Life Guards, the Royal Horse Guards and the King's Dragoon Guards, a total strength of around 1,226. The 2nd British Brigade, under Major General Sir William Ponsonby, numbered slightly fewer, at 1,181, and consisted of the 1st (Royal) Dragoons, the Scots Greys and the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons. Because of the nationalities of Ponsonby's three regiments, English, Irish and Scottish, the brigade became known as the Union Brigade, with Somerset's Brigade attracting the unofficial title of the Household Brigade, largely because of the presence of the Life Guards and Horse Guards.

The regiments of the Household Brigade and the Union Brigade had arrived in the Low Countries between April and May 1815 and spent the next few weeks idling away in camp until hostilities began in mid-June, whereupon they were ordered to march south, arriving too late to join in the fighting at Quatre Bras on 16 June. The following day, 17 June, however, saw the two brigades in action to a greater and lesser degree, covering Wellington's Army as it retired north to its position at Mont Saint Jean astride the main road to Brussels. It is worth noting how well the two brigades of heavy cavalry performed that day; fending off enemy advances whilst the infantry retired, the men of the Union Brigade, in particular, proving more than adept at operating in the style of light cavalry, skirmishing and exchanging carbine fire with the more numerous French cavalry force at Genappe, keeping them at arms length but never allowing themselves to become sucked into a more general action. Indeed, the Union Brigade and, to a lesser degree, the Household Brigade, performed magnificently during the retreat from Quatre Bras, never being compromised but turning in a thoroughly professional performance, something that frequently goes overlooked in the annals of the Waterloo campaign. The commander of the British cavalry, the Earl of Uxbridge, recalling the events of 17 June, was moved to write, 'thus terminated the prettiest field day I ever witnessed.'[5]

British cavalry in action in the Peninsula in 1814. Contrary to popular belief, Wellington's cavalry were far from being brainless gallopers. Indeed, they bested their French counterparts on numerous occasions, with only a couple of very high profile misadventures, such as Vimeiro and Talavera, blotting their copy book. (Anne S. K. Brown)

LEFT
A sketch of a British dragoon in 1815. Of the three regiments of British heavy dragoons at Waterloo only one, the 1st (Royals), had any experience of battle during the Napoleonic Wars. (Anne S. K. Brown)

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MIDDLE
Royal Horse Guard in 1812 pattern uniform. The regiment played only a minor part towards the latter stages of the Peninsular War but performed well at Waterloo. (National Army Museum)

RIGHT
A fine art illustration of the uniforms of the 16th, 13th and 14th Light Dragoons in 1815. (Anne S. K. Brown)

But despite their fine showing during the retreat from Quatre Bras on 17 June the Union Brigade and Household Brigade will be forever judged on their performance on 18 June itself. Like almost everybody else on the battlefield of Waterloo on the morning of Sunday 18 June, the men of the two brigades of heavy cavalry had struggled to find decent shelter during a night of torrential rain that only petered out during the early hours of the morning. Thus, they presented a miserable, soggy sight as they took up their stations on that momentous Sunday morning, with both brigades forming up just south of the junction of the Nivelle road with the main road to Brussels, the Union Brigade to the east of the main road to Brussels and the Household Brigade to the west of it. Somerset formed his regiments with the 2nd Life Guards on the left, the King's Dragoon Guards in the centre and the 1st Life Guards on the right. The Horse Guards were in reserve behind them. Ponsonby, meanwhile, formed the Union Brigade with the 1st Royals on the right and the Inniskillings on the left. The Scots Greys formed up in rear of the first line as a reserve.

At some time around 11.30 a.m. (times vary considerably), Napoleon launched his attack beginning with an assault on the Chateau of Hougoumont which anchored Wellington's right flank. This had been in progress for some time before the French switched their attention to Wellington's left and the sector held by the infantry of General Sir Thomas Picton. The great French infantry attack by General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count d'Erlon's Corps, was the second great phase of the battle and was preceded by a heavy bombardment of Wellington's ridge by almost 80 guns that had been hauled forward onto a low ridge running roughly east to west across the Brussels road at a range of about 600 yards south of the crest behind which the Allied infantry was sheltering. The French gunners, in fact, had performed a prodigious feat in getting their guns so far forward considering the muddy state of the ground and although it had dried out somewhat it was still in an extremely bad state. Nevertheless, the Grand Battery, as it became known, was finally ready and at about 11.50 a.m. the 80 guns exploded into action sending a series of solid iron balls into the dense ranks of Allied infantry deployed on the slopes to the north of the Ohain road.

It is interesting to note that the four divisions of d'Erlon's Corps – commanded by Generals Quiot, Donzelot, Marcognet and Durutte – numbered almost 18,000 men, mostly veterans, with d'Erlon a veteran himself. When we compare this with the single largest attack of the Peninsular War, by Generals Girard and Gazan at Albuera, which numbered around 8,000 infantry, we may well imagine the strength of d'Erlon's attack and the power carried with it. Indeed, it needed something special to stop it. Also, d'Erlon had deployed his four attacking columns in columns of battalions, each with a width of between 180 and 200 men. His decision to use this more expansive formation of the columns at Waterloo was intended to compensate for the disadvantage the French had laboured under in the Peninsula, where French infantry columns had frequently come to grief at the hands of Wellington's Anglo-Portuguese infantry, who were drawn up in line. Rather belatedly, the French were changing their formation and it almost paid dividends.

The attacking French columns endured an uncomfortable advance, struggling across the muddy fields in the teeth of an increasingly heavy fire of Allied musketry and artillery, not to mention the withering fire being poured into them by the green-clad riflemen of the 95th that occupied the sandpit just to the east of La Haye Sainte. But, gradually, the French columns began to close on the crest of Wellington's ridge to the east of the Brussels road. Once at the crest the columns were immediately engaged by Picton's infantry who opened up a devastating rolling fire along the entire length of the line. However, it was at this point that

something unusual happened; the French started to get the upper hand. Of course, there was nothing unusual whatsoever in French infantry getting the better of their opponents in Europe but it had rarely happened in the Peninsula in six years of fighting. But here at Waterloo, during the first major French attack of the day, they were doing just that. All along the crest at the Ohain road the attacking French troops had begun to cross the road and were actually passing through the hedge which partially ran along it. For those who had fought in the Peninsula it must have made a change to have got this far for, apart from at Sorauren, attacking French units rarely got within smelling distance of the British line before being driven back. However, on the field at Waterloo they had actually begun to drive the long, red lines back and for a few minutes were actually established on 'the plateau'. It was the first major French attack of the battle and for a while it looked as if it might succeed. Indeed, the French were on the brink of achieving a major breakthrough but any French thoughts of victory were soon to be quickly and ruthlessly dispelled when they suddenly became the unwilling victims of one of the most famous cavalry charges in history.

Lord Uxbridge, returning from behind Hougoumont where he had been supervising the positioning of some of his cavalry, looked towards La Haye Sainte and saw the dark masses of French infantry passing the farm to both its left and right. Quick to appreciate the situation he immediately galloped over to Somerset and ordered the Household Brigade, sitting at the foot of the reverse slope, to form line and prepare to charge, with the Life Guards and King's Dragoon Guards in the first line with the Horse Guards in support. He then galloped across to the east of the road where he found Ponsonby, patiently waiting whilst Major General Sir Denis Pack's infantry struggled to hold back the French at the crest above him. Uxbridge told Ponsonby to wheel the Union Brigade into line also, the 1st (Royals) and Inniskillings in the first line and the Scots Greys in support. He then returned to join Somerset before, in his own words, he 'put the whole in motion.'[6] Having issued his orders for the charge, Uxbridge took up a position just to the west of the main Brussels road and just in front of the left-hand squadron of the Household Brigade, that of the 1st Life Guards. Somerset's field trumpeter, the 16-year-old John Edwards,[7] then sounded the charge and the Household Brigade trotted forward.

The Household Brigade quickly gained the top of the ridge and charged down the slope to meet General Jacques-Charles Dubois' cuirassiers who were just to the west of La Haye Sainte. The 1st Life Guards were on the right of the line with the King's Dragoon Guards in the centre. On the left came the 2nd Life Guards with the Horse Guards in reserve. The heavy British cavalry came thundering down the slope and crashed into the ranks of Dubois' men,

apparently sending them flying in all directions. Lieutenant Waymouth, of the 2nd Life Guards, who was taken prisoner during the charge, wrote that the Household Brigade and the cuirassiers, 'came to the shock like two walls, in the most perfect manner', and added, 'Having once penetrated their line, we rode over everything opposed to us.'[8] It was indeed an almighty crash as these two bodies of heavy cavalry collided with each other. The Household Brigade sent the French fleeing in all directions, the majority of them having to cut their way out and escape south along the main road as far as a cutting a few hundred yards south of La Haye Sainte where, through sheer weight of numbers, they became jammed and found themselves at the mercy of the Life Guards and King's Dragoon Guards who set about their business with a deadly efficiency, cutting

A quite preposterous depiction of the 1st Life Guards charging French infantry in the midst of battle. Virtually every single thing about this picture is incorrect, particularly the fur caps, save for the fact that the French are on foot and the Life Guards are mounted. However, it gives a wonderful insight into the sheer amount of illustrated material that appeared during the years following the battle. (Anne S. K. Brown)

This picture is to be compared with the previous illustration of the Life Guards to give a far more realistic impression of what the 2nd Life Guards wore at Waterloo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

and hacking in all directions. The British themselves did not get off lightly, however, as a regiment of French chasseurs came to the top of the cutting and fired down into their tightly packed ranks, killing and wounding scores of them.[9] Elsewhere, the 2nd Life Guards and the left-hand squadron of the King's Dragoon Guards crossed to the east of the main road, north of La Haye Sainte, in pursuit of other cuirassiers and in doing so found themselves in amongst the Union Brigade.

Ponsonby's Union Brigade had charged shortly after the Household Brigade. The brigade formed with the 1st (Royals) on the right and the Inniskillings on the left with the Scots Greys in support, although some eyewitnesses claim that all three regiments were in line together at the moment the charge was made. On the extreme French right, Durutte's Division made good progress towards the main Allied line to the west of Papelotte, La Haye and Smohain, whilst on their left Marcognet and Donzelot headed straight for that part of the line held by Pack's Brigade and Major General Willem Frederik Bylandt's Dutch-

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Belgians. It is clear from eyewitness accounts that the attacking French troops had passed through the hedge lining the Ohain road and that the 92nd Highlanders were both 'recoiling' and 'in confusion.'[10] In fact, Ponsonby's men charged at the precise moment that the French infantry had gained the crest and as they went up the slope towards it the Union Brigade met the infantry of Pack's and Major General Sir James Kempt's Brigades wheeling back to let them through.[11] Judging by the eyewitness account of Captain Clark-Kennedy, of the Royals, the crucial intervention by the Union Brigade could not have been better timed:

> The heads of the French columns, which appeared to me to be nearly close together, had no appearance of having been repulsed or seriously checked. On the contrary … they had forced their way through our line – the heads of the columns were on the Brussels side of the double hedge. There was no British infantry in the immediate front that I saw, and the line that had been, I presume, behind the hedges was wheeled by sections or divisions to the left, and was firing on the left flank of the left column as it advanced. In fact, the crest of the height had been gained, and the charge of cavalry at the critical moment recovered it. Had the charge been delayed two or three minutes, I feel satisfied it would probably have failed.[12]

LEFT
A fine depiction of the campaign dress worn by the 23rd Light Dragoons during the waterloo campaign. The regiment had come to grief at Talavera in 1809 as a result of which they returned home to recover and played no further part in the Peninsula War. Waterloo was the regiment's first campaign since then.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

RIGHT
A Hamilton-Smith engraving of an officer of the 14th Light Dragoons in parade dress.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

The signal for the Union Brigade to charge was given by Major George de Lacy Evans, Ponsonby's aide de camp, who waved his hat in the air to set the brigade moving. In fact, the Scots Greys had already begun to move slowly forward, for their commanding officer, Colonel Hamilton, observing the 92nd in difficulty, ordered them to do so. This is possibly how the Greys became level with both the Inniskillings and Royals who had originally been in front of them, although it is also possible that they moved forward, and a little to their left, in order to avoid the round shot which was continually bounding over the crest. All three heavy cavalry regiments then charged up the muddy slope towards the crest where the French were by now having thoughts of victory.

Thousands of French infantrymen were piling up against the crest of the Ohain road when the 1,100 men of the Union Brigade crashed into them. There was little an infantryman could do to combat the power of the charge once the cavalry got in amongst the massed infantry. The British cavalrymen were big men mounted on big horses and one officer of the 92nd, Lieutenant Winchester, actually described the Greys as having 'walked over' the French column.[13] Indeed, it is easy to imagine the huge grey horses simply knocking down all those who were unfortunate enough to find themselves in the way of the charge. Those who did manage to offer resistance were easily cut down or taken prisoner.

Away to the right of the Scots Greys the other two regiments of the Union Brigade had swept forward also, riding down both Marcognet's and Donzelot's men before charging across the Ohain road and down the slope beyond. Once again, the French could offer little resistance to the charge. Colonel Joseph Muter, commanding the Inniskillings, wrote:

> The Inniskillings came in contact with the French columns of infantry almost immediately after clearing the hedge and (I should call it) *chemin creux*. We all agree in thinking that the French columns had nearly gained the crest, perhaps twenty to thirty yards down the slope. We think there were three French columns. The French column did not attempt to form square, nor was it, so far as we could judge, well prepared to repel an attack of cavalry. Our impression is that, from the formation of the ground, the cavalry was not aware what they were to attack, nor the infantry aware of what was coming upon them.[14]

It is interesting to note that Muter thought the French had not gained the crest, a view not shared by Clark-Kennedy of the Royals who, as we have already read, claimed that the French had passed the hedge and had reached the crest. This simply bears out the fact that two men, even though within a few hundred yards of each other, often saw, or thought they saw, totally different events unfolding before them. This perhaps illustrates just how difficult it was, given the smoke and confusion of battle, for participants to actually see what was really happening around them.

Meanwhile, on the right of the Inniskillings the 1st (Royals) had charged into Donzelot's Division and we may well imagine the Royals 'pressing' the French back down the slope in much the same way that a police horse controls a mob of demonstrators, or a large crowd. Here at Waterloo the French infantry, particularly those at the front who were hemmed in by those behind, were unable to offer any resistance whatsoever in their tightly packed crowd and were simply ridden or cut down. After the first few volleys it is almost certain that no French infantryman would have had enough room to go through the process of loading and firing his musket. Only those towards the rear probably had the time and, more importantly, the space to fire back at their assailants. The first phase of the charge of the Union and Household Brigades can be said to have come to a dramatic and very successful conclusion with the repulse of d'Erlon's infantry. Between them the two brigades, numbering no more than 2,300 sabres, had scattered approximately 15,000 French infantry, inflicting severe casualties, the precise number of which is unknown, and taking around 3,000 prisoners, with scores more apparently escaping in the turmoil afterwards. Two eagles were also taken, by Clark-Kennedy of the Royals and by Sergeant Charles Ewart of

TOP LEFT
Major General Sir William Ponsonby, commander of the Union Cavalry Brigade at Waterloo. He died during the great cavalry charge on the afternoon of 18 June. (National Army Museum)

TOP RIGHT
Lieutenant General Henry William Paget, 2nd Earl of Uxbridge, was given command of the cavalry and horse artillery at Waterloo, where he lost a leg. There was a frosty relationship between Uxbridge and Wellington, as a result of him eloping with Wellington's sister-in-law. When asked how he felt about Uxbridge's appointment (the two men had not served together in the Peninsula) Wellington replied, 'Damn it, I don't care, provided he don't run off with me!' (National Army Museum)

BOTTOM LEFT
Major General Lord Edward Somerset, commander of the 1st British Brigade, otherwise known as the Household Brigade. (© English Heritage)

BOTTOM RIGHT
Sir James Kempt served as a major general on Wellington's staff during the campaigns in Spain and France, and during Waterloo he took over the 5th Division when Picton was killed in battle. (National Army Museum)

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the Greys. It was, in other words, a quite devastating attack and the French would not try any other serious infantry attack on Wellington's left centre for the rest of the day. However, it was now that Uxbridge's cavalry needed to show restraint. They had reached the bottom of the muddy valley floor and, having overthrown d'Erlon's column, set about securing prisoners who were escorted back to the Allied lines and then on to Brussels by both British infantry and cavalry. Indeed, the Inniskillings, who had a strength of only 396, having been so reduced during the charge, were further reduced in numbers when a squadron was sent to the rear in charge of French prisoners. But, not content with the success of the initial charge, the two brigades now demonstrated that the old failings of the British cavalry, first revealed at Vimeiro and Talavera, were still latent in 1815.

Many regimental officers had been either killed or wounded during the charge, whilst Uxbrige himself – by his own admission – was in no position to control his cavalry having gone forward with the Household Brigade. With the Union Brigade pouring down the slope on the east of the Brussels road, along with the 2nd Life Guards and the left-hand squadron of the King's Dragoon Guards, and with the Household Brigade galloping in pursuit of Dubois' beaten cuirassiers, all order became lost. The moment that every fighting cavalryman dreamt of – and every good cavalry officer dreaded – had arrived.

The British heavy cavalrymen's blood was well and truly up and having inflicted so much slaughter on the hapless French infantry, who fled across the valley like a flock of sheep, they were not about to stop now. After all, sitting about 300 metres or so further on, on a ridge just south of La Haye Sainte, was Napoleon's Grand Battery of over 80 guns. The two heavy cavalry brigades were now formed in a very rough line with the Scots Greys on the far left, with the Inniskillings on their right and the 1st (Royals) beyond these. The 2nd Life Guards and the left-hand squadron of the King's Dragoon Guards completed the 'line' to the east of the Brussels road. To the west of the road were, from left to right, looking south, the two remaining squadrons of the King's Dragoon Guards and the two squadrons of the 1st Life Guards. These were supported by the two squadrons of Horse Guards. Both brigades now pressed on up the muddy slopes to the Grand Battery where they began slaughtering the gunners and drivers. Away to the east, the Scots Greys rallied before attacking the guns.

Uxbridge himself thought that as many as 40 guns were put out of action, having been informed of the fact by a French artillery officer whom he later met in Paris. However, they could not be brought off because of the counter-attack by Napoleon's cavalry. The British cavalry rode in and out of the guns for quite some time within just 300 metres or so of La Belle Alliance, from where Napoleon

watched with horror. Meanwhile, thousands of retreating French infantry who had been overtaken by the cavalry now came up and passed through the guns, apparently oblivious to the slaughtering going on there. Meanwhile Uxbridge tried desperately to get his men to heed the trumpets sounding the recall, but to little avail. The heavy cavalry continued to enjoy themselves until, exhausted by these efforts, they finally turned and looked back across the valley towards their own lines. It was at this point that they fully appreciated the extremely dangerous position they had got themselves into for, as they gazed back across the valley, and over the carnage they had left in their wake, they saw hundreds of enemy cavalrymen riding in from both left and right, cavalry they would now have to fight if they were going to make it back to their own lines.

Captain William Tyrwhitt Drake, Royal Hose Guards, c.1815. Tyrwhitt Drake was among the 20 officers and 255 men from the unit who fought with Somerset's Household Cavalry Brigade at Waterloo. (National Army Museum)

What the two brigades of cavalry now had to do was to run the gauntlet of both infantry and cavalry in order to fight their way home. Scores would not succeed. The enemy cavalry approaching were Brigade General Martin-Charles Gobrecht's Brigade from General Charles-Claude Jaquinot's Division, being the 3rd and 4th Lancers, whilst from the direction of La Belle Alliance came two regiments of cuirassiers, the 5th and 10th. The men of the British cavalry regiments gathered themselves together for the return journey but had not gone far when the enemy cavalry struck. Scores of isolated British cavalrymen were cut down or speared by enemy lancers who now took their revenge for the devastation the British had wrought earlier. The two British brigades were scattered in isolated little groups who were easy prey for the French. The lancers were by no means invincible but they had the very distinct advantage of having a 2.75-metre-long lance with which to inflict their suffering on their adversaries who would, generally, have not been able to get within striking distance of them. It was a formidable weapon, demonstrated with terrible efficiency upon Colonel Sir John Colborne's Brigade at Albuera some four years earlier, and the lancers went to work with equal venom at Waterloo. Scores of wounded British cavalrymen were killed by the lancers, who showed no mercy; the Greys, for example, suffered more dead than wounded, which is rather unusual. The situation of the two heavy brigades was desperate. Ponsonby, leading the Union Brigade, was killed by enemy lancers, as was the commanding officer of the Scots Greys. In fact, only eight out of 23 officers of the Scots Greys were unwounded. The commanding officers of the King's Dragoon Guards and the 1st Life Guards were also killed. It was during this phase of the charge that the majority of the British heavy cavalry casualties probably occurred, which is backed up by de Lacy Evans who subsequently wrote, 'It was at this part of the transaction that almost the whole of the loss of the

The 1st King's Dragoon Guards, c.1813/15. The regiment was another of those which had not seen active service for many years but performed well at Waterloo. (Anne S.K. Brown)

Brigade took place.'[15] There was no support for the Union Brigade as the Greys, who should have been in the second line, were up front in the thick of the fight. To the west of the Brussels road, however, the Horse Guards had maintained some semblance of order and were able to support and bring off the Household Brigade without too much damage to themselves. Nevertheless, on the whole, the fight for survival for the two British heavy cavalry brigades was not a particularly successful one.

To the west of the main road things were only just showing signs of improvement. The Royal Horse Guards, dressed in their blue tunics, had gone into action numbering just over 200 sabres, but this small number of troops was enough to be able to help bring off the remains of the Household Brigade. Of the seven regiments of heavy cavalry which took part in Uxbridge's charge, only the Royal Horse Guards managed to maintain some semblance of order. They had formed the reserve of the Household Brigade and although they suffered just under 50 per cent casualties for the day, the majority of which almost certainly occurred during the charge, they stuck to their task and were able to protect the survivors of the charge to the west of the main road as they made their way back to the Allied lines. In fact, theirs was a timely intervention because, like the Union Brigade, the regiments of the Household Brigade had been enjoying themselves at the Grand Battery, cutting down the gunners and generally doing much mischief. However, these too quickly became exhausted by their efforts and when Brigade General Étienne-Jacques Travers' cuirassiers counter-attacked they were in no condition to offer serious resistance. The Household Brigade also suffered heavy losses from the fire of Lieutenant General Honoré Reille's divisions which lined the track from Hougoumont to La Belle Alliance, just beyond the Grand Battery.

Uxbridge himself, having led the Household Brigade, was in no position to control affairs, and found himself in a similar position to Brigadier General Robert Ballard Long at Campo Maior four years earlier. Despite attempts to call his men to order Uxbridge found he had lost all control of his brigade:

After the overthrow of the cuirassiers, I had in vain attempted to stop my people by sounding the Rally, but neither voice nor trumpet availed; so I went back to seek the support of the 2nd line, which unhappily had not followed the movements of the heavy cavalry. Had I, when I sounded the Rally, found only four well-formed squadrons coming steadily along at an easy trot, I feel certain that the loss the first line suffered when they were finally forced back would have been avoided,

A fine depiction of an officer of the Royal Scot Greys at Waterloo, although on the actual day his appearance would have been a great deal sorrier than this, following two days of campaigning in very bad weather. (Anne S. K. Brown)

> and most of these guns might have been secured, for it was obvious the effect of that charge had been prodigious, and for the rest of the day, although the cuirassiers frequently attempted to break into our lines, they always did it *mollement* and as if they expected something more behind the curtain.[16]

It is curious that Uxbridge says that the second line, presuming this to be the Royal Horse Guards, 'unhappily had not followed the movements of the heavy cavalry'. The implication is that they should have been close on the heels on the first line, whereas surely by remaining a good distance to the rear they were able to maintain some order and be there to come to their comrades' aid when required. The Greys, to the east of the main road, had followed the movements of the Union Brigade but had been so close, probably in the first line, that they could not hold back once the charge got underway. Furthermore, from the casualties sustained by the Royal Horse Guards, it would appear that they had, after all, followed their comrades, or perhaps they were simply brought up afterwards and suffered their casualties in covering the retreat. The heavy cavalry also received assistance from the infantry during the retreat when Kempt advanced some of his infantry down the slope to the east of La Haye Sainte, partly to secure the many French prisoners and partly to cover the retreat of the remnants of the Union Brigade.

But the most effective support for the beleaguered heavy brigades, and in particularly the Union Brigade, came in the shape of Major General John Vandeleur's Brigade which had sat, along with Major General Hussey Vivian's Brigade, on the ridge above Papelotte. Vandeleur ordered his brigade, consisting of three squadrons each of the 11th, 12th and 16th Light Dragoons, to move in support of the Union Brigade, the remains of which were floundering in the mud away to his right. The brigade was positioned directly north of Papelotte, close to the Papelotte–Verd–Cocu road, more of a track which ran north down across the eastern end of the reverse and north to the latter hamlet. However, the ground in his immediate front presented him with two problems. First, a deep sunken lane, leading down to the east of the farm of La Haye, barred his way. Second, any move to his right and slightly to the south in order to cross the Wavre road at an easier point would bring him within range of Durutte's skirmishers, who at the time were attacking Papelotte. Therefore, he had his brigade wheel to the right and move along the reverse slope before turning to their left and passing through the Hanoverians of Colonel Best and Colonel von Vincke. Finally, the brigade crossed the Wavre road and, presumably, the Ohain road, before charging Jacquinot's lancers and the units of d'Erlon's Corps still remaining in front of the Allied position and in the valley.

The charge by Vandeleur's Brigade had the desired effect of extricating the Union Brigade from the confusion at the bottom of the valley and beyond. That it was carried out with complete success is open to debate, however, as the 12th Light Dragoons demonstrated the same tendency to lose any sense of an ordered attack and, as a consequence, suffered heavy casualties during the charge. Indeed, the regiment almost found itself on the verge of requiring rescue themselves. The 16th Light Dragoons, on the other hand, adopted a far more professional approach and the regiment's officers managed to hold their men in check and prevent them from getting out of hand. Significantly, the 11th Light Dragoons remained at the top of the ridge as a reserve and thus avoided becoming embroiled in the fight. In spite of the 12th charging further than they should have done, Vandeleur's three veteran Peninsular regiments performed their job well in supporting the Union Brigade at the moment of the latter's greatest danger. Losses within the ranks of the 12th Light Dragoons were fairly severe but the entire losses for Vandeleur's Brigade as a whole throughout the day totalled less than any of the individual regiments of the Union Brigade, which is, perhaps, a reflection of the difference in experience between the two brigades and in the way in which they were handled.

Casualties in the Union and Household Brigades were certainly severe, but were perhaps not as severe as generations of historians would have us believe, as we shall shortly see. The Union Brigade lost 525 killed, wounded and missing, a large proportion of the latter being amongst the dead. This was out of a total strength of 1,181, which represents a loss of just below 44.5 per cent. It is also

CONVERT TO MONO

The 1st King's Dragoon Guards charging the Cuirassiers at Waterloo, a spirited painting by Harry Payne. (Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum www.glosters.org.uk)

The 6th Inniskilling Dragoons charging at Waterloo. Along with the Scots Greys and the 1st (Royal) Dragoons, the Inniskillings provided the Irish element to the so-called 'Union' Brigade. The regiment claimed to have captured a French Eagle at Waterloo but lost it again during the fighting. The commanding officer later appealed for the regiment to be allowed to wear the eagle as its cap badge. (Anne S. K. Brown)

CONVERT TO MONO

interesting to note regimental casualty figures. For example, the figures quoted in Siborne's *History of the Waterloo Campaign* (first published in 1844) show that the Scots Greys suffered more dead than wounded, 102 against 97, which probably reflects the ferocity of the attack by Jacquinot's lancers, who apparently thought little of finishing off any wounded enemy cavalrymen. The 1st (Royal) Dragoons showed a similarly high ratio of dead to wounded, 89 against 97, whilst the Inniskillings returned 73 dead against 116 wounded. It is very unusual to note also that the Scots Greys posted not a single officer or private as missing. In fact, the entire Union Brigade returned just 38 men missing, which again is probably accounted for by the merciless conduct shown towards wounded and dismounted cavalrymen by some of the French cavalry. The Household Brigade, which showed a strength of 1,226 at the beginning of the day, suffered 533 casualties, of which 250 were missing. The casualty rate of about 43.5 per cent is about the same as the Union Brigade and is still very high.

It is these high casualty figures that have been used by generations of historians to try to illustrate the indiscipline and even the failure of Uxbridge's charge. However, and this is where I lay the case for the defence, it is difficult to establish just how many of the 525 casualties in the Union Brigade and of the 533 casualties in the Household Brigade were sustained during the charge itself, for it should be remembered that although the brigade was in no fit state to repeat the exercise it did, nevertheless, remain on the battlefield for the remainder of the day, during which time it would have taken further casualties. Although it is a fairly safe bet that the majority of the brigades' casualties occurred during

The Scots Greys get stuck into the French at Waterloo. Although the Union Brigade was severely handled by French cavalry after its initial charge, the brigade inflicted far more severe damage on both the French infantry and, more significantly, on Napoleon's Grand Battery.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

the charge against d'Erlon's Corps and the Grand Battery afterwards, we can be quite certain that not all of them were. The Union Brigade suffered casualties from the Grand Battery even before it had set off on its charge, whilst Clark-Kennedy of the Royals later wrote that the Union Brigade suffered severely during the afternoon when it was moved to the west of the Brussels road to support the infantry line that was buckling under intense pressure from the French. We can never be certain how many men were killed and wounded during the afternoon but if we believe what Clark-Kennedy wrote we can be sure casualties were not light.

Only a fool would suggest that the respective casualty figures for the Union and Household Brigades at Waterloo were purely as a result of Uxbridge's charge. After all, it would mean that neither brigade suffered a single casualty throughout the rest of the battle, which lasted for a further six hours or so after the charge had ended. To assume this was the case is simply absurd.

THE FRENCH CAVALRY AT WATERLOO

The controversy surrounding the famous charge by the British heavy cavalry at Waterloo is equalled, if not surpassed, by that which surrounds the massed charges of the French cavalry during the afternoon of 18 June 1815. Indeed, it is not possible to pick up a book about the battle without reading yet another explanation accounting for Marshal Michel Ney's behaviour on that fateful afternoon.

Wellington's infantry behind the ridge to the west of the Brussels road had been taking a fearful pounding from Napoleon's artillery, and from incursions by French infantry, throughout the afternoon. In fact, from accounts left to us it would appear that this 'unremitting shower of death', as one British soldier put it, had brought Wellington's line almost to breaking point. Almost three hours of constant shelling by French artillery had wrought havoc amongst the densely packed ranks of Allied infantry. Wounded soldiers steamed away from the front line, carried by unwounded comrades or escorted by many whose will to fight had simply vanished.

It is not clear whether Marshal Ney mistook this as a sign of an Allied retreat. We cannot be certain. After all, the view from the French positions allowed no sight of what was happening on the other side of Wellington's ridge, and unless Ney possessed X-ray vision he could not have seen what was happening there. What is certain, however, is that *something* happened on the Allied ridge which led him to believe that Wellington's line was on the brink of collapse and encouraged him to launch Napoleon's cavalry in wave after wave against

An incident depicting the French cavalry charges on the afternoon of 18 June. It very ably demonstrates the folly of cavalry charging four ranks of infantry in square, with each face bristling with steel. Unless supported by artillery or infantry such attacks were doomed to fail, unless some huge slice of good fortune befell them, such as a dead horse smashing into the ranks. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Wellington's line in the hope that the Allied line would be finally pushed over the edge into ignominious defeat.

It was around 4 p.m. when Ney began to draw up the massed squadrons of Napoleon's cavalry, and it is doubtful whether the world had ever seen such a fabulous array on a battlefield. It is certainly the case that Wellington's British infantry had never seen such a display. In the Iberian Peninsula they had grown used to seeing French dragoons, chasseurs and the odd hussar regiment but they had never come across cuirassiers, carabineers, horse grenadiers, Dutch lancers and the like. It was all quite spectacular. And it was a relief also, for no sooner had Ney formed his massed squadrons for the attack than the French guns ceased playing upon the Allied line for fear of hitting their own side. Thus, when the French cavalry went pounding up the muddy slopes to attack Wellington's line it may have looked as if the end was nigh but it was, in fact, a blessed relief for the hard-pressed infantry waiting on the reverse slope.

When Napoleon's cavalry assembled between La Haye Sainte and the orchard to the east of Hougoumont the emperor himself was apparently absent from the field, allegedly feeling unwell. And so it was that command of the army at this vital period of the battle devolved upon Ney, who is said to have been suffering from a kind of 'shell shock' or battle fatigue following the campaigns in Russia and Germany. It certainly revealed a flaw in the French system of command. Indeed, Wellington has often been accused of being what we would

probably today call a 'control freak', a man who was loath to delegate any responsibility to anyone other than his most trusted lieutenants, and only then on rare occasions. Napoleon, on the other hand, was more than comfortable allowing his marshals and generals to accept responsibility on the field of battle. The problem was, however, that by allowing Ney to take the reins at this most important time, Napoleon was effectively handing command of his army to a man who was evidently not suited to command on the day. It was something that Wellington would never have done. In fact, Wellington has provided us with a great 'barometer' at Waterloo as he always appeared to be at the right place at the right time. He was simply unwilling to allow anyone else to display initiative, and although this had long-term consequences for the British Army it certainly paid dividends on 18 June 1815.

The story of the French cavalry charges is simple enough. Once Ney had decided to launch his massed cavalry against Wellington's line he formed them in their regiments and for the next two hours or so led them in a series of charges which effectively achieved nothing whatsoever, other than becoming one of the most memorable episodes on any battlefield in history. It is estimated that there were 12 charges, each charge consisting of several waves of cavalry that swept up to the crest before disappearing out of sight of the main French Army behind the reverse slope. Here the cavalry came face to face with numerous Allied infantry squares, formed in a rough checkerboard formation,

A famous but somewhat inaccurate painting showing the French cavalry charges at their height. The cavalry are coming on way too fast. As Captain Mercer famously said afterwards in his journal, 'There was none of your furious galloping'. After the initial waves the ground would have been churned up to such an extent that it would have been impossible for cavalry to come on at anything other than a slow gallop, particularly as they were going uphill and, presumably, after already having executed at least a couple of charges previously. (akg-images)

CONVERT TO MONO

each supporting its neighbour with musketry. Each infantry square was formed of four ranks, bristling with bayonets, which proved an impenetrable barrier against Ney's cavalry. As long as the men inside each square held their nerve there would be no way through for the French cavalry who swarmed around the squares, thrashing away with their swords or lances, or firing their pistols or carbines into the squares at close range. Hundreds of French cavalrymen were lost on the bayonets of the infantry, or through their musketry. Then, realizing the hopelessness of their situation the French rode on, passing between the squares before being dispatched by the waiting squadrons of Allied cavalry. Ney's men then turned to the west and passed to the north of Hougoumont before swinging left and heading south back to their starting positions in order to form for the next charge. The distance covered by each survivor in each charge, therefore, was about 4 kilometres from start to finish.

Naturally, each charge became more difficult than the previous one. The slope up which Ney's squadrons charged became littered with an increasing number of dead and wounded horses and men, whilst the already muddy ground was churned into a boggy morass as each wave went up the slope. The horses' exhaustion can easily be imagined. Indeed, it is little wonder that Captain Alexander Cavalié Mercer, commanding his troop of horse artillery on the crest, was moved to comment, 'there was none of your furious galloping', a reference, no doubt, to the popular image of cavalry charging full tilt at their opponents. And so it went on, with the French cavalry, frustrated and growing ever more desperate, struggling to

GNMX1043_187 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT, HI RES TO COME]
Major General William Ponsonby meets a sticky end during the charge of the Union Brigade at Waterloo. His horse was blown and got bogged down in a muddy field, leaving Ponsonby as easy prey for the vicious French lancers. A recent controversial theory, however, suggests that Ponsonby was taken prisoner but was only killed when a group of Scots Greys attempted to rescue him. (National Army Museum)

pass the morass of mud, men and horses, to get to grips with an enemy that, with the passing of each charge, was growing ever more confident.

Much criticism has been levelled at Ney for forming so vast an array of cavalry on such a relatively narrow front, barely 900 metres between La Haye Sainte and the orchard at Hougoumont. But the greater criticism was, and always will be, Ney's failure to support the cavalry with infantry and artillery and, perhaps more perplexing, the complete failure by the French cavalry to spike the Allied guns.

When Ney's massed squadrons set off towards Wellington's ridge the Allied infantry commanders quickly ordered their battalions to form squares, the traditional and most effective way of dealing with cavalry. Once in these formations, however, the infantry were easy meat for infantry and artillery. And yet, for over two hours between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the afternoon of 18 June 1815, barely a single infantryman advanced in support of the cavalry nor was a single gun brought forward to wreak havoc amongst the static and vulnerable – to infantry and artillery at least – squares. Of course, as the afternoon progressed the ground was churned over to such an extent that it would have been extremely difficult to get guns forward, though not impossible. And as for the infantry, perhaps they thought better of straying into the path of thousands of charging horses. But it is inconceivable that Napoleon's infantry officers failed to appreciate the opportunity afforded to them once the cavalry had forced Wellington's infantry into squares. So why did they not advance? It is a mystery. Whatever it was – an oversight, a lack of command, bad ground, fear – it allowed a golden opportunity to slip away.

As each wave of French cavalry swept over the Allied ridge Wellington's gun crews abandoned their guns for the relative safety of the infantry squares, leaving their pieces at the mercy of the French. And yet, for some unfathomable reason, none of the guns were spiked. It was a fairly simple process. Each cavalryman would have carried a pouch with headless nails and it would have been the easiest thing in the world for a trooper to dismount, take out one of the nails and drive it into the touch hole of the gun, rendering it completely useless. In effect, the gun would have been turned into a piece of scrap metal. For an infantryman the job would have been done by driving a bayonet into the gun and breaking it off. Again, an incredibly simple process. So why was this not done? Surely it would have occurred to these experienced French cavalrymen that by spiking the guns it would have left Wellington bereft of most of his guns to the west of the Brussels road. Various explanations have been put forward. John Keegan, in his classic *Face of Battle* (London, 1976), even suggests that a French cavalryman, with his assumed superior social standing, would never dismount in front of socially inferior enemy infantry. It seems unlikely but plausible. But perhaps the reason was far simpler.

An officer of the Inniskilling Dragoons fallen from his horse and trapped beneath the wheels of a gun at Waterloo. One would not give much for his chances unless one of his comrades arrived swiftly to spirit him away to safety. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Quite possibly, in the heat of battle and with musket balls flying around as thick as hail, the French cavalrymen simply didn't relish the idea of dismounting and going about the business of driving the nails into the guns. After all, it was a simple process but it was not a particularly quick one, and it may have been easy – albeit extremely risky – for an infantryman, or indeed a gunner, to run out of his square and deal with the cavalryman. There was obviously something up there on the bloody ridge at Waterloo that prevented Napoleon's cavalrymen, all experienced soldiers who had spent years campaigning throughout Europe and fighting on many a bloody battlefield, from dismounting and spiking the guns. But whatever it was we will never know.

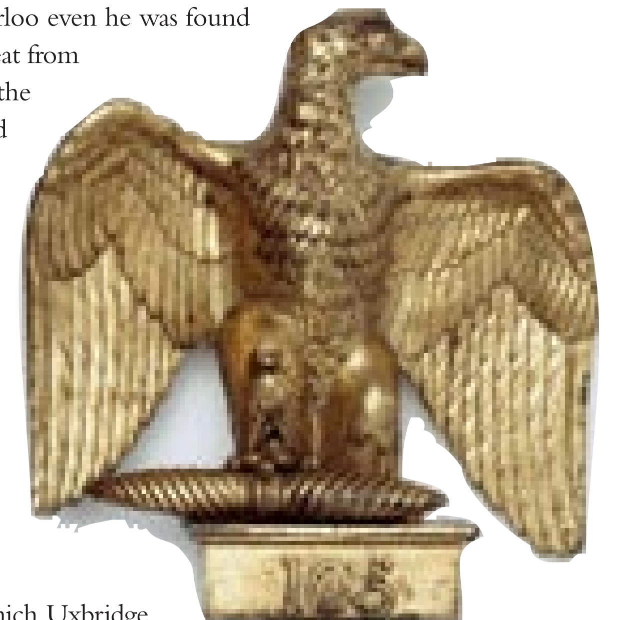
CONCLUSIONS

One final point concerning the French cavalry charges: it is worth pointing out that the verdict upon the British heavy cavalry charge at Waterloo has usually been based upon the casualty figures, something which I have sought to address and dispel in this chapter. It is curious that in the many accounts of the Battle of Waterloo none have ever claimed that the casualty figures for Napoleon's cavalry on 18 June were as a result of the series of charges made by them between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., the correct conclusion being that the casualty figures were for the entire day as a whole. Why is it, therefore, that the casualty figures for the Union and Household Brigades are almost universally attributed solely to the charge and not the day as a whole, even though they played a part in the rest of the battle following the charge?

So, having looked at the end result in terms of casualties of the British heavy cavalry charge, what did it actually achieve? Well, I believe it achieved a great deal. At a cost of just over 1,000 casualties Uxbridge's cavalry had completely destroyed the first great attack by Napoleon's infantry at Waterloo.[17] In fact, such was the effect of the charge that the French would not attack in any great strength to the east of the main Brussels road for the rest of the day. This left Wellington free to concentrate on the assaults on his right and centre. The struggle here was so intense that one cannot believe that Wellington would have been able to hang on had the French been able to launch further attacks against his left. True, the Prussian intervention occupied Napoleon's right flank during the late afternoon, but any further French attacks on the scale of d'Erlon's before the Prussian arrival would probably have tested even Wellington's resolve.

As for the conduct of the charge, it almost certainly gave Wellington a sense of *déjà vu*, as he harked back, no doubt, to Vimeiro and Talavera. In fact, he is reputed to have turned to Uxbridge and said, somewhat sarcastically, 'Well, Paget, I hope you are satisfied with your cavalry now.'[18] Much has been written about Uxbridge's absence from the Peninsula and there is little doubt that he was indeed sorely missed. However, when it came to the final test at Waterloo even he was found wanting. His command of the rearguard during the retreat from Quatre Bras was exemplary but on 18 June he allowed the heavy cavalry to charge too far, primarily because he had taken up a position from where he was unable to control the charge, as he himself pointed out later. '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.'[19]

It is also worth considering whether Uxbridge or indeed Wellington underestimated the French infantry or perhaps even overestimated their own. Had they become complacent after years of success in the Peninsula? After all, Wellington had grown used to seeing the French driven off countless battlefields in Portugal and Spain, which Uxbridge



The French eagle belonging to the French 105th Régiment d'Infanterie. Arguments raged afterwards as to who captured the eagle. There is little doubt that Captain Clark-Kennedy of the 1st Dragoons was responsible for killing the officer carrying the prized bird but it fell across the neck of the horse belonging to Corporal Styles of the same regiment. Styles grabbed the eagle and immediately carried it from the field in triumph, much to the chagrin of Clark-Kennedy. (National Army Museum)

CONVERT TO MONO

The Union Brigade on the early afternoon of 18 June, doing what all good cavalry were trained to do at such moments; spiking the enemy's guns. Every cavalryman carried a pouch with headless nails and the simple driving of one of these into the touch hole of an artillery piece effectively turned it into a piece of scrap metal. It remains a mystery why not a single Allied gun, overrun by the French cavalry on the afternoon of 18 June, was not similarly spiked. A French officer later admitted that as many as 40 French guns were put out of action by the British heavy cavalry during their charge on 18 June. (Courtesy of René Chartrand)

would have been well aware of, and perhaps they thought the outcome of d'Erlon's attack a forgone conclusion. Did the relative initial success of the French assault take Uxbridge and Wellington by surprise, forcing them to make rather hasty preparations for the heavy cavalry charge? There is certainly evidence to support this, with Uxbridge making a hurried dash from one side of the main road to the other, leaving some with the impression that the Scots Greys were to act as a reserve whilst others obviously thought otherwise. Then, without a moment to lose, the charge was launched, with the ensuing result examined above. I would suggest that, with more time and due care and attention, more precise preparations could have been made, with the individual brigade and regimental commanders being made aware of just exactly what their role would be in the coming charge. At Waterloo split-second timing was required and, as we have already seen, at least one British officer thought that the charge would have failed had it been delayed by just two or three minutes.[20] Ultimately, Uxbridge blamed himself for the error in not adequately organising a reserve and in his biography of his illustrious ancestor the Marquess of Anglesey wrote that Uxbridge 'was haunted by this error' for the rest of his life.[21] However, this is to detract from the more significant and wider achievement of the Union and Household Brigades at Waterloo, which Anglesey quite perfectly summed up:

> Whatever blame must attach to Uxbridge for leading the charge himself, it cannot be denied that by choosing exactly the right moment to launch it he had so completely smashed an infantry corps and a large portion of its artillery that it was virtually out of action until late in the day and then so reduced in numbers and enthusiasm as to have no major effect on the battle.[22]

Despite the criticism levelled at Uxbridge and the British heavy cavalry at Waterloo it must be admitted that, when we analyse the casualties suffered by the Union and Household Brigades and the damage inflicted upon d'Erlon's infantry in return, the British cavalry charge was a successful one.

However, when we examine the massed charges by Napoleon's cavalry between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. it is difficult to make any case whatsoever for them being anything other than a complete and utter disaster. Indeed, there were three main results of the charges, all of which were to the benefit of the Allies. First, it gave the hard-pressed Allied infantry some much-needed relief, albeit temporary, from the French artillery barrage, the French guns being unable to fire whilst the charges were in progress. Secondly, the charges failed to break any of the Allied squares but resulted in thousands of casualties amongst the French cavalry; and, thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it bought Wellington two hours of valuable time. After all, Wellington's strategy on 18 June was based on receiving assistance from the Prussians who were still some way off when the battle began. The time that Napoleon frittered away in needless cavalry charges effectively handed the Allies two hours, during which time the Prussians were able to reach the battlefield to make their telling contribution to the day's victory. We can only imagine what might have happened had Napoleon launched his Guard two hours earlier. But that, as they say, is history. As the old adage goes, 'time once lost is rarely regained'.

CONVERT TO MONO

A nice Simkin depiction of a clash between British Horse Guards and French cuirassiers. Whether two formed bodies of cavalry would go head-to-head at this speed and in this manner is open to debate. It is a subject nicely dealt with by John Keegan in his classic Face of Battle. Much depended on consent, and on whether the two bodies were willing to open out their ranks to allow the enemy through in order to engage in close quarter combat. Eye witness accounts would suggest that formed bodies of cavalry did indeed clash 'like two walls coming together', although whether it happened in the manner depicted by Simkin is unlikely. (Anne S. K. Brown)