



DECISIVE BATTLES OF THE WORLD

(8) The Battle Of Waterloo

ON March 11, 1915, a most curious thing happened in Vienna. The Austrian capital was then still a place for gaiety and laughter, and would remain so for another 100 years. Many things died in Vienna with Metternich, but Vienna could still laugh in 1815.

But it was a different sort of laughter that Vienna heard in 1815, on March 11. The diplomats of Europe were assembled recarve the frontiers thrown into such a tangle by the marchings and counter-marching of an insatiable French Emperor.

Napoleon was in Elba, the diplomats could settle down to govern once again with diplomacy, the guns were temporarily silent, and for a while the war-weary peoples could see no figure looming over them to persuade them into battle. The diplomats settled down to it.

Why They Laughed

And then, surprisingly, cynically, shockingly, on March 11, they laughed. It was not the sort of laughter Vienna usually heard. Rather was it the sort of laugh the men of Versailles (excepting, of course, Woodrow Wilson) might have laughed if 1919 had found the Kaiser escaped from Doorn and rallying another group of armies. Everything was being managed most excellently. There had been some trouble among the rabble since the mad French had set a fashion in revolutions. Now it was possible to show the people that these departures from the ordinary only brought with them such calamities as Napoleon.

But on March 11, when they were all assembled for the deliberations which would set this people against that, this nation over that one, this policy beside that policy, this plot against that intrigue, Talleyrand rose among them and announced that Napoleon had escaped from Elba. And they laughed.

This exquisite humour, with which the men of diplomacy saw their diplomacy so humorously compared with reality, did not last long. The projected Treaty had to be held in abeyance. Napoleon must be stopped before the fun could begin again. They went into ways and means.

The Armies Compared

As a result of their more practical deliberations two armies faced the army of Napoleon at Waterloo on the morning of June 18, 1815. In those short

months Napoleon had assembled a veteran force of 48,950 infantry, 15,765 cavalry, and 7,232 artillerymen with 246 guns. We who know the uses of newspaper, and telephone, and radio, and railways, might do well in these days to consider the implications of that feat, performed as it was while the Rothschilds were still secret with their idea that pigeons could be used for posting.

No less busy, but with greater resources to call upon, had been the allies. From Vienna the Duke of Wellington travelled into the Netherlands to survey the forces he might be able to use in what was to be his first personal encounter with the rival general. When he finally drew up his forces opposite those of Napoleon, he had under him 49,608 infantry, 12,402 cavalry, and 5,645 artillerymen with 156 guns. He therefore had 67,655 men to Napoleon's 71,974, and fewer guns. Although contemporary historians were careful to point out that only 24,000 men under Wellington were British, another great army was in the field under Marshal Blucher, who began the battle with 83,417 men and 224 guns, while General von Bulow held 25,000 men ready to join him.

Napoleon's Strategy

It is not possible in a few words to give a detailed account of the geography and strategy of a battle in which three able generals for several days performed an intensely intricate series of manoeuvres. Briefly, the campaign resolved itself into the attempt of Napoleon to keep the allies separated, and the attempt of the allies at once to cover Brussels, smother Napoleon whichever way he turned, and still effect the necessary conjunction when the main battle should be joined.

Ligny and Quatre Bras

Before Blucher and Wellington could decide on their plan of battle they had to wait and see what Napoleon's intentions were. He was in a position to force this method upon them. He assembled his army behind a triple chain of strong fortresses on the Belgian frontier, and they knew him well enough to believe that this army would be organised to a pitch which would enable him to throw it out from any point in this chain in whatever direction he might choose. Wellington accordingly disposed his troops to screen Brussels, which was considered a strategic focal point from which Napoleon must be kept at all costs. Blucher occupied the banks of the Sambre and the Meuse from Liege to Charleroi.

On Blucher, at Ligny, Napoleon pushed his centre and right, while Marshal Ney, with the left of the French

slightly westwards to keep as close as possible to Wellington's flank.

Revelry by Night

Meanwhile the other preliminary battle, at Quatre Bras, had gone against Ney.

Ney had made his dispositions for the following day by June 15. On that night Wellington arranged the famous ball in Brussels. His cool head could see that it was no use to become excited until the allies knew exactly what technique their adversary would employ. Wellington had taken all precautions, and he thought they might as well enjoy the dancing. He remained at the Duchess of Richmond's ball until 3 a.m. on June 16, and then rode out to Quatre Bras. With 16,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, and 28 guns, Ney began the battle at 2 p.m. Added to his forces later in the day were 5,000 splendid heavy cavalry under Kellerman, but one of the major errors



Wellington at Waterloo, as envisaged by an artist of 1846, in a typically unreal engraving of the period

army, advanced on Wellington's outposts at Quatre Bras. Here Wellington held 40,000 of the French army, just close enough to Blucher's right flank to protect it from encirclement. Blucher faced the fiercest onslaught of the main French forces. Napoleon's military skill won the day, but technically only. Blucher's centre was pierced and he had to retire. However, the operation was performed successfully, and he fell back moving

of Napoleon's strategy deprived him of the men who would have made his force up to 40,000 and possibly won the day before Wellington could concentrate a sufficient force to oppose him. Half of his nominal command of 40,000 men was under the Count d'Erlon, who received instructions to march to the aid of the Emperor in the engagement with the Prussians. The Count spent most of his time during these engagements marching to and fro well behind the lines in answer to contradictory orders. So Ney failed, and the British infantrymen held the day. Although Blucher had retreated on this flank the French had also failed there. Blucher retired in good order and used the direction of his retreat to improve his communications with Wellington. On June 17 Wellington had word of this movement by Blucher, and himself began a retreat, abandoning the position at Quatre Bras. He retired on the village of Mont St. Jean, twelve miles from where Blucher had re-assembled his army at Wavre.

Napoleon's Plan Develops

Napoleon now switched the direction of his advance westwards, effected a junction with Ney, who had been enabled by Wellington's retirement to pass

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