

WAR DIARY

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through Quatre Bras, and sent Marshal Grouchy, with 32,000 men and 96 guns, to cut off the Prussians, whom he wrongly imagined to be in flight.

Napoleon's plan was now coming to a head, but Wellington still foresaw all contingencies, and still refused to retreat further towards Blucher and leave open the road to Brussels. The initiative was still with Napoleon. Grouchy, he considered, would put the Prussians finally to flight while he himself made a frontal attack to annihilate Wellington in direct combat.

But he reckoned without Blucher and without the discipline of the British forces under Wellington. Napoleon himself had never previously met the English in battle. He had heard of them from his Marshals, who discovered their mettle when Wellington led them through the Peninsula campaign in Spain. But Napoleon could not believe that there was anything to equal the magnificent fighting spirit of his veteran French soldier. He was wrong, and it cost him his Empire for the second time.

Poor Grouchy!

By June 18 Blucher at Wavre had been reinforced by the army under Bulow. This fact still further discounted Napoleon's estimate of the state of the Prussian army. Blucher led the Prussians; hate for the French who had ravaged Europe spurred them on; and Bulow reinforced them.

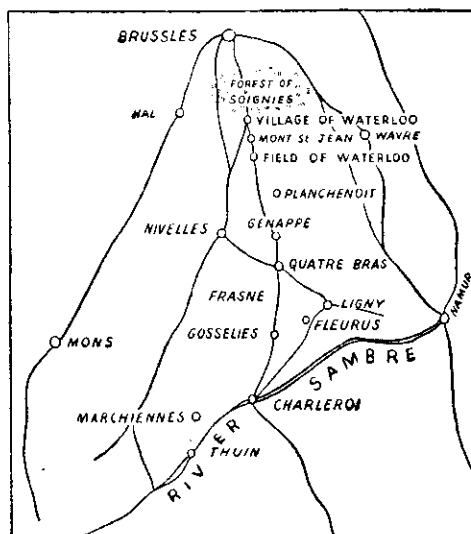
Poor Grouchy! At all costs he must keep Blucher and Wellington separated. But Blucher and Wellington knew that at all costs they must come together. Communications were by no means efficient, but Blucher well knew what was required of him. Under Thielman he left behind him at Wavre a detachment which would have to sacrifice itself to keep Grouchy out of the main battle. The main body of his army, with Bulow's, he started out on the twelve-mile march towards the field of Waterloo, near Mont St. Jean. Thielman was left with about 17,000 men when the morning of June 18 saw Blucher set out to join Wellington.

Thielman held his ground during the day and Grouchy made the final mistake of the battle. On the 17th he had the impression, which he communicated to Napoleon, that Blucher had been retreating in a more easterly direction towards Maestricht. On the eighteenth he attacked at Wavre, quite unaware of Blucher's flanking movement westwards towards Mont St. Jean. Early on that day Napoleon learned independently of the presence of Prussians at Wavre and ordered Grouchy to engage them without delay.

Grouchy was to hinder Blucher from moving westwards, but was to work westwards himself so that Napoleon could bring his whole army to bear in the main battle while Blucher was still recovering, or so Napoleon thought, from the "defeat" at Ligny and the second blow which Grouchy was to strike.

Blucher Struggles On

Grouchy ignored these instructions and allowed himself to be taken eastwards, away from the main battle. Thielman held him thus, while Blucher



A plan of the battle area, showing the roads leading from the French frontier to Brussels

struggled with his army through rains and mud to help Wellington.

Contemporary military opinion, viewing the magnificent defensive stand of Wellington's troops at Waterloo, had it that Napoleon would have done no better if Grouchy's men had been available to him. To this extent Grouchy is absolved from responsibility for loss of the battle; but the fact remains that he quite failed to hinder Blucher, when Blucher's army in the mud, with its heavy transport, could easily have been hindered; and instead allowed himself to be occupied in the wrong place, moving in the wrong direction, by Thielman's inferior force.

On the field of Waterloo itself, while Grouchy was attacking Thielman and Blucher was marching westwards, a most bloody battle was being fought.

The Field of Waterloo

The field of Waterloo is a valley between rolling hills. Napoleon drew up his army on one side and spent the day charging them across to the other and up at Wellington's lines on the rising ground opposite.

This was the method dear to his heart. He inspired his troops to a state of courage in which they would throw themselves for his sake against any obstacle. Thus inspired, he used them as machines. He knew the strength of his enemy, calculated the probable loss on each side in each engagement, and when battle was finally joined he decided its result in advance by a callously efficient process of military arithmetic.

He believed he had enough men to throw Wellington back off the hills. Minute after minute, hour after hour, on that long day he threw his troops across the valley to charge the British positions. Each time they charged, and made some ground, and each time what was left of them was thrown back into the valley to be decimated once again by the British artillery.

Charging the Squares

When the French horse charged the British formed squares against which horse and man threw themselves with

impotent courage. When the cavalry wheeled to retreat the British horse cut into them, and when they rode back the British artillery, posted well forward, and abandoned temporarily at each charge, was manned again to mow down the French before they could gather themselves for another onslaught.

When the French infantry attempted to follow the cavalry the British squares became lines of battle; even the veteran French soldier could not stand when his charge was met by a charge of bayonets used expertly by soldiers handling their favourite weapon.

It is a moot point which side displayed the greater courage. For the French there was the reckless, planned, self-slaughter against the cold steel of the defence. For the British there was the strain of holding formation all the day long and waiting with closed ranks for the charges they could see coming at them. Battered by each successive charge, mown down by artillery fire, they held formation in perfect discipline, with Wellington confidently waiting for these blood-spilling French attacks to lose their force.

The Prussians Arrive

Near the end of the day, Napoleon was forced at last to realise that a strong body of Prussians was coming up to reinforce Wellington. Between seven and eight o'clock, dissuaded from leading them himself, he placed Ney at the head of the Old Guard, held in reserve for just such a moment, and ordered them to make a final desperate charge. The British lines were thin now. They held only because Wellington had ordered them to hold at all costs. Waiting was his indispensable method. He could do nothing else.

But now the Prussians had come up close enough to demand battle of Napoleon's flank. The Young Guard was despatched to hold them while the French attacked the British centre. Here a detachment of Germans, drawn up in squares in anticipation of a cavalry charge, was cut to pieces by grape-shot from French guns posted hardly one hundred paces away. Here Wellington saved the day by rallying Brunswick troops to their aid before the centre position could be forced by the now desperate French. Meanwhile, the French Imperial Guard had attacked Wellington's right flank. The pressure on the centre remained fearfully intense. The fight here might go any way. If the Imperial Guard succeeded on the flank it was certain that the centre would also succumb.

"Up Guards and At 'Em!"

The Imperial Guard advanced on a position which, it so happened, was held by troops of British Guard regiments. Here the pick of the two armies was meeting, the one under Ney himself, the other under Wellington, who had ridden round to this post after rallying the troops at the centre.

The Imperial Guard advanced in columns, steady under the fire from the British artillery. They came pace by pace up the hill in front of the British position, overtopped it, and at a range of fifty paces were met by a fierce volley from troops roused by Wellington's now legendary cry. Their officers endeavoured to deploy the French, but it was too late. The British Guards had been lying down and surprised the French as they topped the rise. The British bayonet charge broke the Imperial Guard into disorder, and the first column streamed back into the valley. The second column marched into heavy frontal artillery fire with rifle fire from British infantry flanking it, and it could not stand. It broke in disorder, and its retreat carried it back among the troops who were still assailing the British centre. Seeing these veterans in flight, these other Frenchmen also began to waver.

The British Line Advances

Napoleon saw the danger of the situation, and prepared to throw into the battle some reserve battalions. But Wellington had made his men wait long enough. Now he saw his opportunity. The approach of the Prussians had covered his left flank. He was able to withdraw reserves of horse, fresh and untired, from that quarter. This cavalry succeeded against the French horse and the way was cleared for the infantry to advance. The French army was now driven entirely into disorder. The British troops completed the victory on their front. The Young Guard was forced to give ground to the advancing Prussians and the whole array became a rout. The British were in no mood to pursue, but the Prussians gave the French no chance of rallying. When they at last ceased their pursuit the French were frantically attempting to cross the Sambre, which they had bridged with such high hopes not one hundred hours before.

The Reckoning

The battle was over and those who remained on the field were at last able to give way to their emotions, forgotten during a battle which had raged intensely throughout the day. Of Wellington's army 15,000 men were killed and wounded. Seven thousand Prussians fell at Waterloo. No returns were ever made of the extent of the French losses. But France had been following her Napoleon to the wars ever since he had assumed command of the French armies in Italy in 1796. In Austria, in Egypt, in the Netherlands, in Spain, in Russia, the flower of French manhood had spilled its blood for him. At Waterloo, the last of them, all veterans of 20 years of fierce warfare, assembled for a final throw in the game which Napoleon played. And at Waterloo those that were left of them were sent running.

The peace of Europe had been secured for a generation, but the price was high, and there were still to come on the European scene a Bismarck, a Wilhelm, and a Hitler.

(Series concluded)