

WATERLOO 200

Watershed

18 June 2015 will mark the 200th anniversary of the decisive Battle of Waterloo. The British and German victory over the French at the Battle of Waterloo decisively ended the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars which had convulsed Europe for almost 25 years. It ended the political and military career of Napoleon Bonaparte and ushered in almost a century of general peace throughout most of Europe. Waterloo was a victory of Christianity against Humanism. It was a great victory for God's Covenant Nations. It was a victory for Protestant Britain and Germany against Catholic France. It marked the beginning of the Greatest Century of Missions.

Decisive

Waterloo was the crowning triumph of the career of Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington. The Duke of Wellington remarked that the battle had been "*a damned serious business*" and "*the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life.*" On 18 July 1815, the Duke of Wellington, leading an Anglo-Dutch-German force fought to a standstill a confident and enthusiastic army led by Napoleon whose military performance had dazzled Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte was renowned as the greatest soldier of his age. Yet, he was decisively stopped and outmanoeuvred by the Iron Duke and his ally Field Marshall Gebhard Blücher, whose timely arrival at the close of the day sealed the victory and sent Napoleon and his forces fleeing for Paris.

Revolutionary Threat

The Battle of Waterloo was an epoch closing event, and one of the great watersheds of history. The disastrous Russian campaign of 1812, had signalled the decline of Napoleon and his Revolutionary French forces. Marshall Blücher's victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig, 1813, led to Napoleon Bonaparte's abdication and exile to the Island of Elba. However, he escaped back to France, February 1815, and with whirlwind energy reassembled his army. Paris workshops produced 1,200 uniforms and 12,000 cartridges a day. By June, 124,000 French soldiers were concentrated near the border of Netherlands, which at that time included Belgium.

Outnumbered

Few Allied armies could be mobilised in time to resist Napoleon's inevitable offensive. The Duke of Wellington arrived in Brussels, 4 April, to discover that his Anglo-Dutch forces consisted of a scant 33,000 men. Wellington exclaimed: "*I have an infamous army, very weak and ill-equipped and a very inexperienced staff.*" Most of Wellington's experienced officers and men had been shipped across the Atlantic to fight the Americans in the War of 1812. German volunteers from Hanover and Brunswick and 6,000 men of the King's German Legion swelled Wellington's heterogeneous force to 68,000. Insufficient to be able to defeat the French forces, Wellington was dependent on the support of the Prussian (German) forces of Marshall Blücher.

Invasion

On 14 June, Napoleon's Order of the Day came to invade the Netherlands. "*The moment has come to conquer or to perish,*" he declared. In brilliant sunshine, the Emperor's forces seized the frontier town of Charleroi, where he was supported by many French speaking Belgians, who were revolutionary sympathisers and quick to switch sides. Napoleon's plan was to march on to Brussels, severing the communication lines between Wellington's Anglo-Dutch-German forces and Blücher's Prussian army, defeating them separately.

Retreat

Napoleon's surprise offensive enjoyed early success, as he forced Wellington's forces at Quatre Bras, 32km South of Brussels, to withdraw before the overwhelming French attack. Eight

kilometres away the Prussian army at Ligny was also forced to retreat under furious artillery fire and an overwhelming concentration of French forces.

Making a Stand

On the afternoon of 17 June, the Duke of Wellington halted on a ridge that crossed the road to Brussels. Flanked by forests on both sides, it was a choke point through which Napoleon's forces would be funnelled. Napoleon had carefully selected the ground as an ideal defensive position in August the previous year. (At the time he had recommended the construction of a number of fortresses, which had not yet been built.) Wellington had chosen his battlefield well. His men occupied and fortified the Chateau of Hougoumont and the farm house of La Haie Sainte. The East-West ridge which became the central point of Wellington's defensive position, provided cover for his cavalry and troops on its Northern reverse slope.

Downpour

Providentially, intensive rain had saturated the soil, which forced Napoleon to delay his offensive on Sunday, 18 June, until noon, to enable the soil to dry out sufficiently. As it was, the mud dissipated much of the effect of his artillery and slowed down the French forces as their boots and hooves churned up the clay soil into a morass.

Teamwork

While Wellington had made the best use of his chosen ground, he knew that his forces were insufficient to resist an all-out attack by all the French forces available to Napoleon. It was on the basis of an assurance from Marshall Blücher that he would march to their relief, that Wellington made his courageous stand just South of Mont Saint Jean, close to the village of Waterloo.

Volunteer Veterans

At the Battle of Waterloo, the French had 69,000 including 48,000 infantry, 14,000 cavalry, 7,000 artillery with 260 guns. Most of Napoleon's men were veterans of at least one campaign and were almost all volunteers.

Inexperienced Conscripts

Wellington had 50,000 infantry, 11,000 cavalry, and 150 guns. Of these 25,000 were British, 6,000 from the King's German Legion, 17,000 Dutch and Belgian troops, 11,000 from Hanover, 6,000 from Brunswick and 3,000 from Nassau. Many of the troops of the Coalition Forces were inexperienced. (Most of the experienced troops who had served with Wellington before had been sent to North America.) 48,000 Prussians under Marshall Blücher arrived at the climax of the battle.

Hougoumont

Hours later than Napoleon had intended, the battle began at 11:30am on Sunday, 18 June. Most of Wellington's forces were sheltered from the artillery fire by being stationed on the reverse slope of the ridge. The initial attack by Napoleon was against the farm house of Hougoumont, guarding Wellington's right flank. Resolutely defended by the British Foot Guards and Hanovarian and Nassau soldiers, Hougoumont resisted all assaults by Napoleon's three main infantry corps who assailed it mercilessly throughout the day.

Mass Assault Repulsed

Having failed to divert any of Wellington's reserves into this diversionary flank attack, Napoleon sent in D'Erlon's infantry corps, supported by cavalry and the concentrated fire of over 260 cannon of the French artillery against Wellington's left centre. Two brigades of British heavy cavalry scattered the massed columns and sent them fleeing back down the slope.

Scotland Forever

One of the most heroic actions of a day filled with heroism was the charge of the Scots Greys as part of the Heavy Brigade. As they thundered down the slope on their magnificent grey chargers, yelling "*Scotland Forever!*" and slashing at their enemy left and right, they seized the Eagle banner of the French 45th Regiment, the so-called *Invincibles*, and scattered the massed French centre column attack. However, in their euphoria, the Scots Greys advanced too far and many were lost to the French counter attack with the Lancers.

Squares Defeat Cavalry

As Wellington ordered his infantry in the centre right to move to the reverse slope of the Northern ridge at 16h00, Marshall Ney ordered a cavalry assault in hope of chasing this apparent retreat into a rout. From the French perspective this was a disastrous move. Wellington had ordered a controlled and limited withdrawal and his infantry were able to form squares in good time to fight off every cavalry charge.

La Haie Sainte

Marshall Ney finally succeeded in capturing the farm house of La Haie Sainte only because the King's German Legion garrison had run out of ammunition. It was at this critical moment that the Prussian cavalry charged at Plancenoit and forced the redeployment of most of the Imperial Guard to confront the Prussian threat to their right flank.

Grouchy Fails to Defeat the Prussians

The 33,000 men Napoleon had detached under Marshall Grouchy to pursue the Prussians to ensure that they did not link up with Wellington's forces, failed in their mission. Despite Marshall Blücher having been injured by his horse falling on him during a cavalry charge at Ligny, the 73-year old veteran had succeeded in reorganising his defeated and scattered men into a cohesive fighting force that out-marched Grouchy's pursuing French forces.

Triumph

In an extraordinary feat, Blücher led his army on a torturous forced march, along muddy roads, arriving at the Battle of Waterloo in time to save the day and crown Wellington's forces steadfast resistance with a most decisive victory. Together they crushed the French and relentlessly pursued them all the way to Paris. The Prussians nearly captured Napoleon himself.

The Ridge

At 19:30 Napoleon launched the final attack against Wellington's line on the ridge in what was to be the climactic point of the battle. Wellington had bolstered his centre by bringing in the Dutch and Belgian divisions. Nine battalions of the Imperial Guard attacked Wellington's centre, who were dangerously short of ammunition. The British Foot Guards of Maitland's Brigade faced the Imperial Guard and Wellington's voice rang out: "*Now, Maitland! Now is your time!*" The order rang out: "*Up Guards! Make ready! Fire!*" The Foot Guards gave a withering fire to the French formations who were unable to deploy into line.

They Will Not Stand

Wellington galloped to Sir John Colborne of the 52nd: "*Go on, Colborne! Go on! They won't stand. Don't give them a chance to rally!*" Wellington had gauged the mood of the French army precisely. At this point Colonel Colborne, commanding the 52 Light Infantry Battalion took his men out of the line in an audacious move wheeling them to their right, so they ended up parallel to the left flank of the French formation and delivered a final devastating blow, forcing the French to crumble and retreat. As the 52nd charged with bayonets, Napoleon's last army disintegrated in flight.

Counter Attack

As the Prussian forces emerged from the woods, to roll up the French right flank, Wellington ordered his men off the ridge into a general advance, which cleared the battlefield of all French units. The battle had been hanging in the balance before the arrival of Blücher's Prussian army. The German assault was decisive in crushing Napoleon's reserves and relentlessly pursuing the scattered French forces all the way to Paris, which they entered on 7 July.

Retreat

The French retreat turned into rout as coalition cavalry pursued them until 23:00. Napoleon's elite Young Guard failed to stem the Prussian advance and were annihilated. Napoleon's abandoned carriage was captured, still containing diamonds left behind in the rush to escape. These diamonds became part of King Frederick Wilhelm of Prussia's crown jewels. Over 2,000 French prisoners, including several generals and 78 artillery pieces were captured by the Germans before the end of that day, 18 June 1815. French casualties for the Battle of Waterloo totalled 41,000. Allied casualties, 24,000. The defeat of Waterloo ended Napoleon's rule as Emperor of the French and marked the end of his 100 days return from exile.

Victory

Around 22:00, the Duke of Wellington and Marshall Blücher met at La Belle Alliance, the farm house that had formed Napoleon's headquarters during the battle. Marshall Blücher and the Duke of Wellington saluted each other and warmly shook hands, congratulating one another on their stunning victory.

Abdication and Capture

Napoleon's political support withered away after the defeat at Waterloo and, on 24 June 1815, Napoleon announced his second abdication. Paris surrendered on 4 July 1815. Napoleon's attempt to escape to North America was thwarted by the Royal Navy blockade and he was forced to surrender to Captain Frederick Maitland of HMS Bellerophon on 15 July. The Treaty of Paris was signed 20 November 1815 and Louis XVIII was restored to the throne of France.

Surrender

Napoleon in his letter of surrender to the Prince Regent of England, wrote: *"Royal Highness – exposed to the factions which divide my country, and to the enmity to the great powers of Europe, I have terminated my political career; and come like Themistocles to throw myself upon the hospitality of the British people. I claim from your Royal Highness the protection of the laws and throw myself upon the most powerful, the most constant, and the most generous, of my enemies."*

Lions Mound

Today one can visit the Battlefield of Waterloo. 18km South of Brussels, it is dominated by the large monument, the Lion's Mound. The Lion's mound is a large conical artificial hill built as a symbol of the Allied victory over the French. The Mound is 43 metres high with a circumference of 520 metres and a volume of 390,000 m³. Victor Hugo mentions in his novel, *Les Misérables*, that on visiting that site two years after the completion of the Mound, the Duke of Wellington is said to have remarked: *"They have altered my field of battle!"* As much of the soil used to construct the artificial hill was taken from other parts of the battlefield, the topography has been seriously altered. However the Mound does offer a splendid view of the battlefield to those who ascend the 226 steps leading to the Lion statue and observation area. The Lion statue weighs 28 tonnes and is 4.5 metres in length. The Lion is the heraldic focus of the coat of arms of the Monarch of the Netherlands. The Mound was completed in 1826.

Grenadier Guards

Maitland's First Foot Guards, having defeated the Grenadiers, were awarded the title of Grenadier Guards and adopted bearskins in the style of the French Grenadiers that they had defeated.

Household Cavalry

Britain's Household Cavalry likewise adopted the Cuirass armour of the French cavalry that they had defeated at Waterloo.

Lancers

The effectiveness of the French Lancers led to the widespread adoption of their weapon throughout Europe. The British converted their first light cavalry regiment to lances in 1816.

A Sepulchre for France

Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables*, wrote that: "*At the battlefield of Waterloo there is no French tomb. The whole of that plain is a sepulchre for France.*"

A Legacy of Destruction

Although Napoleon is highly respected as a military commander, at least 6 million Europeans died in the 17 years of war that Napoleon had waged against the rest of Europe. When he went into exile, France was bankrupt and her overseas colonies were lost. The Napoleonic Wars set back Europe's economic life for at least a generation.

Duke of Wellington

Field Marshall Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), was a Protestant from Ireland who served as an Aide-De-Camp to two successive Lord Lieutenants of Ireland. He was also elected as a Member of Parliament in the Irish House of Commons. A Colonel by 1796, Wellesley saw action in the Netherlands and in India, served as Governor of Seringapatam and Mysore in 1799. As a Major General, he won a decisive victory at the Battle of Assaye in 1803. Wellesley rose to prominence as a General during the Peninsula campaign in Spain and Portugal during the Napoleonic Wars and was promoted to Field Marshall after his victory over the French at the Battle of Vitoria in 1813. Following Napoleon's exile in 1814, Wellesley served as British Ambassador to France and was granted a Dukedom. During the 100 Days War in 1815, he crowned his military career with the decisive defeat of Napoleon and the French forces at the Battle of Waterloo. The Duke of Wellington participated in 60 battles during his military career.

Courageous and Decisive

The Duke of Wellington's constant appearance at points of crisis did much for the morale of the troops. He hazarded himself as much as the most frontline soldier. The heavy casualties amongst his staff bear solemn testimony to the risks he ran on that day, and at other battles he fought. Wellington showed the rare ability to always be at the right place at the right time. It was his personal intervention which shored up the damaged and threatened centre after the fall of La Haie Sainte. It was his precise timing and order which initiated the destruction of the Imperial Guard at the climactic point of the battle.

Honoured Leader

Wellington adapted defensive styles of warfare where he minimised his own losses while succeeding in defeating numerically superior forces. Many of his tactics and battle plans are still studied in military academies around the world. He was twice elected Prime Minister of Great Britain. He continued as one of the leading figures in the House of the Lords and remained Commander in Chief of the British Army until his death.

Compassionate Leader

Wellington was known to always rise early. He scorned creature comforts, and even after returning to civilian life, slept in a camp bed. He was described as a practical man who spoke concisely. It was rare that he expressed emotion. His physician reported that he broke down in tears the night after the Battle of Waterloo, unwilling to be congratulated for his victory, because of the high cost

of the battle in terms of the loss of lives of his own forces. Wellington wept when he read the casualty returns: *"I do not know what it is to lose a battle, but certainly nothing can be more painful than to gain one with the loss of so many of one's friends."*

Truth and Valour

Wellington received a state funeral, 18 November 1852 and buried in St. Pauls Cathedral next to Lord Nelson. The bronze memorial sculptured for Wellington's memorial features *Truth tearing the tongue out of falsehood* and *Valour trampling cowardice underfoot*.

Dramatic Reversal of Fortunes

The Battle of Waterloo is one of the most famous battles in history. Waterloo has entered the dictionary as *"a decisive or crushing defeat."* The name itself conjures the most dramatic and decisive reversal of fortune possible. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that had this crucial battle been lost, today we could be speaking French.

"Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them... Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition..."

1 Corinthians 10:6-7,11

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