

Why did Napoleon lose the Battle of Waterloo?

Political Background

On the 26th of February 1815 Napoleon and his entourage of followers left Elba and set sail for France and the 100 days had begun. On the 1st of March Napoleon landed at Golfe Juan on the Mediterranean coast of France. Michel Ney, one of Napoleon's old Marshals, left Paris telling King Louis he would bring Napoleon back in an 'iron cage'. Marshal Ney's Wife remarked 'What utter madness could have seized the Emperor? But he will soon be its first victim. Who will support him? Not a soul.'¹ On March the 12th Marshal Soult, minister of War in France and another of Napoleon's old generals, remarked 'This man is nothing but an adventurer, which his final insane act now clearly proves.'² No one in France would credit that Napoleon was even a slight threat. Louis had a standing army of 200,000 and Napoleon had 600 men with him at Golfe Juan. It seemed Napoleon had already made a massive tactical blunder by landing in the Midi which was a strong pro-Royalist and anti-Bonapartist centre within France.

Ney and his troops faced Bonaparte. Napoleon pushed to the front of his entourage and reputedly threw open his coat and invited the soldiers to shoot 'their emperor'. They cheered and joined him and Ney, forgetting his vow to Louis, threw his arms around his master and welcomed him back. The same happened along the route to Paris with military garrisons and armies flocking to join the throng which surrounded Bonaparte's march on the capital. Twenty days after landing in France Bonaparte reached Paris and the mob turned out in force some even chanting old revolutionary slogans. On the 19th, King Louis fled to Belgium and a Paris broadsheet commented wryly:

'The Tiger has broken out of his den,
 The ogre has been three days at sea,
 The wretch has landed at Fréjus,
 The Buzzard has reached Antibes
 The Invader has arrived in Grenoble
 The General has entered Lyons
 Napoleon slept at Fontainebleu last night
 The Emperor will proceed to Tuileries today'³

This clearly shows the changing attitudes toward Napoleon and shows that the military and the working class in Paris welcomed him back. However Bonaparte faced many challenges in setting up a functioning government. Many ministers refused to accept his authority as legitimate and refused to serve under him. These included Talleyrand and Soult, the Prime Minister and the Minister of War respectively.

On the 7th of April Sir Francis Burdett addressed the British Parliament and admitted 'No man can doubt that Napoleon stands as Emperor of France by the will of the French people.' This is not quite the case and Napoleon had to show a lot of

¹ Quoted on Page 34 'One Hundred Days' Alan Schom. 1993. Penguin Books.

² Quoted on page 12 'One Hundred Days' Alan Schom. 1993. Penguin Books.

³ Quoted Page 19 of 'Waterloo: The Hundred Days' David Chandler

Diplomacy in pulling a functioning Government together. He relied, as he had before, on his brothers and was forced to make peace with Lucien, his youngest brother, whom Napoleon had fallen out with on numerous occasions. There were several armed insurgencies in France but they were not co-ordinated and were crushed easily by the army. Napoleon set about mobilising a larger army knowing that the nations at the congress of Vienna would not sit back and watch whilst another 25 years of war and invasion racked Europe. Napoleon was upset as well that his wife and son refused to join him. He felt, with a Corsican's pride, that this was a huge insult and would affect the people's view of his legitimacy and chance of success.

Eventually Napoleon had formed a workable government in Paris. However he was by no means there by the will of the majority of the French people. Many, quite sensibly, feared that even more of their men would be sent into the meat grinder of a large-scale battle and were loathed to face the consequences of losing another generation of boys. However many of Napoleon's old veterans flocked to his Eagles and a huge army was ready for mobilisation towards the end of May. Napoleon was sure that this was 'make or break time', he wasn't sure if the allies would march on France or would wait for him to come to them in Belgium. Either way he knew if his opposition sensed a weakness in him or his military machine then he could have to face an enemy at his back as well as several armies closing on him. Napoleon was almost certainly sure that resistance fighters had lost him the Peninsular war and tied up vital troops which should have been facing the English by forcing them to protect convoys and messengers.

In Vienna the news that Napoleon had left Elba was greeted with a calm dread and Tsar Alexander I remarked to Wellington 'It is time for you to save the world again.'⁴ The allies mobilised rapidly. The Russian army, still on their return march to Moscow, turned about and headed towards Paris. The Prussian army was still largely intact and marched to Belgium under the command of Generalfeldmarschall Blucher, a well liked 70 year old and a very experienced leader. Wellington was pleased when he heard who his ally was to be but less pleased about the state of the Anglo-Allied forces. The British army had been very effectively demobilised at the end of the Peninsular war and only one third of the English contingent had seen action in a major battle before and of the 106,000 men in the Anglo-Allied army, only 35,000 were British. Of the remainder Wellington was confident of the King's German Legion (KGL) and the Hanoverians. This was about another 30,000 men and Dutch-Belgians made up the remainder of the army. Many of these men had previously fought for Napoleon and felt that they were more French than Dutch (a great many of the Belgian civilian population felt the same way) and most of the men wore French uniform with merely the badge on the head dress changed. The Duke of Brunswick had also attached his small army (of about 7000 men) to Wellington and, although his men were inexperienced, they turned out to be some of the best fighters on the field. Wellington felt confident in well under half of the men which, on paper, were available for his command. The Prussian army was large, experienced and had one of the best cavalries in the world at this time. However although the men and the leaders were good quality, Blucher's chief of staff Gneisenau distrusted Wellington and felt that he would run to the Channel Ports at the first sign of trouble and leave the Prussians to face the music. His lack of faith nearly cost the allies the campaign.

⁴ Quoted in 'The Waterloo Campaign' by Albert Nofi page 29

At the end of May both sides were ready and the allies were preparing for an August invasion of France. The Allies had a total of about 200,000 men at the Belgian frontline whilst Napoleon had 124,000 men on the Belgian border and 56,000 more left in support in France. Wellington admitted at the beginning of June 'By God! I think Blucher and myself can do this business'⁵. Napoleon displayed even more confidence. Dismissing advice for caution from officers who already had faced Wellington he dismissed the Englishman as a mere 'sepooy general'. This refers to Wellington's early career in India where, as well as British troops, he had commanded regiments of natives called sepoys.

From early June there was a complete block of news across the Franco-Belgian border and it was evident that this was the beginning of the campaign but Wellington and Blucher did not expect an attack until July at the earliest. The Allied armies were spread throughout Belgium to ensure that no one place was totally stripped of food. The plan was for the various corps to have concentration points where they would then wait to hear where the army would concentrate. The major flaw with this plan was that they needed two to four days' notice at least to concentrate into a position to be able to fight. This meant that frequent Cavalry patrols roamed the border and even deep into France to gather information about the French movements. On the 15th of June, in the early hours of the morning, French Dragoons galloped across the border at Phillipeville on the Charleroi road which led straight into Brussels. Prussian picquets were swiftly pushed back and, despite minor skirmishing within Charleroi, the brunt of the fighting was borne by the French cavalry. This is significant in itself as Cavalry can only capture ground and not hold it whereas well-placed infantry positions should be able to resist the most determined cavalry charges. This means that the Prussians were not only totally caught off guard by the attack but their troops were scattered very lightly around what turned out to be a critical border crossing on an even more critical road.

The Prussians dispatched a message to the British of the attack but sent it with a severely over-weight officer and it did not reach the British until much later. By midday scattered reports were reaching the Prince of Orange's headquarters, at Braine le Compté, of a French attack and musketry was heard towards France. The British were expecting an attack at Mons which would mean that Napoleon would cut the British off from the Channel ports. That would prevent reinforcements or supplies reaching Wellington and also sever any escape route for the British. This was a favourite manoeuvre of Bonaparte's and was known as the '*Manoeuvr sur les Derrieres*'⁶. Wellington did not seem to realise that this manoeuvre was impossible for Napoleon, as it required superior numbers. The beauty of the Charleroi-Brussels road was that as well as a direct route to Brussels it also represented the border between the British and Prussian armies. If Bonaparte could consolidate his position he was facing two smaller armies rather than one big one.

⁵Quoted Page 60 'Waterloo: The Hundred Days' by David Chandler

⁶ Described in detail in David Chandler's 'The Campaigns of Napoleon' 1966 In the 'Napoleon's Art of war Chapter' it is very detailed and outlines clearly why this manoeuvre was unsuitable for the Waterloo Campaign

The Duke and Duchess of Richmond were throwing a Ball in Brussels on the night of the Fifteenth of June as most of London's society had moved to Brussels for the summer. Despite rumours of a French attack the ball was still going to go ahead. It was now around seven o'clock in the evening and still the British were not reacting seriously to the French invasion which had started almost fifteen hours before. Both Wellington and Orange were waiting for confirmation from General Dornberg at Mons. Still, at this late time, they were convinced that it was merely a feint at Charleroi and the real attack would explode at Mons. Confirmation of the French offensive finally reached Braine le Compte an hour after the Prince of Orange had left for Brussels. The Prince's chief of staff, the Baron de Constant Rebeque, sent an aide after the Prince and studied a map before ordering Baron Saxe Weimar's Brigade to the small crossroads at Quatre Bras. This brigade held the French vanguard up until they retired to Frasnes to rest for the night. The Prussians took up position at Ligny. Quatre Bras then took on an even more important position as it stopped the French from looping around and attacking the Prussian flank. Rebeque ordered I Corps to concentrate at Quatre Bras and awaited the return of the Prince.

The Prince came galloping back to Braine le Compte on one of his escort's horses. He confirmed that the French had halted for the night and that there was still no news from Mons. He then galloped back to the ball. As he entered the Ball Wellington approached him and asked 'What news from your sector?' The Prince told him of a considerable French force on the Charleroi road but could not say if the Emperor was with them or the size of the force. He could confirm that it was comprised of infantry, artillery and cavalry and was probably not just a nuisance raid. The General then asked 'What news from Mons?' and was told that Dornberg had sent cavalry patrols deep into France and still had found no sign of movement. The Duke confirmed that I Corps should concentrate at Quatre Bras and resumed socialising at the ball.

At around midnight a soiled Lieutenant called Harry Webster, an aide of the Prince's, crashed into the ball, crossed the dance floor and handed a dispatch to the Prince. To Webster's obvious dismay the Prince merely pushed it into a pocket and dismissed Webster. Wellington crossed to the Prince's side and asked to examine the report. He read it, and several guests noticed the pained look on his face. Cavalier Mercer reported 'The Duke was evidently dismayed and gestured to the courier (Webster) to kneel'. The Duke then had a hurried conversation with Webster before finding the Duke of Richmond asking 'Have you a good map in the house?' Richmond took the Duke upstairs and Wellington examined the map. Webster's dispatch had carried the confirmation that this was no feint and that the Prussians were willing to fight at Ligny and would the Duke join them there. 'Humbled, by God, he's stolen a march on us, by God he's good!' and then 'Officers to their regiments, I think,' Wellington muttered and an aide left to dispatch the order. Wellington examined the map and, with no mention of helping Blucher, he pointed to it and said 'The army will concentrate here (Quatre Bras) but we will stop them (here he reportedly paused before jabbing his thumb down on Waterloo) here.' The Duke's plan of the campaign was decided without consultation with Blucher and it would appear that the Duke was using Blucher to delay the French and the only assistance the Duke was giving him was to stop the French from assaulting his flank by

holding them at Quatre Bras. However, later in the campaign Wellington was expecting Blucher to come to his aid at Waterloo.⁷

By the time the Duke returned downstairs the Ball was broken up and, apart from a few officers clinging to their girls on the dance floor, everyone else was leaving and shouting for their coats and carriages. Even as the guests left the ball the clerks were hurriedly copying the marching orders and dispatching them. Almost twenty four hours after the French army mobilised, the first British regiments struck camps and began the march to Quatre Bras some officers still wearing dancing shoes and trousers.

Quatre Bras and Ligny

At Quatre Bras regiments had been streaming in throughout the night and by the morning two batteries of artillery, one regiment of cavalry and several battalions of infantry were in position. At around ten o'clock Wellington arrived and, after confirming that as yet there was no movement from the French, he proceeded to Ligny to consult with Blucher. He confirmed that if the French did not attack him then he would march to Ligny to aid Blucher. He then he returned to Quatre Bras to await the French assault. It is inexplicable why Marshal Ney, commanding the French troops at Frasnes, did not attack until the early afternoon. Ney had nothing to gain from waiting, his troops were already assembled and every hour that he delayed was another hour for Wellington's reinforcements to arrive. The French cannonade began between 11 and 12 o'clock and the first French troops began advancing between 12 and 1 o'clock. The Dutch-Belgians holding one of the farms at the front of the British position turned and fled. Despite staff officers trying to rally them they fled straight past another farm which they were meant to fall back on. Thus immediately the main obstacles, which stood between Ney and crossroads, were removed with hardly a volley being fired. The French infantry columns marched towards Saxe Weimar's troops and, although unable to stop them, the troops fell back in good order firing until the wood adjacent to Quatre Bras was at their backs and there they poured volley after volley into the massed French ranks. The French retired and the cannonade resumed. Ney deployed hundreds of skirmishers to harry the British lines and the British deployed more troops to reinforce their own light companies. The newly arrived Duke of Brunswick led a charge of his black-coated cavalry and swept the skirmishers away until a charge of French cavalry hit them. The melee lasted a few minutes and then the Brunswickers broke off leaving the dead Duke behind them. Ney began a series of cavalry charges led by General Kellerman. The first caught General Hackett's brigade in line, reputedly ordered to remain in that formation by the Prince of Orange. The 69th was almost destroyed losing one of their colours in the process as they stood and tried to fight, the 33rd turned and ran for the safety of the woods and the 30th managed to form a crude square. The 33rd lost most of their officers who stayed to fight the cavalry and protect their men.

⁷ This entire sequence of events is catalogued marvellously in Lady Elizabeth Longford's book Wellington the years of the sword and also in Jac Weller's Wellington at Waterloo, in which Weller also talks of Wellington having visited the battle site the year before in 1814 and remarked on it as a fine site for a large battle (page 7)

At one point cavalry managed to grab the crossroads and the British commanders had to flee. However cavalry could not hold ground and a fresh surge of British cavalry swept them away. It seems that Ney's second mistake was not to send guns and Infantry after his cavalry. If he had done so no doubt the battle would have been very different. This mistake was because both Ney and the most senior officers with him were cavalry men and felt that a swift charge was all that was needed to repulse the tenuous hold the British had on the crossroad. Once the cavalry charges stopped and the British had been reinforced there was very little more fighting. Quatre Bras is often viewed as a stalemate but the tactical advantage rested very much with the allies at this stage.

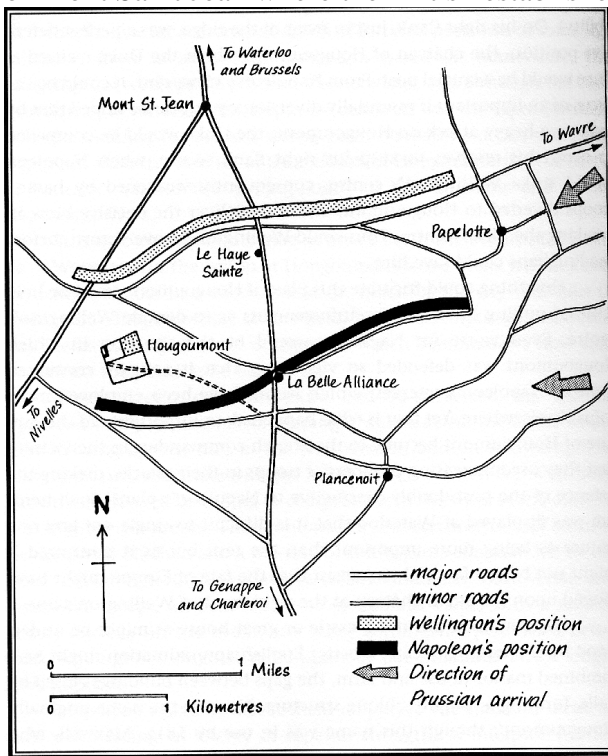
Napoleon had engaged Blucher at Ligny. Despite massive fighting the Prussians were repulsed and 70,000 of them managed to retire in good order. Blucher himself had three horses killed under him. He narrowly evaded capture by discarding his plumed hat and jacket as he lay trapped under his horse. He managed to rejoin his army in the early hours of the 17th. However this delay was critical for Wellington's forces. They spent the night of the 16th ignorant of the fact that the Prussians were no longer guarding their flank at Ligny, in fact quite the opposite, Gneisenau had sent word to Wellington that the French had been repulsed and that the Prussians were still at Ligny. Also if Blucher had not rejoined the Prussians then Gneisenau had no intention of moving to support Wellington. Napoleon could have crushed the Prussians or, equally, Ney the British but neither had consolidated their position. D'Erlon's Corps had spent the 16th marching between Ligny and Quatre Bras and, just as they were about to be committed at one battle, urgent orders sent them back to the other. Thus they did not fire a shot all day. The difference of a whole Corps, if fresh, could have routed the Prussians or brushed the British aside but as it was, neither happened. Thus Bonaparte still had two separate armies to face and so he sent Marshal Grouchy in pursuit of the Prussians to make sure that they could not join Wellington. Then the Emperor turned his attention towards the remains of Wellington's army.⁸

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth of June 1815

The rest of the British army had arrived in the night. The morning of the 17th found the British preparing to pursue a fleeing French army. Wellington sent an aide to find Blucher only to discover that the Prussians were no longer there and that there was an imminent danger of a French army dropping on Wellington's left flank. Wellington sent word for Blucher to join him at Waterloo and gave the order to retire. The British began to retreat towards Waterloo and, as the last regiments left Quatre Bras, a massive downpour began. Just before the downpour started the British rearguard was given a view of a mass of French cavalry with a small man in a cocked hat riding along it. It was the British troops' first view of the Emperor. The rearguard turned and left just as the French began to pursue. The rain saved the British by stopping the French from riding cross-country to harass the flanks of the column. It also absorbed many of the canon shots that were fired after them. Towards evening the French vanguard rode over a crest at a point

⁸ The best account I have found of these events and some controversy surrounding Wellington's loyalty to the Prussians came from a very recent book by Peter Hoffschroer which covers in detail the Battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras.

marked by an inn called La Belle Alliance and a huge cannonade greeted them. The British had revealed their position. The field itself was a valley between two ridges, neither particularly steep. On the French side of the ridge the central point was marked by the inn, whilst on the English side a solitary elm tree marked the crest. There were two farmhouses in the valley between the ridges Hougenout and La Haye Sainte, the former garrisoned by British guardsmen and the latter garrisoned by German riflemen. Beside La Haye Sainte was a sandpit garrisoned by British riflemen of the 95th (the famous Greenjackets). The British formed their infantry up on the reverse slope of the ridge sheltered from view and from cannon fire. Nearly all the troops were out of site apart from one regiment of Dutch-Belgians who were in prominent view and open to fire. Behind the British ridge was a road that ran parallel to the valley and would allow swift, concealed movement of troops during the battle. Slightly further back still was the village of Mont Saint Jean where the British established their field hospitals.



Basic map of Battlefield taken from 'Die Hard!'
Philip J Haythornthwaite , 1996.
Arms and Armour Press

Satisfied with his placement, Wellington and his staff retired to the village of Waterloo where peasant hovels would become very welcome shelter for Earls, Dukes and Lords for the night. The British troops settled down as best they could for a night in the rain. Perhaps some of them remembering, as Mercer did, great battles which had been fought and won after rainstorms. At Agincourt, for example, a small British army had repulsed a larger French force after a night of rain. That evening, Henry Paget, Earl of Uxbridge, the Duke's second in command and commander of his Cavalry, approached the Duke and asked what he intended to do the next day. The Duke commented dryly 'My plans depend on Bonaparte and as he has yet to confide in me I cannot confide in you. Good night sir.'⁹ At 3.30 in the morning Wellington received a message from Blucher confirming that he would march to his aid at Waterloo. However, Gneisenau was left in charge of the

⁹ Paraphrased from Elizabeth Longford's 'Wellington the Years of the Sword'

logistics of this march and so he tried to delay arrival at Waterloo. He made the IV Corps break camp first, at about 3.50am. These were the furthest away from Waterloo. Everyone else was to follow, but not via a direct route. They would have to pass through a small village with a battery of guns in the street effectively blocking it, and, after the infantry and cavalry had passed it this battery was then to follow.

The rain had stopped during the night. When Wellington reached the ridge, the first campfires were already smoking into the morning air as men burnt hoarded, dry wood and finished off their last few tealeaves. There was however no sign of Bonaparte or the French, apart from the smudge of a few fires in the distance. Mist hung in the air of the valley where the Guards were finishing their loopholes in the thick walls of the farms. About this time Wellington made a prophetic statement 'Hard pounding this, gentlemen; let's see who will pound the longest'¹⁰. The British were hungry. They had not had any supply wagons with them since they left for Quatre Bras and they were still somewhere behind them between Brussels and Waterloo. By 9.00 the allied deployment at Waterloo was complete. At 11.30 an army appeared on the opposite ridge; infantry, cavalry and artillery formed in a parade formation dressed smartly in dress uniforms. They continued to file on until the rear rows were obstructed from sight and then again, a vast horde of blue uniformed French troops. Napoleon, dressed in the uniform of the Imperial Guard, galloped his horse along the line and the French cheered themselves hoarse. Wellington turned away and ordered his troops to lie down so that they could not see the display, then he turned his horse and trotted along his own line. An artillery captain called to Wellington that the Emperor would be in his sights in a few seconds and asked permission to fire. Wellington said 'It is not the business of army commanders to fire on each other. Save your ammunition.'¹¹ The French display finished and a barrage of artillery began. At five past twelve French troops advanced on Hougoumont. Just after the cannonade began, Marshal Grouchy, who was leading his corps in a pursuit of the Prussians, heard the guns and instead of turning and reinforcing Napoleon continued to search for the Prussians in the wrong direction. The attack was repulsed fairly easily by a combination of heavy musketry and well-fired shells. Another attack on Hougoumont was led by a Lieutenant Legros, a giant man who wielded an axe and managed to cut through the bar locking the gate. A surge of French burst into the courtyard of the farmhouse and vicious hand-to-hand fighting erupted. Somehow a group of Guards officers managed to reach the gate and shot and barred it again, then the Guards fell on the surviving French and killed all but one of them. Wellington's breakwaters in the middle of the valley remained intact.

The French then launched d'Erlon's corps against the allied centre. Two columns of men surged forward against the allied ridge. The French had fought the British before and knew that columns didn't work against the Redcoats, so this time they planned to deploy into a thick line as they reached the ridge and to overwhelm the thin British line. German riflemen at La Haye Sainte flayed the central column with fire until it was forced to turn and assault the Farm. This central column was no longer a threat. However, the Prince of Orange observing from the ridge saw French milling around La Haye Sainte

¹⁰ Taken from 'The Oxford book of Quotations'. To Sir. W. Scott published in Paul's Letter's.

¹¹ Quoted in 'Wellington at Waterloo' Jac Weller

and a stream of green coated riflemen (from the sandpit and gardens of the farm) streaming back. Assuming that the farm had fallen, he sent a regiment of German troops forward to recapture it. After sweeping the French away, the Germans were so blinded by their own smoke that they did not see the French heavy cavalry, led by Travers and Dubois, which fell on them and in seconds the regiment was routed. The other column was being punished by allied artillery and just as it began to deploy into line the British infantry of Sir. Thomas Picton's Brigade stood up and began to fire volleys into the approaching French. Unable to form line and not in column the French just edged forward. Thomas Picton died, shot in the head by a stray bullet and then the British Heavy Cavalry Brigade charged. They swept through the reforming French cavalry, which had just destroyed the German infantry, and destroyed them in the process, before crashing into the French column. The French broke and the British Heavy Cavalry rode among them slaughtering the defenceless men. Two French Eagles were captured and the cavalry swept on towards the French gun line. They reached the French ridge to find French infantry formed in impenetrable squares and so they rode along the ridge uselessly. The remains of the Life Guards, Scots Royals and the Union Brigade turned back and rode towards safety only to find the French Light Cavalry was between them and the British ridge. The Heavy Brigade, in ones and twos, was destroyed. The British Light Brigade rode out to help but it was too late. One regiment charged with three hundred and fifty men and only twenty-one reached the British ridge again.

At 4.00pm the Prussian IV Corps arrived on the French right flank and Lobau advanced his corps and checked their advance. Marshal Ney, feeling that the Battle must be concluded quickly, launched a mass cavalry attack against the British centre. The French horse reached the British ridge to find the British infantry formed in squares. Unlike their British counterparts, the French rode on and were blasted to destruction by the infantry. Accounts differ in the number of times that the French charged the squares; estimates range from 6 to about 26. However not one square was broken and, because of the proximity of their cavalry, the French gunners were unable to blast the squares apart. At about half past five the French cavalry withdrew and the French eighty-eight-gun bombardment began again. The French sent infantry to assist the cavalry and both sides took heavy losses. Eventually the French fell back. The Prussian II corps had arrived alongside the IV corps and the French were desperately struggling to hold on to the village of Plancenoit. At six o'clock Ney organised his third assault on the Anglo-allied centre and sent the Jeune Guard to assist Lobau at Plancenoit. By 6.30 Ney's assault had taken La Haye Sainte and the Young Guard had pushed the Prussians away from Plancenoit. The French placed guns in the garden of La Haye Sainte and began a close range bombardment of the allied line. At six forty-five the Prussian I corps arrived on Wellington's left and allowed him to strengthen his line. Wellington committed his last reserves at 7.00 and prepared for a final stand. A squad dispatched from the 95th rifles silenced the guns in the garden of La Haye Sainte and, as the remainder of the Prussian army came into sight of the French, Napoleon ordered his Imperial Guard to advance. The remainder of the French Infantry fell in behind the Guards column and the remains of the cavalry rode support on its flanks. The Guard broke into two columns, the main one was halted by the Guards.¹²

¹² now the Grenadier Guards despite the fact that they actually defeated the 'Chasseurs of the Guard' and not the 'Grenadiers of the Guard'

There is debate about how the smaller column was defeated. All accounts agree that redcoats ran away in front of it but no account agrees how they were reformed to stop it. However both columns were repulsed and the British Light Brigade charged and harried the French enough to prevent them from re-forming. The Prussian I corps managed to turn the French right at about 8.15, at 9.00 the Prussians captured Plancenoit and the British Light Cavalry smashed through the French line destroying a formed square in the process, a feat which the French cavalry had failed to match earlier in the day. At 9.30 the Prussians captured Rossomme and Napoleon fled the Battlefield as his army crumbled.

One third of the men who were fighting were taken as casualties. The battle had lasted 10 hours and had accumulated casualties at a rate of 6300 an hour. Other than Gettysburg, this was the bloodiest battle in recent history and out did even the Somme for the amount of casualties taken in one day. On commenting on the losses Wellington said 'The next greatest misfortune to losing a battle is to gain such a victory as this.'¹³

Analysis of the Campaign

Napoleon faced a number of disadvantages from the beginning of the 'one hundred days' period. He had to try to maintain a firm grasp on France whilst fighting off the Allies who severely outnumbered him. He wasn't left with the choice of establishing firm control in France either, as every day that he waited brought the Austrians and the Russians closer to French borders. He had a matter of months before the Prussians and the Anglo-Allied army pressed into France, and, in an invasion he had little chance of winning. The French army was geared towards offence and not defence, as were all of Napoleons strategies. The exception was the winter of 1814 where he fought a dazzling series of rearguard actions which nearly halted the Russian and Austrian advances. Very few of his famous victories had been defensive. Napoleon was also forced to leave a vast number of troops in France to keep control of the province and to maintain his supply routes. There was a genuine threat of a French resistance movement against him.

The Campaign itself started on a high note but there were some serious tactical blunders made by his commanders. If Ney had pushed on and attacked Quatre Bras at night, or even early in the morning of the sixteenth, then he could have left a rearguard at the crossroads and routed the Prussians from the flank. As it happened the fighting of the 16th left very little advantage for the French. The Prussian army was still intact and the British were able to retire in good order. Napoleon's strategy relied on separating the allies and crushing both armies individually. After Ligny this was virtually impossible. The very fact that the Prussians arrived at a critical moment during Waterloo is testament to this failure. The fighting of the sixteenth was largely uncoordinated with d'Erlon's Corps being thoroughly wasted as they were committed at neither battle and at either they would almost certainly have ensured total victory. The French were unlucky in that the weather on the morning of the seventeenth made it almost impossible to conduct a successful pursuit of the retreating armies. If the rain had

¹³ Taken from 'The Oxford book of Quotations' published in Recollections by S. Rogers

held off, the French could have massacred the English whilst they were in column of march and could certainly have prevented them from choosing such an effective battlefield. Chances are that a properly conducted pursuit could have forced Wellington back towards the Channel ports isolating him from Blucher and forcing him to fight a desperate defensive action with little hope of Prussian support. The battle of Waterloo was fought sloppily. After a late start, a mishmash of half-hearted attacks were thrown forward and were beaten back swiftly. This was a waste of resources and left the French in no position, even if they had routed the English, of turning and surviving a Prussian onslaught. By the time the French gained the upper hand in the late afternoon, the Prussians were in sight and the British line was still nowhere near to collapsing. If the French had begun with a mass early morning attack then the chances are that they could have defeated the British by early afternoon and turned to engage the Prussians while they were still strung out in line of march. The tactics used by Ney were almost amateurish and, had Napoleon taken control of the battle himself, possibly the result would have been a co-ordinated rout of the English.

The major mistake of the day was, with the Prussians drawing ever closer, relying on the French artillery to soften the English up enough for a swift resolution to the battle. Wellington's position was well enough chosen to shelter his troops fairly effectively from the massive bombardment. Grouchy's corps (33000 men) in pursuit of the Prussians should have been kept with Napoleon because surely a concentrated army would have had more chance of a swift resolution to the Anglo-Allied resistance.

Napoleon's commanders failed to effectively exploit the mistakes made by the Allies during the campaign. There was only a skeleton force of raw troops at Quatre Bras until the early afternoon. However Ney proceeded very cautiously and made a vital error in trying to capture an objective with cavalry alone. If he had reinforced that cavalry with a corps of infantry, the crossroads would have fallen fairly easily. Ney then made the same mistake at Waterloo. If he had supported his cavalry charge with infantry, and even artillery, then a breakthrough seems likely because the British forced into square would be murdered by a combination of infantry and artillery. By the time that the French used this tactic in the early evening, their troops were so depleted and exhausted that it was doomed to fail. A similar attack a couple of hours earlier would almost certainly have strained the British past a breaking point.

The allies' mistrust of each other could also have been fatal and could have been exploited by early starts on the mornings of the 16th and 18th. Also Wellington's caution in sending one of his more experienced Corps to cover his escape route was also nearly fatal to him.

Ney could also, if proper co-ordination had been in effect, pinned Wellington at Quatre Bras on the morning of the seventeenth whilst the bulk of the French army fell on his left flank. This would have been a swift and brutal end to the Anglo-Allies. Instead they were allowed to march away in good order. The allies also had the advantage of the ground. Jac Weller points out that in the summer of 1814, a year before Waterloo, Wellington reconnoitred the field of Waterloo and declared it an almost ideal battlefield. Hence, when Wellington heard of the Emperor's assault, he was able to choose the battlefield in advance and be confident of its usefulness as a reverse slope position. Wellington had the advantage from the start with reserves to his rear, a powerful ally a

day's march away and the choice of ground. The battle was described in the Duke's words; 'It has been a damn serious business- Blucher and I have lost 30,000 men. It has been a damn nice thing- the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life...By God I don't think it would have done if I had not been there.'¹⁴ Although immodest, Wellington's leadership and timing were critical to defeating Napoleon on the 18th.

For all his bloody-mindedness, Gneisenau led such a good pursuit into the night of the 18th and morning of the 19th that he destroyed any chance of the French army rallying and the rest of the campaign was concluded fairly swiftly.

¹⁴ Taken from 'Wellington at Waterloo'. Jac Weller, 1967. Greenhill Books.

Chronology

26 Feb	Napoleon escapes from Elba
1 March	Napoleon lands at Golfe Juan.
13 March	Allied declaration outlawing Napoleon
20 March	Napoleon enters Paris
25 March	Allies confirm coalition to prosecute war against Napoleon.
1 June	Champ de Mai ceremony
12 June	Napoleon leaves Paris to join Armée du Nord
15 June	Napoleon advances into Belgium, meets strong Prussian pickets around Charleroi
16 June	Battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras
17 June	Retreat from Quatre Bras to positions at Mont St Jean
18 June	Battles of Waterloo June 18, 1815
21 June	Napoleon returns to Paris
22 June	Napoleon abdicates in favour of Napoleon II
25 June	Napoleon moves from Elysée to Malmaison
29 June	Napoleon moves from Malmaison to Rochefort
8 July	Louis XVIII enters Paris
15 July	Napoleon boards H.M.S. <i>Bellerophon</i> and sails for Plymouth.
24 July	Louis 'promulgates ordinances against traitors'
15 Oct	H.M.S. <i>Northumberland</i> lands Napoleon on St. Helena
November	Second Treaty of Paris, war concluded.
21 Nov-	Trial of Marshal Ney
6 Dec	
7 Dec	Ney executed.

June 18, 1815

- 3:30 AM Wellington receives confirmation from Blücher that he will come to his aid at Mont-St-Jean.
- 3:48 AM The Prussian IV Corps breaks camp near Wavre.
- 9:00 AM The Anglo-Allied Army completes its deployment at Mont-St-Jean.
- 11:30 AM Reille begins his assault at Hougomont
A 24-gun bombardment of the Allied centre begins.
- 11:15 AM Grouchy hears the cannonade but decides not to march to the sound of the guns.
- 12:00 AM Lobau deployed to guard the French right flank.
- 1:00 PM French bombardment increases to 88 guns and the rate of fire increase to two-to-three rounds per minute.
- 1:30 PM D'Erlon's I Corps, with the support of Travers' and Dubois' cuirassiers, begins its assault on the Allied centre.
- 1:45 PM Kempt countercharges, stopping the assault, Picton dies.
- 2:00 PM Travers and Dubois fall on Kempt and Pack, driving them back.
Uxbridge orders countercharges with two brigades of British heavy cavalry repel the French. Some French artillery is overrun, but a French cavalry countercharge inflicts heavy losses on the British cavalry.
- 4:00 PM Prussian IV Corps emerges from the Bois-de-Paris.
Lobau advances and checks the Prussian advance.
- 4:00 PM Ney launches cavalry charge on Anglo-Allied right centre, which soon escalates into a mass cavalry attack.
- 5:00 PM Remainder of French Cavalry committed to mass charge.
Prussian II corps arrive and advances along the left of IV corps.
- 5:30 PM Reille's sends infantry to support the weak French cavalry attack on the Anglo-Allied centre. Both sides taking heavy losses.
Lobau desperately struggles to defend Plancenoit.
- 6:00 PM Ney organises his third assault on the Anglo-Allied centre.
The Young Guard is sent to support Lobau's defense of Plancenoit.
- 6:30 PM Ney's assault takes La-Haye-Saint, opening Anglo-Allied centre.
Prussians pushed out of Plancenoit, and pause to regroup.
- 6:45 PM Prussian I Corps arrives on Anglo-Allied left, allowing Wellington to repair his broken line.
- 7:00 PM Chasse ordered to fill in the gap in the Anglo-Allied line.
Wellington commits the Brunswickers, his last reserves.
- 7:30 PM Middle Guard assault on Anglo-Allied right centre.
- 8:15 PM Middle Guard's attack is repulsed.
Prussian I Corps attack turning French right.
- 9:00 PM Prussians retake Plancenoit.
Imperial Guard makes last stand.
- 9:30 PM Prussians take Rossomme.
Napoleon leaves the battlefield as his army disintegrates.

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