



The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras by Elizabeth Thompson, 1884. [National Gallery of Victoria]

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

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The Waterloo Campaign started when the French L'Armée du Nord commanded by Emperor Napoleon crossed the Belgium-France frontier on 15 June 1815. Its interlinked battles took place over the next five days culminating in Napoleon's last great battle near a small Belgium town called Waterloo on 18 June 1815.

The Battle of Ligny was fought between the main body of the French L'Armée du Nord commanded by Emperor Napoleon and Generalfeldmarschall Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher's Prussian Army on 16 June 1815.

The Battle of Quatre Bras was fought between the Duke of Wellington's Anglo-Dutch Army and the Left Wing of the French L'Armée du Nord commanded by Marshal Michel Ney on 16 June 1815.

The Battle of Wavre was fought between the Prussian Rearguard commanded by Lieutenant General Thielemann and the Right Wing of the French L'Armée du Nord commanded by Marshal Grouchy. It began on the 18th and split over into the following day to end on 19 June 1815.

The Battle of Waterloo, the most famous of the four battles, was fought between the main body of Emperor Napoleon's L'Armée du Nord and the Duke of Wellington's Anglo-Dutch Army supported by Prince Blücher's Prussians on 18 June 1815.

The Battle of Ligny was to be Emperor Napoleon's last great victory. The Battle of Waterloo was to be Napoleon Bonaparte's first personal defeat and down fall. When his Grande Armée was defeated that day any hope that he had of consolidating his position as the Emperor of the French and undisputed ruler of France faded and ultimately died.

Waterloo

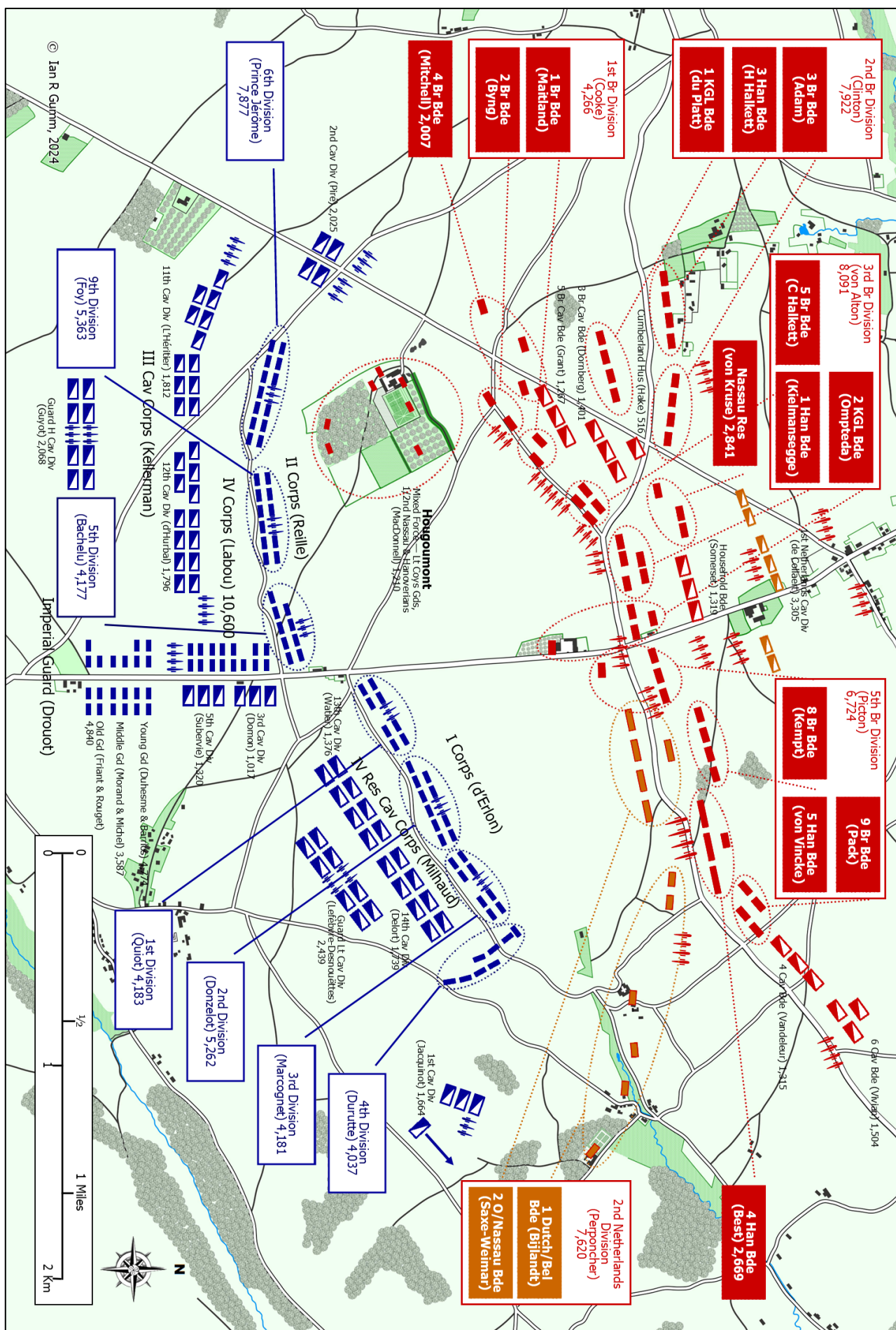
Following Napoleon's victory at Ligny and the stalemate at Quatre Bras on 16 June 1815 Wellington's Anglo-Dutch Army withdrew to the area south of Mont-Saint-Jean near the hamlet of Waterloo and the Prussians withdrew towards Wavre. Napoleon's forces re-grouped and the bulk under the Emperor followed up the Anglo-Dutch along the axis of the Chaussée, the Charleroi to Waterloo road. By the evening of 17 June 1815, Napoleon had reached the farmhouse at Le Caillou where he spent the night. The next morning, he continued northwards towards Wellington's waiting Army.

Napoleon's French at Waterloo numbered 48,950 infantry, 15,765 cavalry, and 7,232 artillerymen with 246 guns. These were not the best forces that the Emperor had ever commanded. Many of his old troops had been dispersed, and the regiments had taken in new, untried recruits. Muskets and ammunition were in short supply, as was equipment. But perhaps his greatest weakness was his commanders, for they were not his A-team but his second eleven.

Wellington's Anglo-Dutch Army at Waterloo consisted of 49,608 infantry, 12,402 cavalry, and 5,645 artillerymen with 156 guns. The army was a mixture of British, King's German Legion, Hanoverians, and Brunswickers, some of whom had fought with Wellington in the Peninsular War and others had been fighting in America. There were also 7,620 Dutch, some of whom had been former soldiers of Napoleon, but all were to prove themselves worthy of the Duke's praise.

The night before the battle it had rained heavily and the ground was wet and soggy, At 11:00 am the French artillery began pounding Hougoumont Chateau on Wellington's right-wing and half an hour later the French left, Prince Jerome's French 6th Infantry Division, advanced with column after column descending from the southern ridge to attack through the wood. The attacking Frenchmen drove the defending Hanoverian riflemen and Nassau infantrymen steadily back through the wood towards the Chateau. Once at the Chateau the French surged around its walls to rush the main gates.

The Chateau and farm complex was defended by the Guardsmen of the Light Companies of the British 2nd (Coldstream) and 3rd (Scots) Guards under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James MacDonnell. Wellington had ordered Lieutenant Colonel MacDonnell to "defend the post to the last extremity" and his guardsmen certainly did just that. As the French came charging through the main gate the British guardsmen counterattacked to drive them back. In the struggle, the gates were damaged, but Lieutenant Colonel MacDonnell's men forced it shut and Sergeant Graham of the Coldstream Guards dropped the bar in place. The first French attack at Hougoumont had been repelled. Thereafter, what had begun as a French diversionary assault to draw Wellington's troops towards the right became a battle that sucked more and more Frenchmen into the affray.



The opposing forces at Waterloo. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The massed French guns to the right of the Chaussée began firing at the centre of the Wellington's line at 11.35 am. The effect that this normally would have attained on the waiting enemy was significantly degraded by the soft ground absorbing the impact of the cannonballs. This, combined with the Duke of Wellington's reverse slope defence meant that the massed French Batteries normally devastating barrage was largely ineffectual.

At 1:30 pm D'Erlon's I Corps began its advance to the right of the Chaussée its right flank covered by Jacquinet's Cavalry Division and its left covered by Dubois's Cavalry Brigade. As they passed through the French gun line the guns fell silent and the thin red line of Anglo-Dutch skirmishers began to fall back. The Anglo-Dutch guns began to take a heavy toll on the massed ranks of the French divisions, but on and on they came.

The left of D'Erlon's Corps became embroiled with the defending King's German Legion in La Haye Sainte, and their right tried to fight their way into Papelotte. The two central divisions advanced on Bylandt's Dutchmen deployed on the forward slope of the ridge and they began to give ground.

As the Dutchmen crested the ridge and began to drop into the dead ground of the reverse slope, they passed through the lines of Sir Thomas Picton's veterans of the 5th Division. General Picton's 7,000 British soldiers moved forward over the crest to confront the advancing Frenchmen, and the two opposing forces exchanged musket fire at close range and a fierce close-quarters battle ensued.

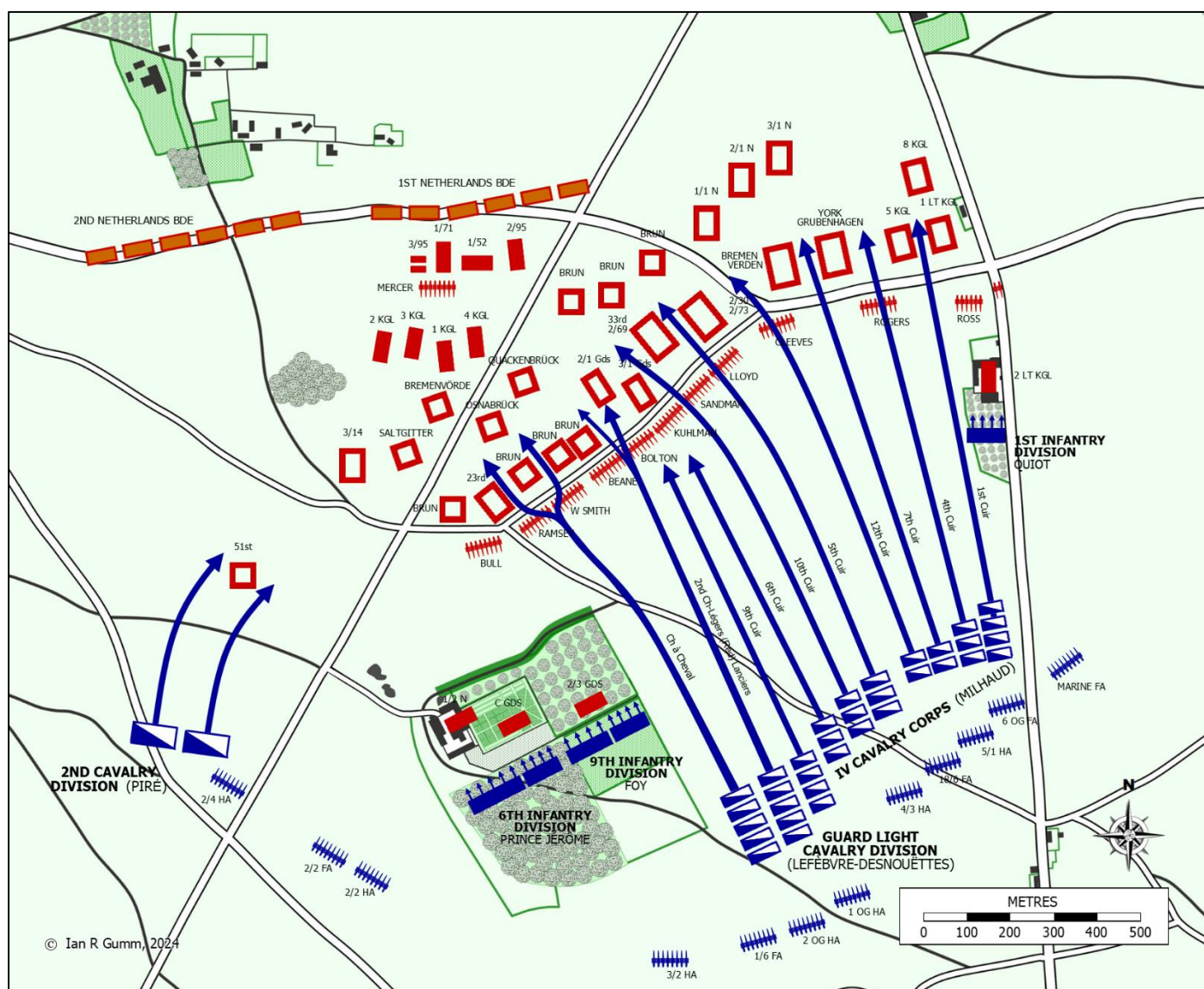
At 2.20 pm Lord Uxbridge gave the order for the British heavy Cavalry to drive the French off the ridge. Five minutes later Somerset's Household Brigade advanced up the reverse slope of Wellington's ridge without too much hindrance from the Anglo-Dutch infantry that had already formed squares. They reached the crest and saw Debois's Cuirassiers across the sunken road. The two heavy cavalry contingents clashed: 840 British against 780 French. The British had the advantage of a downhill charge as they smashed into the French and Dubois's Cuirassiers turned and fled hotly pursued by Somerset's men. The 2LG went to the left of La Haye Sainte and the 1LG, 1DG and RHG went to the right.

East of the Chaussée Ponsonby's Union Brigade charged into the mêlée on the ridge and dispersed D'Erlon's French infantry. Passing through the Frenchmen the Union Brigade pressed on across the battlefield and into the French guns. The French cavalrymen of the 2 Brigade 13th Cavalry Division and 1st Brigade 14th Cavalry Division charged the broken up and tiring Squadrons of the Union Brigade as Jacquinet's 1st Cavalry Division charged into the Union Brigade's flank. Together the French cavalry drove the Union Brigade back to Wellington's ridge inflicting heavy casualties on the British horsemen as they tried to escape on their blown horses.

As the British Heavy Cavalry charged Prince Blücher's Prussians began to arrive in the vicinity of the battlefield. Seeing the immediate danger that this presented to him Emperor Napoleon sent Lieutenant General Lobau's French VI Army Corps with 2 French Cavalry Divisions in support to hold them back. Napoleon had now committed all of his infantry reserves, except for his Imperial Guard, and now faced Wellington's Anglo-Dutch at a numerical disadvantage.

The British Heavy Cavalry Charge at 2.25 pm 18th June 1815. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The next major development in the battle took place at 4.00 pm when Marshal Ney launched the French Cavalry against the Anglo-Dutch to the west of the Chaussée. Believing that he saw movement in Wellington's centre that he took to be the beginning of a general withdrawal from the battlefield Marshal Ney gave the order for the French Cavalry to charge. Marshal Ney led Milhaud's IV Cavalry Corps, some 4,800 horsemen in 10 Regiments forward at a trot as eleven French artillery batteries provided a heavy preliminary bombardment that continued by firing over the heads of the cavalrymen as they advanced. As they made their way through the standing crops and over the sodden ground the pace was little more than a walk. Their combined frontage was about 800 metres between Hougomont and the Chaussée and the distance to the ridge on which the Anglo-Dutch were deployed was about 1000 metres.



The Cuirassiers of Lieutenant General Milhaud's IV Heavy Cavalry Corps and the Chasseurs and Lancers of Lieutenant General Lefebvre-Desnoettes' Imperial Guard Light Cavalry Division charged just as their British counterparts had done not so long before, but they rode up the heavy ground of the slope rather than down from the ridge. As they struggled up into the wait squares of Wellington's centre their charge had little impetus.

Captain Mercer's G Troop RHA had been ordered to abandon their guns when the French Cavalry were upon them and retire to the safety of the nearby infantry square. However, the infantry square into which G Troop was to take cover was that of the Brunswick Infantry and Captain Mercer did not trust them to hold their ground when they saw the British artillerymen retiring. He ordered his men to stand by their guns and keep firing up to the very last minute. As the French Cavalry were upon them, they were to take cover behind the low earthen bank of the sunken road and under their guns as best they could. Thus, on the afternoon of 18 June 1815 G Troop, RHA famously stood their ground as the French Cavalry charged. They continued to fire grapeshot into the French Cavalry as they came on reaping a terrible harvest.

By standing firm Captain Mercer disobeyed the Duke of Wellington's orders. Had he and G Troop abandoned their guns however, the outcome of the battle could have been very different indeed. As it was the Battle of Waterloo was won by the evening of the 18 June 1815. In all, G Troop lost 140 of its 226 horses dead or injured at the Battle of Waterloo and it fired a total of 700 rounds, which was far more than any other Horse Artillery Troop in the battle.

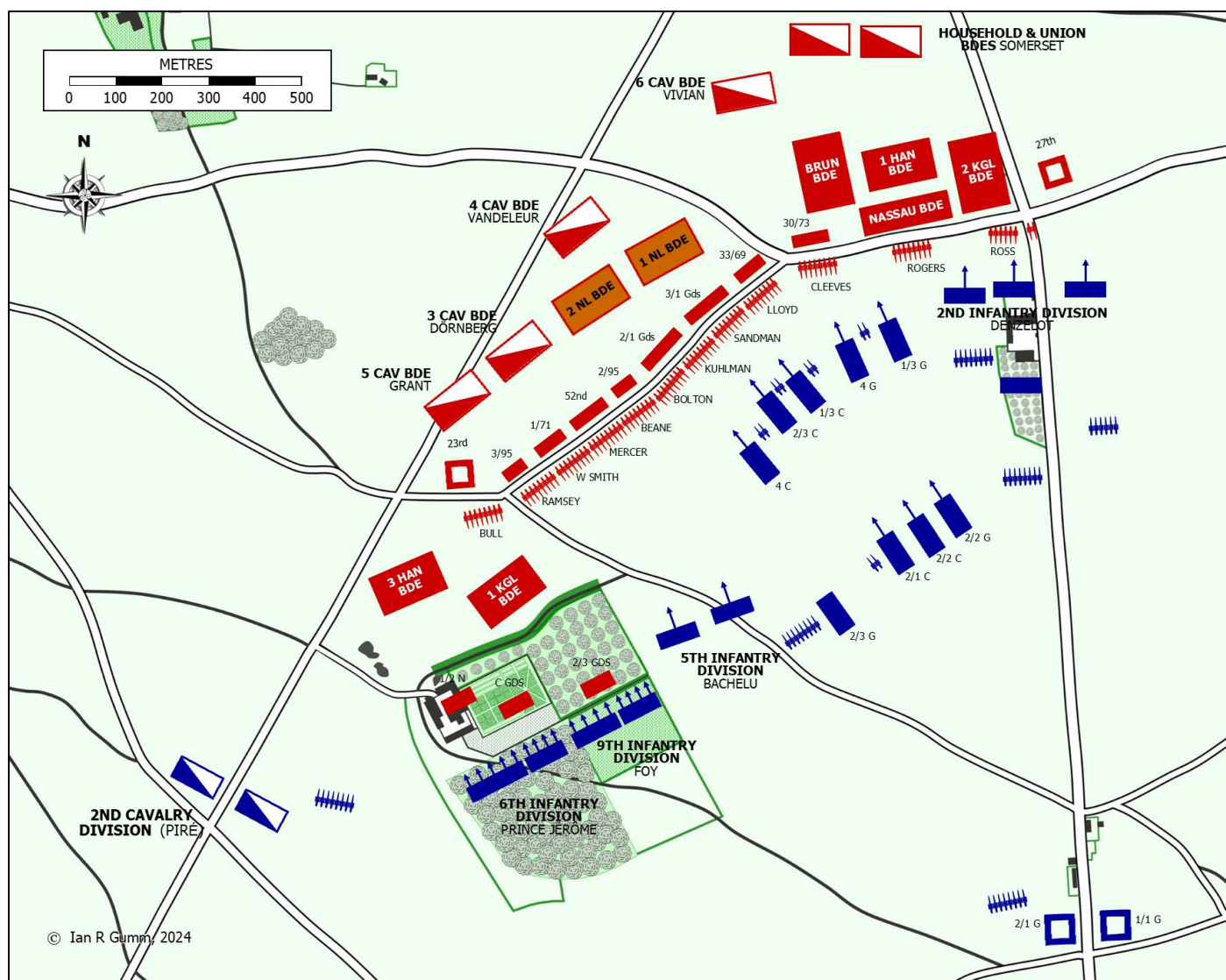
The French cavalrymen attacked the solid Anglo-Dutch Infantry squares. These infantry squares were four ranks deep and vulnerable to enemy artillery or infantry but bristled with their rows of fixed bayonets that were deadly to the enemy's cavalry unless they could be broken up. The French Cavalry attack relied upon impetus and its psychological shock to penetrate the infantry square, but the impetus was lost as the Heavy Cavalry struggled up the slope. The infantry within the squares knew that if they could hold together, they were more deadly to the cavalry than the cavalry was to them. The Anglo-Dutch infantry squares held, and the French cavalrymen were beaten off.

Following the initial repulse of his French Cavalry Marshal Ney ordered forward Lieutenant General Kellerman's French III Cavalry Corps and Lieutenant General Guyot's Imperial Guard Heavy Cavalry Division. The combined cavalrymen of four French Cavalry Divisions charged the Anglo-Dutch Infantry squares time and time again, but the repeated attacks were all driven off.

The British Artillery to the flanks fired into the French cavalry as they recoiled down the slope away from the Anglo-Dutch squares to regroup. The combined Anglo-Dutch Light Cavalry regiments, the Netherlands Heavy Cavalry Brigade, and some of the remnants of the Household Cavalry Brigade counterattacked. Marshal Ney had moved some of his artillery up towards the Anglo-Dutch centre. As the combined Anglo-Dutch cavalry charged he began to bombard the infantry squares. Had there been any French Infantry reserves at this point Marshal Ney would almost certainly have broken through Wellington's centre, but there were not and exhausted his French cavalrymen withdrew.

On the French right, the situation in Plancenoit was temporarily stabilised and Napoleon decided to commit a large portion of his last infantry reserve, the Imperial Guard. The Middle Guard of the Chasseur Division marched forward

through a hail of canister and musket balls to attack Wellington's first line. They pushed back the Anglo-Dutch centre which once again was in danger of being broken. Elements of Lieutenant General von Ziethen's Prussian I Army Corps finally arrived and helped to relieve the pressure on Wellington's left flank. This allowed the Duke of Wellington to draw battalions from his left to strengthen his weakened centre.



The Imperial Guard Advance 7.30 pm 18th June 1815. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

Lieutenant General Baron Chassé's 3rd Netherlands Division was sent forward to reinforce Wellington's line to halt the French Imperial Guard advance. He deployed his artillery, and their fire took the victorious Frenchmen in the flank, but this still couldn't stop the advance of the Imperial Guard. Baron Chassé ordered his 1st Brigade to charge.

To the right of the 3rd Netherlands Division were the 1,500 British Guardsmen of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions the 1st (Grenadier) Foot Guards under the command of Major General Maitland. They had been lying down to protect themselves from the French artillery, but as one they rose to fire devastating volleys into the shocked Imperial Guard at point-blank range. The French Chasseurs deployed to return the fire and after a duel that lasted about 10 minutes the outnumbered French began wavering.

The British Guardsmen prepared for the bayonet charge, but as they then began to advance a fresh French Chasseur Imperial Guard Battalion arrived. With the situation reversed the British Guardsmen retired with the French in pursuit. The French Imperial Guardsmen were in their turn halted by flanking fire from the 52nd Regiment of Major General Frederick Adam's British 3rd Brigade. This onslaught was enough to send the last of the French Imperial Guard back towards their lines in disarray and chaos.

A wave of panic spread through the French front line at the sight of their Imperial Guard falling back. The hitherto undefeated Imperial Guard had been stopped and the words of "La garde recule. Sauve qui peut!" (The Guard retreats. Save yourself if you can!) Rippled along the French ranks. The Duke of Wellington judged that the moment was now right as Napoleon had done at Ligny. Standing up in the stirrups of Copenhagen, his horse, he waved his hat in the air to signal the general advance. The Anglo-Dutch Infantry who had stood to in their lines all day were at last unleashed. They rushed forward behind the retreating French Imperial Guard to throw themselves at the remaining ranks of French Infantrymen.

At about the same time as the Imperial Guard was pushed back from the ridge; the Prussians drove the French out of Plancenoit. With this, the whole of the French line began to disintegrate under the general advance of the Anglo-Dutch Army from their front and the Prussians from the rear. The last coherent French force remaining on the battlefield was two battalions of the Old Guard at La Belle Alliance. They were the final reserve and a personal bodyguard of the Emperor. Any possibilities that Napoleon had of holding his now defeated L'Armée du Nord together to prevent a complete rout seemed to melt with the Prussian arrival. As the leading elements of the Anglo-Dutch Cavalry approached the two battalions of the Old Guard formed squares to protect their Emperor, one on either side of the inn. Napoleon commanded the square that had been formed on rising ground to the west of the inn until he was persuaded to leave the field. The Prussians engaged the square to the left, and General Adam's Brigade charged the square on the right. As dusk fell both squares withdrew in relatively good order away from the battlefield towards France, but the rest of the L'Armée du Nord fled in panic. The Anglo-Dutch cavalry continued to pursue the fleeing Frenchmen until 11.00 pm, whilst the Prussians harassed them throughout the night.

A Battle had been won and lost. Wellington and Blücher met following the battle at La Belle Alliance at 9.00 pm, they had jointly won the battle. Napoleon had left the field when the last of his Imperial Guard had formed their squares to defend him. He had lost the day and with it any chance he had to establish himself as the undisputed ruler of France.

Wellington's Anglo-Dutch suffered around 15,000 dead and wounded and Blücher's Prussians some 7,000. Napoleon's L'Armée du Nord lost 25,000 dead and injured, plus 8,000 taken prisoner.

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