

## BASILDON AND THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

### JOHN COLE

**Born 1785 – Buried 10 April 1836 All Saints Church North Benfleet Essex Aged 51 years.**

John Cole would never have dreamed of this. A soldier in the Second Battalion of the Grenadier Guards of Lieutenant Colonel Banlay's Company, he was no more glory-seeking when he marched across the rolling Belgian hills to Waterloo in June 1915. He was thirty years of age.



Grenadiers were originally special assault troops who threw grenades (iron balls filled with gunpowder) at the enemy, as well as using muskets. In theory they were chosen for their height and strength, but in reality, they were usually selected from veterans and more experienced soldiers. The thought that one day, the name of Waterloo would be linked with the name of the Commander in Chief Wellington in the history of the world would never have occurred to him.

The thought that he might die before the war with Bonaparte was out, certainly did. For this was not the first time that Britain had faced the might of France. The thought that 150 years later a Grenadier Officer would lay a wreath on his grave at North Benfleet would have seemed laughable.

Guardsman Cole survived his wounds and went home to North Benfleet and died there twenty years later in April 1836. He left his campaign medal to the Curate of the Parish who in turn erected a gravestone to his memory. His tombstone today now two hundred years later is believed to be the only surviving grave of a private soldier who marched home from Waterloo.



#### **Stations and Combats – 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.**

1803: June formed at Chelmsford Essex.

1804: January – to Liverpool; to Dublin; Moate; Clara; Kilbeggan

1805: July - Kilbeggan; Curragh, Dublin; Strabane; Draft of 7 Officers and 400 men to 1/30<sup>th</sup>. 1806: At Strabane; December 246 men to 9<sup>th</sup> Garrison Battalion.

1807: Londonderry; Longford; Athlone; May – Curragh; Athlone.

1808: Londonderry, Longford; Athlone: May – Curragh; Athlone.

1809: Athlone; Dublin; Kinsale; Cork: March – Portugal: April – Lisbon: June – Gibraltar.

1810: Gibraltar: April – Five companies to Tarifa: May – Battalion re-united at Cadiz: October – Lisbon; Sobraj; Mont Agraca; Torres Vedras.

1811: Fuentes d’Onoro; Fuentes Guinaldo.

1812: Badajoz; Salamanca, retreat from Burgos; Villamurial (Light Company taken Prisoners of War). November – draft of 90 men from depot; December – reduced to four companies and into 4<sup>th</sup> Provisional Battalion; Lamego.

1813: February – 12 Officers and 75 men invalided home: May – ordered home to recruit; Lisbon; June – England: September reunited with six depot companies (from Hull) in Jersey.

1814: January – drafts to 1/30<sup>th</sup> in India: to Flanders: Loenhout; Bergen-op-Zoom; Antwerp; October – draft of 215 recruits.

1815: Soignies; Quatre Bras; Waterloo; Paris; Army of Occupation; December Calais; Dover; Margate; to Ireland – Cork.

1817: 24<sup>th</sup> April Disbanded in Ireland.

#### **British Regiments present at the battle:**

1st and 2nd Life Guards now the Life Guards

Royal Horse Guards now the Blues and Royals

King’s Dragoon Guards now the Queen’s Dragoon Guards

Royal Dragoons now the Blues and Royals

Royal Scots Greys now the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards

6th Inniskilling Dragoons later the 5th Inniskilling Dragoon and now the Royal Dragoon Guards

7th Hussars later the Queen’s Own Hussars and now the Queen’s Royal Hussars

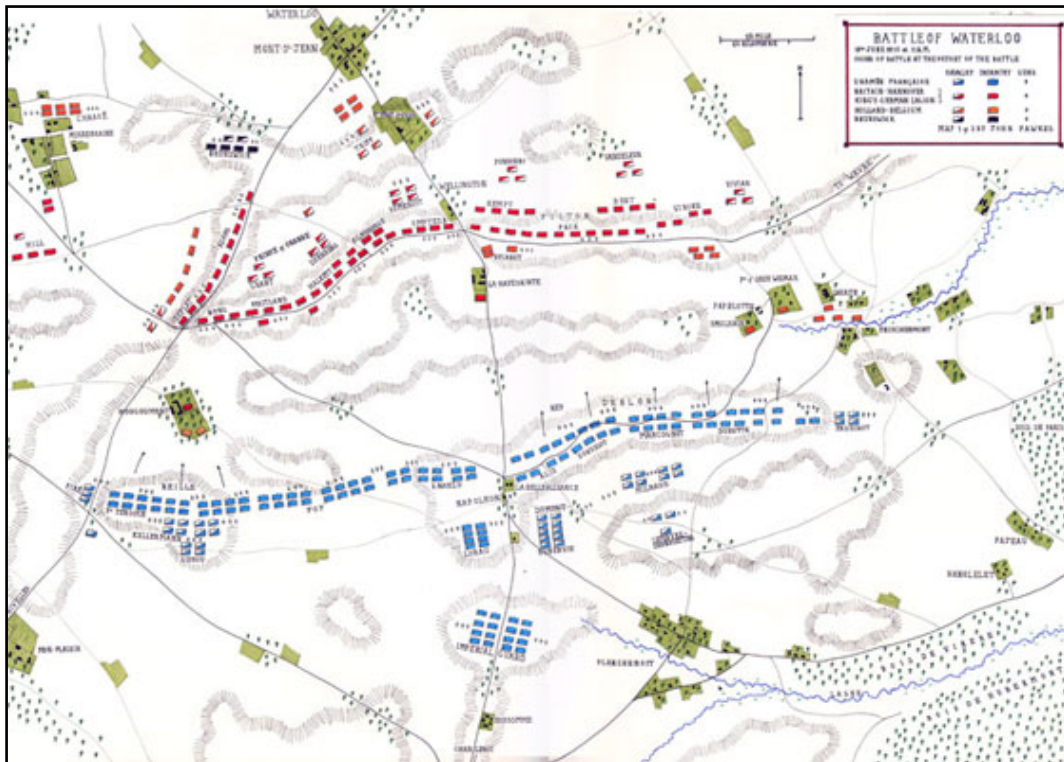
10th and 11th Hussars later the Royal Hussars and now the King's Royal Hussars  
 12th Light Dragoons now the 9th/12th Lancers  
 13th Light Dragoons later the 13th/18th King's Royal Hussars and now the Light Dragoons  
 15th Light Dragoons later the 15th/19th Hussars and now the Light Dragoons  
 16th Light Dragoons later the 16th/5th Lancers and now the Queen's Royal Lancers  
 18th Light Dragoons later the 13th/18th King's Royal Hussars and now the Light Dragoons  
 Royal Artillery  
 Royal Engineers  
 1st Foot Guards now the Grenadier Guards  
 2nd Coldstream Guards  
 3rd Foot Guards now the Scots Guards  
 1st Foot now the Royal Scots  
 4th King's Own Regiment of Foot now the King's Own Royal Border Regiment  
 14th Foot later the West Yorkshire Regiment and now the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire  
 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers  
 27th Foot, the Inniskilling Fusiliers and now the Royal Irish Regiment  
 28th Foot later the Gloucestershire Regiment and now the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment  
 30th Foot later the East Lancashire Regiment and now the Queen's Lancashire Regiment  
 32nd Foot later the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and now the Light Infantry  
 33rd Foot the Duke of Wellington's Regiment  
 40th Foot later the South Lancashire Regiment and now the Queen's Lancashire Regiment  
 42nd Highlanders now the Black Watch (the Royal Highland Regiment)  
 44th Foot later the Essex Regiment and now the Royal Anglian Regiment  
 51st Light Infantry later the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and now the Light Infantry  
 52nd Light Infantry later the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and now the Royal Green Jackets  
 69th Foot later the Welsh Regiment and now the Royal Regiment of Wales  
 71st Highland Light Infantry now the Royal Highland Fusiliers  
 73rd Highlanders the Black Watch  
 79th Highlanders later the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, then the Queen's Own Highlanders and now the Highlanders  
 92nd Highlanders the Gordon Highlanders and now the Highlanders  
 95th Rifles later the Rifle Brigade and now the Royal Green Jackets

In 1814, twenty-five years of war finally ended with the surrender of the Emperor Napoleon and his banishment to the Mediterranean island of Elba. The European powers began the task of restoring their continent to normality and peace.

On 1st March 1815 Napoleon escaped from Elba and landed in France. Nineteen days later he was in Paris and resumed his title as Emperor. His army rallied towards him. The soldiers who had been captured during the years of fighting had been released enabling Napoleon to reform his Grande Armée. The European allies reassembled their armies and prepared to resume the war to overthrow the emperor yet again.

Napoleon resolved to attack the British, Prussian, Belgian and Dutch armies before the other powers could come to their assistance. He marched into Belgium.

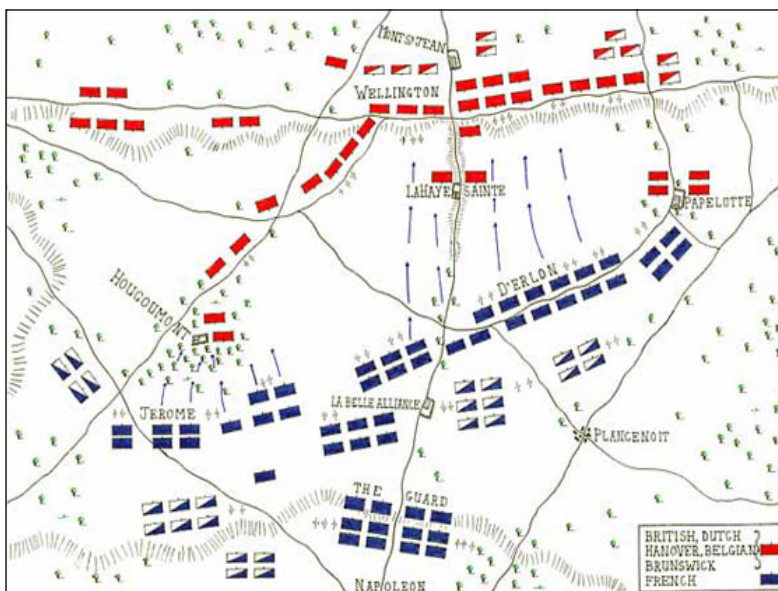




### The Battle of Waterloo: The positions of the armies

The Duke of Wellington took up a position on the Brussels Road where it emerges from the woods of Soignies south of the village of Waterloo. The road crosses a low ridge and descends into a valley before rising on the other side to a further ridge. In the valley, below the first crest, lay La Haye Sainte Farm and on the road at the southern side of the valley, below the second crest, stood La Belle Alliance Farm. During most of the battle the Germans occupied La Haye Sainte, and the French used La Belle Alliance as a headquarters.

To the North of the first crest the Namur Road crossed the Brussels Road. The main British, German, Belgian and Dutch positions lay along the Namur Road, behind the first crest. The French approach to the battle was up from the country to the South of La Belle Alliance. In the valley to the front of the right wing of the British line stood Hougoumont Farm, the key to Wellington's right flank. Held by the light companies of the Coldstream and Third Guards, there would be fighting around Hougoumont all day.



### "The Battle of Waterloo at 2pm: D'Erlon's infantry attack past La Haye Sainte"

Lying by the road leading to the centre of Wellington's position capturing La Haye Sainte was a crucial goal for the French army.

To the East of the Duke's army lay Papelotte, another farm that would be the centre of a ferocious struggle, particularly as the Prussian Army appeared on the field at the end of the afternoon.

In the Duke's centre stood the farm of Mont St Jean, used as a

headquarters and hospital. It rained heavily during the night of 17th June 1815. The French artillery commanders insisted that the attack did not begin until the ground had dried out sufficiently for the guns to manoeuvre without sticking in the mud.

**The Battle of Waterloo:** The French attack began at 11am.

The morning and afternoon of the 18th of June 1815:

At 11am the French bombardment of Hougoumont Farm, on the extreme right of the Allied line, began the battle. The British artillery on the ridge behind the farm replied, cannonading the French infantry massed for the attack on the far side of the valley.

At midday Prince Jerome ordered the assault on Hougoumont, and the French infantry columns of his division moved forward to begin the day long struggle around the farm buildings. At about 1.30pm Marshal Ney brought forward 74 French guns over the ridge opposite La Haye Sante followed by the 17,000 infantry of D'Erlon's corps to begin the attack on the Duke of Wellington's centre and left.

The French cannonade began and was later described by veterans as the heaviest they had experienced. The duke ordered his infantry battalions to move behind the ridge and to lie down. This had the effect of shielding them from the worst of the cannonade. Only Bilandt's Belgian-Dutch Brigade was left on the exposed slope and suffered heavily.

After half an hour the barrage stopped, giving way to the roar of drums as Ney's columns advanced to the attack. The French infantry passed La Haye Sante and marched up to the crest of the ridge, where Picton's 5th division was positioned. As part of the advance a furious assault began on La Haye Sante, held by the King's German Legion, which was to continue intermittently for the rest of the day until the German troops ran out of ammunition and were finally overwhelmed.

As the French infantry approached the hedge at the top of the ridge the line of British infantry stood, fired a volley, and charged, driving back the massed French columns. Cavalry formations were ordered to charge in support of the infantry attack; the Household Brigade (1st and 2nd Lifeguards and Royal Horse Guards), the Union Brigade (Royals, Scots Greys and Inniskillings) and Vivian's Hussar Brigade (10th and 18th Hussars and 1st Hussars, King's German Legion).

It is notoriously difficult to pull up cavalry committed to an attack and the British regiments did not readily respond to the recall orders. In particular the Union Brigade continued to attack across the valley. These regiments charged up to the French gun line on the far ridge where they were in turn overwhelmed by French cavalry. General Ponsonby, commanding the Union Brigade was killed. It is of note that of the three regiments in the Union Brigade two, the Greys and Inniskillings, had not served in the Peninsula and lacked battle experience.

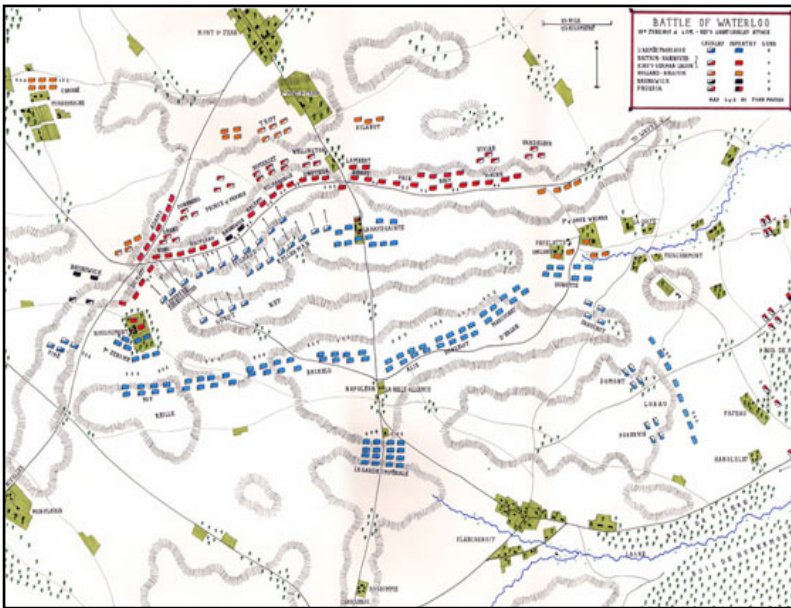
The time was 3pm and there was a lull in the battle, the only active fighting being the continuing attack on Hougoumont at the western end of the line which had been sucking in more and more of Reille's corps. The battle began slowly swinging in the Allies' favour as Blucher's Prussian Army arrived on the field in the South-East.

Napoleon ordered Ney to capture La Haye Sante, considering the farm to be the key to the Allied position. Ney launched this assault with two battalions he found to hand and during the operation formed the view that the Allied army was withdrawing. It is likely that the movements he saw were casualties or prisoners moving to the rear.

It was on this impetuous assumption that Ney launched the massive cavalry attack on the Allied line. Initially the attacking force was to be Milhaud's Cavalry Corps of Cuirassiers.

Before the French could reach the Allied line, the infantry formed squares interlaced with artillery batteries. The French cuirassiers flowed around the squares but were unable to penetrate them. During the next three hours some twelve cavalry attacks were made up to the ridge and back.

Napoleon while deprecating the initial attack as premature felt bound to commit increasing numbers of cavalry to support the assault.



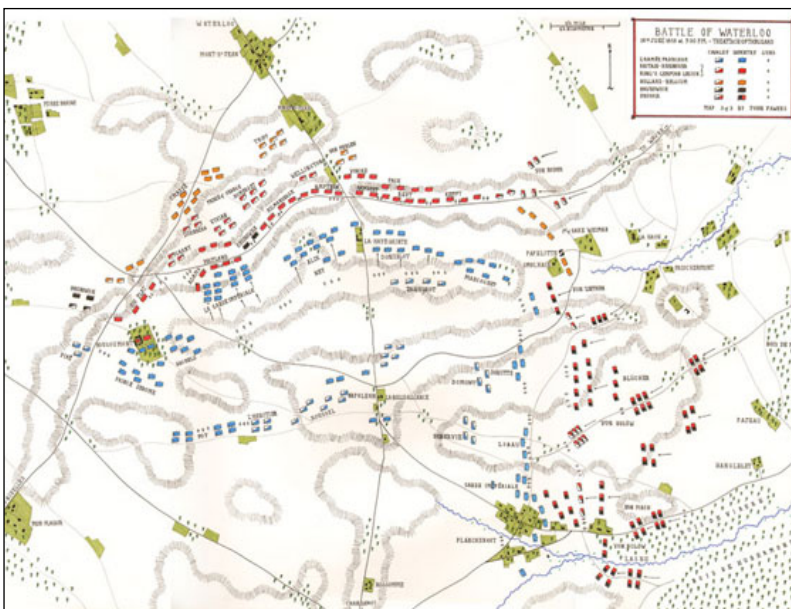
At around 5.30pm Ney launched the final cavalry assault. There were too many regiments, fresh mingled with exhausted. The attack failed yet again. Ney now, far too late, launched the sustained infantry assault on La Haye Sante which was overwhelmed. By now the Prussian assault in the Southeast on Plancenoit was seriously threatening the French position.

Sure, that the Allied line was at breaking point, Ney sent desperately to the emperor for more troops to attack.

Napoleon was at this point deploying the Guard to drive the

Prussians back from Plancenoit. Once this had been achieved. He resolved to launch the Guard at the main Allied line. By this time Wellington had reorganised his forces and the opportunity that Ney had, this time, correctly identified had passed.

The Guard marched up to La Haye Sante for the attack. There Napoleon stood aside and left the command to Ney. Ney led the five battalions up the left-hand side of the Brussels Road.



As they climbed the ridge, they came under fire from a curve of batteries assembled to meet them.

A deserting French cavalry officer had warned of the Guard's advance.

### **Battle of Waterloo 18th June 1815: 7.30pm The Attack of the Guard**

The Middle Guard threw back the British battalions of Halkett's Brigade but were assaulted by the Belgian and Dutch troops of General

Chassé and Colonel Detmers who drove them back down the hill.

The 3rd Regiment of Chasseurs approached the ridge opposite Maitland's Brigade of Foot Guards (2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Foot Guards). Wellington called to the brigade commander "Now Maitland. Now's your time." One authority had him as saying "Up Guards, ready." The Foot Guards stood, fired a volley, and charged with the bayonet driving the French Guard back down the hill.



The last of the French Guard regiments, the 4th Chasseurs came up in support as the British Guards withdrew back over the ridge.

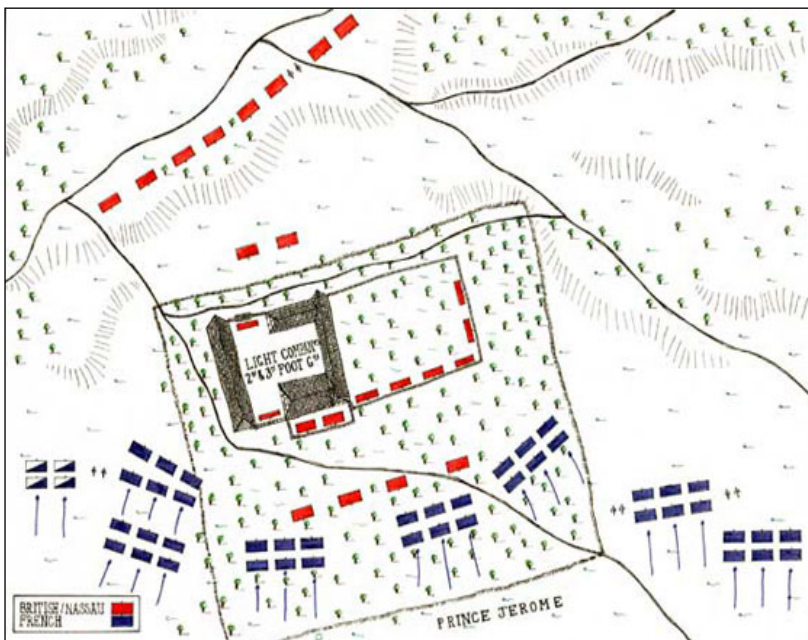
Sir John Colborne brought the 52nd Foot round to outflank the French column as it passed his brigade, fired a destructive volley into the left flank of the Chasseurs and attacked with the bayonet. The whole of the Guard was driven back down the hill and began a general retreat to the cry of "La Garde recue."

Within fifteen minutes Wellington appeared on the skyline and waved his hat to give the signal for a general attack in pursuit of the French troops. The British, Belgian, Dutch, and German troops poured forward and the French retreat became a rout. Three battalions of the Old Guard fought to the end to enable the emperor to escape from the battlefield as the Allied troops including the Prussians closed in. General Cambronne is reputed to have answered a call to surrender with the words "The Guard dies but does not surrender."

### **The Battle of Waterloo: Hougomont Chateau**

The small chateau of Hougomont stood before the extreme right of the Allied position. The Duke of Wellington formed the view that the chateau was the key to his flank and garrisoned it with the light companies of the Coldstream and 3rd Foot Guards under Lieutenant Colonel James MacDonnell of the Coldstream Guards. Nassauers and guardsmen held the woods to the front of the building.

The British troops took over the range of buildings on 17th June and spent the night fortifying them, building fire steps and loop holing the walls. All the gates were blocked other than the main gate on the northern side to provide access.



At 11am on 18th June Prince Jerome's division began the battle with his attack on Hougomont, the French driving the Nassauers out of the woods and attacking the chateau.

The French surged around the buildings and rushed the main gate in the face of a rush of British guardsmen headed by Colonel MacDonnell to keep them out.

The gate was damaged and there ensued a struggle by the British to shut the gate and by the French to force it open.

MacDonnell and his party of officers and sergeants forced the gate shut and Sergeant Graham of

the Coldstream put the bar in place. The few French who had penetrated the farm were hunted through the farm buildings.

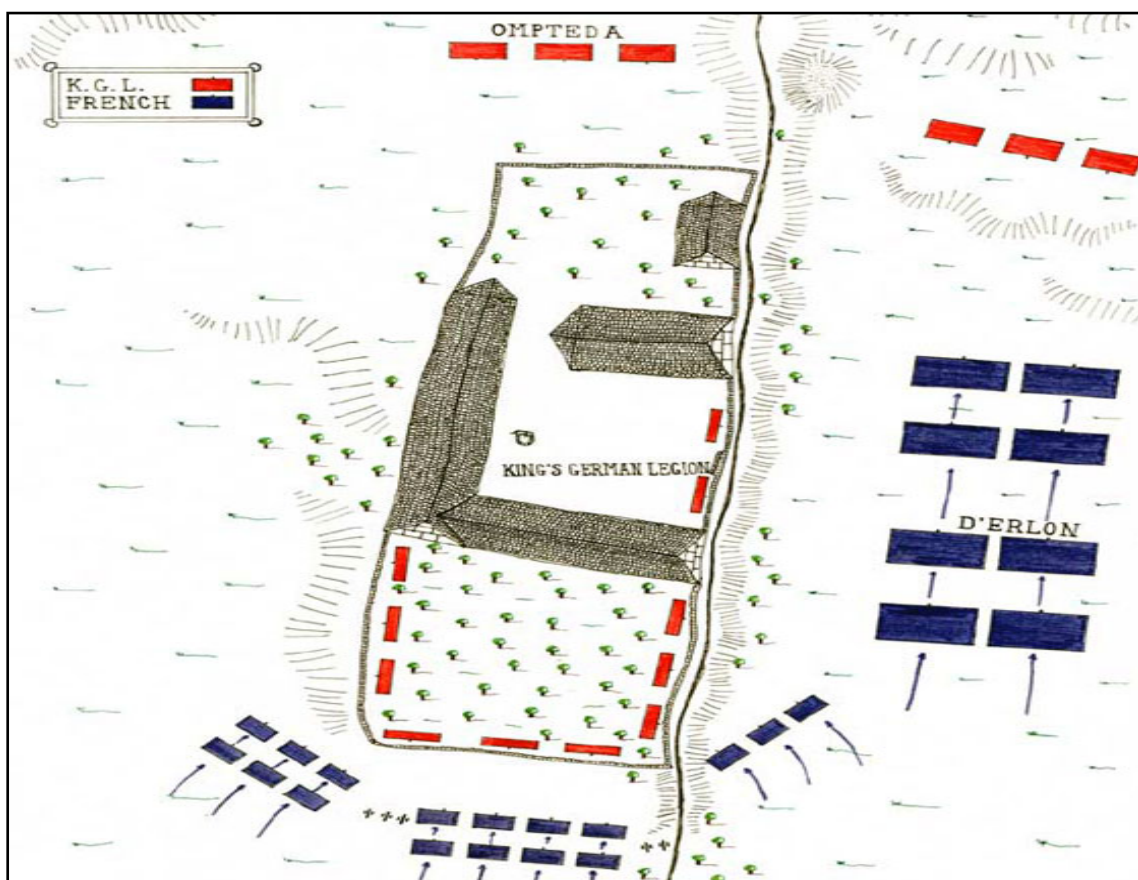
During the rest of the day Hougomont was subjected to a sustained attack by Jerome's troops with assistance from a further division. The garrison was reinforced with more companies from the two Foot Guards battalions of Byng's Guards Brigade, 2nd/2nd and 2nd/3rd Guards. When, during the afternoon the supply of ammunition in the chateau became critically low, Sergeant Fraser of the 3rd Guards returned to the main line and returned with a wagon of cartridges, thereby enabling the defence to continue.

By the end of the battle the chateau had been set ablaze by howitzer fire and the buildings were heaped with British casualties. The French were unable to capture Hougoumont and their casualties filled the woods and fields. The two battalions that defended Hougoumont suffered 500 dead and wounded out of strengths of 2,000.

Some years later an English clergyman bequeathed £500 to be given to the bravest Briton from the battle. The selection was referred to the Duke of Wellington who nominated Lieutenant Colonel McDonnell of the Coldstream Guards for his defence of Hougoumont. Colonel McDonnell gave half the sum to Sergeant Graham. Annually the Coldstream Guards celebrate the defence of Hougoumont with the ceremony of the hanging of the brick.

### La Haye Sante Farm

The farm of La Haye Sante stood on the west side of the main Brussels Road beneath the ridge, two hundred metres in front of the centre of the Allied position. As Emperor Napoleon urged Marshal Ney, La Haye Sante was the key to the Allied line and had to be taken at all costs.



The King's German Legion had expected only to spend the night in the farm and did not discover until the morning that they were to hold it for the battle. By then the main gates had been used on the campfires and few preparations could be made to put the farm in a state of defence in the time left.

The garrison were largely spectators as D'Erlon's attack swept past and up the ridge to the main Allied position to be pursued back to their lines by the British cavalry counterattack.

It was then that Ney's attack on the farm was launched in the direction of the emperor. From that moment the King's German Legion troops fought for their lives until late in the afternoon, when with ammunition finished and the farm in flames, the garrison were annihilated or driven out. Some 39 of 360 survived.



**Casualties:**

The British, Belgians, Dutch and Germans lost 15,000 casualties or 1 in 4 engaged. The Prussians lost 7,000. The casualties of the French army are estimated at 25,000 dead and wounded, 8,000 prisoners and 220 guns lost.

**Follow-up:**

Waterloo decisively saw the end of 26 years of fighting between the European powers and France. The French star was eclipsed, and the German began its ascendancy. For Britain, Waterloo is not just a battle. It is an institution.

**Regimental anecdotes and traditions:**

The Royal Dragoons captured the eagle of the French 105th of the Line in the charge of the Union Brigade and subsequently adopted the eagle as its badge. It is now worn as an arm badge by the Blues and Royals, the successor regiment. As with the Greys the regiment was given the nickname of the "Bird catchers."

After the battle, the 1st Foot Guards were given the title "the Grenadier Guards" to commemorate the regiment's role in overthrowing the French Grenadiers of the Old Guard. All ranks were given bearskin caps to wear.

14th Foot: The 3rd Battalion of the regiment fought at Waterloo. The battalion had been newly raised and was awaiting disbandment, having seen no service, when Napoleon escaped from Elba. The battalion crossed to Belgium and won the battle honour for the regiment. Most of the soldiers were under 20 years of age.

The Emperor Napoleon, some years before Waterloo, presented to each of his marshals a silver snuff box. Marshal Ney's snuffbox was looted from his carriage after the battle by a British officer. Some years later the snuffbox was presented to the officers of the 19th Foot, the Green Howards, who used it in their mess for formal occasions.

The 27th Inniskilling Fusiliers, in the course of Ney's cavalry attacks was bombarded by a French horse battery. By the end of the battle the battalion had suffered 478 casualties from a pre-battle strength of 750. An officer from a nearby battalion, Captain Kincaid, commented that the 27th seemed to be lying dead in its square. Kincaid, a veteran of the Peninsular War, said "I had never thought there would be a battle where everyone was killed. This seemed to be it."

The Duke of Wellington spent his early army service as lieutenant colonel of the 33rd Foot.

After the Duke's death Queen Victoria permitted the 33rd to adopt the title "the Duke of Wellington's", a fitting attribution for one of the army's most persistently successful regiments of foot.

79th Cameron Highlanders: As the French cavalry approached for the attack the regiment formed square. Piper Mackay marched around the square playing the pibroch "Peace or War." The King subsequently presented Mackay with silver mounted pipes.

In spite of their presence in the film "Waterloo," the 88th Foot, Connaught Rangers, were not present at Waterloo. They were on the far side of the Atlantic fighting the Americans.

The 95th had three battalions at Waterloo. After the battle, the regiment was given the title of the "Rifle Brigade" in place of its number, which was reallocated to a newly raised infantry regiment. In the closing moments of the battle a cannon ball struck the Earl of Uxbridge as he rode with the Duke of Wellington. The duke said, "By God you've lost your leg." The Earl said, "By God, so I have." The remains of the leg were amputated in a house nearby and the owner buried the leg in his garden where it was a place of interest for some years.

Every year after 1815 the Duke of Wellington held a “Waterloo” banquet for his officers. The banquet is still held.

### **Umbrellas at Waterloo:**

Captain Mercer of the British Horse Artillery described the miserable night he and his troop spent on the field of Waterloo before the battle: “My companion (the troop’s second captain) had an umbrella, which by the way afforded some merriment to our people on the march, this we planted against the sloping bank of the hedge, and seating ourselves under it, he on the one side of the stick, me on the other side, we lighted cigars and became-comfortable”.

The duke, who was indifferent to the way his officers chose to dress, drew the line at umbrellas. “At Bayonne, in December 1814,” writes Captain Gronow of the First Foot Guards, “His Grace, on looking round, saw, to his surprise, a great many umbrellas, with which the officers protected themselves from the rain that was then falling. Arthur Hill came galloping up to us saying, Lord Wellington does not approve of the use of umbrellas during the enemy’s firing and will not allow the “gentlemen’s sons” to make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of the army.”

Colonel Tynling, a few days afterwards, received a wiggling from Lord Wellington for suffering his officers to carry umbrellas in the face of the enemy; His Lordship observing, “The Guards may in uniform, when on duty at St. James’, carry umbrellas if they please, but in the field it is not only ridiculous but unmilitary.” Standing orders for the army in the Peninsula and in the Waterloo, campaign stated categorically “Umbrellas will not be opened in the presence of the enemy.”

However, the surgeon of Captain Mercer’s troop of Horse Artillery was seen to be sheltering under the forbidden item during the early part of the Battle of Waterloo.