

FIRE

WATERLOO ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENT INSIDE
THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO: 18 JUNE 1815

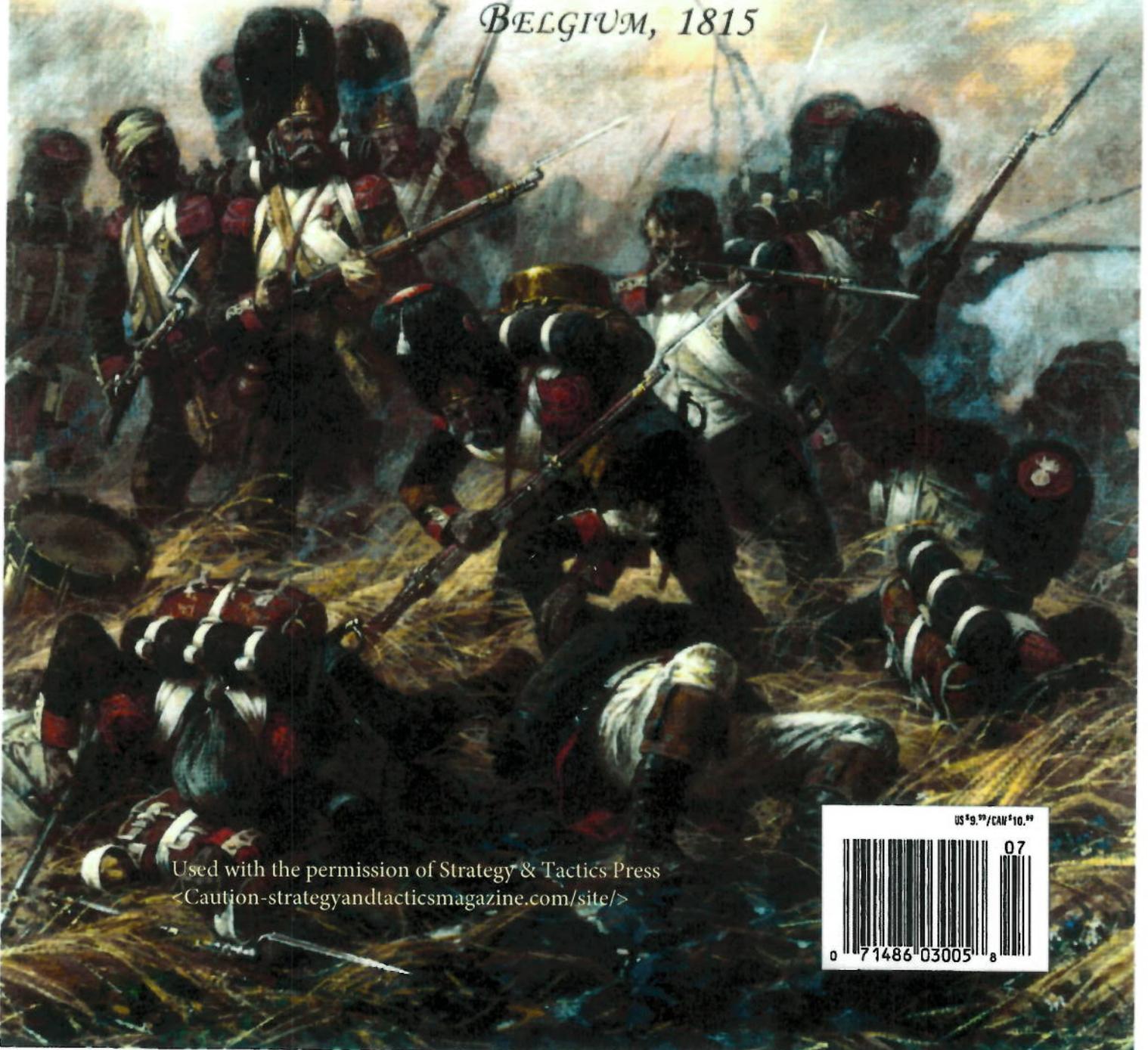
1066: Year of Three Battles | Napoleon's Last Campaign: Belgium, 1815 | Battle of Mount Street Bridge: Dublin, 1916 | Satan's Chariot: MI-24

Strategy & Tactics®

#293 JUL - AUG 2015

NAPOLEON'S LAST CAMPAIGN

BELGIUM, 1815



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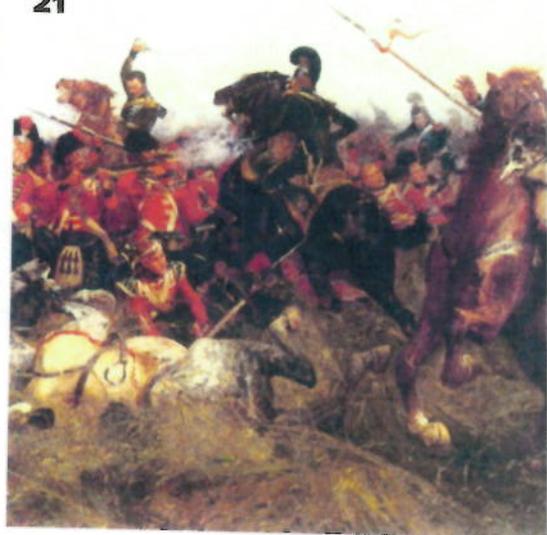


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The Long Tradition

Napoleon's Last Campaign

Belgium, 1815

By Christopher Perello

Editor's Note. This article, presented in commemoration of the Waterloo bicentennial, covers the entire Waterloo campaign. The battle itself was analyzed in detail in issue 292. An extensive and detailed order of battle can be found at www.strategyandtacticspress.com.

Waterloo was one of the most dramatic and decisive battles in history, but like most battles occurred in the midst of a larger campaign. Many events in the days leading up to the battle contributed to its course and outcome. It is tempting to study the campaign only in terms of those contributions, but a battle

is a part of the campaign and must be perceived as such. Napoleon lost at Waterloo partly because of decisions made on that battlefield, but in reality the battle was a defeat waiting to happen before it began.

A Shaky Peace

The empire of Napoleon Bonaparte sustained repeated defeats after 1811, finally succumbing to the armies of the Sixth Coalition in the spring of 1814. Napoleon abdicated his throne that April, accepting exile to the tiny island of Elba though he retained the title of Emperor. The Bourbon monarchy ascended once again to the French throne in the person of Louis XVIII

and the coalition armies departed. Peace reigned, after a fashion.

Louis, well-intentioned but inept, attempted to turn back the clock, restoring the nobility and the church to their traditional place in society and returning to them lands distributed after the Revolution. The French middle and lower classes were left with little to show for a quarter-century of sacrifice.

They did, however, have peace, and it was welcomed. Half a million Frenchmen had died in the wars and their fellow citizens had had enough of glory. Louis' one truly popular decision was the abolition of conscription, accompanied by a paring of the army to cut expenses. Of the authorized





In one of a series of paintings by Stephen Stanton, an officer of Napoleon's Chasseurs à Cheval, part of the Light Cavalry of the Guard, leads his squadron to attack a square of Brunswickers in the distance (see pages 30 and 35) during the great French cavalry charges on the afternoon of 18 June. Go to www.waterloo-collection.com for details on this and other prints.

strength of 150,000, no more than one-third were actually under arms.

Over time the benefits of peace began to pale next to the reactionary Bourbon policies, particularly those regarding land ownership and the continued humbling of France. Unrest simmered, but without a focus could gain no traction.

The victorious coalition powers meanwhile convened a pan-European assembly in the fall of 1814. By the end of October, representatives of more than 200 states had arrived in Vienna, though proceedings were dominated by the four great powers: Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The allies shortly fell out over the dispensation of the spoils

of war, the British and Austrians lining up against the Prussians and Russians, though there was tension within each pairing as well.

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a former minister of Napoleon now serving Louis, attended on behalf of France. Playing the situation masterfully, he obtained a softer peace and an ever-greater role for France in the new Europe.

Napoleon, 180 miles off the coast of France, watched and waited.

Napoleon Returns

Napoleon made his move in late February 1815, slipping off Elba with an "army" of 1,100, the personal guard

he had been allotted by the terms of his abdication. Landing near Cannes on 1 March, he began a slow march northward. The column would have been short work for any of the French military establishments along the route to Paris, but Napoleon was convinced the Bourbons had worn out their welcome, and equally certain the quarreling Allies would be incapable of any rapid response themselves.

His analysis appeared questionable at first, as his welcome was quiet; neither French officials nor civilians were sure what his return entailed. The higher reaches of the French government showed no such qualms, though, and issued orders to stop the procession and arrest Napoleon.

The first crisis came outside Grenoble on 7 March, where the column was confronted by an entire regiment, the 5th Line. Napoleon boldly strode to the front of his army, threw open his cloak, and offered his breast to any many who wished to shoot or stab him. The 5th broke ranks and swarmed over their emperor, transforming him in that instant from a criminal to a conqueror.

Another confrontation took place eleven days later near Auxerre, less than 100 miles southeast of Paris. Michel Ney, one of Napoleon's marshals who had remained in service under Louis, deployed 6,000 men across Napoleon's path. Ney had vowed to Louis to bring the usurper to Paris "in an iron cage." Instead, most of Ney's troops went over to Napoleon. Ney followed, either enthusiastically or reluctantly, depending on the source. He probably could see Napoleon's eventual success and, again depending on the source, wanted to ensure either his position or the unity of France.

Auxerre was the tipping point. Napoleon's march thereafter became a triumphal procession. Another week saw him in Paris. Louis escaped, accompanied by his household and those members of the military who chose to remain loyal, including several other former Napoleonic marshals.

Napoleon resumed his position, but not his titles. He insisted to all who would listen that he had returned to rescue France from the Bourbons and wanted only peace with the rest of Europe.

The allies would have none of it. Outwardly setting aside their differences, they announced their

resolve to remove Napoleon from power once again. The proclamation carefully identified their enemy as the person of Napoleon, not the nation or people of France. The four major powers pledged 150,000 men each for the duration. The minor powers eventually promised another 200,000. It would take some time before this host could be gathered and put in motion—like France, the rest of Europe had retrenched during 1814—and Napoleon put that time to good use.

Arms & Men

Despite general approbation for the ouster of Louis, Napoleon knew his return to power was conditional. The French simply would not accept a remilitarization of the country, above all any attempt to renew the hated conscription. The coalition's rejection of his peaceful overtures gave him some leeway to strengthen the army for defensive purposes, and the necessary funds were soon forthcoming from the National Assembly.

His first step was to recall all soldiers currently on furlough. The reintroduction of conscription was side-stepped for the moment by calling up those men conscripted in the last years of the Empire, but who had never reported; legally, they were already bound to serve. The National Guard, France's militia, also could also be called out under existing laws.

For the higher levels of command Napoleon could count only a half-dozen of his marshals. The rest either remained loyal to Louis, were unfit for field duty, or were outside France.

The lack was not keenly felt. Experienced generals and lower-ranking officers were plentiful. Like the rest of Europe, France was filled with long service veterans, including thousands returned from coalition prison camps during the peace.

The growing army could be equipped at first from stockpiled weapons left over from the late wars. By the time those resources were exhausted, foundries and workshops were turning out new weapons. Fortresses, particularly those on the northern and eastern frontiers, were put on a war footing. Supplies, wagons, and horses were gathered. By the end of May, France would have nearly a quarter-million

men in the field army, sufficiently if not plentifully equipped, with half again as many being readied in the depots and a similar number slated for service by the end of summer.

Coalition forces grew apace, gathering in seven armies spaced around the French frontier. Two were forming in Belgium, the southern half of the expanded Kingdom of the Netherlands. The *Army of the Low Countries* (usually called either the *Anglo-Allies* or just *Allies*), commanded by Britain's Duke of Wellington, included the British contingent, supplemented by the armies of the Netherlands, Hanover, and Brunswick. It covered western Belgium and Brussels (where Louis established his court in exile). The rest of the province was occupied by the main Prussian field army, Field Marshal Gebhard Blucher's *Army of the Lower Rhine*. Each would grow to over 100,000 by mid-June, but the process of assembly would not be finished until after the campaign had ended.

At the opposite end of the frontier, two largely Austrian armies were gathering. In the Var (France's Mediterranean coast), Gen. Frederick Bianchi commanded the *Army of Naples*, still arriving after chasing another of Napoleon's marshals, Joachim Murat, off his Neapolitan throne. Once redeployed, Bianchi was to follow the coast toward Toulon and Marseille. North across the mountains, Gen. Johann Frimont commanded Austrians and Piedmontese bent on traversing Savoy to capture Lyons, France's second city.

The largest concentration would be made on the upper (southern) Rhine, between the Swiss border and the Ardennes. The first wave would consist of more Austrians, plus Bavarians and other German contingents, slated to number 225,000. This group, the slowest to gather, would also be the slowest to move as it was commanded by the cautious Austrian general, Prince Charles Philip Schwarzenberg. The coalition's *generalissimo* during the successful campaigns of 1813 and 1814, the politically astute Schwarzenberg commanded with as much an eye toward intra-allied relations as toward military victory. He would be backed up, eventually, by the Russian army, probably stronger than the nominal 150,000 pledged. One corps of this

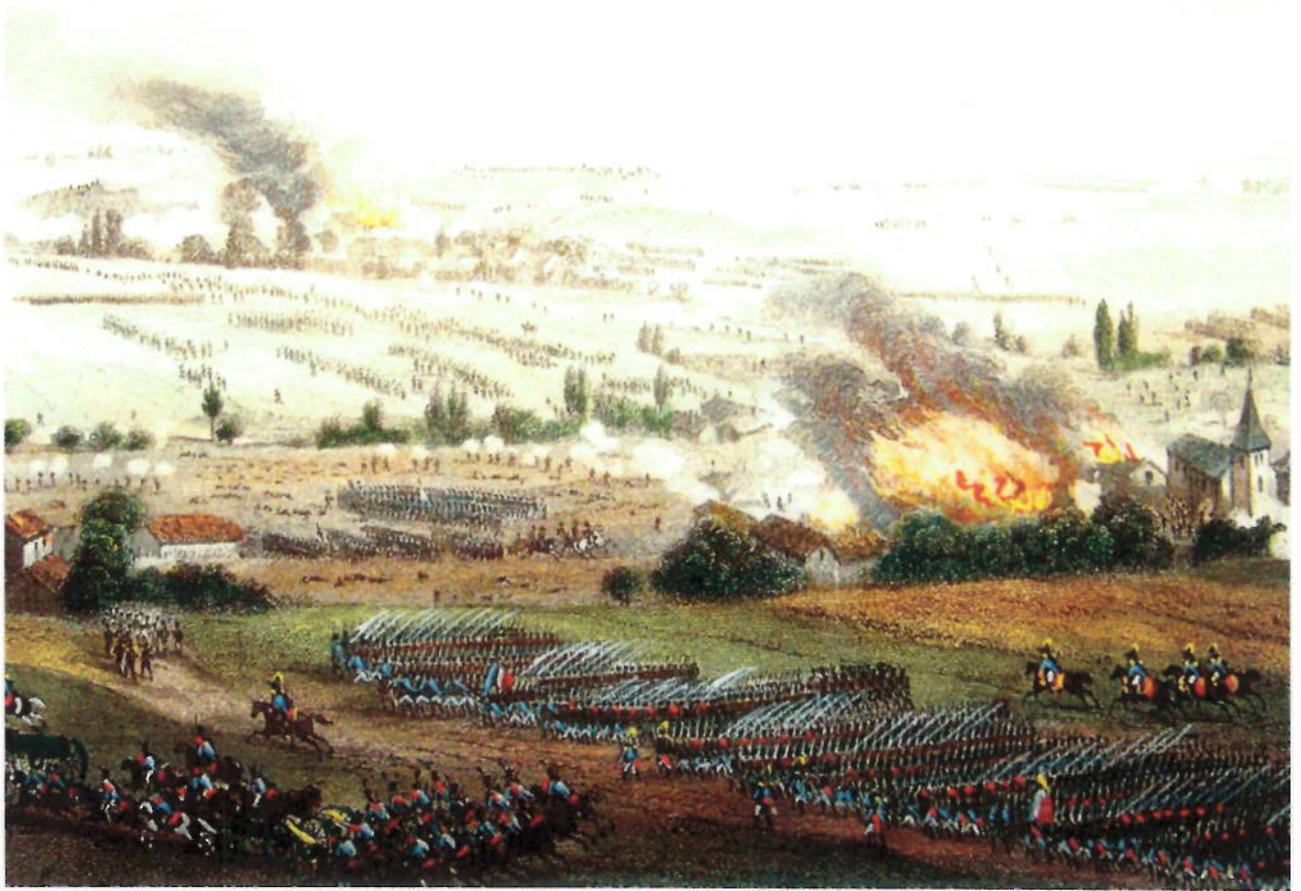
The Hundred Days

1814



1815





A French column moves toward Ligny on the afternoon of 16 June. Blucher's Prussians line the hills in the background.

army had been offered to Wellington if the British would transport it by sea to Belgium. Wellington declined the offer on purely political grounds.

There were still more soldiers available if needed. Nearly half the Prussian army was held back around Berlin, nominally forming a reserve but actually keeping an eye on both the Russians and Austrians. One corps was thrown forward to the Rhine, in part to protect communications between Belgium and the upper Rhine, and in part to protect newly acquired Prussian provinces on the river. The Russians also had a second army of 60,000 in Poland, again an ostensible reserve but in actuality deployed for postwar purposes.

Three minor armies were in the field; none could be counted on for offensive action, but all would provide an additional draw on French manpower. The Swiss, about 37,000 strong, covered the Alps between Schwarzenberg and Frimont. The Spanish were to do

the same along the Pyrenees, and negotiations were underway to incorporate the Portuguese as well (though Wellington wanted them for his army). In the end, few Spaniards and no Portuguese were deployed.

The last army was one in name only, consisting of French royalists in the Vendée, the region south of the Loire along the Atlantic coast. The exact number of insurgents is uncertain, but in the end they tied down more first-line French troops than the Swiss and Spanish combined.

French Plans

Napoleon had two strategic choices. He could fight a defensive campaign like that of 1814, shuttling his outnumbered force back and forth to strike the separate coalition armies sequentially, hoping to stave them off while France gathered her strength and the coalition powers fell to quarreling. The bolder course, the one he chose, was to strike quickly at

one coalition force, hoping for a quick victory to give the coalition pause and open the way to a negotiated peace.

Any one of the coalition forces would serve the purpose. He could move into northern Italy, a repeat of the campaigns he used to unhinge the Second Coalition in 1796-7 and the Third in 1800. An assault into southern Germany, as he had done in 1805, would catch Schwarzenberg still forming, snap the coalition center, and perhaps break the Austrian will to fight.

The third choice, Belgium, was the most obvious (both Wellington and Blucher expected it) but also the most promising. With two separate armies in the area, one from either faction of the divided Congress of Vienna, Napoleon could play one against the other. The region was also the smallest; coalition forces in Italy and Germany had plenty of room to retire before any French advance, blunting its effects. Any retreat in Belgium would uncover the ports on the English Channel, politically unacceptable in Britain, or



French infantry advance out of Fleurus on 16 June.

bring French armies back to the lower Rhine, an imminent threat to Prussia.

Another factor favoring the Belgian approach was that Britain and Prussia were his most important enemies. Britain had been the most steadfast in resisting Napoleon and British gold had been an essential element in forming anti-French coalitions. Prussia, the poorest of the major powers, had been the driving heart of the Sixth Coalition. A victory in Belgium could deprive the new Seventh Coalition of its financial base, its sustaining leadership, or both.

Napoleon early on opted for the Belgian gambit and began deploying his forces accordingly. A total of 63,500 men formed five corps-sized groups (7,000 to 20,000) to cover the secondary fronts—Alps, Var, and Pyrenees—and to garrison Paris for both political and military purposes. Though representing nearly a quarter of available French manpower, the frontiers had to be occupied at least nominally to prevent unopposed coalition advances. Most of the troops were National Guards, with only a smattering of regulars, so the effect on Napoleon's offensive capability was minimal.

Three other forces were needed, and no qualitative shortcuts could be afforded in them. Two corps of 23,000 each, the *Fifth* and *Seventh*, were deployed on the upper Rhine and in front of Lyons, respectively. Both would be badly outnumbered when the opposing coalition armies finished mobilizing, but in the meantime each would make an active and credible defense possible.

The third was needed in the Vendée. The royalist uprising had to be snuffed out quickly, lest it spread or give the allies a safe bridgehead in western France. An *Army of the*

West was organized out of bits and pieces, mostly of active troops.

The remainder of the field troops went into the *Army of the North* (Napoleon was careful not to resurrect the appellation of his old *Grande Armée*). Comprising five infantry and four cavalry corps, plus the restored *Imperial Guard*, the army amounted to 125,000 men. Napoleon carefully kept the corps separate and dispersed to the last moment; only in the week prior to the opening of the campaign were they marched quickly and secretly into northern France. The *Guard* was the last to march, leaving Paris just ahead of Napoleon, who departed the capital on 12 June. By the evening of the 14th, the *Army of the North* was concentrated south of Charleroi, a city on the Sambre River near the Franco-Belgian border and the juncture of the Allied and Prussian armies.

Coalition Plans

Napoleon, despite his acknowledged genius for war, could be beaten. The coalition knew that, and knew how to bring it about.

The overall strategy of the Seventh Coalition was to be a repeat of the successful one employed by the Sixth: the cardinal rule was to avoid battle against Napoleon except under the most advantageous conditions, but take every opportunity to strike his subordinates. Napoleon could not be everywhere at once, and over time the French would be ground down.

Wellington and Blücher in Belgium, anticipating a strike against them, planned to use a diminished form of the strategy to contain the French offensive. Both coalition armies were spread across a large

The Hundred Days 1815 cont.

14 March: At Auxerre, Napoleon confronts 6,000 Royal French troops under Ney, who has promised to bring Napoleon to Paris in an iron cage. Ney, seeing the feeling among his men, instead goes over to Napoleon.

15 March: Napoleon's brother-in-law Joachim Murat, late marshal of the empire and now king of Naples, declares for Napoleon and marches north to raise Bonapartist veterans in northern Italy.

17 March: The Treaty of Chaumont is invoked at Vienna, forming the Seventh Coalition.

20 March: Napoleon enters Paris; this is considered the true start of the "Hundred Days" (which actually lasts 110).

28 March: Joachim Murat, King of Naples, declares war on Austria.

4 April: Napoleon declares his peaceful intents publicly and in letters to the crowned heads of Europe.

8 April: Napoleon orders a general French mobilization, but without conscription.

9 April: Murat's Neapolitan army is defeated on the Po River.

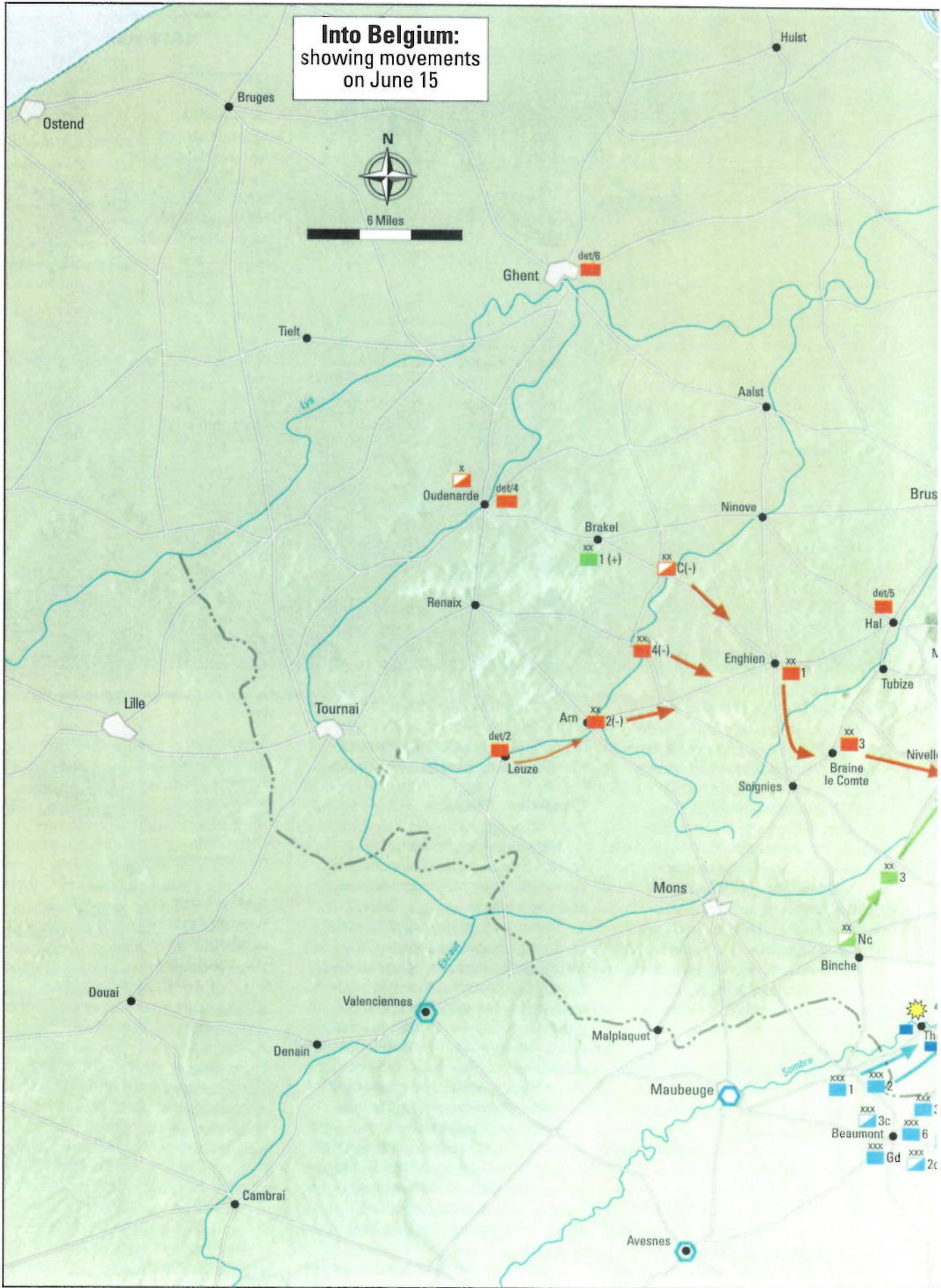
3 May: Murat is beaten again at Tolentino.

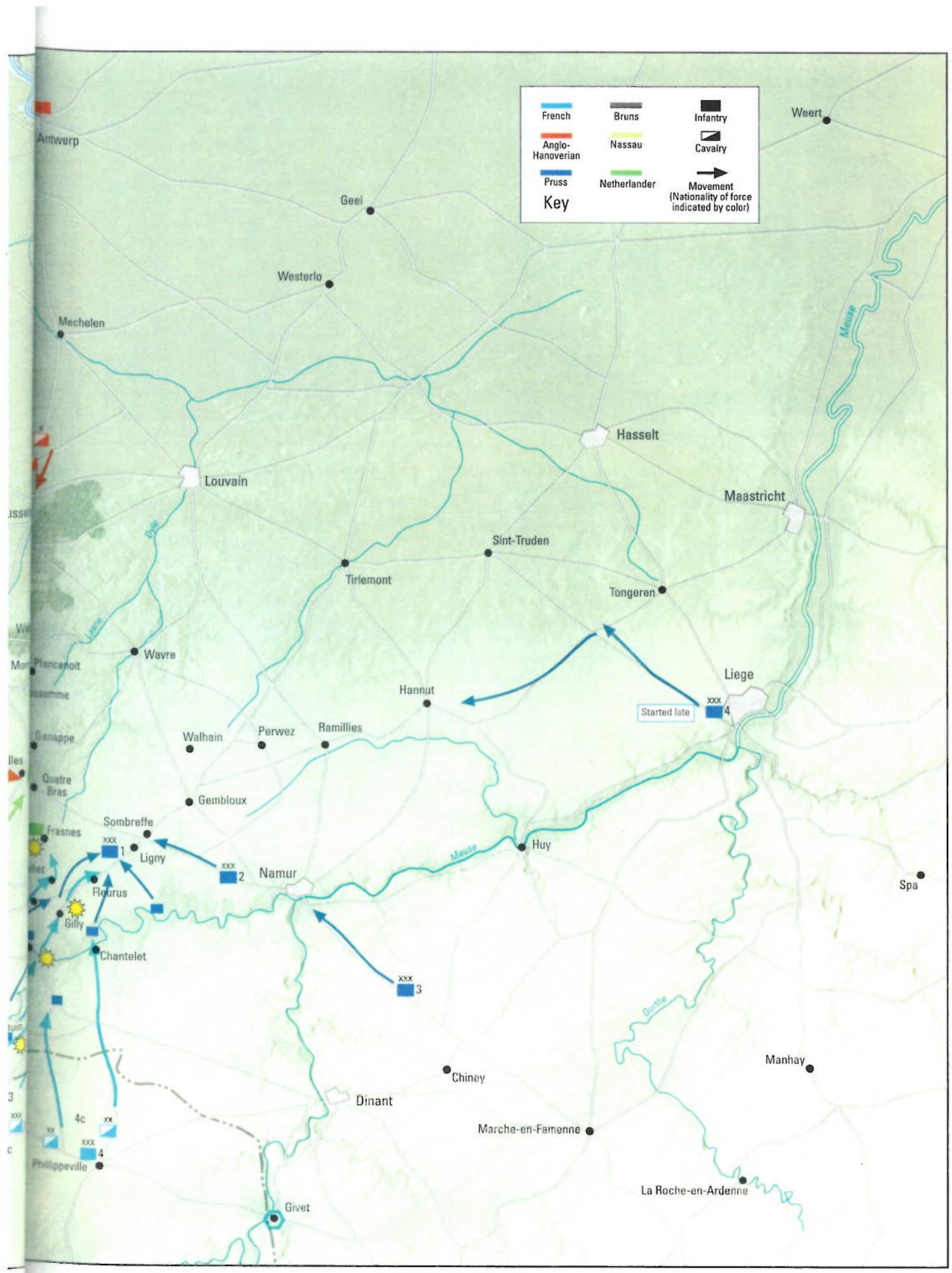
20 May: Murat flees Naples, to be replaced three days later by the reinstatement of Ferdinand IV Bourbon.

9 June: The final covenant of the Congress of Vienna is signed, establishing the framework of Europe that will last until 1914.

15 June: Napoleon's *Army of the North* descends on Prussian positions around Charleroi, effecting a crossing into Belgium and taking station between the Prussian and Allied armies. In eastern France, Suchet leads the *Army of the Alps* into Switzerland.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 »





| | | |
|------------------|--------------|---|
| | | |
| French | Bruns | Infantry |
| | | |
| Anglo-Hanoverian | Nassau | Cavalry |
| | | |
| Pruss | Netherlander | Movement |
| Key | | (Nationality of force indicated by color) |



Prussians (left) and French tangling in the village of Ligny.

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

area, to observe as many roads as possible and to ease the logistic burden. If Napoleon attacked, the armies would concentrate and draw toward one another, avoiding a general engagement until they were near enough for mutual support. In discussions through the spring, a number of sites were discussed as likely places for such a general engagement,

many being north of Brussels.

The two commanders and their staffs cooperated well on the surface, but there were points of possible contention. The primary British concern was the safety of their contingent, representing a significant portion of the British Army's experienced soldiers. Their second concern was protection of the ports along the English Channel, not only as the source of supply and communication between

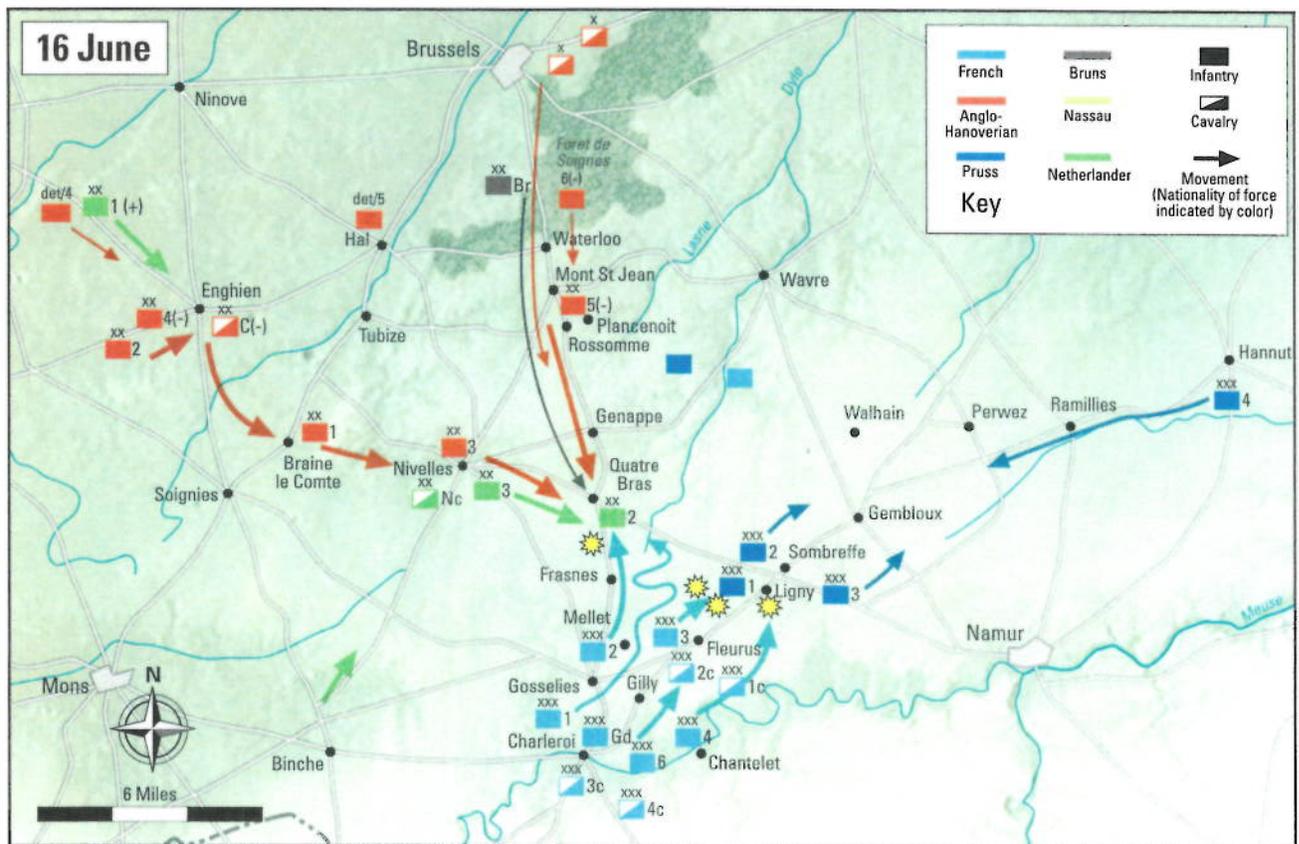
Britain and the army, but because French possession of the ports was a danger to British shipping lanes and to the island itself.

The Prussians also were looking over their shoulders. Their primary interest was cementing control of their new provinces along the Rhine—not for nothing was Blucher's command named for the river, though its operation center was 80 miles to the west. Their secondary concern was the growing contest between Prussia and Austria for German hegemony, considerable Prussian effort was expended through the spring to obtain control of various German contingents. So unpopular were the Prussians that the Saxons mutinied when placed under Prussian command.

Into Belgium

The gist of Napoleon's campaign plan is clear: he intended to grab Charleroi, getting between the coalition armies, then turn on each one at a time, anticipating each would fall back on its lines of communication: the British to the west, the Prussians to the east.

His subsequent objective is obscure. The capture of Brussels was unimportant in itself, being no





A fanciful vignette of action on a bridge over Ligny Brook on 16 June.

more than a continuation of keeping between Wellington and Blucher. He had to do more than just push the coalition forces; one or the other of the opposing armies had to be wrecked sufficiently to force it out of the war. He probably lacked the strength, having an army comparable in size to the Prussian and only slightly larger than the Allied. The uncertainty of his next move would come home to roost on only the second day of the campaign.

The initial attack went mostly according to plan, with a few minor glitches slowing the operation. Marching early on 15 June, French columns drove the Prussians from their outposts along the Sambre, seizing several bridges. The French poured through Charleroi, fanning out to the north and northeast to confront the Allies at Quatre Bras and the Prussians at Fleurus. By evening Napoleon knew he faced a substantial part of Blucher's army at Fleurus, while only a detachment of Wellington's was at Quatre Bras. He opted to focus on Blucher first. Blucher, assured of assistance by Wellington, was happy to oblige. The Prussians deployed along Ligny Brook, running between Fleurus and Sombreffe.

Both Napoleon and Blucher expected help from the west, the former from a two-corps wing under Ney, the latter from Wellington. In the event, neither western force made an appearance, becoming embroiled in a fierce but indeterminate fight at Quatre Bras.

Napoleon's attack on the Prussians gained little ground at first, but used up Blucher's reserves at an alarming rate. Too weak to finish the Prussians without help, and with Ney clearly tied down, Napoleon turned to one of Ney's corps, the *First* under Drouet d'Erlon, then marching up from the south. Throughout the afternoon, d'Erlon zig-zagged between the battlefields as first Napoleon, then his immediate superior Ney, ordered his presence. Inadequate communications, often laid at the feet of Napoleon's chief-of-staff, Marshal Jean de Dieu Soult, were to blame. D'Erlon eventually sent too little strength to Ligny to tip the balance, and arrived with the rest at Quatre Bras too late to be of use.

Napoleon finally broke the Prussian line in the evening using the *Guard*, Blucher getting himself injured in the fighting. Retreat routes were open both north, to stay close to Wellington, and east, along the Prussian line of communication. With Blucher out of action, his chief of staff, August von Gnesienau, ordered the army north, toward Wavre.

The battle ended too late in the day to allow much pursuit. Ligny was nevertheless a clear French victory, and Napoleon's campaign appeared to be unfolding according to plan. The Prussian retreat left Wellington exposed at Quatre Bras, so Napoleon decided to turn his focus to the west. It probably was the right decision. Blucher was in retreat but the French had lost contact during the night. Chasing after the Prussians, especially

The Hundred Days

1815 cont.

16 June: While Napoleon defeats the Prussians at Ligny, Ney fights an inconclusive battle against Wellington at Quatre Bras.

18 June: Napoleon assaults the Allied position at Mont St. Jean, stretching it to the breaking point before Blucher, undeterred by Grouchy's late attack at Wavre, leads 70,000 Prussians to join Wellington. The day ends with the French in headlong retreat.

21 June: Napoleon reaches Paris. Suchet's invasion of Switzerland reaches its high water mark at the pass near Meillerie, east of Geneva.

26 June: Schwarzenberg's Bavarian corps occupies Nancy.

28 June: In Alsace, Rapp administers a sharp repulse to Schwarzenberg's advance guard at La Souffel, then retreats toward the fortress of Strasbourg.

17 June: Napoleon redeploys to focus on Wellington, leaving a wing to pursue the Prussians. Under a driving rain, Wellington and Blucher retire on parallel courses to Mont St. Jean and Wavre, respectively.

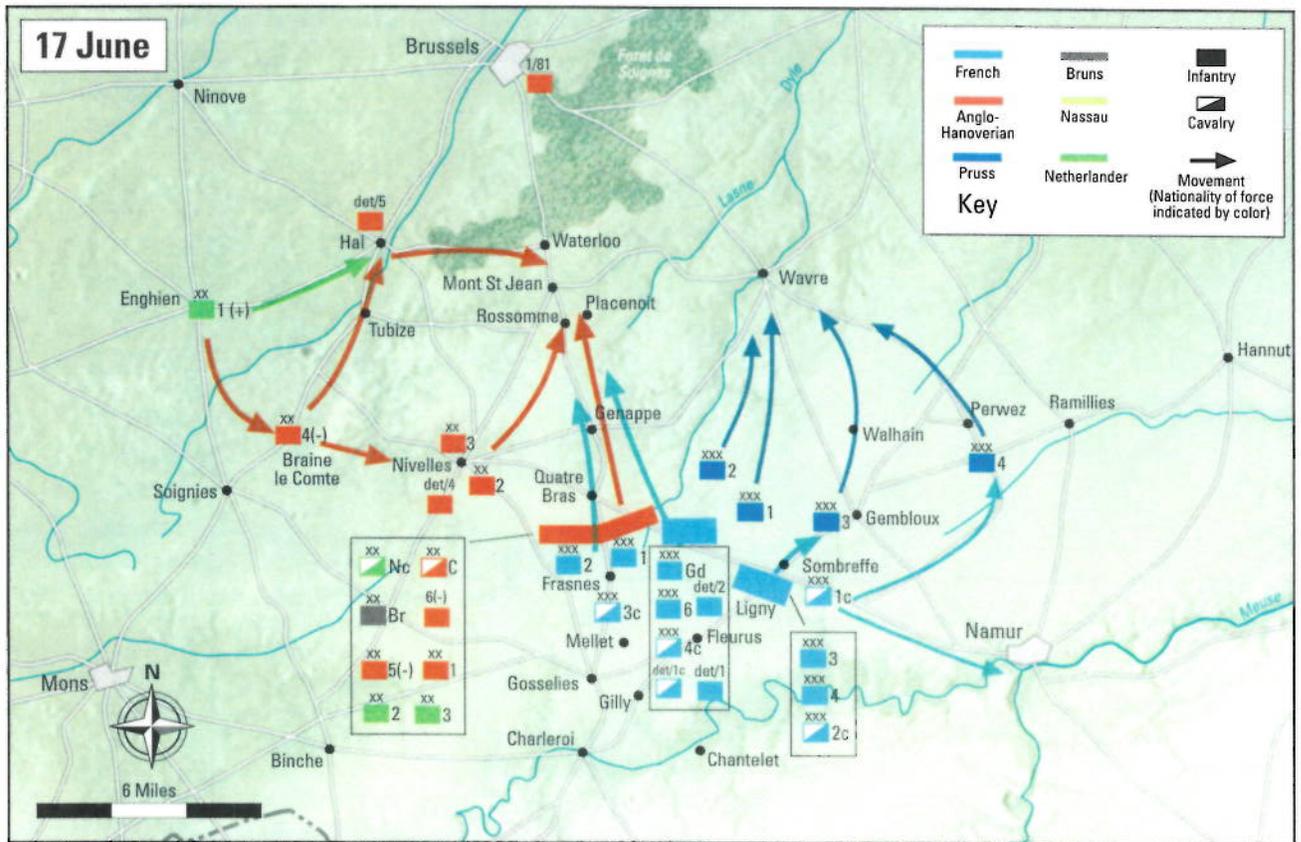
19 June: Grouchy completes the defeat of Blucher's rearguard at Wavre, but retreats on learning of Napoleon's defeat. Schwarzenberg's *Army of the Upper Rhine* crosses the river at several points on either side of Rapp's French *Fifth Corps* at Strasbourg.

20 June: The royalist uprising in the Vendee is snuffed out, though the formal submission will not occur until the 26th.

22 June: Napoleon abdicates in favor of his son, offering his services as a general against the advancing Coalition forces.

24 June: Suchet falls back toward Geneva as the Austrians cross Mt. Cenis on his flank.

27 June: The Austrian advance in Switzerland is checked by Suchet at the Arve River, and again the following day at Conflans, but the French withdraw steadily toward the border.



The Chasseurs à Cheval of the French Imperial Guard advance at the charge, the second of three prints by Stephen Stanton (see pages 22 and 35). Go to www.waterloo-collection.com for details on this and other prints.

if they were retreating east as the first intelligence indicated, would have forced a dangerous separation of the wings of the French army. Ney's wing

alone was no match for Wellington's entire army. With Blucher apparently out of the fight, at least for a time, and Wellington fixed at Quatre Bras,

it made sense to go after the stronger enemy rather than the weaker.

The following morning Napoleon departed Ligny with an infantry



Brunswickers in action at Quatre Bras.

corps, a corps of heavy cavalry, and the *Guard*. He left Grouchy with two infantry, one cavalry, and one mixed corps, a total of 33,000 men, to follow the Prussians and prevent them getting back into the fight. Napoleon often has been criticized for detaching so much strength on a secondary task, but the criticism is made with all the advantages of hindsight. No one knew on the morning of 17 June the most decisive battle in modern European history would occur the following day. The expectation at the time was a victory over the Allies, leaving both coalition armies in Belgium in retreat and giving Napoleon time to consider his next move. In that eventuality it made sense to keep his army in a balanced position rather than crowding it all onto a single road.

The two problems with the detachment of Grouchy were his orders and inadequate provision for communication between the two wings, mistakes properly laid at the feet of both Napoleon and Soult. Rather than being sent after the Prussians, which caused Grouchy to lose most of the 17th trying to pick up their trail, he should have been kept closer to the main body of the army, even at the risk of staying out of contact with the Prussians. Had he cheated his movements to the west, through Mont St. Guibert rather than Walhain, he would have remained in a position to protect Napoleon's right against any possible interference from the Prussians, even if they had moved east. Instead, Grouchy moved into a vacuum and out of the fight.

The westerly approach also would have minimized the difficulties in keeping the wings in contact. As it was, long delays in messages between the two wings ensured Grouchy remained a crucial step behind the events unfolding over the following 36 hours.

Napoleon reached Quatre Bras to find Wellington had flown the coop. Ney had failed to keep pressure on the Allies and they were able to commence their retreat unhindered. Napoleon put himself at the head of the *Guard Light Cavalry* to regain contact and force a battle, but the combination of a single road with a number of restricted points, and an untimely downpour, allowed Wellington to reach a new position at Mont St. Jean.

Wellington's position, selected weeks earlier as a likely place to make a stand, was a narrow one running along an east-west ridge. It was within easy marching distance of Wavre, the goal of the Prussian retreat. He received word from Blucher, now recovered from his injury, that the Prussians would march west on the 18th. Thus assured, Wellington deployed for battle.

His entire army was present, with the important exception of a corps of 17,000 left at Hal, about 12 miles west of Mont St. Jean. Wellington has been much criticized for leaving a fifth of his army out of the fight, but again the criticism only holds up with the benefit of hindsight. He knew Napoleon was chasing him—the emperor had been spotted at the head of his cavalry—but could not know whether another French column had swung west. Also, like Napoleon in his detachment of

The Hundred Days 1815 cont.

29 June: Napoleon leaves Paris, hoping to take ship to America.

3 July: Napoleon reaches Rochefort, but contrary winds and an English squadron prevent his escape.

5 July: The Bavarians reach Chalons-sur-Marne.

8 July: Louis XVIII is restored to the French throne, ending the Hundred Days.

11 July: Lyons falls to the Austrians.

13 October: Murat is executed by Neapolitan soldiers after a laughably ineffective attempt to regain his throne.

1 July: The Austrians punch through the Vosges Mountains after stiff fighting at the pass of Les Rousses, opening the path to the Rhône valley and Lyons.

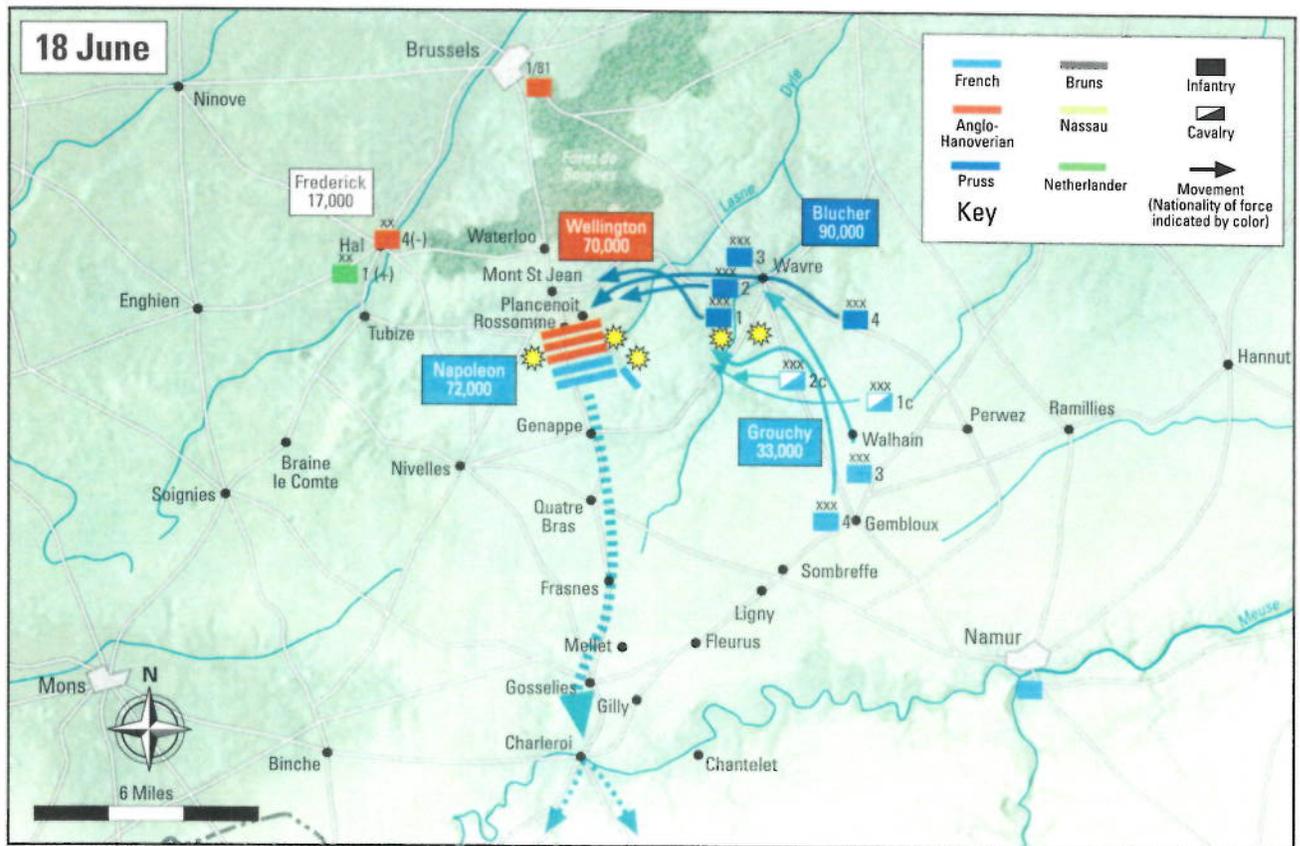
4 July: An armistice at Paris requires the French army to retire south of the Loire, where it is disbanded by order of Louis XVIII.

7 July: Prussian troops enter Paris.

9 July: Grenoble surrenders to the Austrians.

15 July: Trapped, Napoleon surrenders to the Royal Navy and boards *HMS Bellerophon*.

20 November: The Treaty of Paris officially ends the Napoleonic Wars with a general repudiation of French Republican principles and the imposition of reparations on France.



French lancers hit a British square at Quatre Bras on 16 June. The British experience in Spain, against armies weak in cavalry and artillery, left them ill-prepared for the power of a well-equipped French army.

Grouchy, Wellington had to think beyond a single day's battle. If defeated he would need reserves and a safe position to which he could retreat; if victorious, the Hal force would be well positioned to begin a pursuit. It also should be noted that except for a single brigade of British infantry, the troops at Hal were largely second rate and would have added less strength to his army than their numbers indicated.

Waterloo

The morning of the 18th dawned with Wellington's army deployed three lines deep along and behind the ridge, with a fourth line thrown forward of the ridge in outposts, some of them heavily fortified. Across a shallow valley, half of Napoleon's main body was deployed, the rest still slogging up the muddy Charleroi-Brussels road; the last troops would not be deployed until noon. Blucher also

was on the move, though he chose his most distant corps to lead the march. The first Prussians would reach Chappelle St. Lambert, two miles east of Napoleon's position, by 9:00 a.m. Two more corps followed along poor roads made nearly impassable by the rain. Grouchy was far to the southeast at Walhain, still uncertain what direction the Prussians had gone.

By the time the first serious shots were fired at Mont St. Jean, at about 11:30, Napoleon already knew the Prussians were on his flank. He did not yet know how many there were, nor how long it would take them to affect his battle with Wellington, nor when Grouchy would enter the mix, but he knew the time available for beating the Allies was limited. Any victory would be tempered by the presence of the Prussians—he would not be free to pursue a retreating Wellington with Blucher closing on his line of communications.

Napoleon's decision at that time is the decisive moment of the campaign. He had already achieved most of his primary objective, having beaten one coalition army and chased another. He had shown his abilities to be undiminished and the French army sound, and had demonstrated



A battalion of the King's German Legion is ridden down by a brigade of French Cuirassiers in the early afternoon at Waterloo, one of a set of prints by Stephen Stanton. Go to www.waterloo-collection.com for details on this and other prints.

the unity of France behind him. If he had not won a knockout victory, he certainly was ahead on points.

A quick withdrawal from Mont St. Jean, to Genappe, or all the way to Quatre Bras, would free him for another set of quick marches. He could swing behind Grouchy to strike the Prussian bases at Namur and Liege, or pull back into France. The Coalition armies in Belgium would need time to recover their balance before advancing into France—the Prussians already were feeling the supply pinch, having cut themselves off from their primary bases—leaving Napoleon free to march east against the armies along the Rhine or complete the rebuilding of his field army.

He opted to go forward with his attack on Wellington. It was badly weakened before it began as he moved much of his reserve, nearly 10,000 men and 34 guns, to shield his right from a sudden Prussian assault. When the main assault did go forward, it was unsupported, leaving it vulnerable to the British cavalry counterstroke that hit just as the French attack crested Wellington's ridge.

Napoleon's battle plan was wrecked, and without his reserve there was little he could do to restore the situation. He might still have ended the battle at that time, content with a stalemate until nightfall allowed a retreat. Though not in as good condition as he would have been that morning, he still would have had an unbeaten army and some options.

He instead allowed the battle to continue. French efforts became disjointed—often blamed on Ney—with massive cavalry attacks unsupported by infantry, while French infantry continued to assault Wellington's outer works without the means to isolate them from the main Allied line. The Prussians steadily pushed toward Plancenoit, a village less than a mile east of Napoleon's headquarters, forcing the diversion of more men and guns, but too few to do more than slow the Prussians.

By 7:00 p.m., more than 100,000 coalition soldiers were on line against no more than 50,000 tiring Frenchmen. Only Napoleon's *Old Guard* remained uncommitted, a mere 14 battalions. Two were needed to restore the situation, temporarily, at

Plancenoit. Three more were held as a last reserve, leaving just nine to make one final effort against Wellington.

Five battalions, barely 3,000 men, formed the assault column, with two guarding a flank and two more in support. They faced more than 10,000 Allied soldiers in Wellington's center. Even if they somehow broke through, the French front on their right was being rolled up by a fresh Prussian corps, and no reserves were available to exploit the success. It was a forlorn hope, and quickly went down to defeat.

The French army spontaneously began to retreat, beginning on the right-center and working out toward the flanks. Only the three battalions of the *Guard* were available to stop the flow. Forming square, they retreated slowly, buying time for the rest of the army to escape. In the gathering darkness, Wellington, by agreement with Blucher, called off his troops, leaving the pursuit to the Prussians. Some French were captured, especially after the bridge at Genappe was blocked, but most of the army got away.

Miles to the east, Grouchy had gained considerable ground



against the Prussian rearguard at Wavre. He would be in position to score a substantial victory by morning. Had Napoleon been able to remain on the field, the Prussians at Plancenoit would have been in dire straits; they had left behind their supply wagons and Grouchy's wing sat astride the road west.

Back Into France

The Belgian campaign was over. The coalition powers were victorious not only because they had the larger force, but because they had a better plan. Napoleon's offensive opened well, but without a central purpose it degenerated into seeking battle for battle's sake.

When the battle was fought and lost, the campaign was lost with it.

The coalition commanders, on the other hand, accepted battle only within the scope of a larger plan. The Prussian defeat at Ligny was nearly as complete as the French defeat at Waterloo, yet the army stayed in the fight and made the victory at Waterloo possible.

Just as a lost battle does not necessarily mean a lost campaign, however, a lost campaign does not mean a lost war. The French army gradually regained order through the night and into the following day while continuing its retreat into France. By the 22nd, it reached Laon, where a quick count showed more than 30,000 men still with the colors. Just over half those who had fought at

Mont St. Jean had been lost, though the core of every regiment was present. The cannon had been left behind, but the artillerymen were on hand and could be reequipped from magazines across northern France.

Grouchy's wing soon rejoined the main body, having won convincingly at Wavre before pulling back on learning of Napoleon's defeat. Avoiding Prussian columns, Grouchy captured the Prussian fortress at Namur, opening a road over the Meuse and into France. His arrival brought the French army to a balanced force of 60,000.

Allied losses also amounted to approximately 60,000, though from a considerably larger initial strength. The pursuing armies were weakened further by the need to mask numerous



*A square of Brunswickers about to be charged by the Chasseurs à Cheval (see pages 22 and 30).
Go to www.waterloo-collection.com for details on this and other prints.*

French fortresses, by incomplete logistical support, and by political rivalries once again rearing their heads. Marching on parallel but widely separated roads, Wellington and Blücher were invitingly open to defeat in detail by the reunited *Army of the North*. France was not beaten yet.

Napoleon, however, had left for Paris to deal with the political fallout of his defeat. There, outmaneuvered by his political enemies, he abdicated on the 22nd, offering his services to the new government as a general. The offer was refused, but preparations were made to carry on with the war. The army at Laon pulled back to Paris, uniting with the garrison and reserves under minister of war and marshal Nicolas Davout.

Blücher by then had pulled ahead of Wellington, reaching the environs of Paris at the end of June. After an unsuccessful attack on the city's defenses, he circled to west, skirmishing with Davout's cavalry.

The other major coalition armies were across the Rhine, but moving cautiously. Most of their strength was tied up by fortresses and by the lone French corps at Strasbourg, only the Bavarians striking into the French interior. Farther south, Austrians advanced slowly through the Alps.

The French were everywhere in retreat or shut up in fortresses, but the situation was not hopeless. Davout commanded 117,000 around Paris (including many National Guards), 170,000 recruits were available in depots around the country, while the coalition forces were strung out and dispersed.

With Napoleon gone, however, there seemed little point in further fighting. Louis XVIII returned to Paris, and political intrigues of those attempting to turn coat once again undermined any attempts to continue the struggle. Davout's army was ordered to give up Paris and retreat south, where Louis soon ordered its disbandment. Some fortresses held out through the summer, the last not surrendering until 30 November, after a peace treaty had formally ended the war.

Another Peace

The Bourbon Restoration of 1814, despite its reactionary elements, had been relatively moderate as Louis had accepted the inevitability of a constitutional monarchy. The Hundred Days removed some of his restraint, and the second restoration was far more Draconian. Tens of

thousands of civil and military officials who had colluded with Napoleon were dismissed. Many senior officers went into exile; Ney was shot after a farcical trial.

France was occupied by coalition soldiers for three more years, the French bearing the cost of their support as well as paying reparations. The country survived intact however, and within a few more years was once again one of the leading powers on the continent and in the process of carving out a new empire in Africa.

Napoleon was back in exile, this time on remote St. Helena in the South Atlantic, guarded by British soldiers on the island, a British squadron in the surrounding waters, and garrisons on several nearby islands. There would be no second Hundred Days. ❖

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