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STRATEGY & TACTICS® (USPS 10744) is published bi-monthly by Decision Games, 2804 Mosswood St. Bakersfield CA 93312. Periodical Class postage paid at Bakersfield, CA and additional mailing offices.

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Waterloo

by Christopher Perello



Félix Philippoteaux's classic painting of a French cavalry charge at Waterloo gives a good feel for the dense formations and the proximity of opposing soldiers. It is inaccurate on two important points: the ridge occupied by the Allied army was not nearly so hilly, and the French attacks were not delivered at the run because of crowding and mud.

Editor's Note. This article is presented in commemoration of the Waterloo bicentennial. The entire campaign will be covered in issue 293. An extensive and detailed order of battle can be found at <http://strategyandtacticsmagazine.com/article-index/#waterloo>.

Waterloo is the most written about battle in human history, and for good reason. It had every conceivable dramatic element: the fate of Europe in the balance, a duel between two of the greatest commanders of their time, indeed of all time, sweeping cavalry charges, a last-minute rescue, the final attack of one of the most storied corps in history, and a near victory turned into total rout. Such was the scope of that outcome the name has become synonymous with absolute, crushing, irretrievable defeat. It also cemented the Napoleonic paradigm—that of a decisive, war-ending battle—into the minds of military men around the world for generations to come.

Situation

Napoleon Bonaparte's eleven month exile on Elba ended in March 1815 with his return to France. The French people welcomed him, but cautiously. They wanted no more wars, and Napoleon duly (and probably duplicitously) pledged peace to the French and all of Europe.

His former opponents, then bickering in Vienna over the future of Europe, would have none of it. They formed the Seventh Coalition and put their armies on a war footing; by early spring 800,000 men were under arms.

Napoleon, constrained by the impossibility of reintroducing the hated conscription, did what he could in response. By late spring he had 250,000 in the field, with as many more preparing in depots. Rather than await the Coalition onslaught, he chose to concentrate his best troops for a strike into Belgium, hoping to defeat the armies of his most steadfast opponents, Britain and Prussia. A quick victory over

them might give the Coalition pause and allow for a negotiated peace.

The campaign opened on 15 June with the 125,000-man French *Army of the North* driving a wedge between the Coalition armies. The next day Napoleon defeated the Blucher's Prussian *Army of the Lower Rhine* at Ligny, while a detachment fought to a draw against Wellington's Allied *Army of the Low Countries* at Quatre Bras.

Napoleon next turned on Wellington, leaving 33,000 men under Marshal Emmanuel Grouchy to pursue the Prussians and prevent their rendering any assistance to the Allies. Wellington had no intention of facing the French alone, so he retreated to a previously selected position near Mont St. Jean, just south of Waterloo.

While the armies marched in a driving rain on 17 June, Wellington contacted Blucher. He would fight Napoleon at Mont St. Jean if the Prussian could send him a corps. Blucher, his army still full of fight despite the pounding it had received, promised three. Thus assured,

The Strength of Armies

The strength of an army or its subordinate units could be stated in two ways in 1815, both of which are used in this article. The first was a straightforward numerical count of infantrymen, cavalrymen, and cannon. All numbers are rounded and take into account losses prior to 18 June.

The other method counted the primary combat units—infantry battalions, cavalry squadrons, and artillery batteries—because they constituted the army's discrete elements of combat power. A balanced army would have roughly equal numbers of battalions and squadrons, with perhaps one-quarter to one-third that number of batteries.

Infantry battalions generally numbered anywhere from 150 to 1,200 men, with the preferred size being 600 to 800, in four to ten companies. Most battalions had specialist companies of light infantry (for skirmishing) and grenadiers (to lead assaults).

Cavalry squadrons usually numbered about 150 men, in theory made up of a pair of companies. In practice, a cavalry regiment, the usual parent organization, would split or combine companies as needed to maintain uniformity in squadron size.

Artillery batteries had four to eight field pieces, generally paired in two-gun sections. Most cannon were guns, flat-trajectory, direct-fire weapons identified by the weight of their solid shot (such as a 6-pounder). Nearly every battery had one or two howitzers, less powerful than guns but better for firing explosive shell, and capable of firing at a higher trajectory. ♦



Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) was a superb general forced into caution by the nature of the armies he led, and by the realities of coalition warfare. One of his concerns during the Waterloo campaign was to ensure the lion's share of credit for the victory went to the Anglo-Austrian axis within the Seventh Coalition, rather than the Russo-Prussian axis.

Wellington prepared for battle.

Napoleon reached the Mont St. Jean area on the afternoon of the 17th, his army strung out behind him on a road turned to quagmire by the downpour. Deploying the men with him, he laid plans for a strike early the next day, hoping a quick victory would leave him time to pursue the defeated Allies or turn on any Prussians who might appear.

The following morning, French cavalry and artillery commanders advised a delay to allow the sodden ground to dry. That, and the time needed for the rest of the army to reach the field along muddy roads, forced a postponement. Napoleon set about refining his plans based on observation of Wellington's position.

Allied & Prussian Dispositions

Wellington deployed cautiously. He and his officers had been stunned by the power of massed French artillery and cavalry at Quatre Bras, something they had not encountered during the long Peninsular War (1808-1813).

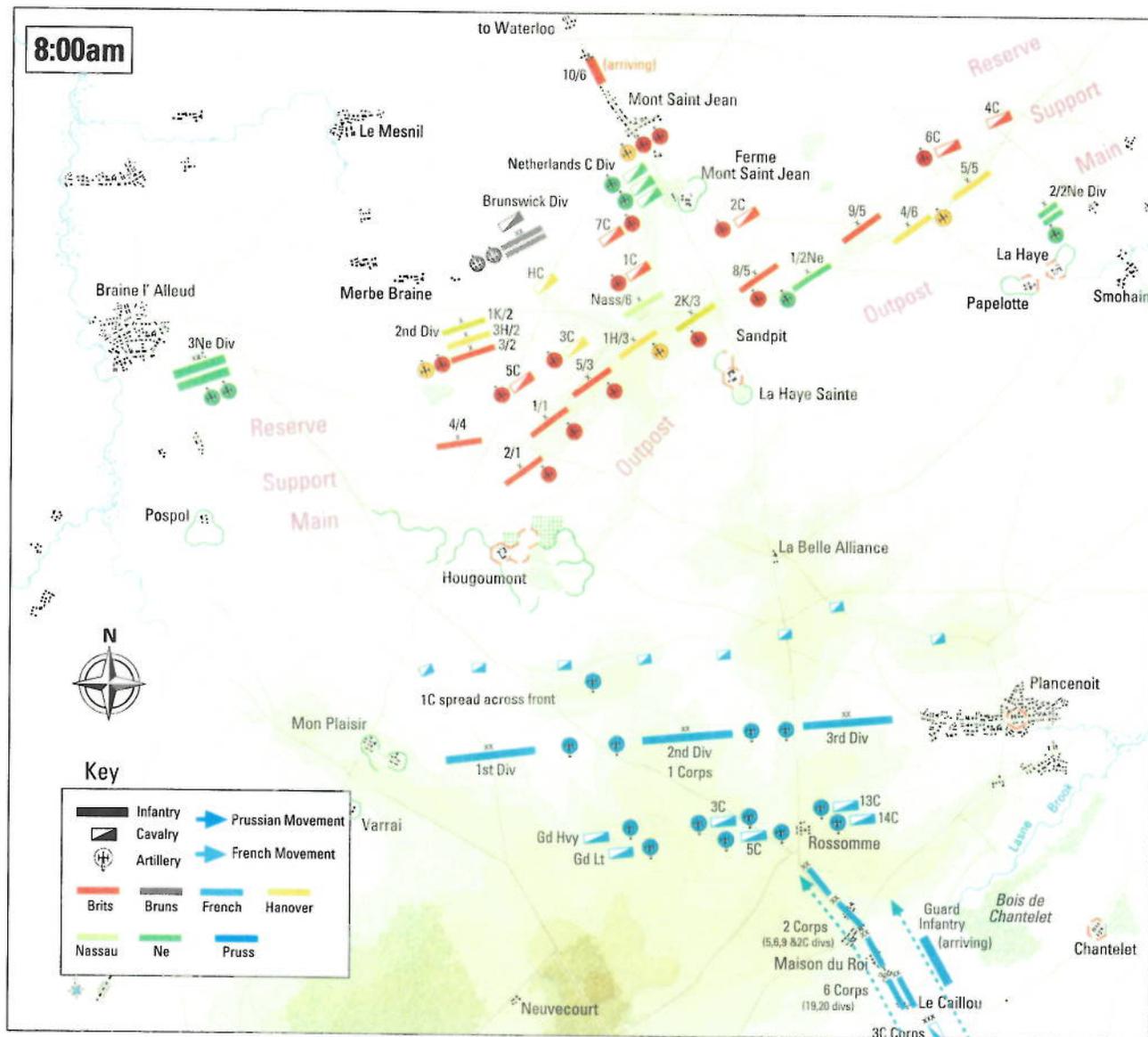
Most of the army was concentrated on a three-mile front bisected by the Charleroi-Brussels road. The key to the line was a ridge perpendicular to the road, and Wellington arrayed four lines to defend it in depth.

The front line, 6,000 men and two cannon in eight battalions, two squadrons, and one weak battery, occupied outposts centered on walled houses and farms. On the left the complex formed by the farms of Papelotte and La Haye, Smohain village, and the chateau Frichermont, was held by an entire brigade, half the outpost line's strength, because it was on the expected Prussian line of approach.

Near the center of the line was La Haye Sainte, held by a full battalion of riflemen. Recent histories have tended to treat the place as the real key to Wellington's line, probably due to the crisis facing the Allies after it fell. It actually was not that important as it lay in a depression. Fire from the farm could not reach the Allied line; the French had to advance up the slope, something they could do and did before the house fell.

A mile to the west were the extensive grounds—600 yards square—of the chateau Hougoumont, where a garrison of 1,600 manned stout walls, woods, and hedged fields. Hougoumont has suffered the reverse treatment of La Haye Sainte, reduced to a mere outpost or even a ruse to waste French effort. In reality, the place was the cornerstone of Wellington's position. Its sheer size broke the French front in two—units on one side would be out of supporting range of those on the other—while Wellington could shift units behind it freely.

Behind the outposts stood the main line, 20,000 men and 50 cannon in 37 battalions and eight batteries, running along the ridge. Most of the infantry stood behind the crest to prevent giving French artillery an easy target. Only the artillery and skirmishers were visible.



The third line, 12,500 men and 30 cannon in six battalions, 59 squadrons, and five horse artillery batteries, supported the main line. The infantry backstopped Hougomont and the center, while the cavalry was spread the length of the line to counterattack any French breakthrough.

The final line was the reserve, almost 40 percent of the army: 26,000 men and 76 cannon in 34 battalions, 31 squadrons, and 12 batteries. The bulk was posted in the center. The outlier was the 3rd Netherlands Division, posted far to the west to guard against a French turning movement, and to keep half the Netherlands contingent safe in case of disaster.

Wellington, later to deride Napoleon as “a mere pounder,” had prepared for just such a battle. More than half the army, including two-thirds of its artillery and cavalry, was

concentrated on the mile-long center. If Napoleon attacked there, the surest way to a quick victory, he would face more than 20 men per yard of front, far higher than standard for the era. It would take time to bull through.

The flanks were relatively weak, but Wellington could afford the risk. If Napoleon attempted to turn his right, he would use up valuable time and push the Allies closer to Blucher. An attack on his left would put the French closer to the oncoming Prussians.

That the Prussians *would* arrive was known by 9:00 a.m. Wellington had been notified the vanguard of the Prussian column had reached Chappelle St. Lambert, two miles east of Smohain and five miles from Napoleon's headquarters.

What Wellington did not know, and in fact was unknown to the Prussians themselves, was how long it would take

them to arrive. The leading Prussian corps, Bulow's *Fourth*, had set out at 5:00 a.m. with just an eleven-mile march ahead of it. No one had any inkling, however, of the state of the roads. Poor to begin with, they were drenched by the previous day's rain, and each passing unit deepened the morass. Bulow's leading troops needed four hours to make the trip, the time lengthening for those behind.

French Plans

Napoleon could see some of the British dispositions, and what he could not see he could surmise. Contrary to many histories, Wellington's reverse-slope deployment was of no great value in fooling the French. The Allied outposts were clearly visible,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 37

Wellington's Allied Army of the Low Countries

Wellington commanded an army usually referred to as a ployplot, haphazard organization. Language actually was only a minor issue as most senior officers spoke at least two of the prevalent languages: English, French, and German.

The lack of organization was a genuine problem. Partly it was a matter of fitting in the various contingents, but the greater problem was Wellington's practice of concentrating too much power in his person. During the battle, he virtually ignored his senior commanders, giving orders directly to divisions, brigades, and even battalions.

The total strength of 105,000 included garrisons. Of the field troops, those at Waterloo were:

49,950 infantry in 84 battalions
13,650 cavalry in 96 squadrons
157 cannon in 25 batteries

British

The British were the army's largest single group, including a disproportionate amount of its cavalry and artillery. The infantry is often held up as being mostly "second" battalions, implying a lack of experience. Of those on the field, however, fourteen were "first" battalions, including many veterans of Wellington's superb Peninsular army. Four of the eight second battalions and one-and-a-half of three-and-a-half third battalions belonged to the elite Guards or Rifles. Only the 3/14th Foot was of questionable value.

15,325 infantry in 25½ battalions
6,550 cavalry in 49 squadrons
77 cannon in 13 batteries

Hanoverians

Hanover shared a monarch with Great Britain, so its army effectively had been part of the British army until 1803 when the country was overrun by France. Exiles in England formed the King's German Legion (KGL). Equal in every respect to British formations, it was in the process of merging back into Hanoverian service and was having difficulty obtaining recruits. Present at Waterloo were:

3,650 infantry in 8 battalions
2,375 cavalry in 16 squadrons
18 cannon in 3 batteries

A new national Hanoverian army was formed in 1813, making extensive use of KGL cadres. Most of the army was in Belgium, though much of it was dispersed into garrisons. The units present at Waterloo were:

10,250 infantry in 17½ battalions
500 cavalry in 4 squadrons
12 cannon in 2 batteries

Netherlanders

The 25,000 Netherlanders were a new army, the country having been detached from France only in 1814, but contained many veterans of the recent wars. For political as much as operational reasons, a significant portion of the army was left out of the battle, its contribution being:

9,250 infantry in 17 battalions
3,300 cavalry in 23 squadrons
34 cannon in 6 batteries

Nassauers

The Nassauers were to the Netherlanders as the Hanoverians were to the British: kinsmen by virtue of monarchical ties, though in this case it was monarchs from the same family rather than in the same person. The three Nassau regiments were independent of one another and did not represent a truly national force. Together, the regiments amounted to:

6,600 infantry in 8 battalions

Brunswickers

The Duchy of Brunswick fell under French control in 1806, but rebelled during the war of 1809. Defeated again, the Duke led his brigade-sized *Black Corps* to England, thence to Spain, where they served under Wellington. The organization was expanded to divisional size during the peace. Possessing only a kernel of experienced men, the bulk of the corps was raw and astonishingly young. It suffered substantial casualties—among them the much-loved Duke—at Quatre-Bras. Its strength on the field was:

4,875 infantry in 8 battalions
925 cavalry in 4 squadrons
16 cannon in 2 batteries

FIRST CORPS (William of Orange)

1st (Guards) Division (3,525 infantry in 4 British battalions, 12 cannon in 2 batteries)

3rd Division (6,550 infantry in 4 British, 4 KGL, and 5½ Hanoverian battalions, 12 cannon in 2 batteries)

2nd Netherlands Division (6,150 infantry in 5 Netherlands and 5½ Nassau battalions, 10 cannon in 2 batteries)

3rd Netherlands Division (6,525 infantry in 12 Netherlands battalions, 16 cannon in 2 batteries)

SECOND CORPS (Lt. Gen. Rowland Hill)

2nd Division (7,200 infantry in 3½ British, 4 KGL, and 4 Hanoverian battalions, 12 cannon in 2 batteries)

4th Division (part; 1,925 infantry in 3 British battalions, 6 cannon in 1 battery)

RESERVE (Wellington)

5th Division (5,700 infantry in 8 British and 4 Hanoverian battalions, 12 cannon in 2 batteries)

6th Division (commander not present; 7,000 infantry in 3 British, 4 Hanoverian, and 3 Nassau battalions, 6 cannon in 1 battery)

Brunswick Corps (4,875 infantry in 8 battalions, 925 cavalry in 4 squadrons, 16 cannon in 2 batteries)

Reserve Artillery (12 cannon in 2 batteries)

Cavalry (9,425 British, KGL, and Hanoverian cavalry in 69 squadrons, 35 cannon in 6 batteries)

Netherlands Cavalry Division (3,300 cavalry in 23 squadrons, 8 cannon in 2 batteries)

Note. Allied units on the maps are identified by brigade number and division; for example, 3/2 is the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Division. Letters indicate nationality: H for Hanoverian, K for KGL, N for Netherlander. ◆

and the artillery and skirmishers along the ridge defined at least where the line was strongest.

Napoleon directed his army into a balanced deployment, one corps on either side of the Brussels road, each backed up by a corps of heavy cavalry. His reserve was deployed along the road: another corps, two light cavalry divisions, and the *Imperial Guard*. The *Guard* alone accounted for a quarter of the army's infantry and cavalry, and 40 percent of its cannon.

Napoleon had already determined to make his initial attack on Wellington's left, obviously weaker than the center. Like Wellington, he was aware of the danger of being caught between two fires should the Prussians appear, but unlike Wellington he appreciated the speed and power

of the French army in full career and counted on a rapid seizure of the first objective. That objective was the ridge between La Haye Sainte and Papelotte. From there, the attack would wheel left to roll up Wellington's line.

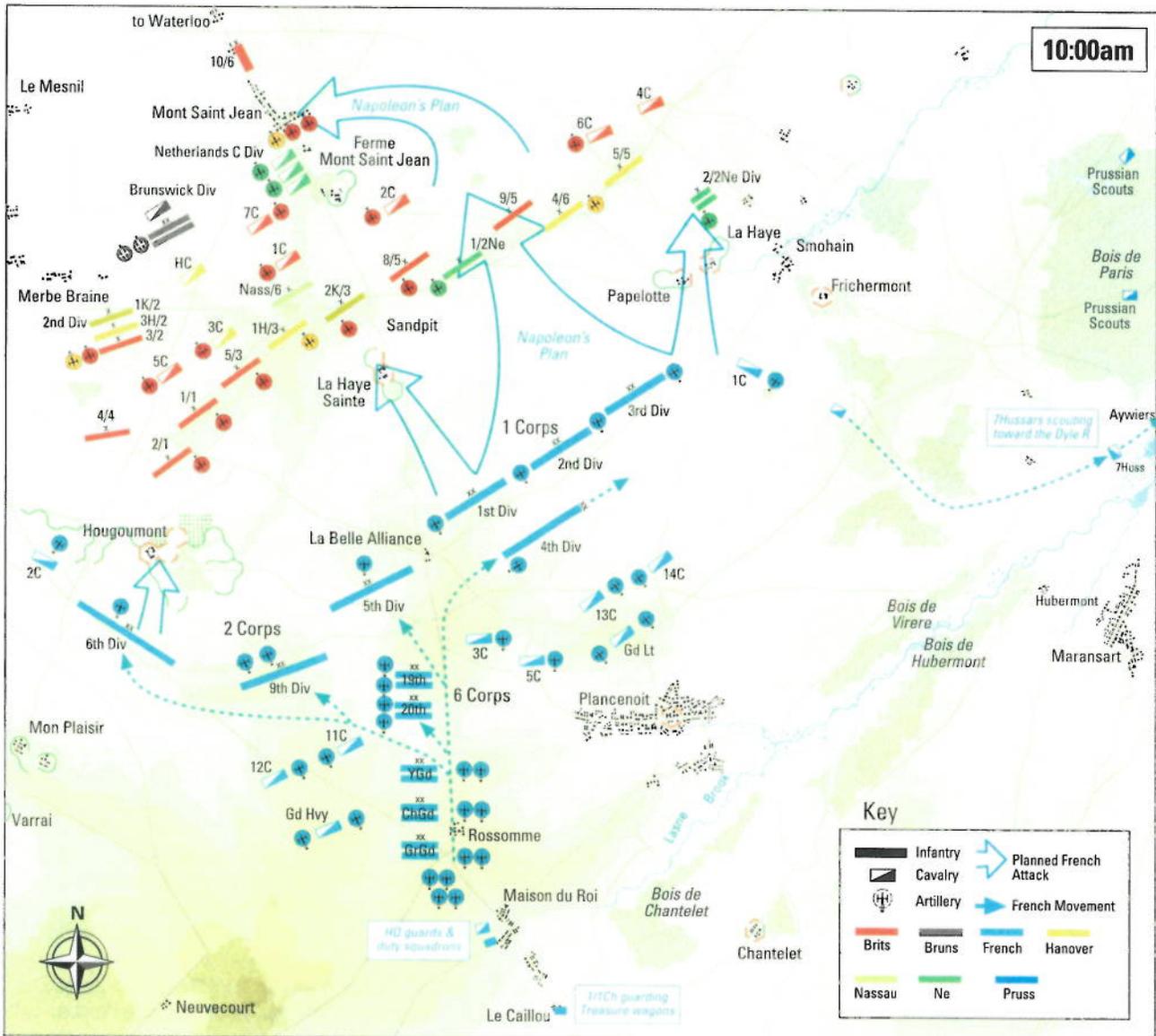
To prepare the way for the main offensive, attacks would be made at Hougoumont, La Haye Sainte and Papelotte. These would serve a threefold purpose; distracting the Allies and drawing in reserves, blocking the use of the strongpoints as the source of, or cover for, attacks on the flank of the assault column, and, if possible, to capture the places.

Direct support for the assault would be provided by a grand battery, a common Napoleonic technique, emplaced on a low ridge south of La Haye Sainte. The battery would pound the British left to ease the way for the attacking infantry, then, in

time-honored French fashion, would shift fire to support the attack as it rolled forward, batteries displacing closer to the front as needed.

There is some question as to how many guns were assembled, numbers quoted from 48 to 80. Without a doubt the heavy 12-pounder batteries assigned to the three infantry corps were present. At least three 6-pounder foot batteries from *First Corps* divisions were added. Less certain is the location of the four heavy batteries of the *Guard*, the traditional core of Napoleon's grand batteries. At least one was sent to Papelotte, but its seems unlikely the rest would have been kept in reserve; Napoleon *was* a pounder, a great believer in the power of massed artillery.

The battery would not be ready until after noon. In the





Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) was one of the great battle captains of history, but his real strength lay in planning campaigns. Most of his victories came after careful maneuver and rapid marching set up a favorable situation. Confident, perhaps over-confident, in his abilities and those of his army, he repeatedly took the bolder course on 18 June. His self-serving history of the battle, written during his captivity on St. Helena, successfully pushed the blame for the defeat onto others.



Michel Ney (1769-1815) was the enigma of the campaign. A late addition to the army, he commanded at Quatre Bras, then was the effective field commander at Waterloo. He has borne a great deal of the blame for French mistakes on both fields: caution at Quatre Bras and disjointed attacks at Waterloo.



Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher (1742-1819) was a hussar at heart, having no head for the vital technicalities of running an army. What he did possess was the courage of a lion harnessed to an abiding hatred of Napoleon and all things French. All that was needed was for him to give general directives, leaving the details to his efficient staff.

meantime, Napoleon ordered the preliminary attacks to begin.

First French Crisis

Even before the first French troops strode forward at about 11:30, Napoleon's entire scheme was upset. At some point during the preceding hour (accounts vary from 10:00 a.m. to as late as 1:30 p.m., the earlier times being more likely), the French staff noticed troop movement on the low hills around Chappelle St. Lambert. Having learned Grouchy's whereabouts from a message received earlier—he was

farther southeast than anticipated, and not in contact with the Prussians—Napoleon knew the newcomers were not French. They could only be Prussians, though in what strength was uncertain. Shortly thereafter, a captured Prussian cavalryman was brought in and attested (prematurely) to its being Bulow's entire corps.

It was a severe blow; Napoleon later wrote his odds of success dropped from "ninety for and ten against" to "sixty for and forty against." His hands were not tied, however. The army was scarcely engaged at the moment—only a single brigade of infantry was in

action—and the only reason to fight at Mont St. Jean had been the chance of fighting Wellington's army alone. He could have retreated south to regain maneuvering room. He also could have converted the attack on Wellington into a holding action, making the main effort against the Prussians while they were still strung out on the march.

He decided to continue the battle, reasoning the Prussians would need time to enter the fight, by which time the Allies might be defeated. He did take precautions though, detaching his reserve corps and two cavalry divisions under Sixth Corps' commander, Lobau, to watch the Prussians.

The size of the detachment, almost 10,000 men with 34 cannon in 16 battalions, 20 squadrons, and five batteries, is one of the controversies of the battle. At a stroke, Napoleon halved his reserve, and the detached corps would do little more than mark time for most of the afternoon.

There are two points in favor of the decision. First, Napoleon could not know exactly how long it would take the Prussians to put in an appearance, and an early intervention could not help but compromise the main battle.

The second point follows from the first. The Prussians clearly were still arriving, so the body at Chappelle St. Lambert had not developed its full strength. Had Napoleon posted no flank guard, or a weak one, the

Napoleon's French Army of the North

The standard assessment of Napoleon's army at Waterloo is that it was high-quality due to the presence of many veterans, but brittle due to the veterans' mistrust of the high command, particularly the marshals who had forced Napoleon to abdicate in 1814. This thread of thought supposedly was proven when the army suddenly collapsed on the evening of 18 June.

The facts indicate otherwise. There are no instances of mutinies or disobedience, and the troops fought with enthusiasm throughout the campaign and the battle. The rout at the end of the day was due to the simple fact that the army was being surrounded by double its numbers, and was at the end of its strength after eight hours of fighting.

The truth is that the French army in 1815 was what it had been for nearly a quarter-century: a highly-professional organization willing to carry out the orders of its commanders. Its ability to do so had been affected by deliberate neglect during the short peace.

The greatest shortage was infantry, it having been cut most severely. Where French regiments were supposed to contain three 840-man battalions, most had barely 1,000 men in two battalions.

The army as a result was cavalry- and artillery-heavy, giving it great striking power relative to its flexibility and durability. Napoleon's penchant for keeping large cavalry and artillery reserves exacerbated the disparity. The force at Waterloo had 306 cavalymen and 5.0 cannon per 1,000 infantrymen, almost double the scale of the armies with which he had conquered Europe. His opponents would field 231 cavalry and 3.2 guns per 1,000 footsoldiers, the Allies and Prussians respectively contributing ratios of 273 and 2.5, and 180 and 3.2.

When Napoleon returned to power, he worked a near-miracle in getting a quarter million men under arms in three months. Veterans formed the core, but there were many recent recruits as well. The army entering Belgium contained half the total, including the lion's share of artillery and

regular infantry (as opposed to National Guards, the French militia), all the heavy cavalry, and the *Imperial Guard*. Of those just over half made it to Waterloo:

50,425 infantry in 104 battalions
15,425 cavalry in 113 squadrons
254 cannon in 35 batteries

IMPERIAL GUARD (Gen. Antoine Drouot, vice the ailing Marshal Mortier)

Old Guard (8,400 infantry in 14 battalions, 32 cannon in 4 batteries)

Young Guard (4,200 men in 8 battalions, 16 cannon in 2 batteries)

Heavy Cavalry Division (1,675 cavalry in 9 squadrons, 12 guns in 2 batteries)

Light Cavalry Division (2,075 cavalry in 10 squadrons, 12 guns in 2 batteries)

Reserve Artillery (32 guns in 4 batteries, 275 engineers in 2 battalions)

FIRST CORPS (Gen. Drouet D'Erlon)

1st Infantry Division (4,000 infantry in 8 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

2nd Infantry Division (5,125 infantry in 9 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

3rd Infantry Division (4,025 infantry in 8 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

4th Infantry Division (3,850 infantry in 8 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

1st Cavalry Division (1,525 cavalry in 11 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

Reserve Artillery (8 guns in 1 battery, 350 engineers in 1 battalion)

SECOND CORPS (Gen. Honoré Reille)

5th Infantry Division (3,225 infantry in 9 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

6th Infantry Division (6,250 infantry in 13 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

9th Infantry Division (4,400 infantry in 11 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

2nd Cavalry Division (1,625 cavalry in 15 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

Reserve Artillery (8 guns in 1 battery, 400 engineers in 1 battalion)

SIXTH CORPS (Gen. Georges Mouton, better known as Comte de Lobau)

19th Infantry Division (3,925 infantry in 9 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

20th Infantry Division (3,025 infantry in 7 battalions, 8 guns in 1 battery)

Reserve Artillery (14 guns in 2 batteries, 200 engineers in 1 battalion)

RESERVE CAVALRY (no commander)

3rd Cavalry Division (950 cavalry in 9 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

5th Cavalry Division (1,250 cavalry in 11 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

THIRD CAVALRY CORPS
(Gen. François Kellermann)

11th Cavalry Division (1,725 cavalry in 13 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

12th Cavalry Division (1,650 cavalry in 12 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

FOURTH CAVALRY CORPS
(Gen. Edouard Milhaud)

13th Cavalry Division (1,125 cavalry in 11 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery)

14th Cavalry Division (1,625 cavalry in 13 squadrons, 6 guns in 1 battery) ◆

Prussians could have moved forward with whatever troops were available. The strong detachment helped ensure the Prussians would await additional men before advancing; in the event, the French gained at least

two hours to focus on Wellington.

While these grand-tactical decisions were being made, the preliminary attacks commenced. A brigade from the division under Napoleon's brother Jerome (the

6th) cleared the woods around Hougoumont before being repulsed at the farm wall. A second assault by the entire division lapped around the farmstead from the west. A party of French broke into the house grounds,

Blucher's Prussian Army of the Lower Rhine

The Prussian army, reborn after a disastrous defeat in 1806, was in many ways the most modern in the world, the beginning of a German ascendancy in land warfare that would last a century. Its effectiveness in 1815 was hampered by Prussia's poverty, leaving it short of uniforms, quality weapons, mounts, and equipment of every kind. There were many veterans in the ranks, and leadership overall was good, but training, especially of large units, was lacking, and almost half the infantry was in recently formed *Landwehr* (militia) units.

The Prussian general staff, a unique organization in the world at the time, went a good way toward making up for the deficiencies. Permanent staff officers oversaw the basic functions of supply and administration at every level of command, forming a network that would keep the army operating even when its commanders lost control or were out of touch.

The army was divided into self-sufficient corps, there being no army reserve of cavalry or artillery like the other armies at Waterloo. Each corps had four infantry brigades, a cavalry division, and an artillery reserve nominally controlling the guns of the corps. In practice, each brigade would have one or more squadrons, and one or batteries assigned on a regular basis. Within each brigade, the battalions of the component regiments were controlled directly by the brigade commander and his assistant, giving the unit greater flexibility than its official organization would imply.

Almost half the field army was held back in Prussia, ostensibly as a Coalition reserve but actually to keep an eye on the Russians and Austrians. The larger and better half formed the army in Belgium. Barely half of Blucher's full strength of 120,000 reached the battlefield in time to participate in the fighting:

41,275 infantry in 61½ battalions
7,450 cavalry in 61 squadrons
134 cannon in 17 batteries

but the gate was closed behind them, barely, and those inside annihilated.

It had been a close call. Wellington ordered up the first of what would be a string of reinforcements, strengthening the garrison, spreading the front west, and increasing artillery support from the ridge behind it.

FIRST CORPS (Gen. Hans Graf von Zielen)

1st Brigade (5,425 infantry in 9½ battalions, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

Cavalry (part; 2,250 cavalry in 20 squadrons, 16 cannon in 2 batteries)

SECOND CORPS (Gen. Georg von Pirch, often called Pirch I to distinguish him from another officer of the same name)

5th Brigade (6,025 infantry in 9 battalions, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

6th Brigade (5,525 infantry in 9 battalions, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

Cavalry (part; 1,450 cavalry in 12 squadrons)

FOURTH CORPS (Gen. Friedrich Bulow, Graf von Dennewitz)

13th Brigade (6,725 infantry in 9 battalions, 200 cavalry in 2 squadrons, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

14th Brigade (5,475 infantry in 7 battalions, 200 cavalry in 2 squadrons, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

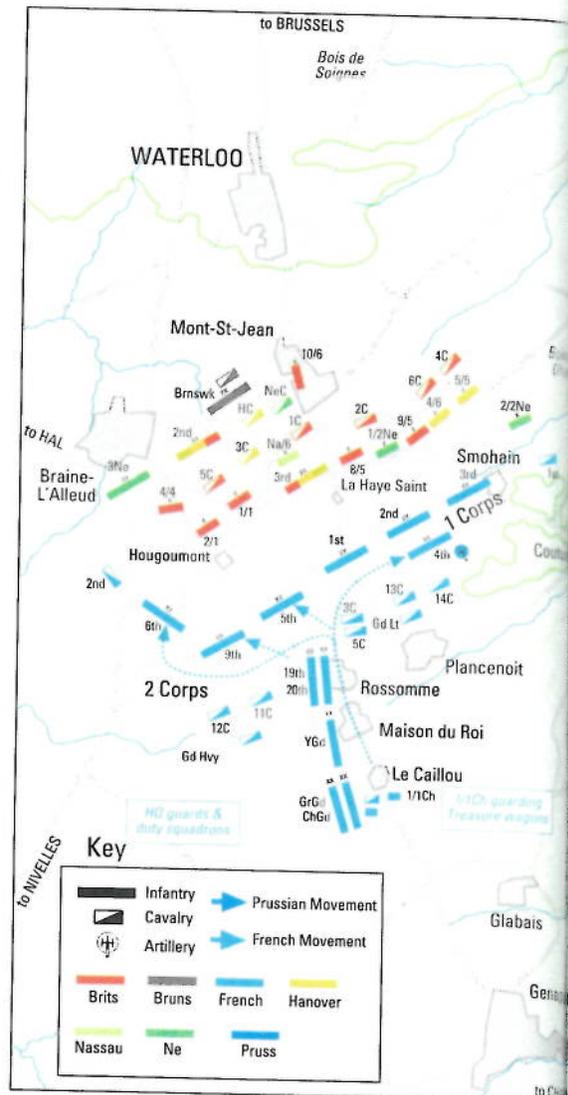
15th Brigade (6,125 infantry in 9 battalions, 150 cavalry in 2 squadrons, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

16th Brigade (5,975 infantry in 9 battalions, 150 cavalry in 2 squadrons, 8 cannon in 1 battery)

Cavalry (3,025 cavalry in 22 squadrons, 14 cannon in 2 batteries)

Artillery Reserve (48 cannon in 6 batteries) ◆

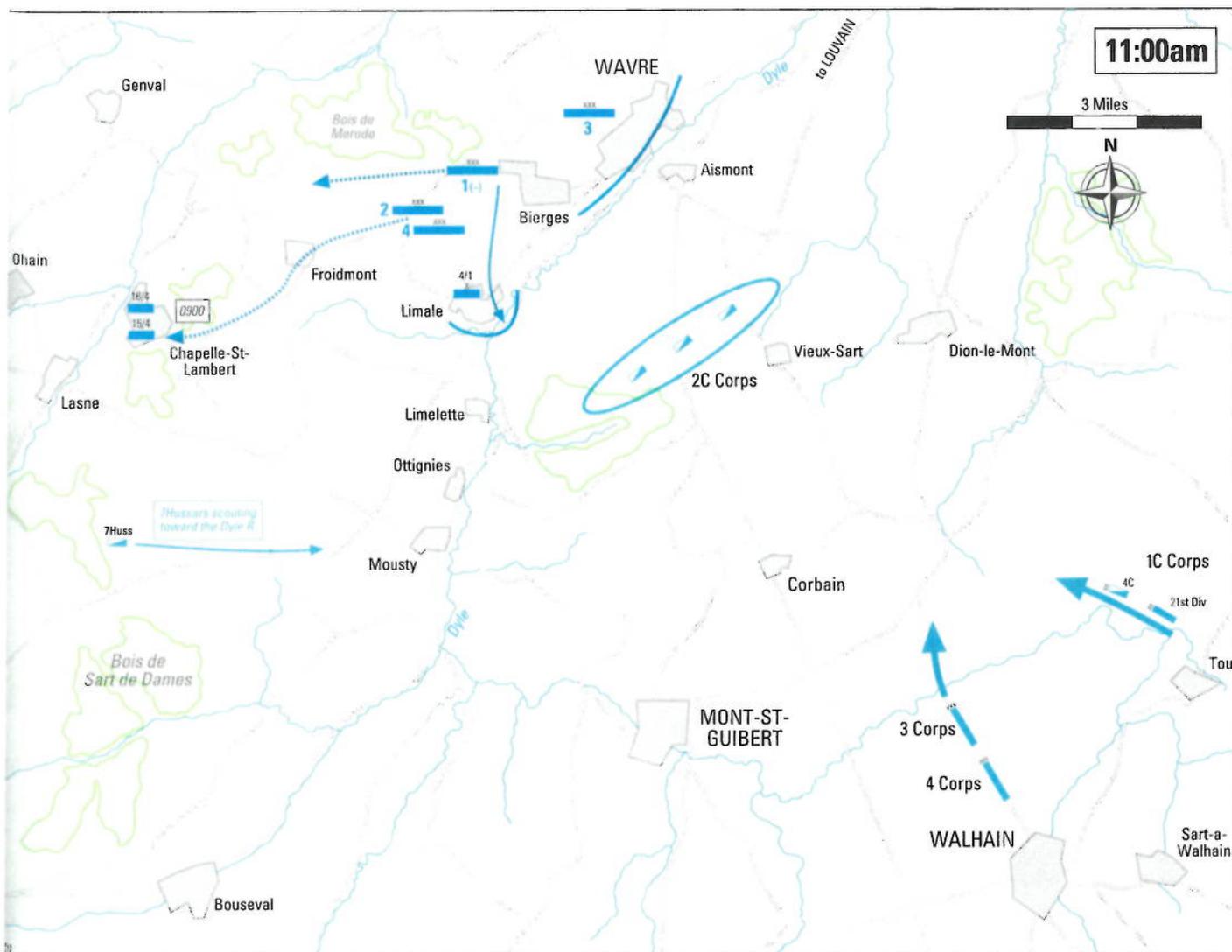
At the other end of the line, a brigade of *First Corps* struck Papelotte. The first assault broke into the farmstead, but the defending Nassauers were reinforced and regained it. As at Hougoumont, the French stayed close and maintained pressure.



First Allied Crisis

The grand battery opened fire between 12:30 and 1:00 p.m. It had little impact on Wellington's infantry, who were sheltered behind the ridge or in a sunken lane. The troops in the second line were not so lucky, as shells flew over the ridge to strike supporting cavalry. They moved away to avoid losses, leaving the infantry alone.

The main French advance got underway at 1:30. Six brigades of D'Erlon's *First Corps*, 13,150 infantry in 25 battalions, headed toward the ridge in four columns spaced 200 yards apart, with skirmishers out in front. The two center columns contained entire divisions, the 2nd and 3rd, while the outer columns each contained a brigade of four battalions. All the battalions were formed in line, giving a frontage of about 200 yards, the battalions in each column following one behind the other.



The unusual formation is another oft-discussed aspect of the battle. One theory has it the result of a simple error, the officers forming “divisions in column of battalions” (as described above) instead of the intended “battalions in column of division” (each battalion forming its own column, with companies lined up in pairs one behind the other). Given the experience of the leaders at every level of command, this version borders on the ridiculous.

A more likely explanation is an attempt to use previous experience against Wellington in Spain. There, French battalions would approach the British position in column of divisions, the best formation for rapid movement, with the intent of deploying into line, the best formation for fighting, just before entering musket range. Wellington routinely short-circuited the tactic by hiding his battalions, already in line, behind

a ridge covered by a strong line of skirmishers. By the time the French plowed through the skirmishers, they were in range of the British lines and had to deploy under fire, putting them at a huge disadvantage. By deploying D’Erlon’s battalions in line to begin with, they would be ready to fight as soon as they made contact.

Still another possibility is the deep formations were intended to do no more than deliver a mass of battalions, already deployed for battle, onto the enemy position.

The three left columns made contact almost simultaneously, the right-most column having farther to go to reach the Allies. Allied troops, British, Netherlander, and Hanoverian, put up a fight and the advance stopped in front of the road along the ridge. The firefight did not last long as the French quickly gained the upper hand (apparently justifying the formation), and began pushing

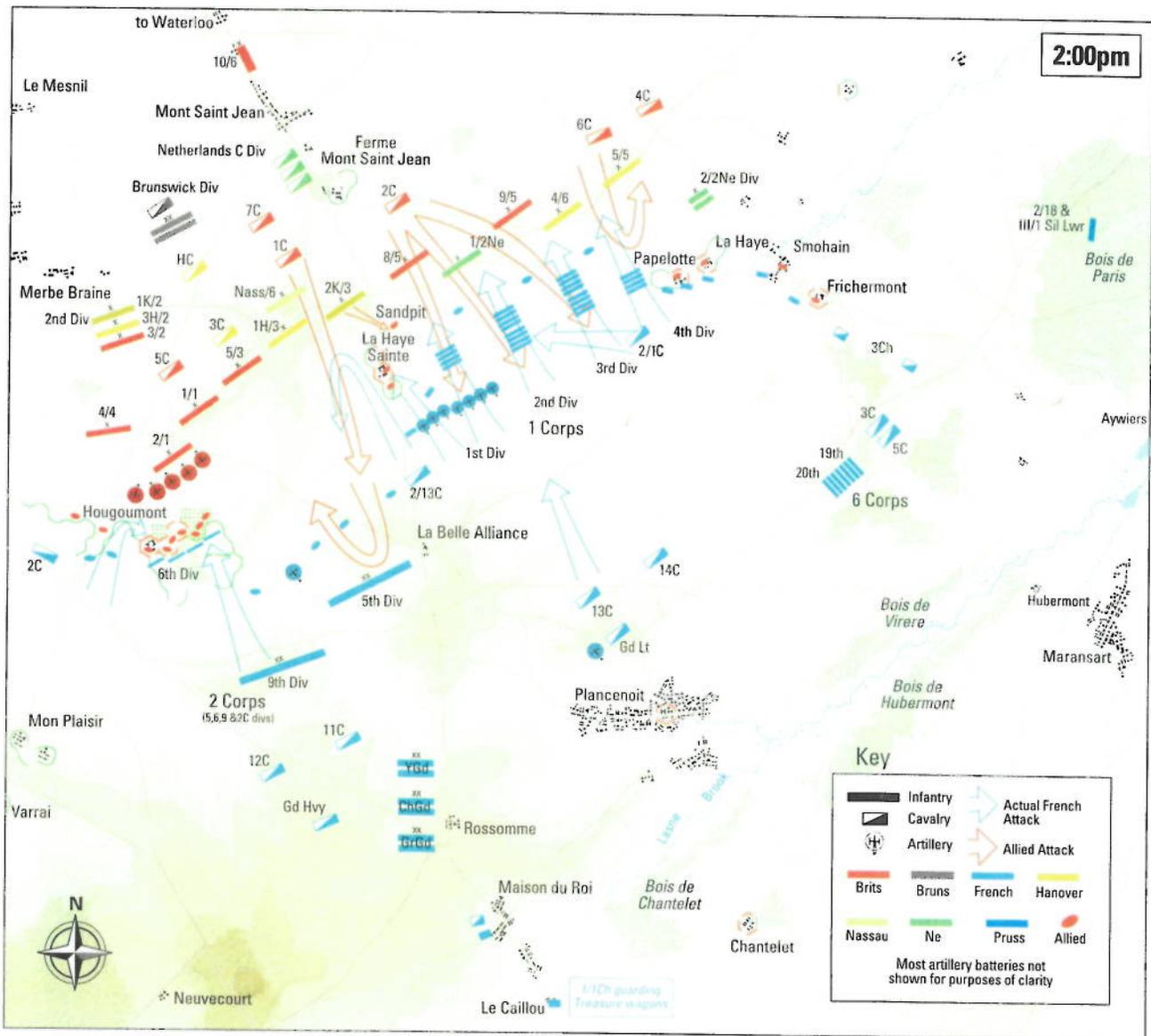
across the road. It was about 2:00 p.m.

Far to the east, Blucher and his staff observed the attack. If it succeeded, the Prussians might be left out on a limb to face the victorious French alone. Undeterred, Blucher knew something had to be done. He ordered Bulow to commence his advance with the troops present, though he still lacked most of his cavalry and artillery.

All three farmhouse outposts came under renewed assault as well. A third attack on Hougomont, involving the French 9th Division, was repulsed in tough fighting. Papelotte was isolated from further reinforcement.

The first assault on La Haye Sainte cleared the orchard, then surrounded the building on three sides. Skirmishers broke off to ascend the ridge and take the main Allied line under fire.

Someone up on the ridge, either Wellington, or his *First Corps* commander, Prince William of Orange, or possibly one of the brigade



commanders, saw the danger to La Haye Sainte and ordered a rescue. A single battalion was detached from the main line and moved down the slope to drive off the Frenchmen.

The movement was spotted by a brigade of heavy cavalrymen following D'Erlon's attack, the *cuirassiers* of Étienne Travers' 2nd Brigade of the 13th Cavalry Division (2/13C). The cavalry charged the moving battalion, riding it down before it had a chance to form square. The surviving infantrymen ran back up the slope, followed by the slashing troopers. The battalion was virtually destroyed.

The incident points out the first French mistake in the battle, but it was a huge and glaring error. D'Erlon's infantry had moved forward almost alone; the *cuirassiers* at La Haye Sainte, the smallest cavalry brigade in the army with just 375 men, had been

the only cavalry accompanying the attack, though D'Erlon's brigade of lancers was stationed behind his right.

Warfare in the Napoleonic era was essentially linear; even D'Erlon's massive columns were wider than they were deep. Combat effectiveness depended on maintaining a straight and continuous line. More units were broken in combat by disorder than by casualties. The fragility of units made imperative the provision of support, another unit nearby behind which a disordered unit might retire to restore itself. This was as true for a whole corps as for a single battalion.

Travers' brigade was disordered by its charge, and would need time to reassemble. With D'Erlon's lancers still rooted in position, the corps lacked any backup. The nearest support, the grand battery, was more than a half-mile behind, and the nearest

maneuver units, Edouard Milhaud's *Fourth Cavalry Corps*, another three-quarters of a mile behind them.

The mistake must be laid at the feet of Napoleon. Only he had the authority to commit units to action, and he certainly had had time to consider the necessity of supporting D'Erlon. Milhaud's corps, along with its brace of horse batteries, would have been the ideal candidate.

D'Erlon, and Ney, who supervised the attack, also come in for a share of the blame. Either one could have requested support—neither did—or could have arranged for a few battalions to drop back to form a second line. Three or four left out of the attack would not have weakened it much, and formed in square a hundred yards behind the front would have prevented the disaster about to befall the French.

The cavalry in Wellington's supporting line came under the authority of Henry Paget, Earl of Uxbridge. With his command spread the length of the Allied line, Uxbridge had freed his brigade commanders to do as they saw fit. It was a recipe for disaster, but in every case the brigade commanders performed well, never more so than as D'Erlon's infantry crested the ridge.

Fifteen minutes of fighting had been enough to push the allied infantry back from the road. As the French columns moved forward, battalions began the process of deploying out of the column.

At this moment, three British cavalry brigades moved up. West of the road, the *1st Cavalry Brigade* charged Travers' winded *cuirassiers*. Unable to resist, Travers retreated rapidly, then reformed and counter-charged. The British in their turn withdrew, covered by a reserve regiment (an excellent example of the value of supports).

On the eastern end of the battle, the British *6th Cavalry Brigade* charged the right-hand French column. Because the column had lagged behind, the British had some distance to cover, giving the French enough time to form squares. The squares held, but the French pulled back down the slope.

The real damage was done in the center, where Sir William Ponsonby's *2nd (Union) Cavalry Brigade* struck. Each of Ponsonby's three regiments struck a French column.

The *1st Dragoons ("Royals")* hit the lone brigade of *1st Division*, taking the regimental eagle from the front unit before plowing through the rest of the column. The infantry fell apart and raced back down the slope.

Ponsonby's center regiment, the *6th Dragoons ("Inniskillings")*, hit the *2nd Division*. Once again the lead unit gave up its eagle. Some battalions held together, others broke and ran.

The last fight was between the *2nd Dragoons ("Scots Greys")* and the French *3rd Division*. No eagle was lost, but this division also lost momentum. When struck shortly thereafter by returning British infantry, it too started back down the hill in considerable disorder.

The British charge had halted and reversed the French tide, but at this point it was no more than a setback. The presence of even a few fresh units would have given

the broken battalions a chance to recover and return to the battle. The absence of any support left them defenseless, and they ran through and beyond the French gun line.

Actual casualties were not especially heavy, though difficult to ascertain with precision at an intermediate point in the battle. Hundreds had fallen during the advance and first contact, hundreds more during the British charge. At least a thousand were taken prisoner, though probably not the oft-quoted 3,500 as that certainly included men captured later in the battle. The real damage, though, was the disorder; the bulk of D'Erlon's corps was put out of action for some time.

What saved the remaining French infantry was the indiscipline of the British cavalry. Rather than rein in to help round up prisoners, the cavalry continued their charge.

The *Scots Greys* veered left to strike unsuccessfully the squares of the French *4th Division*. Ponsonby's other regiments carried on to the French gun line. Here they cut down a few gunners, but could not accomplish more as their horses were winded, their formations gone, and they were soon beset by French cavalry.

Napoleon and his generals had reacted calmly. From the east, D'Erlon's lancers swept down on the disorganized British. Travers, reformed yet again, closed in from the west, while Milhaud's other three brigades converged from the south. The trapped British troopers got out as best they good. Ponsonby, unlike *1st Cavalry Brigade*, had kept no reserves. A belated charge by *4th Cavalry Brigade* helped some get away, but by 3:00 p.m. *Union Brigade* was wrecked.

Bulow's Prussians meanwhile had slogged their way across a steep streambed to enter the Bois de Paris. As they emerged, they were driven back by Lobau's cavalry. It was an inauspicious start, but the Prussians were in action.

Second French Crisis

D'Erlon's defeat cost the French any time gained by Lobau's shift to the east. It would be another hour before *1st Corps* could get back into action, so the only uncommitted infantry available were *5th Division* and the *Guard*. To make matters worse, another message

from Grouchy confirmed he would not reach the battlefield, and had closed on Wavre too late to prevent additional Prussian units (*First* and *Second Corps*) departing for Waterloo.

Once again, Napoleon had options. He could fall back on the defensive. Once D'Erlon was reordered there would be plenty of infantry to man the line. The French also had a decided advantage in artillery, with the heavy cavalry and the *Guard* as reserves. The battle could be spun out until nightfall, Prussians notwithstanding, after which the army could withdraw to commence a new maneuver.

If the battle was to be continued, Napoleon would have to conceive a new plan, and quickly. Time was running out, and he still needed to score a knockout blow against the Allies.

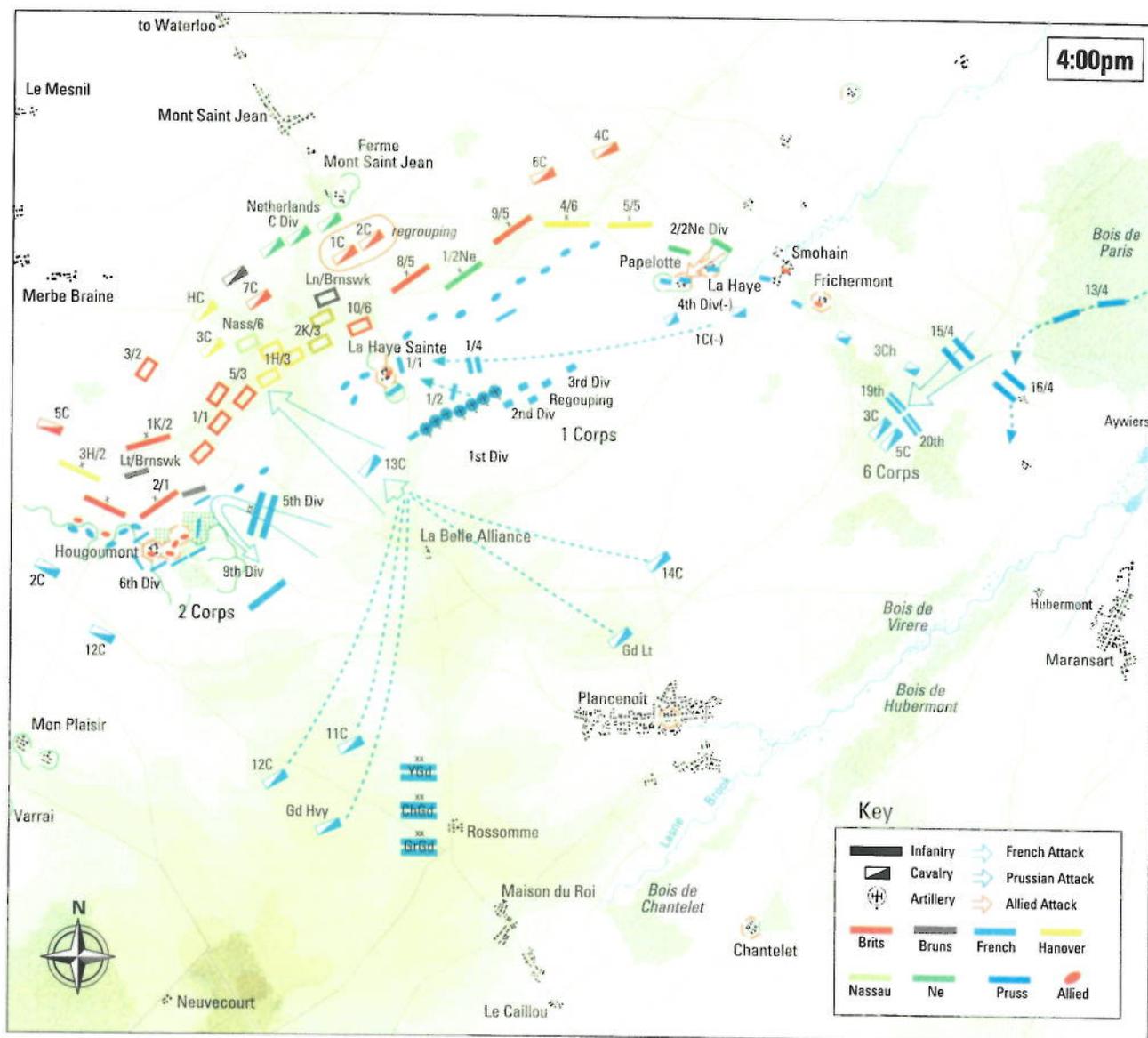
Whether he ever got to the point of forming such a plan is unknown. It is certain he ordered another attack on La Haye Sainte and a fresh assault on Hougoumont. No other orders went out, and before long the battle slipped out of his control.

Sometime between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. French cavalry stormed up the slope between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. Ney was the instigator, but his intentions are unclear. He may have intended nothing more than a follow-up to the French countercharge, or he may have thought the Allies were in retreat when he saw infantry pull back from the ridge to avoid the renewed French bombardment.

He called on one of Milhaud's brigades to make the foray. Milhaud balked, not willing to take orders from Ney (the actual authority of Napoleon's marshals varied according to time, place, and assignment). Tempers flared, Ney gaining the upper hand.

The attack was made, but somehow expanded to a full division. Milhaud, not wanting the division thrown away, led his second division in support, a wise precaution. He also sent word to the *Guard Light Cavalry Division*, deployed behind his corps, and asked for support. With no authority, the Guard division commander led his troopers forward.

Ney meanwhile led the attack up the ridge. There he found the Allies still in position, the infantry forming squares while artillery sprayed the cavalymen with canister. The cavalry could make no impression on the



squares, and soon were driven back by Allied cavalry. Milhaud brought up his supports, allowing Ney to disengage.

The attack should have ended there, after what amounted to a minor repulse. Napoleon had seen the attack, of course, and also observed the *Guard Light Cavalry* moving up. He apparently believed Ney had ordered it. He should have sent countermanding orders, but did not. Why he did not do so is unknown; it may be he was distracted by the growing Prussian threat, or he may simply not have had any better ideas.

Instead of putting a stop to the attack, he reinforced it, his second major error of the day. François Kellermann's *Third Cavalry Corps* was ordered to support Ney. Behind Kellermann, the *Guard Heavy Cavalry Division* also moved forward, again without orders from anyone. Ney, no

doubt thinking the reinforcements indicated Napoleon's approval and desire, reversed course and led the cavalry back up the slope.

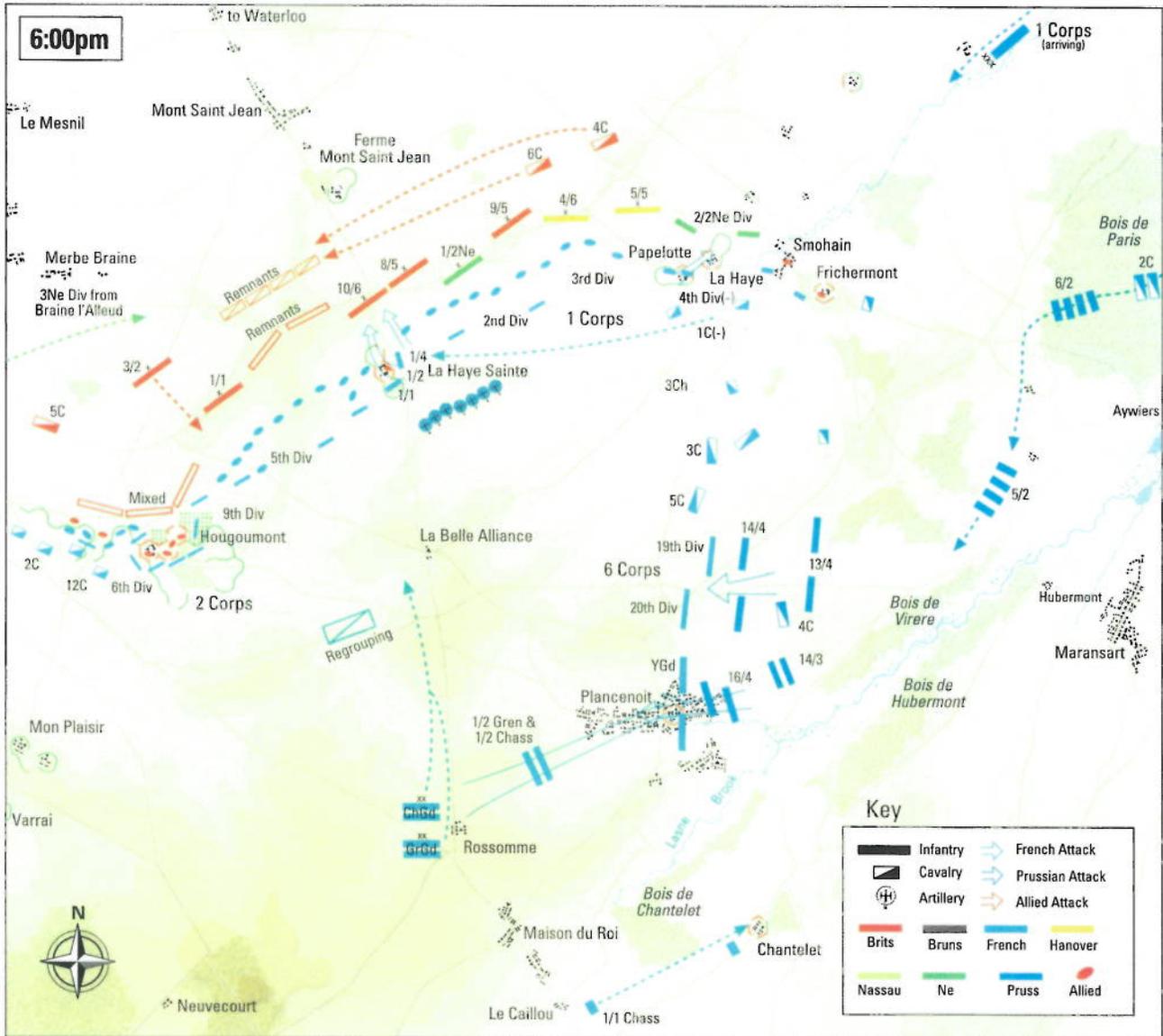
There were now close to 9,000 horsemen advancing on a front of less than a mile. The depth of the column made most of the troopers useless in combat, while their mounts helped churn the ground into a bog. Rather than charging or even galloping, the attacks were made at barely more than a walk.

How many attacks were made is an open question. Some British participants counted 20 or more. Given the duration, about two hours, and the distance to be covered, the actual number is probably no more than three or four. Within each great charge, there were multiple individual actions, which may account for the disparity.

The attacks were not a complete waste. They forced the British infantry into square, an excellent target for French artillery between charges. The Allied cavalry was worn down too, engaged in repeated countercharges. It also fixed the Allied army in place. Napoleon had used a similar tactic in 1807 at Eylau, where a massive cavalry attack pinned the Russians while the French line was reorganized.

At Waterloo, however, the pinning effect of the cavalry was thrown away. No attempt was made to back it up with even the few available infantry, who would have made short work of the dense squares.

Even more startling is the absence of close artillery support. Napoleon assigned every cavalry division a battery of horse artillery to blast holes in squares and shred counterattacking enemy cavalry. Yet none of the thirteen



horse batteries on the field, including eight attached to the attacking divisions, made an appearance. A few had been detached earlier to support attacks at Hougomont and Papelotte, and Lobau had three, but there is no explanation for the absence of the rest. Any of the French commanders could have rectified the situation; none did.

The Prussians, meanwhile, had emerged from the Bois de Paris. Rather than pressing straight for the French right around Papelotte, Blucher directed *Fourth Corps* farther south, towards the village of Plancenoit. Partly he wanted to avoid a direct assault on Lobau, but he was aiming for more than just rescuing Wellington, who by that time seemed to be holding his own. If the Prussians could take Plancenoit, they would be closer to the French trains and lines of communication

than most of Napoleon's army. Lobau noted the move and shifted to his right, throwing a brigade into Plancenoit and putting the rest into position along a ridge north of town.

The first Prussian attack gained the town, driving out the French garrison, at about 5:00 p.m. Napoleon responded by sending the *Young Guard Division* to retake the place.

Napoleon's plan was in a shambles. His heavy cavalry was a spent force, with heavy casualties and exhausted horses. At Hougomont, despite the use of howitzers to set fire to the buildings, the battle raged. La Haye Sainte still held out. The Prussians held Plancenoit, and had a two-to-one advantage over Lobau, even with the *Young Guard*. More Prussian columns could be seen debouching from the Bois de Paris. All his reserves had been committed, save the *Old Guard*.

Incredibly, the battle was about to turn his way.

Second Allied Crisis

La Haye Sainte fell at 6:15. Emboldened French skirmishers scaled the ridge to pepper the Allied center, soon joined by a battery. Wellington could make no effective response; his cavalry was also used up, his infantry mangled, and his reserves committed. At Plancenoit, the *Young Guard* drove out the Prussians, who pulled back to regroup.

Above all, Napoleon still had the *Old Guard*. One hard blow by the *Guard* had won battles before, and it appeared the time had come for another, if there was time.

Napoleon's window of opportunity was small, though, and closing fast. Fewer than 55,000 Frenchmen were

still in action, not counting the *Guard*, while the Coalition forces had grown to 90,000 or more.

Both Coalition commanders worked feverishly to take advantage of the numbers. Wellington strove to rebuild his shattered center. From the left, now secured by Prussians, he shifted the relatively fresh 4th and 6th Cavalry Brigades. From the far right, the untouched 3rd Netherlands Division was called in, along with a few battalions from behind Hougoumont.

Blucher ordered a fresh assault on Plancenoit, and the town changed hands again. Papelotte fell to the Prussian *First Corps*, D'Erlon's line contracting toward the southwest, fighting in three directions.

By 7:00 p.m. Napoleon had missed his chance, though he probably did not know it. Even at that late stage, he could have avoided a crushing

defeat by pulling back into a defensive stance until nightfall. He chose the bold approach, planning to break Wellington's center, hoping it would collapse the Allied army and cause the Prussians to turn cautious.

Only nine Guard battalions could be spared, forming two lines—six in front, three in support—near La Belle Alliance. They were joined by their foot batteries and a few scratch squadrons.

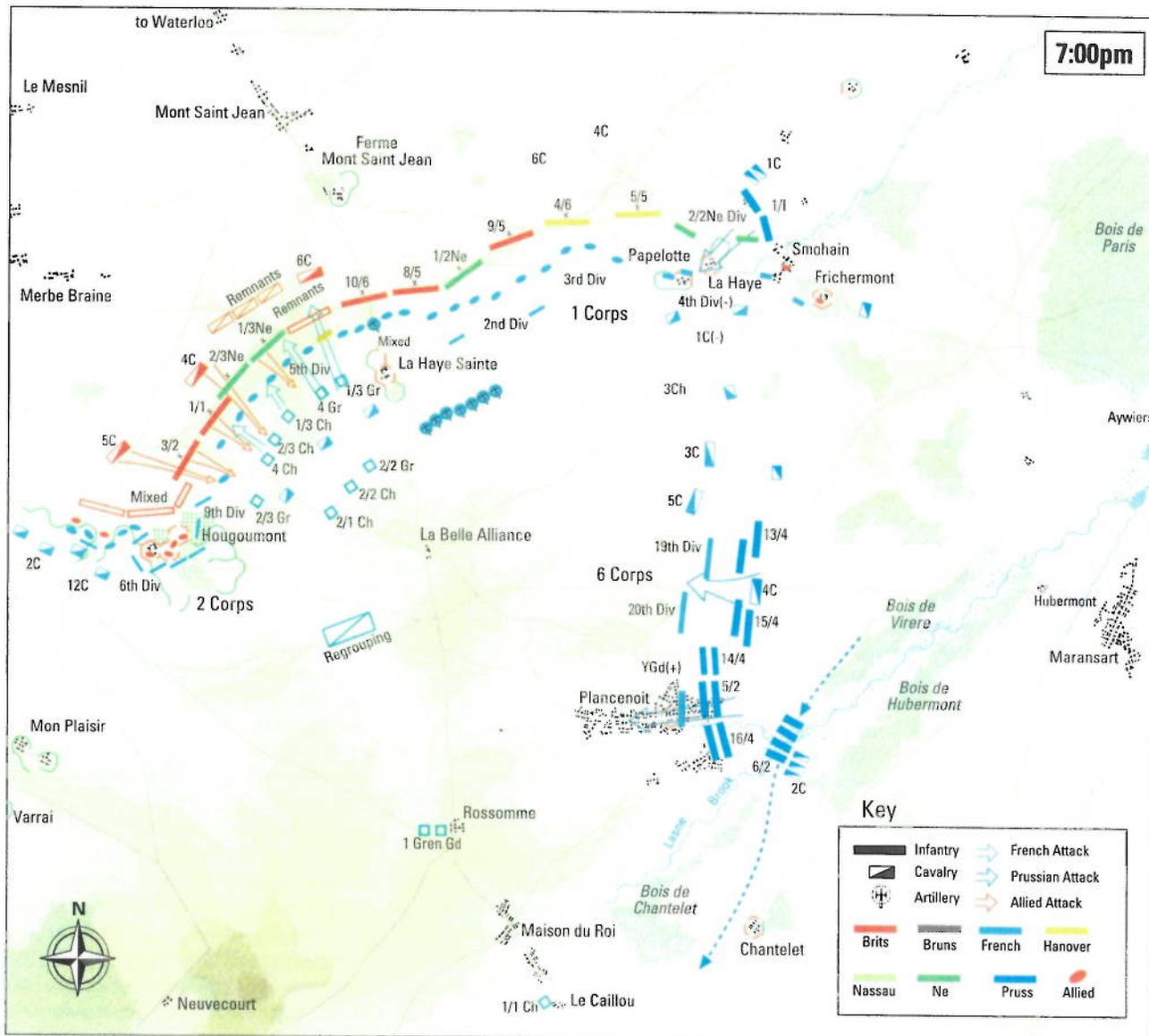
The column moved forward at about 7:30, the indefatigable Ney leading. One battalion from each line shifted west to guard the flank against sorties from Hougoumont.

Ney has been accused of ruining the attack by advancing before the support battalions were formed, and by veering west of La Haye Sainte rather than toward the weaker Allied line east of the farmhouse. The answer to both charges is that by the time

the attack commenced, the Prussians had taken Papelotte and were driving west against dwindling resistance. Had Ney moved later, or moved east of La Haye Sainte, he would have risked being caught in the flank. Napoleon was on the spot and could have altered the orders had he so chosen.

It also is unlikely the three battalions in the second line were intended to be part of the initial attack. They were positioned to provide support to the first in case of defeat, while if the first line made a breakthrough the more experienced units in the second line could exploit it.

Each battalion moved in an open square, a formation with no open flanks, but with a larger front and thinner lines than the standard square. Given the chaotic state of the battlefield, it was a wise move.



The two Grenadier battalions on the right drove through the remnants of Allied units that had been on line all afternoon. On the left, the *Chasseurs* hit the reasonably fresh British 1st (Guards) Brigade. Two battalions were driven down the hill, but the third chased the British back up the slope.

The high point of the assault had been reached when Wellington's reinforcements took charge of the

battle. The Grenadiers were struck by 3rd *Netherlands Division*. Sheer weight of numbers, 6,000 to just over 1,000, made the outcome inevitable. The grenadiers fell back, then broke and ran.

The *Chasseurs*, caught in the flank by a fresh British brigade and in front by the reformed British *Guards*, joined the general retreat. The French infantry nearby joined suit,

while farther east D'Erlon's line was already pulling back. The Frenchmen at Hougoumont gradually became aware of the withdrawal, and they too fell back to avoid encirclement.

Defeat & Victory

Up on the Allied ridge, Wellington raised his hat, a signal for his entire army—at last—to attack. The line



La Garde

Napoleon rousing the Guard as it moves forward for its final assault.

From the Persian *Immortals* to today's special forces, armies throughout history have formed elite formations by culling the best material from line units. At its best, the practice gives an army an absolutely dependable unit for use at critical points. At its worst, it results in a dull edge among the denuded line units (one German commander in WWII referred to line infantry as "dross") since each ranker in an elite unit is a potential leader in an average one.

Napoleon's *Old Guard* is a case in point on both sides of the issue. Only long service veterans were eligible to join; for the senior battalions, 20 years' service was mandatory. The sum of experience in the Guard's ranks – a quarter of the French infantry at Waterloo, about a sixth of the whole *Army of the North* – certainly would have improved the performance of the line infantry if spread among them. On the other hand, at the end of the battle, three battalions – just 1,600 men – held back the pursuing Coalition forces long enough for most of the beaten army to escape.

Even the most strenuous efforts during the spring of 1815 could produce only enough guardsmen to fill eight battalions, and even that required a lowering of standards. Seven more were filled by lowering the standard still further. The drop in quality of the newest unit, the 3rd and 4th *Grenadiers* and 3rd and 4th *Chasseurs*, was recognized by the entire army, so they were semi-officially referred to as the "*Middle Guard*." The term had been used a few years earlier for a different class of Guard regiments; its resurrection for this campaign was emphatically not a compliment. Whatever the opinion of others, the new formations performed well in combat, buckling only under extreme pressure by superior numbers.

There were fourteen *Old Guard* battalions at Waterloo (the battalions of the 4th *Chasseurs* had been merged after heavy casualties at Ligny). The regiments nominally were grouped into a division each of Grenadiers and Chasseurs, each having one *Old Guard* and one *Middle Guard* brigade, and each brigade possessing a battery of artillery.

The divisional and brigade organizations were often ignored in practice. Battalions could be sent off alone (such as the 1/1 *Chasseurs* guarding the trains at Le Caillou) or in non-brigaded pairs (the 1/2 *Grenadiers* and 1/2 *Chasseurs* at Plancenoit). The generals, twice as many as in a line organization, could take charge of any subordinate units. For example, the commander of the second brigade of grenadiers took charge of the battalions sent to Plancenoit though neither came from his brigade.

Old Guard Deployment at 7:00 p.m.

1/1 Grenadiers: at Rossomme.

2/1 Grenadiers: at Rossomme.

1/2 Grenadiers: sent to restore the situation at Plancenoit, regaining the town at about 7:15.

2/2 Grenadiers: supporting the final assault.

1/3 Grenadiers: in the final assault.

2/3 Grenadiers: deployed for the final assault, but shifted left to cover the column's open flank.

4 Grenadiers: in the final assault.

1/1 Chasseurs: guarded the army's treasury at Le Caillou.

After driving off a marauding column of Prussian cavalry, it sent a detachment to the chateau of Chantelet.

2/1 Chasseurs: supporting the final assault, but cheating left to watch Hougoumont.

1/2 Chasseurs: with 1/2 *Grenadiers* at Plancenoit.

2/2 Chasseurs: supporting the final assault.

1/3 Chasseurs: in the final assault.

2/3 Chasseurs: in the final assault.

4 Chasseurs: in the final assault. ♦

started forward, but except for a few cavalry units did not get far. The Prussians were in hot pursuit, and in the gathering darkness there was a good chance of the Coalition forces firing on each other.

Wellington and Blucher met at La Belle Alliance. After an exchange of congratulations, it was determined the Prussians would take on the pursuit, leaving the Allies to secure the field.

Not far from their meeting, four *Old Guard* squares and a few batteries formed a bulwark against both retreat and pursuit. The squares slowly withdrew, holding the pursuers at arm's length, but dribbling casualties. At length the squares dissolved and joined the retreat.

It was not yet a rout. Near Rossomme, the *1st Grenadiers*, oldest of the *Old Guard*, had formed two more squares. A few hundred yards to the

east, Plancenoit held out, bottling up the mass of the Prussian army. The defenders would pay the price; *Young Guard* losses would reach 90 percent.

The *1st Grenadiers* slowly withdrew southward. Prussian cavalry charged repeatedly, but fortunately for the *Guards* few cannon or infantry had made their way so far south.

The squares dwindled nevertheless, becoming triangles, then merging. The *1/1 Chasseurs* also stayed together, and together the last of the *Old Guard* held back the worst of the pursuit.

The army finally fell apart at Genappe, seven miles south, where wagons blocked the lone bridge. Panic set in, and even the squares of the *Guard* cracked.

The army survived (not a single eagle was lost during the retreat) to reach France, where it was united with Grouchy's wing,

but Napoleon was finished. He abdicated four days after the battle.

The battle had been, in Wellington's words, a "near run thing." French casualties are estimated at 25,000, plus up to 15,000 captured, against 22,000 Allies, one-third of the latter being Prussians. Despite the eventual disparity in numbers, the battle could have gone Napoleon's way.

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Special thanks to Nik van Diepen for assistance with the Netherlands order of battle.

