

## The Napoleon Series

### ‘Too soon by an hour’: The failure of the French Reserve Cavalry at Waterloo

By [Stephen Millar](#)

*Many nineteenth-century sources cited below use archaic or unfamiliar forms of English. Therefore, in order to clarify several passages, a small degree of editing was required. Main ideas, however, remain intact.*

“The spectacle was imposing, and if ever the word sublime was appropriately applied, it might surely be to it. On they came in compact squadrons, one behind the other, so numerous that those in the rear were still below the brow when the head of the column was but at some sixty or seventy yards from our guns. Their pace was a slow but steady trot. None of your furious galloping charges was this, but a deliberate advance, at a deliberate pace, as of men resolved to carry their point. They moved in profound silence, and the only sound that could be heard from them amidst the incessant roar of battle was the low thunder-like reverberation of the ground beneath the simultaneous tread of so many horses.”<sup>1</sup>

“As they ascended the ridge, the French artillery suspended their fire, and the Allied batteries commenced pouring a destructive shower of grapeshot amidst their devoted ranks. Fiercely and fatally did this iron hail rattle against the helmed and steel-clad cuirassiers, here glancing off, there penetrating the armour; wounding or laying prostrate many a gallant warrior at the very moment when the brightest visions of glory had opened on his ardent imagination. This iron sleet, however, caused no perceptible check to their progress; and, with shouts of ‘*Vive l’Empereur!*’ they accelerated their pace until, having arrived within about forty yards of the guns, they received the last and well-prepared discharge. Its effects were terrific; but though their order was somewhat broken, their courage was not shaken. The charge was sounded, a cheer followed, and, in the next instant, they rushed up to the very cannon’s mouth.”<sup>2</sup>

There were moments of supreme crisis during the Napoleonic Wars when the Emperor’s Reserve Cavalry – his massed regiments of cuirassiers, dragoons and carabiniers – had to be thrown into battle. One of these desperate moments came on 8 February 1807 during a snowstorm in East Prussia; led by Marshal Joachim Murat, the regiments of the Reserve Cavalry charged in a ‘death or glory’ attack to cover the shattered French centre at the bloody Battle of Preussisch-Eylau. Another crisis came on 7 September 1812 at the sprawling Battle of Borodino. There, on the road to

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<sup>1</sup> Mercer, General Cavalie. Journal of the Waterloo Campaign kept throughout the Campaign of 1815, Volume 1. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1870. 319.

<sup>2</sup> Siborne, William. The Waterloo Campaign, 1815. Birmingham, 1894. 444.

Moscow, II, III and IV Reserve Cavalry Corps charged in support of the final French infantry assault on the Russians' Great Redoubt. The attack succeeded, but at a fearful cost on both sides.

But the most celebrated Reserve Cavalry charge of them all occurred in the late afternoon of 18 June 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo – the single most crucial day of the entire Napoleonic Wars. This attack, which began as the result of Marshal Michel Ney's tactical confusion, eventually grew into a series of massed charges which, for two hours, battered the already-weary Allied infantry regiments. But by 6pm, the Emperor's heavy cavalry regiments had been decisively defeated; in another two hours, the battle – and the First Empire -- was lost. In the aftermath of Waterloo, these great attacks have been described as being completely void of any military merit; glorious, but futile, manoeuvres which only helped Ney and Emperor Napoleon to lose this crucial battle:

“A more inconsiderate and reckless purpose has seldom been formed in the annals of war; it was, we repeat, a violation of positive orders; it was the third great error of the tactics of the French at Waterloo. The attack, as it was to be conducted, was to be made by horsemen, exposed on a considerable space to the destructive fire of the Allied guns; it was to be made without the support of infantry in force. It was to be made, too, against Wellington's right centre, exactly where his line was strong, and could be easily reinforced; for at this point, the crossroad from Ohain to Braine l'Alleud did not present the obstacles which had proved so fatal to the luckless cuirassiers a few hours before; and it was to be made against masses of infantry still unbroken, capable of being greatly increased in numbers, and in a large part, at least, composed of men of proved constancy and worth. No wonder that experienced British officers, as they saw the preparations being made for this waste of military strength, felt that the effort was premature, and was doomed to failure.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the confusion of the battle, it is not completely clear how many individual charges the Reserve Cavalry made between 4 and 6 pm – Houssaye says four charges,<sup>4</sup> while French historian Louis-Adolphe Thiers says Ney led 11 charges of 10,000 cavalrymen.<sup>5</sup> This later figure is likely an exaggeration, because “...by degrees, every charge became weaker and weaker; the French horsemen, their battle steeds exhausted, their officers having fallen in scores, slowly losing heart, brave men as they were, began to feel they could not overcome their enemy.”<sup>6</sup> In all, there were probably four main charges: the first and second charges undertaken by Milhaud's IV Cavalry Corps and Lefebvre-

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, William O'Connor. The Campaign of Waterloo: Ligny, Quatre-Bras, Waterloo. London: Grant Richards; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1900. 257-8.

<sup>4</sup> Houssaye, Henry. 1815: Waterloo. Trans. S.R. Willis. Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1905. 197.

<sup>5</sup> Thiers, Louis Adolphe. History of the Consulate and the Empire of France under Napoleon, Volume 12. Trans. D. Forbes Campbell and John Stubbing. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company; London: Chatto and Windus, 1894. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Morris: 269.

Desnoettes' Guard Light Cavalry Division; Kellermann's III Cavalry Corps and Guyot's Guard Heavy Cavalry Division reinforced the third and fourth charges.

### **'On the spur of the moment'**

By 4 pm on June 18, French efforts against Wellington's Allied army had ground to a halt. General de Division (GdD) Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count d'Erlon had failed with his great infantry assault in the early afternoon; both Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte stubbornly remained unconquered. The French artillery, however, continued its ceaseless bombardment against the Allied lines: the 80 guns of Napoleon's Great Battery (the reserve artillery of I, II and IV Corps) continued to hammer the centre of Wellington's position. It was through this dense cloud of smoke – and the additional smoke from the opposing Allied batteries – that Ney, the Emperor's tactical commander, thought he had seen the turning-point of the battle. In one of the great miscalculations of military history, Ney thought he saw the beginning of Wellington's retreat. His confusion was the initial spark which would eventually lead to the destruction the Emperor's Reserve Cavalry:

“Wellington had, we have seen, withdrawn a considerable part of his army behind the ridge to escape the effects of the tremendous cannonade; there were movements of the impedimenta in his rear; some of his auxiliaries were already flying from the field. Ney thought he saw the signs of retreat at hand. On the spur of the moment, without reflection, and in contravention of Napoleon's commands, he resolved to attack the enemy with a mass of cavalry, and to change a retrograde movement into defeat – nay, rout.”<sup>7</sup>

Ney's mistake was easily to make in the smoke; already impetuous by nature, Ney, by late afternoon, was likely suffering from effects of 'battle fatigue'. While it was true that some British units had performed a limited withdrawal to protect themselves from the French artillery fire, these regiments remained unbroken:

“Some battalions of the first English line retrograded a hundred steps in order to shelter themselves behind the crest of the plateau. At the same time, groups of wounded, convoys of prisoners, empty caissons, and crowds of fugitives streamed towards the Forest of Soignes. Ney, who saw with difficulty through the smoke, mistook these movements for the beginning of a retreat, and thought of establishing himself upon the plateau with the cavalry. He summoned immediately a brigade of cuirassiers.”<sup>8</sup>

Ney sent an aide-de-camp to General de Brigade (GdB) Pierre Farine du Creux, an officer in the 14th Cavalry Division. Farine was told to prepare his brigade, six squadrons of the 5th and 10th Cuirassier Regiments, to charge the ridge in the centre of Wellington's position. This order had scarcely been issued when GdD Delort – Farine's

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<sup>7</sup> Morris: 257.

<sup>8</sup> Houssaye: 187-8.

immediate superior – halted the cuirassiers’ advance.<sup>9</sup> The resulting argument between Ney, Delort and Milhaud eventually dragged the whole of IV Cavalry Corps into Ney’s attack:

“The aide-de-camp addressed himself to General Farine, who put his two regiments on the march. But General Delort, commanding the division, arrested the movement. ‘We take orders only from [GdD Edouard-Jean-Baptiste] Count Milhaud’ he said. Ney, impatient, hastened to Delort. The Marshal was greatly irritated by this disobedience. He not only reiterated the orders concerning Farine’s brigade, but he ordered the other six regiments of Milhaud’s corps to advance. Delort having again remonstrated against the imprudence of this manoeuvre upon such unfavourable ground, Ney invoked the instructions of the Emperor. Delort obeyed.”<sup>10</sup>

What made Delort’s criticism even more important is that it led directly to the ten squadrons of the Guard Light Cavalry Division being attached to the proposed attack. Ney would now lead the 34 squadrons of Milhaud and GdD Charles, Count Lefebvre-Desnoettes, instead of Farine’s six squadrons:

“Ney had told [GdD Antoine, Count] Drouot in the morning that the French cavalry, under his leading, could do great things, he hurried to Delort, one of Milhaud’s lieutenants, and demanded that a body of cuirassiers should be placed in his hands. Delort referred the Marshal to his superior officer; Milhaud protested against an attack to be made in difficult ground, under worse conditions; Ney angrily replied that the whole cavalry had been entrusted to him, but he did not add that he was not to stir until Napoleon bade him. Milhaud reluctantly obeyed what seemed to be an imperative command; his splendid division of mailed horsemen was given to Ney to be at his disposal; it was followed as it began its movement, by the light cavalry of the Guard, perhaps because, chafing at its inaction at Quatre-Bras, it broke away from its experienced chief, perhaps because Milhaud called on Lefebvre-Desnoettes to support him.”<sup>11</sup>

There will probably never be a definite answer explaining Lefebvre-Desnoettes’ movement, but two reasons are possible:

“The two divisions of cuirassiers started at a rapid trot, and behind them moved the red lancers and chasseurs of the Guard. Did these regiments follow the movement by order of Lefebvre-Desnoettes, to whom Milhaud had said when starting, ‘I am going to charge; support me’ or did they advance spontaneously – seized, as it were, by an irresistible desire to charge at the sight of their comrades hastening against the enemy, whose retreat had begun, and desirous of having their share of the English to sabre?”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> GdD Jacques-Antoine-Adrien, Baron Delort’s second brigade was composed of the 6th and 9th Cuirassier Regiments.

<sup>10</sup> Houssaye: 188.

<sup>11</sup> Morris: 259.

<sup>12</sup> Houssaye: 188.

French 'command and control' was starting to break down. Marshal Adolphe-Edouard-Casimir-Joseph Mortier, Duke of Treviso, the commander of the Imperial Guard, was suffering from severe sciatica; his absence during the battle undoubtedly contributed to this problem:

"As General Milhaud passed before Lefebvre-Desnoettes, who commanded the light cavalry of the Guard, he clasped his arm and said, "I am going to charge, support me." Lefebvre-Desnoettes, whose valour needed no fresh incitement, believed it was by order of the Emperor he was desired to support the cuirassiers, and following their movement, he took up a position behind them. Serious inconveniences had resulted at Wagram [5-6 July 1809] and Fuenes d'Onoro [3-5 May 1811] from the institution of *commandants-en-chef* of the imperial guards, where it had paralyzed the efforts of these troops; but here we had to regret the decay of that institution owing to Mortier's illness, as there was no-one to check unreasonable enthusiasm; and to add to the disaster, Napoleon had been obliged to leave his post in the centre and betake him to the right, to direct the action against the Prussians, who thus deprived us not only our reserves, but of Napoleon's presence."<sup>13</sup>

### **'In beautiful order'**

In this atmosphere of 'unreasonable enthusiasm', the initial cavalry charge against the centre of Wellington's army grew to a total of 40 squadrons – 21 squadrons in IV Cavalry Corps, and seven lancer squadrons and 12 chasseur squadrons in the Guard Light Cavalry Division.<sup>14</sup> The impression that these experienced troopers made on the Allies as they headed into action was unforgettable:

"The French force which we saw advancing to the attack was the whole of Milhaud's corps, consisting of forty squadrons of heavy cavalry. That corps, being on the French right of the Charleroi road, had to cross the road before making this attack, and had consequently to oblique considerably to its left. This was affected in beautiful order, and the formation and advance of that magnificent and highly-disciplined cavalry had, as a spectacle, a very grand effect. These splendid horsemen -- enthusiastic in the cause of Napoleon, full of confidence in him and in themselves, thirsting to revenge the reverses which had been suffered by the French armies, led by most experienced and able cavalry officers -- submitted to a rigid discipline. Their advance to the attack was splendid and interesting in the extreme. Our surprise at being so soon attacked by this great and magnificent force of cavalry was accompanied with the opinion that the attack was premature, and that we were perfectly prepared and secure against its effect, so far as any military operation can be calculated upon."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thiers: 121.

<sup>14</sup> Gardner, Dorsey. Quatre-Bras, Ligny and Waterloo: a Narrative of the Campaign in Belgium, 1815. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1882. 276.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, James Shaw. Notes on the Battle of Waterloo. London: John Murray, 1865. 115-6.

These massed regiments were, however, all deployed in a dreadfully small and muddy area – less than 1,000 yards wide – between the still-defiant bastions of La Saye Sainte and Hougoumont:

“...Milhaud led his shining squadrons into the low grounds on the south of La Haye Sainte, and Lefebvre-Desnoettes followed with the light cavalry of the Guard. There were twenty-one squadrons of cuirassiers, seven squadrons of lancers, and twelve squadrons of chasseurs. They were formed in columns of attack, and presented a brilliant and an imposing mass, armed with long sabres or longer lances; all were clad in rich uniforms – the cuirassiers in polished steel, the lancers in red, the chasseurs in green and gold. They were five thousand strong, and filled the open space between the Charleroi road and the enclosures of Hougoumont.”<sup>16</sup>

The Allied batteries caused horrific casualties as the lines ascended to the top of the ridge, but the cavalrymen continued on:

“...they retained their formations, and exulted in proud confidence; the ‘bravest of the brave’ was at their head, accompanied by many a brilliant officer; the cuirassiers were men of Borodino and Eylau, whose weighty and dauntless onset had achieved wonders; the troopers of Lefebvre-Desnoettes were choice soldiers, selected from the flower of the cavalry of France. The multitudinous shouts of ‘*Vive l’Empereur*’ swelled in tumultuous roar towards the enemy’s line; sabres flashed out in thousands in the summer air; the sun shone on a still-ordered array rushing up the low eminence it had all but mastered, in the pomp of war, and in strength that appeared invincible.”<sup>17</sup>

The final artillery salvo, double-shotted grapeshot and canister, was fired at forty yards. Despite the carnage this ensued, the heavy regiments kept pushing forward to their objective:

“It was in vain that the Allied artillery tore through their ranks, causing at each discharge great gaps to show themselves. Without breaking beyond a steady trot, these resolute horsemen continued to advance, their own cannon firing over them with great spirit, as long as they could do so without striking friends as well as foes, till arriving within forty yards of the English guns, they received a last discharge; it was grape and canister, and told, but it could not stop them. With a shout, which rent the air, they put their strong horses to their speed, and in a moment the whole of the advanced batteries of the Allies were in their possession.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hooper, George. Waterloo, the Downfall of the First Napoleon: a History of the Campaign of 1815. London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1862. 215.

<sup>17</sup> Morris: 260.

<sup>18</sup> Gleig, George Robert. Story of the Battle of Waterloo. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875. 214.

When the first line of cuirassiers cleared the smoke and reached the summit of the ridge, they received a nasty surprise. Wellington's army – far from being broken and retreating – was deployed in defensive infantry squares, ready to repel Milhaud's heavy regiments:

"The faintest irresolution among the British foot-soldiers and they were lost; but none were irresolute. The cuirassiers dashed at a square and received its fire. Horses stumbled and fell, saddles were emptied, files broke off or bounded backwards to fall under the fire of another square. It was a confused combat, which defies analysis and eludes imagination. Regiments, squadrons, troops, soon lost their unity, but the infantry formations remained entire and unshaken. The mailed horsemen rode around them, a confused and jostling crowd, and at the right moment the Allied cavalry poured through the intervals of the squares, fell upon the disordered crowd, and drove them down the hillside."<sup>19</sup>

Milhaud's cuirassiers then reformed and, joining with Lefebvre-Desnoettes' light regiments, again ascended the ridge. The effect of the second charge was the same as the first: the muddy ground slowed the attack; the Allied artillery was overrun; the infantry squares held fast; the French troopers became disorganized; Allied cavalrymen counter-attacked and forced the French squadrons back down the slope.

### **'The desperate use'**

It was now about 5 pm. Despite their best efforts, almost 5,000 French cavalrymen had failed to crack Wellington's infantry squares on the ridge. It was obvious that the muddy ground, the restricted attack frontage and the tenacious defence of the unbroken Allied infantry were proving too difficult for Ney's cavalrymen. Given the current situation, Ney should have realized that any further cavalry action against Wellington's squares would be fruitless. But the Emperor, who had seen Milhaud's charge, was about to give him another chance to break the Allied army:

"From La Belle Alliance, the Emperor and his staff had seen these magnificent charges; they saw the cannon abandoned, the horsemen galloping over the plateau, the enemy lines pierced, and the squares surrounded; already the cry of victory was heard around Napoleon. Napoleon was surprised and vexed that his cavalry had been engaged without his order against infantry as yet unbroken. He said to [Marshal Nicholas-Jean-de-Dieu] Soult: 'This is a premature movement, the results of which may prove disastrous.' The Major-General inveighed against Ney, 'He is endangering us as at Jena!' The Emperor looked long at the field of battle, reflected a moment, and then said: 'It is too soon by an hour; but it is necessary to follow up what has already been done.' He sent one of his aides-de-camp, Flauhaut [GdD Auguste-Charles-Joseph de Flahaut de La Billarderie], to carry to Kellermann the order to charge with four brigades of cuirassiers and carbineers."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hooper: 216

<sup>20</sup> Houssaye: 191-2.

GdD Francois-Etienne Kellermann, Count of Valmy – a highly-experienced officer who led the famous French cavalry charge in 1800 at the Battle of Marengo – commanded III Cavalry Corps. Composed of two cuirassier brigades, one dragoon brigade and one carabinier brigade, Kellermann's corps, along with GdD Claude-Etienne, Baron Guyot's Guard Heavy Cavalry Division, formed the Emperor's sole remaining cavalry reserve. Therefore, Kellermann, like Milhaud earlier in the afternoon, was very surprised when he received the Emperor's orders:

"Kellermann, who had had some experience at Quatre-Bras of what he called Ney's foolish zeal, condemned the desperate use which at this moment was made of the cavalry. Distrusting the result, he kept back one of his brigades, the carabineers, and most unwillingly sent the remainder to Ney."<sup>21</sup>

Houssaye adds some details about this episode with Flahaut, saying that Kellermann eventually decided to detach the two carabinier regiments commanded by GdB Amiable-Guy, Baron Blanchard:

"Like the Emperor, Kellermann thought the movement of Milhaud premature; he also believed it imprudent to engage his own cavalry. He was on the point of stating his reasons to Flahaut when General L'Heritier, who commanded his first division (cuirassiers and dragoons), started at a rapid trot without awaiting orders. Kellermann was forced to follow with his second division, composed of the 2nd and 3rd Cuirassiers and the 1st and 2nd Carbineers; but not far from Hougoumont, he halted the brigade of carbineers in the hollow of the ground, and gave positive instructions to General Blanchard not to budge from there unless he received an order from him. This was a wise precaution, for these 800 carbineers were henceforth the only cavalry reserve left to the army."<sup>22</sup>

As Kellermann's troopers attacked Wellington's infantry squares, the Guard Heavy Cavalry Division under General de Division Guyot also advanced. Like Lefebvre-Desnoettes, Guyot did not have any authorization for his attack:

"Whilst this titanic combat was going on, the heavy cavalry of the Guard hastened forward, though nobody knew why. These had been stationed in a slight hollow somewhat in the rear, when some officers having advanced to assist Ney in this gigantic conflict, believing that he had conquered, brandished their sabres, and cried victory. At this cry, other officers rushed forward, and the nearest squadron, regarding this as the signal to charge, advanced at a trot. The entire mass followed, and yielding to a species of mechanical impulse, the 2,000 dragoons and mounted grenadiers ascended the plateau, trampling through the wet and muddy ground. [GdD Henri-Gatien, Count]

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<sup>21</sup> Thiers: 124.

<sup>22</sup> Houssaye: 192.



Bertrand, being sent by Napoleon to keep them back, hastened to do so, but could not overtake them.”<sup>23</sup>

Guyot’s decision to attack without orders committed the last remaining division of the Reserve Cavalry to battle. Both Imperial Guard cavalry divisions had now ridden up to the ridge in a glorious, but hopeless, attack:

“...whether Napoleon ordered or allowed Guyot to join in the attack is doubtful; but, whether by Napoleon’s wish or not, Guyot did join the attack with the cavalry of the Guard. This third attack of cavalry consisted of 77 squadrons, and was one of the most powerful efforts ever made by cavalry against infantry in the history of war.”<sup>24</sup>

### **‘A front of only 500 yards’**

It was a gigantic charge, even by Napoleonic standards – especially considering how small the area leading up to Wellington’s position was. In this trampled and muddy field, barely 1,000 yards wide, the survivors of IV Cavalry Corps and Lefebvre-Desnoettes’ division were joined with three fresh divisions:

“Napoleon – either of his own accord or at Ney’s solicitation – sent him Kellermann’s corps of heavy cavalry, consisting of 7 squadrons of dragoons, 11 of cuirassiers, and 6 of carabiniers. To this was further added – by Ney, without the Emperor’s authorization, some have said; against the Emperor’s express orders, as others state it; by their own spontaneous impulse, as Thiers believe – Guyot’s division of the heavy cavalry of the Guard, composed of 6 squadrons of horse-grenadiers and 7 of dragoons, a total addition of 37 fresh squadrons to the 40 which had already charged.”<sup>25</sup>

Forming up under the protection of the French artillery, these massed horsemen were terribly cramped. Squeezed between La Haye Sainte and Hougoumont, the 77 squadrons had very little space to manoeuvre:

“When it is considered that about 12,000 men were employed in this attack, and that only 1,000 horsemen could stand in line on the 1,000 yards which separate the enclosures of La Haye Sainte and Hougoumont – that, therefore, twelve different ranks, two deep, could assail in succession the Allied force opposed to it – and when, further, the composition of this force is considered, and the reputation of its leaders, its imposing character becomes evident. It will be recollected that these horsemen could advance on a front of only 500 yards, as they were obliged to keep at some distance from the enclosures of both Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte; it will also be recollected that the fire of artillery, under the protection of which this vast force of cavalry advanced to make its attacks, was of the most formidable character.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thiers: 125.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy: 117-8.

<sup>25</sup> Gardner: 293.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy: 118.

It is interesting to note that Thiers, by contrast, says Flahaut “according to the instructions of the Emperor, had transmitted the order to charge not only to Kellermann, but also to General Guyot, commanding the heavy cavalry of the Guard (dragoons and horse grenadiers).”<sup>27</sup> Whatever the truth, the charge of Guyot’s division against the Allied infantry on the ridge was a grave error:

“Napoleon said, and it cannot be seriously disputed, that the heavy cavalry of the Guard, the division of Guyot, went in without his orders. Whether Ney ordered it in is, however, doubtful. His chief-of-staff, Colonel Hermes, denies that he did. He says the cavalry of the Guard went in of its own accord. At any rate, it was a great mistake, whoever committed it, as all the authorities free say. It destroyed the last cavalry reserve of the army.”<sup>28</sup>

As it turned out, Blanchard’s carabinier brigade – the two regiments so carefully preserved by his superior officer – was thrown into battle in a short time later. Ney, “seeing Kellermann’s carabineers in reserve, hastened to where they were, and then, despite of Kellermann’s resistance, led them against the enemy.”<sup>29</sup> Charging through the muddy and torn-up ground towards Wellington’s infantry, these elite troopers did their duty:

“For the fourth time they reascended it, crying, ‘Long live the Emperor!’ Ney led the charge at the head of the carabineers. He had seen at a distance their golden cuirasses, had hastened to them, and, in spite of the observations of General Blanchard, who opposed the formal order of Kellermann, led them with him in this race of death.”<sup>30</sup>

It was about 6 pm when the French cavalry finally ceased their efforts to conquer Wellington’s squares; leaving the ridge “... they fell back of their own accord, discouraged, desperate, to the bottom of the valley, followed at a distance, rather than driven by, the English cavalry, itself at the end of its strength.”<sup>31</sup> The position again offered protection for the battered squadrons:

“The beaten cavalry retired to the hollows at the foot of the Allied right centre – but no farther. Here somewhat sheltered from the fire of the Allied guns, which, by recoiling into the deep soil, had lost their true elevation, and protected by a heavy cannonade resumed by the French batteries, when their cavalry rolled down the slope, they sought to reform their confused squadrons, and make ready for fresh exertions.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Houssaye: 192.

<sup>28</sup> Ropes, John Codman. The Campaign of Waterloo: A Military History. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893. 311.

<sup>29</sup> Thiers. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Houssaye. 197.

<sup>31</sup> Houssaye. 197.

<sup>32</sup> Hooper. 219.

In addition to the hundreds of dead and wounded French troopers, the repeated charges also wounded thirteen generals of the Reserve Cavalry:

“Generals Donop, Delort, L’Heritier, Guyot and Roussel d’Hurbal are wounded. Edouard de Colbert charges with his arm in a sling. Wounded also are Generals Blanchard, Dubois, Farine, Guiton, Picquet, Travers and Wathier.”<sup>33</sup>

### **‘Determined to carry the Allied centre’**

The destruction of the Emperor’s Reserve Cavalry at Waterloo began with two key events. The first event was Ney’s misreading of the Allied withdrawal to the reverse side of the ridge; this led directly to the argument between Ney, Delort and Milhaud over his orders to Farine. Had Farine’s regiments charged Wellington’s position as Ney had originally ordered, the Allied ‘retreat’ would have been discovered; the remainder of Milhaud’s IV Cavalry Corps (and, subsequently, Lefebvre-Desnoettes’ division) would not have been committed. Had Milhaud not charged (and been repulsed), the Emperor would not have needed to order Kellermann’s III Cavalry Corps – and Guyot’s heavy division which followed it – to support Ney’s initial attack.

Ney’s contribution to the disaster at Waterloo has been greatly criticized – especially his lack of combined-arms attacks during the battle:

“The great charges might have succeeded, but on condition of being supported instantly by infantry. Whilst the enemy’s batteries, passed by the cuirassiers, remained silent, the infantry could have climbed the slopes without danger of loss, taken position on the edge of the plateau and attacked the squares. The English would have been compelled either to sustain in a vicious formation the fire and assaults of the infantry, or to deploy, which would have placed them at the mercy of the horsemen. Bachelu’s division<sup>34</sup> and Jamin’s brigade<sup>35</sup> (Foy’s division) had remained for many hours at 1,300 yards from the allied position, witnessing with grounded arms this furious combat. They awaited but an order to go to the assistance of the cavalry. Ney forgot them. It was only after the repulse of the fourth charge that he thought of utilizing these 6,000 bayonets.”<sup>36</sup>

Hooper puts it this way:

“Marshal Ney, then, determined to carry the Allied centre by charges of cavalry. He seems to have made no effort to support this attack by the infantry [of GdD Honore Reille’s II Corps], although it would certainly have been quite possible to have

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<sup>33</sup> Houssaye. 196-197.

<sup>34</sup> GdD Gilbert-Desiree-Joseph, Baron Bachelu commanded the 5th Infantry Division (3rd , 61st , 72nd and 108th Line Regiments).

<sup>35</sup> GdB Jean-Baptiste, Baron Jamin commanded the 4th Light and 100th Line Regiments.

<sup>36</sup> Houssaye: 198.

withdrawn at least Bachelu's division from the wood of Hougomont and to have used it with good effect. But Ney was originally an officer of cavalry; this fact may have made him think it possible to accomplish more with cavalry alone than to others would seem practical."<sup>37</sup>

There seems to be no question that Ney exceeded his orders in attacking Wellington with the Reserve Cavalry. The flank attacks of Prussian IV Corps under General der Infanterie (GdI) Friedrich-Wilhelm von Bulow were a deadly strike in the Emperor's flanks. Blunting Bulow's assaults at Plancenoit (which threatened to sever the Charleroi road) was the Emperor's first and most pressing task:

"The Emperor, we have said, had resolved to repel this effort before falling in full force on Wellington. It was the plain duty of Ney to obey his orders, to occupy La Haye Sainte in adequate strength, and to abide his time, until he should receive a signal from his master to make the decisive onslaught, which, it should be recollected, he was himself to lead."<sup>38</sup>

Of course, as Ney was only the tactical commander at Waterloo; the Emperor (as commander-in-chief) bears at least an equal portion of the blame of the French defeat:

"Napoleon by contrast [to Wellington], ceded operational control to Ney, partly so as to deal with the oncoming Prussian threat himself, and kept in one place too much, acting on others' information rather than riding out to see the situation for himself. He later complained that Ney's cavalry charges had not been authorised, yet he did nothing to prevent them from taking place from virtually right in front of him. Indeed it is inconceivable that Ney could have launched Kellermann's cavalry or Milhaud's corps without Napoleon's approval."<sup>39</sup>

But, at the time of the cavalry attacks, the flank attacks of the Prussian Army aimed at Plancenoit presented a threat even greater than Wellington's Allied army:

"Napoleon's neglect of the conduct of the operations against the English has often been the subject of comment and severe criticism; but we imagine that he was far more anxious to hinder the Prussians, who were aiming, so to speak, at a vital part, from succeeding, than to defeat the English. To fend off the Prussians was an absolute necessity; to drive the English from the field, a thing no doubt very desirable; but as there was no fear that they would take the offensive, and as, if they did, the army, or, at least, the great bulk of it, was in line of battle opposed to them, no great danger was to be apprehended from them. Whereas the Prussians were striking at the flank and rear, aiming to get control of the Charleroi road, and thus of the communications and retreat of the army. To prevent their succeeding in this was, therefore, of vital importance.

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<sup>37</sup> Hooper: 309-10.

<sup>38</sup> Morris: 256-7.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, Andrew. Wellington and Napoleon: the Battle of Waterloo and the Great Commanders Who Fought It. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. 179.

Hence Napoleon attended to this himself, and left to Ney the conduct of the fight against Wellington's army."<sup>40</sup>

The Swiss-born Lieutenant-General Antoine-Henri, Baron Jomini – himself a veteran of the Emperor's army and a former chief-of-staff to Ney – has this to say about the Emperor's leadership during the two-front battle:

“Undoubtedly, it [would have] been preferable had this charge been executed a little earlier, in conjunction with d'Erlon's first attack, or had been deferred until the return of the Young Guard from extricating Count Lobau, so as to make a combined effort of the three arms re-united. But the plateau was crowned; it was necessary to sustain what was already accomplished, or look upon the loss of Ney's troops. Napoleon then, after six o'clock, orders Kellermann (Valmy) to advance with his cuirassiers on the left of [the] La Haye Sainte causeway, and overthrow everything in his path; the heavy cavalry of the Guard follow[s] this movement, and engage the enemy, it is said, contrary to the Emperor's intention.”<sup>41</sup>

While conceding the heroic nature of the Reserve Cavalry attacks, Jomini also stresses the Emperor's strategic mistakes of the Waterloo Campaign. Had the Prussian Army been decisively defeated at the Battle of Ligny – or been forced away from Wellington's army by Marshal Emmanuel, Marquis de Grouchy's detached French army – then additional infantry would have been available for Ney. Jomini says:

“It would be necessary to borrow the most poetic forms and expressions of an epic, to depict with any truthfulness the glorious effect of this cavalry, and the impassive perseverance of its adversaries. We can beside judge, what would have been the result of these brilliant charges, had Lobau's corps and the Young Guard been able to follow the cuirassiers in their course, instead of being engaged towards Plancenoit making head against the Prussians.”<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the final word belongs to Houssaye, who questions the Emperor's motives for Milhaud's attack:

“The Emperor has said that he had been forced to support the divisions of Milhaud, as he feared that a check suffered by the latter, in the presence of the entire army, would discourage the soldiers and lead to panic and rout. Did he not also hope to crush the English under a new mass of mailed cavalry? It was necessary to press the action, to gain at one point, to hold out at another, to conquer and impose by dint of audacity, for affairs had become terribly critical. The Emperor was fighting to battles at the same

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<sup>40</sup> Ropes. 309.

<sup>41</sup> Jomini, General Baron de. The Political and Military History of the Campaign of Waterloo. Trans. Capt. S.V. Benet. New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862. 167.

<sup>42</sup> Jomini: 168.

time, one parallel, the other oblique: in front he attacked the English; on this flank, he was attacked by the Prussians."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Houssaye: 192.

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