

The Napoleon Series

A Letter Home from Waterloo by a Westphalian Landwehr Soldier

Edited by [Robert Burnham](#)

The letter below was provided to me by Ms. Terri Kallio. It was written by Oltman B. Onnen who was born in Ostfriesland in 1793 in Uttel, Wittmund, Lower Saxony. Although he never stated what his unit was, based on the information in the letter he was probably in the 3rd Westphalian Landwehr Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 3rd Brigade of the Prussian 1st Army Corps during the Waterloo Campaign. The regiment recruited in Ostfriesland in late 1813. The letter was given to Ms. Kallio's great-grandmother, Imke Sophia (Onnen) Evers. She brought the letter with her when she and her husband, Herman Evers, emigrated to the United States in 1894. Family legend has it she hid the letter flue pipe in her kitchen. The letter was later discovered again by Ms. Kallio's Uncle in 1960. The original letter was translated and transcribed by a cousin, Hans Coordes in 1960 and shared with the family.

Oltman B. Onnen was a farmer - as many were in Ostfriesland. He was the son of Graf Onnen. He married Hille Catharina Badburg on August 8, 1817 in Wittmund, Germany. He had two sons, Graf Onnen and Harm Behrends Onnen. He died on December 26, 1868 at the age of 75.

The Letter

France
July 19, 1815

Dear Parents, Brothers and Sister:

Now, I want to tell you about our march from Wangrania¹ to Paris. On the morning of June the 15th at seven o'clock, we marched against the Frenchmen and there was cannon fire all around us and we could notice the Frenchmen coming closer to us and toward evening we were very close together, we had our quarters under the stars that night. This was the first day.

On the 16th of June in the morning at 5 o'clock, we marched beyond the village where the battle took place. In the afternoon at 2 o'clock, we marched to the village and got into fighting immediately. We took prisoners. We come so close to each other that we could take them by hand. Bullets flew like hail from heaven, and a person should think it impossible that anybody would survive. But, the hands of the Almighty can protect and save you. Towards evening we were really in a mess, we were of the opinion reinforcements would move up but instead they were Frenchmen. It was impossible to retreat, but fortunately we got out of the squeeze. We

¹ There is no town near Waterloo called Wangrania. However the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Westphalian Landwehr was garrisoned in Vengenies on 15 June 1815.

dispersed in groups of 6 and 7 men. On the 17th, we got together again and there were not too many missing.

On the 18th the shooting began again and in the afternoon at 3 o'clock we got orders to march on, there was heavy cannon fire and it was towards evening when we reached the real battlefield. Here General Bülow got behind Bonaparte's army and soon all shooting stopped. We marched over battlefields, which were a terrible sight; left and right there were wounded, screaming and shouting and dead ones, not by ten or twenties but by the hundreds and thousands. During the night, we slept among the dead ones; and I wonder whose heart was not touched, hearing and seeing such lamenting and sorrow. I have witnessed it and seen it with my own eyes.

On the 19th, we again pursued the Frenchmen. At one point we bombarded Napoleon's coach,² which he had shortly before deserted. We found a number of treasures in it. We marched the entire day until 11 o'clock and slept again under the sky, being pretty hungry. The Frenchmen had everything pretty well consumed.

On we went the next day the 20th all day and on through the night. The name of the town where we finally camped was, I think, Bomont.³ On the 21st day, we surrounded the fortified city of Vienne,⁴ there was a strong resistance, but a lucky shot from our artillery hit the French powder magazine so the fortification blew up and we had the fort in our hands. On the 22nd, we marched on again until late at night. The 23rd was a day of rest, but there was not much rest since it rained all day so that we were wet to the skin. At 10 in the morning of the 24th, we went on; and the next days to the 26th, we hardly encountered any enemies. The 27th we got to Kompinien.⁵ Here is where Bonaparte had his castle.

When we got to this town the Frenchmen tried hard to throw us back, but they were unsuccessful. On the 28th, we got to a town where the enemy had hidden like snipers; but we pushed them on and our cavalry chased on and captured many of them, also two cannons which were drawn by mules. On the 29th we were only 3 hours away from Paris. On the 30th, we rested until 10 o'clock that night, but then following a 36 hour march to and around Paris. It was so hot, we could hardly stand it.

Early July 2nd again we were called to the weapons, and our general told us "Boys, you had a bad day yesterday, but today we have to be especially brave. We have to take Paris or we are lost." The Frenchmen had blown up the bridges, so we had find another way. The cannon fire lasted until late that night and on the 3rd, they capitulated (surrendered) and all the fighting stopped. The 4th, 5th and the 6th we stayed we stayed in our camp; and the 7th we had church services to thank the Lord that he so tenderly protected us. The theme of the service was: "What would it prosper the people if they conquer the world and lose their soul?" We sang the

² Napoleon's coach was taken by other units on the night of 18th. I am unsure what the author meant when he wrote bombard. It is possible that the translator misread the word which might have been passed or saw. Since I do not have a copy of the original text, it is difficult to say what he really wrote. It might even be a word in his local Frisian dialect

³ The regimental history of the 3rd Westphalian Landwehr places it at Beaumont on 20 June. They arrived at Sotrelle Château on 21 June at 5 a.m., where they rested there until noon, and then went on to Avesnes.

⁴ The town of Avesnes, France. The 3rd Westphalian Landwehr infantry Regiment arrived before this fortress in the afternoon/evening of 21st June.

⁵ The town of Compiègne.

hymn: "Praise and Thanks to God" We camped on the outskirts of Paris until the 10th, then we marched Paris and beyond it we ran into a little fort. We surrounded it from the 11th to the 15th, when they flew the white flag and surrendered. That evening, we remained in a village between Paris and the fort. All the people had left their homes and we took quarters in them. We got plenty to eat and we live as well as at home in Ostfriesland. Some say we are going to march toward the border of Holland or even to Ostfriesland. May God grant this to be so.

Well this is all I know to report now, and you dear parents, brothers, sisters and all dear friends and acquaintances, stay well.

May the Lord protect you, I remain with high esteem
Your obedient son until death
Oltman Behrend Onnen

Editor's Note:

I would like to thank Oliver Schmidt who provided much of the background information on the 3rd Westphalian Landwehr Infantry Regiment.