

QUATRE BRAS

In 1814 the 2nd Battalion of the 69th, together with others, had taken part in the assault on Bergen-op-Zoom (8th/9th March), in Holland, just before the first abdication of Napoleon. After this the Battalion remained in garrison in Belgium.

By June 1815, Napoleon, having escaped from Elba, was once more threatening the Allies, with an Army of some 125,000 men, all eager to redeem France's military honour. On 15th June his main forces were concentrated around Ligny and Quatre Bras, south of Waterloo, and the Emperor decided to give battle simultaneously to Blücher and his Prussians at Ligny, and to Wellington at Quatre Bras.

The 2/69th, with 30 officers and 516 other ranks, were commanded by Colonel Charles Morice and brigaded with the 2nd/30th, 1st/33rd and 2nd/73rd, under Major General Sir Colin Halkett, as an element of the 3rd Division. On 15th June the Brigade was in camp around Soignies, some twenty-five miles east of Quatre Bras. At the cross-roads village of Quatre Bras itself was a mixed division of Dutch and Belgians, and on learning that Ney was advancing on this sector, Wellington ordered his 3rd Division to reinforce them. Having marched the route in twelve hours, the Division arrived at Quatre Bras at 5 pm to find the Dutch-Belgians driven from their positions and Picton's 5th Division holding the left flank. No sooner had the 69th halted than Halkett received an urgent request from the commander of one of the 5th Division brigades for a battalion to reinforce his exhausted and mutilated squares. The 69th were selected, and so found themselves under the command of General Sir Denis Pack, the same officer who had recently presided over the disbandment of the 2/24th.

There then followed a disastrous incident. The terrain around Quatre Bras was completely open, with no natural obstacles - ideal for cavalry action - and as Colonel Morice could see glittering squadrons of Kellermann's cuirassiers deploying to his front, he ordered his companies to form square. The Regiment were in the midst of this complex evolution when up galloped a gesticulating officer who turned out to be none other than the 1st Corps commander, the excitable young Prince of Orange, who demanded to know what Morice was about. On being told he was forming square to receive cavalry, the Prince peremptorily bade him desist and deploy back into line. Though against his better judgement, Colonel Morice could only comply with his Corps commander's direct order.

Meanwhile, the massed squadrons of cuirassiers, led by Kellermann himself, had attempted to ride down the 33rd Foot, but these were already in firm square and were not to be broken. Wheeling off, the 8th Cuirassiers then spotted the 69th in the act of changing formation and exultantly thundered down upon them. Once more Morice strove to get his men into square, but only two companies had time to form before the avalanche of steel-clad horsemen smashed into them. The two unformed companies were virtually destroyed; the two in square stoutly defended themselves with volleys of musketry, but in the face of repeated charges they were eventually forced to take refuge in the squares of the 42nd and 44th. By this time the 1st Guards Division had joined the fight and this gave the 69th the chance to reform. Foy's attacking infantry were repulsed by the British fire, and when Kellerman himself was brought down (though not even wounded), his cuirassiers panicked and fled, carrying with them their infantry comrades.

Although Quatre Bras was a significant victory for Wellington, he had lost nearly 330 killed and 2,160 wounded. The 69th's casualties amounted to 38 killed and 115 wounded. But another loss was the King's Colour, which was captured by one of the cuirassiers, who rode down and sabred its bearer, Ensign Duncan Keith. Almost all these losses were attributable to the crass stupidity of the Prince of Orange, whom Fortescue well described as 'a meddlesome and mischievous encumbrance'. Today, the King's Colour of the 2/69th is displayed in 'Firing Line: The Museum of the Welsh Soldier' in Cardiff Castle.

WATERLOO

After Quatre Bras, Wellington withdrew to a previously reconnoitred position along a ridge near Mont St Jean, on the Brussels road, where he hoped to be joined by Blücher and his Prussians who were hastening from their defeat at Ligny. Just north of the position lay the village of Waterloo.

The withdrawal was carried out on 17th June with little interference by the enemy, although there was a sharp cavalry action at Genappe when Lord Uxbridge's rearguard became embroiled with advanced troops of Ney's Polish lancers. But then the elements took a hand, unleashing a violent thunderstorm which forced the infantrymen to flounder up to their knees in floodwater and mud. No rations had been forthcoming since dawn the previous day. At nightfall the soaked and weary

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soldiers had to make do with some sodden biscuit and hunks of meat, most of which remained uncooked, for it was almost impossible to kindle camp fires. Thus, unfed, caked in mud, shelterless, the troops that were to gain the British Army's supreme victory awaited the dawn of 18th June. The Battle of Waterloo evoked, and continues to evoke, an unexceeded torrent of literature from historians, biographers, military theorists and others, even novelists. Fortescue spread himself over one and a half chapters and fifty-five pages in his blow-by-blow account of the ten-hour engagement. But we are concerned with just one small cog in Wellington's machine - the 69th Foot, who saw little and knew less of what went on beyond their own Brigade squares.

The Regiment was still in Sir Colin Halkett's 5th Brigade with the 2/30th, 33rd and 2/73rd. The 2/69th mustered 30 officers and 511 other ranks, commanded by Colonel Morice. To confront Wellington's Allied Army of 67,660 men and 156 guns Napoleon had deployed 71,940 men with 246 guns. This huge concentration of nearly 140,000 troops with 30,000 horses and 400 guns was to fight it out on a battlefield of less than three square miles, an area which in later days might have been allotted to a single brigade of infantry with armour.

The 2/69th and their Brigade were positioned a few hundred yards north of the outposts of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte and immediately to the left of the Guards Brigade. This position remained unaltered until Wellington's final advance, the only variations being changes of formation from line to square and back to line, as the situation demanded.

It was not before the sun had dispelled the thick morning mist, at about 11 am, that the battle opened with the customary overture of artillery cannonading, but this did little damage to the 5th Brigade taking cover below the reverse slope of the ridge along which the British line extended. Then followed Napoleon's first advance, which surged past Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte to threaten the British centre. Now moved up to the crest of the ridge and forming square with the 33rd, the 69th were heavily assaulted by waves of infantry and cavalry, and it was during this phase that Colonel Morice, already wounded in the shoulder, fell with a musket-ball through his head, so that command of the Battalion devolved upon Lieutenant Colonel George Muttelbury. Mauled by fire from the stolid British squares, the French were finally driven back by the celebrated charge of Ponsonby's 'Union Brigade' (Royal Dragoons, Scots Greys and Inniskillings). There was then a lull until just after 4 pm, when Napoleon unleashed the flower of his cavalry, some 5,000 cuirassiers, dragoons and lancers, in a desperate attempt to smash through the redcoats' squares. Between the two squares of the 5th Brigade stood Major Lloyd's Battery of 9-pounder field guns. After firing volleys of grape and cannister at the advancing squadrons the gunners took refuge within the squares, while the latter, front ranks kneeling, met the horsemen with storms of musketry as they closed on their position. The Battle of Waterloo demonstrated a military fact of life that took a long time to be fully appreciated: no matter how brave and thrusting, unsupported cavalry were totally ineffectual against the disciplined fire-power of formed bodies of resolute infantry.

For nearly two hours successive waves of heavy cavalry thundered upon the British squares, only to be smashed to fragments, 'like waves beating against rocks', as Captain Mercer wrote, while the heaps of dead and wounded men and horses piled up within bayonet reach. Captain Gronow of the 1st Guards likened the storms of bullets striking breastplates to 'the noise of a violent hail-storm beating upon panes of glass'. During one of the attacks Private Dooley of the 69th created a diversion by fighting a personal battle with a lancer who lunged at him and wounded him in the shoulder as he knelt in the front rank. Being exasperated by this, he sprang out of the ranks and chased the lancer, but the latter ... returned at full tilt, and although Dooley was at once ordered to take his place in the square, he faced his antagonist in the open. Everybody expected to see Dooley spitted like a hog, and the excitement was intense; it was soon over, however, for he dexterously caught the lance on his bayonet and threw the point clear, and the next moment the lancer was on the ground, pierced through the body; his horse galloped away riderless. The repulse of his cavalry was a severe reverse to Napoleon, who was now being attacked by Blücher's Prussians on his right flank. Only his Imperial Guards could save the day. At 7 pm the Young Guard and Old Guard advanced on the British centre, to be met by the fire of Maitland's Guards and the 5th Brigade. After an initial setback when the 5th Brigade were driven back with heavy losses (the 73rd lost twenty-one officers out of twenty-five), the line reformed and the Imperial Guards wavered and turned tail. It was then that Wellington waved his cocked hat and ordered the general advance. The Prussians smote the fugitives in the flank and harried them far into the night. Napoleon narrowly escaped capture, but on 25th June, after debating the possibility of fleeing to the United States, he surrendered to the Captain of the British man-o'-war, *Bellerophon*, and sailed to captivity on St Helena.

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'It was the most desperate business I ever was in ...', wrote Wellington after the battle, 'Our loss is immense, particularly in that best of all instruments, the British Infantry. I never saw the Infantry behave so well.' Truly that superb 'instrument' had suffered severely. In Sir Colin Halkett's Brigade alone, 21 officers were killed or wounded, Sir Colin himself being among the latter, while the total other ranks casualties amounted to 480. The 2/69th, who had already lost their Commanding Officer, Colonel Morice, and 153 others at Quatre Bras, suffered a further 6 officers and 64 other ranks killed, wounded and died of wounds. In all, the allied casualties totalled some 22,000, while the French lost 25,000 besides 7,000 prisoners and 240 guns.

But for the British Army there was to be no more blood-letting on the Continent of Europe until 1914.

Apart from the Battle Honour 'Waterloo', granted on 8th December 1815, there were other awards for those engaged in the battle. On 23rd April 1816 the Prince Regent authorised the issue of a 'Waterloo Medal' to every officer, NCO and soldier who had been present. This was the first general service medal since that issued by Cromwell to his troops who gained the victory of Dunbar in 1650. All eligible NCOs and men were allowed to reckon two years' service towards pension, while subalterns were awarded a similar reckoning towards increase of pay. In addition, prize money was distributed to all ranks, from £433.2s.4d for field officers to £2.11s.4d for privates.

In September 1815 the Companionship of the Order of the Bath was instituted, and among the first officers to be awarded the decoration was Lieutenant Colonel George Muttlebury of the 69th.

On 24th July the 2/69th entered Paris with the victorious troops, there to be reviewed by the Emperors of Russia and Austria and the King of Prussia. The victories of the 2/69th under Wellington were to prove a swansong. With the inevitable reduction of the armed forces after Waterloo, all the remaining 'hostilities only' 2nd battalions were ordered to disband. Having been posted home in January 1816, the 2nd/69th was struck off in October of that year.

This extract is taken from 'A History of The Royal Regiment of Wales (24th/41st Foot)' by JM Brereton, Cardiff (1989)



