BRIT POLITICS Fact Sheet – The Battle of Waterloo – 18 June 1815

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Napoleon Bonaparte had risen to power during the French Revolution becoming Emperor of France in 1804. Napoleon conquered much of Europe before his defeat by a coalition of European powers in 1814. Forced to abdicate Napoleon was sent in to exile on the island of Elba.

On 26 February 1815 Napoleon escaped from Elba and landed in France two days later with a force of about 1000 men. Thousands of former Royalist troops joined Napoleon who entered Paris on 20 March to popular support, beginning his Hundred Days rule.

Ambassadors from the European states were attending the Congress of Vienna when news arrived of Napoleon’s escape from Elba. Napoleon was declared an outlaw. Great Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia each agreed to raise an army to fight Napoleon.

Britain’s ambassador to the conference in Vienna was Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. Wellington had successfully fought against the French during the Peninsular War (1808-1814), although he had never faced Napoleon himself. At the beginning of April Wellington arrived in Brussels and took command of the British-Dutch army.

In 1815 Belgium was part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, although it had recently been part of Napoleon’s French Empire. Wellington’s army included German troops from Hanover, as King George III was also the king of Hanover.

The Prussian army was under the command of the 72 year old Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher. By the 14 June these two armies were spread out across Belgium, with the Prussians to the east and Wellington to the west. The Austrian and Russian contingents had not yet arrived.

Knowing he would be vastly outnumbered, Napoleon decided to launch an attack before the arrival of the Austrian and Russian forces. Napoleon moved his Army of the North near to the border, just south of Charleroi. The main road to Brussels ran through Charleroi. It was also situated between the two Allied armies. Napoleon wanted to keep the Prussian and British-Dutch armies apart and prevent them from uniting against him on the battlefield. Napoleon intended to defeat the Prussians and send them retreating eastwards before turning to fight Wellington’s army to the west.

# THURSDAY 15 JUNE

On the 15 June, Napoleon’s Army of the North marched across the border and attacked the Prussians, capturing Charleroi. News of the French advance did not reach Wellington in Brussels until the afternoon. Wellington was unsure whether this was the main French attack and wanted to wait for more information before ordering his forces to move. Wellington was concerned that Napoleon would attempt to outflank him in the west, with an advance up the road towards Mons. This would cut off his lines of communication and his ability to retreat to his base on the coast at Ostend. That evening the Duke of Wellington and several of his senior officers attended a grand ball in Brussels hosted by the Duchess of Richmond.

# FRIDAY 16 JUNE

Very late on Thursday night it became clear that the main French attack was along the Charleroi road. Wellington is said to have exclaimed “Napoleon has humbugged me, by God. He has gained twenty-four hours’ march on me!” Wellington ordered his army to march east towards the Prussians.

The Prussians had retreated to Sombreffe and Napoleon sent his main force after them. A detachment of the Army of the North under the command of Marshal Michel Ney, were ordered to capture the crossroads at Quatre Bras. Quatre Bras was strategically important. Here the Nivelles-Namur road crossed the Charleroi-Brussels road and headed south east towards Ligny, where the battle against the Prussians would take place. Marshal Ney was to hold Quatre Bras and prevent Wellington’s army from reaching the Prussians at Ligny.

Marshal Ney delayed his main attack until the afternoon which allowed Wellington’s army to arrive and reinforce the small contingent of Dutch troops who had been holding the crossroads. When the battle ended later that night the French had failed to capture Quatre Bras, but they had prevented Wellington from sending reinforcements to join Blücher at Ligny.

Napoleon had defeated the Prussians at the Battle of Ligny. They were now retreating towards Wavre.

# SATURDAY 17 JUNE

The Prussian retreat forced Wellington to withdraw from Quatre Bras and move further north up the Brussels road. Wellington took up a strong defensive position on a low ridge at Mont Saint Jean, just south of the village of Waterloo, blocking Napoleon’s route to Brussels.

Although in retreat the Prussians were not moving eastwards as Napoleon had hoped. Instead they were heading north and re-grouping at Wavre, about 12 miles from Wellington’s position at Mont Saint Jean. Napoleon sent a detachment of 33,000 men under the command of Marshal Grouchy to attack the Prussians and prevent them from sending reinforcements to aid Wellington.

The main force of the French army went in pursuit of Wellington but the British-Dutch army had already left Quatre Bras by the time Napoleon arrived. French cavalry caught up with Wellington’s rearguard at Genappe but there was no French infantry attack. Napoleon’s army halted at a ridge less than a mile south of Wellington’s position.

The night of the 17 June was cold with torrential rain. The men on both sides had to sleep out in the open with little or no shelter from the weather. Wellington spent the night at an inn in Waterloo, Napoleon at Le Caillou three miles away.

# SUNDAY 18 JUNE – WATERLOO

The battlefield was small, 2.5 miles across and less than a mile deep, with fields of high corn. The ridge at Mont Saint Jean ran east-west and Wellington had positioned most of his troops on the reverse slope to protect them from artillery fire, a tactic he had used before. On the ridge crest ran a sunken road bordered by hedges.

In front of the ridge Wellington held three strongly fortified and garrisoned positions. To the left (east) was the farm of Papelotte. Next to the Brussels road, which ran north to south through the middle of the battlefield, was the farm of La Haye Sainte. To the right was Hougoumont, a large farmhouse complex surrounded by high stone walls.

There are no accurate figures for the number of combatants. Wellington had around 68,000 men and Napoleon a few thousand more. Wellington had approximately 150 cannon, Napoleon about 250 a greater proportion of which were of a heavier calibre. Napoleon was a former artillery officer and his 12 pounder guns were known as the Emperor’s ‘favourite daughters’. 80 of Napoleon’s cannon were grouped together forming the Grand Battery, while Wellington’s cannon were spread out along his line.

Marshal Grouchy had not reached the Prussians in time to prevent Blücher from sending his promised reinforcements to Wellington. A corps of Prussian troops led by General Friedrich von Bülow began marching from Wavre early Sunday morning. Two more corps of Prussian troops followed soon after. Marshal Grouchy and his 33 000 strong force would end up fighting the Prussian rearguard at Wavre and so would not be available for the battle at Waterloo.

The torrential rain had left the battlefield wet and muddy. Napoleon delayed the start of the battle hoping the ground would dry out, which was better for his artillery and cavalry. It is not certain when the battle actually started, but sometime after 11am Napoleon’s cannon opened fire.

# HOUGOUMONT

To the right of Wellington’s line was the farm of Hougoumont. Soon after the French cannon opened fire, Napoleon’s younger brother Jerome led an infantry attack of 5000 men on Hougoumont. The French attackers greatly outnumbered the 1,500 Allied defenders but the farmhouse was strongly fortified with high stone walls.

It was a scene of fierce fighting throughout the battle with repeated charges by French infantry. In one of these charges second-lieutenant Legros and about forty French infantrymen forced their way through the north gate. The garrison managed to close the gate and then killed all the Frenchmen who were trapped inside, with the exception of the drummer boy. The French incurred many casualties trying to take Hougoumont but despite being set on fire, it was never captured.

# FRENCH INFANTRY ATTACK

As the fighting continued at Hougoumont, Napoleon’s Grand Battery opened fire on Allied positions along the ridge. Most of Wellington’s men were lying down on the reverse slope trying to shelter from the artillery bombardment. The gun crews were firing on the massing ranks of French infantry.

18,000 French soldiers in four columns, under the command of Count D’Erlon, attacked Wellington’s line from La Haye Sainte to Papelotte shortly after 1pm.

The French captured Papelotte on Wellington’s left flank and surrounded La Haye Sainte. There was fighting along the ridge crest. Lines of infantry fired volleys of musket rounds at close range but the French soldiers kept coming.

Shortly after 2pm two brigades of British heavy cavalry, under the command of Lord Uxbridge, charged the French troops. The men of the Household and Union Brigades, armed with swords, charged into the infantry columns leaving the French attack in chaos. The French soldiers hastily retreated from the battlefield.

The British cavalry continued their advance across the valley towards the French line where they suffered many casualties in a counter-attack by French cavalry.

# FRENCH CAVALRY CHARGES

Marshal Ney mistook the stream of Allied casualties moving north to Brussels as a retreat by Wellington’s army. At about 4pm Ney began a series of cavalry charges against the right of Wellington’s line.

The Allied defenders formed themselves up into squares which were a good defence against a cavalry attack. Wellington’s well-disciplined men stood their ground, firing volleys of musket fire as the cavalry charged. Between each cavalry charge the French artillery opened fire resulting in heavy casualties as the Allied troops had to remain standing in their squares ready for the next cavalry assault.

The Allied gun crews took shelter in the infantry squares during the cavalry charges and then returned to their cannon to fire on the cavalry as they retreated down the slope and re-grouped.

The French cavalry charges lasted for around two to three hours by which time they had sustained many casualties for very little gain.

# LA HAYE SAINTE

The fortified farm at La Haye Sainte protected the centre of Wellington’s line. It was garrisoned by men of the Kings German Legion who had been defending it from French attacks all afternoon. They were now running short of ammunition. The French launched a new assault late in the afternoon and by 6.30pm had captured the farm. Only forty-two men of the garrison escaped alive.

The capture of La Haye Sainte allowed Napoleon to move some of his artillery forward and attack Wellington’s centre at close range.

# PRUSSIANS ARRIVE AT PLANCENOIT

At about 4.30pm General von Bülow’s IV Corps attacked the French right flank near the village of Plancenoit. The battle for Plancenoit was fierce and bloody. Napoleon was forced to commit more and more men to the fight, including ten battalions of his Imperial Guard.

More Prussian reinforcements were arriving to the left of Wellington’s line, allowing Wellington to move his men and strengthen his centre.

# ATTACK BY THE IMPERIAL GUARD

At about 7.30pm, eight battalions of Napoleon’s Imperial Guard marched towards Wellington’s line between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. Allied cannon fired at the 6000 French soldiers advancing up the ridge, but they made it to the ridge crest.

The fighting was confused and chaotic and in places the French soldiers pushed Wellington’s men back. Allied soldiers who had been lying down to protect themselves from the French artillery bombardment stood up and fired volleys of musket fire at almost point blank range.

The Imperial Guard began to fall back until they were in full retreat, fleeing down the ridge. Wellington on the back of his horse Copenhagen waved his hat in the air and motioned his army to follow the retreating French. Napoleon and his army fled the battlefield.

# AFTERMATH

Approximately 50,000 men were killed or wounded at the Battle of Waterloo. There were wounded men still lying out on the battlefield four days later. Most of the dead were stripped of their belongings and buried in large pits.

The Duke of Wellington returned to Britain a national hero, later becoming Prime Minister. Napoleon Bonaparte surrendered in July 1815 and was subsequently exiled to St Helena, where he died in 1821.