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Battle of
Waterloo
Engraving incl.
Congreve Rockets



which partially blocked the road at Wavre, the Prussians took many hours to arrive, their rearguard valiantly holding off Marshal Emanuel Grouchy whom Napoleon had ordered to prevent their reinforcing Wellington.

Napoleon ordered the first main attack on Wellington's position at about 1.30 pm, d'Erlon's Corps, which advanced in massive, unmanageable columns. Raked by artillery fire, the infantry pushed the Allied skirmishers back and engaged Baring's German Legion in La Haye Sainte; the Prince of Orange, thinking they should be supported, again ordered a battalion into line (the Hanoverian Lüneburgers), and as at Quatre Bras they were destroyed by French cavalry. Struggling up the ridge, the French attack was halted by the disciplined musketry of Picton's Division, though Picton himself was killed by a shot through the head. A conspicuous figure in his customary civilian greatcoat, 'roundhat' and spectacles, the bluff Welshman had been severely wounded at Quatre Bras but had deliberately concealed his injury to command his Division at Waterloo; his was a grievous loss.

As the French attack faltered, Uxbridge launched a counter-charge by the British Household Cavalry and 'Union' brigades (1st, 2nd and 6th Dragoons) which was at first brilliantly successful, breaking all but one of the French Divisions, capturing two 'Eagles' (most famously that of the 45th *Ligne*, by Sgt Charles Ewart of the Scots Greys) and 3,000 prisoners and chasing the remainder back towards the French lines. The whole mass careered on, through the 80-gun 'massed battery' and resisting all orders to rally (such was the pride in the individual regiments that members of the 1st Dragoon Guards refused to obey the command to rally from an officer of the mere Royal Dragoons!). When disordered and their horses 'blown', they were duly cut to pieces by French cavalry; among those killed was Sir William Ponsonby, commander of the Union brigade, whose small horse had stuck in the mud; Lt-Col James Hamilton of the Greys, who had both arms cut off and rode with the reins in his teeth; and John Shaw of the Life Guards, a renowned bare-knuckle prize-fighter who attacked the French with fists and helmet after his sabre broke.

At about 3.30 pm Ney mistook a re-



arrangement of Wellington's line for a withdrawal, and ordered forward the first of numerous French cavalry charges, executed without infantry or artillery support, over glutinous terrain and often executed at a walk, with as many as 10,000 troopers on a 700-yard front, rendering manoeuvre impossible. Never had the French cavalry behaved with more heroism, as they tried to break the squares formed to greet them; each charge was assailed by artillery-fire, the gunners then sheltering within the squares until the cavalry began to retire, then returning and blasting them with canister again; Cavalié Mercer of the Royal Horse Artillery compared them to grass being mown down by a scythe. (His troop remained with their guns throughout, creating a wall of dead in front of their position, as to retire would have caused the raw Brunswick battalions nearby to panic.) British cavalry delivered some counter-charges, but the infantry bore the brunt of the attacks. By 4.30 pm Wellington could hear firing from his far left, indicating the arrival of the Prussians, Blücher commanding in person, but stout defence of Plancenoit by Napoleon's Young and Middle Guard held them off, at least for a time.

Before the Prussians were fully in action, however, the most critical moment of the battle occurred with the

British infantry in square repel charges by French cuirassiers in the mid-afternoon; note the Congreve rockets visible over the buildings in the centre, which apparently are intended to represent La Haye Sainte. (Engraving by R Reeve after W Heath)

fall of La Haye Sainte, as Ney at last coordinated cavalry, artillery and infantry in a major attack. Baring's German Legion in the farm ran out of ammunition, and tried to hold the buildings with bayonets. The Prince of Orange, attempting relief, repeated his two earlier errors by ordering the 5th and 8th KGL line battalions to advance in line; and as before, they were caught by French cavalry and the 8th destroyed. At last, Baring with his surviving 42 riflemen evacuated La Haye Sainte, opening the Allied centre to the French onslaught. Moving up artillery, Ney assailed the line with a storm of iron, raking the British battalions still clinging to the ridge. The 2/30th and 2/73rd were so reduced that they had to combine to form a square, as did the 33rd and 2/69th. Colin Halkett, commander of the British 5th Bde, begged Wellington to allow him a few moments' respite to reorganise his four battalions, but Wellington told him that 'every Englishman on the field must die on the spot we now occupy.' The endurance of the