

The Battle of Waterloo - Scots Greys - Eye Witness Account

The Regiment was disbanded on 12 May 1814 and re-raised at once as the 42eme. Renumbered 45eme by Napoleon it spent the start of the Waterloo campaign marching between Quatre Bras and Ligny without contributing to the outcome of either conflict. At the Battle of Waterloo it formed part of d'Erlon's' Corp.

D'Erlon's Attack

At 1.30pm the Emperor gave Ney orders to attack the British left and centre. This was preceded by an artillery bombardment from over 80 cannon which lasted for around 40 minutes. It had little effect on the allies mainly because of the wet condition of the ground and the ability of the mud and water to absorb the impact of the roundshot and shell.

D'Erlon's four divisions were marched in echelon with about 400 yards between each of them. From the left Allix's Division formed the first echelon, Donzelot's the second. Marcognet's the third and Duruette's the fourth. Each echelon was arranged by battalion, deployed and in close ranks. These divisions, with the exception of Duruette's, thus presented 3 compact phalanxes of between 160 to 200 files width and 24 ranks depth. This was an unusually cumbersome formation unsuited to rapid deployment and passage over uneven, wet, boggy and very sticky ground.

Irritated at not having fought the day before, the soldiers were burning to attack the enemy. They rushed forwards with shouts of Vive L'Empereur! and descended into the valley. The ground soon began to rise and by now many men had lost shoes and equipment that had stuck fast in the mud. As they approached the enemy a line of skirmishers ran on ahead, stopping to fire and then running on again. The officers led the massive columns of marching men and the drums beat the pas de charge. Inside these irresistible columns though it was very difficult for the men to hear the commands of their officers due to the shouting and the drumming. They slipped and struggled as the long stalks of rye became tangled around their legs and their feet became heavy with mud. Many could see nothing but the men in front of them and the muskets of all but the first three ranks were rendered practically useless. The formations made excellent targets for the British artillery which was firing ball, shell and canister. Each division broke off to attack different parts of the allied line. The tightly packed columns marched bravely onwards through the enemy canister fire as shot and shell tore through the ranks. Allix's division fell on La Haye Saint to the left. They pushed the English Rifles from the sand pit, poured into the orchard and sealed the boundary walls. Here they

came under a murderous fire from the KGL still defending the farm buildings. The divisions of Donzelot and Marcognet in the centre pushed on towards the British line. A Belgian brigade already weakened by the French artillery barrage promptly turned and ran. On the right Durutte's division captured Papelotte. English rifle fire began to take its toll but the drums increased their tempo and the officers shouted, En avant!

The charge of the Scots Greys

The columns of the 2nd and 3rd divisions inclined their way towards the gap in the British lines left by the Belgians. Here Donzelot's division came to a halt in front of a hedge row, before which they began to deploy. At this vulnerable moment Scottish infantrymen in highland uniform rose up from behind the hedges and poured a deadly volley from 3,000 muskets into the leading ranks. Before the roll of fire had died away the Scots shouted 'Hurrah!' and came charging over the hedges with their bayonets levelled. The French skirmishers were swept before them and each man's awareness then contracted to within a few yards of himself as he fought with musket butt and bayonet to kill the enemy in front of him before they killed him. Some of the French infantry were still loaded and fired into the melee. Marcognet's division did not stop to deploy below the crest but swept on over it still in column. They too were met by devastating close range volleys which scythed through their ranks. The French advance faltered but rallied to see the Highland lines waver. Fresh troops from Durutte's division began coming up to support Marcognet's right. A few men even managed to cross the hedge and the shout of 'Victoire!' was heard before they were driven back. Each regimental standard became the centre of bitter struggles as the fight raged on. In their dense formations confusion reigned and they began to slowly give ground. French cuirassiers came galloping towards the gap to lend the infantry support but order had already begun to break down and leaderless groups of men began to flee back down the slope. Officers tried to rally these troops but it was then that the English heavy cavalry came charging through them. These were the Scots Greys; big men on big grey horses who slammed into the leading French infantry with sabres flashing. The 45e Regiment de Ligne took the brunt of this attack. The 45eme had been raised from the streets of Paris and were in the 2nd brigade of Marcognet's division. In their tightly packed formation they were unable to defend themselves and were cut to pieces by the Greys. The frenzied British cavalry then charged on towards the 21eme who, through the misfortune of the 45eme, had found time to form square. Intoxicated by battle these horsemen swirled around the hastily formed ring of bayonets before charging straight through the cuirassiers and on towards the French guns. There they sabred the gunners, lamed the artillery horses and cut their harness before being ambushed themselves by the French cavalry. The French losses were terrible. Many soldats surrendered and the eagle of the 45eme was lost to the enemy. The 21eme retired as best

it could. Those who still remained on the slope and were able picked themselves up out of the mud and limped back towards the French lines. The French now assailed La Haye Saint with resolution. Quoit's division led the attack with the 54eme and 55eme in skirmishing order. Behind them was a division from Reille's 2nd Corp and on their right Marcognet's 3rd division including the 21eme, 46eme, 25eme, and the remnants of the 45eme. This was flanked by cuirassiers and horse artillery. As the final attack went in Marcognet's division took the far right, driving the English Rifles from the sand pit.

An eye witness account

Jacques Martin was born on August 12, 1794 in Geneva. He became French like his fellow-citizens in 1798, and after passing through the military academy he entered the 45eme line in 1813 as a second lieutenant. It is in the ranks of the 45eme that he takes part in the campaigns of 1813, 1814, and 1815. In 1867, he published an account of his military life entitled "Memories of an ex-officer". He states that the account of Waterloo was based on a letter that he had written to his mother on August 1, 1815. This letter was first published in the Notebooks from the Sabretache in 1895. Some broad extracts follow:

"All the army had been joined together as if by magic in this plain. The villages were not large enough for the Generals, their servants, their horses, the Commissaries, the bakers, etc, all people who hardly ever camp, especially in the weather it was then. The houses were full with these bloodsuckers. They were overflowing, and I believe, in truth, that the Emperor himself could not find anywhere to place himself, because we saw him putting up his tent and sitting down at the corner of a fire. It was thus impossible to find wood and straw; the good people who occupied the village, and who were up to their ears in luxury, would have rather let themselves be strangled than to let the soldiers have any of it. This is their praiseworthy habit: it little matters to them that their defenders eat or do not eat, sleep or do not sleep, provided that they themselves have everything in plenty and, to prevent anyone seizing their goods by violence, they shout until they are hoarse: "This is the lodging of general so-and-so, this of his aides-de-camp, this the Marshall, this of the Prince, etc.", and this stratagem almost always works. While waiting, we were chilled to the bone, being deployed in all the manners, in mud up to the knees to place us in the most advantageous position to cover these gentlemen. "What a night! It seemed that the sky had been wrapped in the blackest darkness, and had opened all its taps. The water fell in torrents without cease. As an additional stroke of fortune, the regiment was placed in the earthworks which were completely flooded. That's where we had to rest our weary limbs; that's where we had to enjoy our sweet dreams (the sweetness of sleep). No wood, no straw, nothing to eat and no way to get any of them. What a sad situation! The thing that

we should have complained least about was our bed. It was not hard – in fact the opposite. Whenever you lay down, you would feel yourself sinking softly until half submerged and with the simple precaution of placing a shako under your head as a pillow, the finest duvet could not be as soft. It is true that it was a little cold, but we had the advantage, when rolling over, to feel the rain washing clean the side that had got dirty when it was underneath. In spite of all these accumulated benefits, many people still complained, swearing and sending to the devil those who had sent us there. But, having had a good moan, they settled down to sleep, the remedy for all ills. You will no doubt have difficulty believing me, but ask a man who has been on campaign what the desire for sleep is when exhausted by forced marches and every sort of work involved with making war: he will tell you that in that case you would sleep on bayonets.

Early next morning we rose from our bed and, toilet done, the refreshed soldiers ran about in all directions looking for wood and other necessities. Having gathered enough we lit a fire despite the rain which continued to fall; there we grilled several beef cutlets which were truly delicious, and we drank well because spirits were in good supply. Our meal over, we waited patiently for the order to leave, which we thought would be very soon. But we were mistaken. The whole morning passed without us being made to change our position.

We were the furthest forward, it is true, and we watched the other corps marching past, some on our right, some on our left, to finally take up the normal dispositions for a general battle.

Then we realised that the moment had come when, according to the soldiers, we would deal a famous blow. Everyone prepared, cleaned their weapons, and encouraged each other to do well and finish the campaign with a single stroke. Alas! We did not believe our own words.

At last we left. The weather had cleared up; the sun, shining brightly, illuminated an imposing spectacle. The army was deployed magnificently before the enemy positions. All combined to make more majestic the terrible scene which was unfolding.

We advanced by a hill, which gave us in all directions a magnificent viewpoint. We deployed in massed brigades and halted at the foot of a small rise which hid the enemy from us.

Then the cannonade started and was terrible from the beginning, because once we had appeared from behind the rise, the distance between the two armies became very small. We were in column of battalions when the order came to climb up to the position and capture at the point of the bayonet the English batteries and anything else that offered resistance.

The mountain was peppered with their cannons and covered with their troops; it looked impregnable. Nonetheless, the order was given, the charge beaten, the cry of 'Vive l'Empereur' came from every mouth and we advanced with ordered ranks, aligned as on a parade ground.

I can confirm: At this critical moment I did not see a single cowardly thought show on the faces of our soldiers. The same enthusiasm, the same joy shone there as before. Meanwhile bullets had already killed many and it was when we arrived at their guns that the carnage became terrible.

Death flew from all around; entire ranks disappeared under the hail, but nothing could stop our march. It carried on with the same order, the same precision. Dead men were replaced on the field by those who survived; the ranks although thinner, were no less formed. At last we arrived at the summit. We were about to receive the prize for such bravery. Already the English had started to bolt for it, already their guns were retiring at the gallop. A sunken road, lined with hedges, was now the only obstacle separating us from them. Our soldiers did not wait for the order to jump across; they charged, leaping over the hedges and leaving their ranks disordered to chase after their enemies. Fatal mistake! We had to enforce good order, we halted them to rally... Just as I was pushing one man into his rank, I saw him fall at my feet from a sabre blow. The English cavalry charged at us from all directions and cut us to pieces. I just had time to throw myself into the middle of the crowd to avoid the same fate. The noise, the smoke, the confusion, all happening together, we could hardly see that on our right several squadrons of English dragoons, having come down through a sort of ravine, had extended and formed behind us and charged us in the rear.

It is extremely difficult for the best cavalry to break soldiers who have formed square and defend it with bravery and coolness. But when the infantry is in disorder, it is nothing more than a massacre almost without danger to the horseman. Here too, it was soon a general massacre. The cavalry pushed in amongst us; we saw that our batteries were lost and expected to see them taken away; and they poured fire into the melee and killed many of us. We too, in the mayhem of a confused and agitated crowd, shot many of our own people with shots aimed at the enemy. All bravery was useless. After feats of valour, our eagle, taken and retaken, was kept in the hands of our enemies; in vain our soldiers rose to their feet and stretched their arms out to try to stab with bayonets at the cavalry mounted on the tall vigorous horses. Useless courage, their hands and muskets fell together to the ground and left them defenceless against a persistent enemy who sabred without pity even the children who served as drummers and fifers in the regiment, who asked in vain for mercy.

It was there that I saw death closest. My best friends fell at my side, I could not believe that the same fate did not await me, but I had no more distinct thoughts. I fought like a machine, awaiting the fatal blow. I did not even notice the danger, or maybe it was providence that made the blows aimed at me fall aside, and until that moment I was without serious injury.

That lasted until, seeing no further resistance from us, the English split into two groups, of which one took what remained of the division as prisoners and escorted them to the rear, the other remounted either side of our cannon to drag them away. A moment before I was knocked on my back by a fast-moving dragoon; I remained on the ground amid several others, of whom some were dead, some seriously wounded and some in my own condition – knocked down by horses. The men taking the prisoners only bothered with those who were standing, without searching amongst the dead to find the living; they therefore left me on the battlefield, where it seemed I should stay until the end of the affair, because at that moment, I could not decide whether to surrender or to save myself by making for our batteries. This was the course I took. Love of liberty, almost as great as the love of life, made my decision for me and I got out, having escaped the dangers where a thousand others had perished. I do not know if others saved themselves in the same way: what I do well know is that I was in no state to care. Drunk with fatigue, sorrow and sad of heart, unable to breathe, I wanted to run and found myself as if in a dream where, wishing to flee from danger, one's muscles will not move the legs a single pace. I staggered between the cavalry who were remounting around our guns. I looked around me and saw nothing but enemies and without hope, kept walking. It was this unbelievable apathy which saved me, although I should have been lost a thousand times. Actually I survived the fire of our artillery which was firing at me as well as at them, because we were getting up together, how could I hope to escape from them? Three or four times I saw those who were closest turn as if to chase me. I do not know what restrained them, if they thought me too weak, or probably the bullets and balls that flew around drew their attention to something more important for them. However it was, we arrived together at our batteries, and while they engaged in swordfights with our gunners, I slipped away and reached on foot a ravine 3 or 400 paces to the rear. Arriving there, I threw myself on the ground to get my breath back. While the danger had been pressing, my strength was supernatural, but as soon as I was in safety it left me and I lay there without movement. The fatigue that had forced this walk amongst the beaten and bloody wheat, the light wounds that I was now beginning to feel, the astonishment at a near-miraculous deliverance, above all, loaded down as I was, for I had my haversack and greatcoat on my back, which had protected me from many sword-blows, all gave me more fear of the danger that I had escaped than when I had been in it. I

got up at last and made my way towards the Imperial Guard, who were fighting persistently on my left.

During this time, our own cavalry which had been left a half-league to our rear arrived. I passed in front of the 3rd Lancers who were preparing to charge, and I witnessed the discomfiture that they gave to the dragoons which had been so well used against us. I read in the newspapers that there were not 30 survivors from the Regiment they called "Royal George", and I can well believe it. Our lancers gave them such good work, it was the envy of all who watched them: they pursued them as far as our battlefield where they rode over a great number of our wounded, and they retook many prisoners.

The rest of the army corps were regrouped with several hundred men and they gave us a wooden barricade to defend where the enemy skirmishers were already trying to push through".

Translated by Paul and Christine Wisken.