

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

John Marshall, Private, 10th Hussars

Pidlute, near Paris, 11 July 1815

I have availed myself of this opportunity, to give you as much information as comes within my knowledge, though you no doubt are well acquainted with what has transpired during that short, but ever-glorious Campaign: but as the scribbler of a newspaper can say what he pleases, I shall take the liberty of saying what I know to be true—and so to the subject. On the 16th of June, our troops were in motion. At day-break in the morning, the British were advancing with all possible speed towards the Enemy, who was waiting our approach, and had already made an attack upon some Hanoverian troops, and on that account we had a forced march. The brigade to which I belong, marched a distance of about fifty miles, taking their posts the same evening about seven o'clock; and being the first cavalry that arrived, we remained under arms all night, during which time several brigades of cavalry, and most of our infantry, arrived. But the enemy was so strongly posted, that it was thought prudent not to attack them in their works, but to fall back. The infantry, therefore, about ten in the morning of the 17th, began to withdraw, leaving us to cover their retreat. The French, perceiving this, did not remain long inactive, but soon brought up their Lancers to attack us; but we were not to bring them to action, but retreat, which was accordingly done. General Vivian, who commands our brigade, conducted the retreat; in a most able and skilful manner did he complete it, covering the retreat with our brigade of the whole army, that fell back on this point. The enemy, seeing us retreat, were quite delighted, and followed us with all speed, cheering and hallooing at us, thinking to alarm and frighten: but in this they were disappointed, for we did not lose a man, although they attempted to charge us several times; but our skirmishers kept them back, in spite of all their boasted bravery. Thus was our retreat completed, after having fallen back about eight miles: thus far then they were to come, but no further. But we were much hurt by a thunderstorm, which brought with it the most heavy torrents of rain that I ever beheld, nor did it abate during the night, nor till about nine the next morning; and we were exposed to it all the time, for we took up our abode in a wood all night, so that we were like drowned men, more than soldiers: but as many of us have long been enured to hardships and privations of all descriptions, it went off cheerfully, and none seemed to repine; for when the motives of the mind are strong for exertion, all things are set aside to gain the wished-for purpose. This it is that makes us think light of misfortunes, and bear deprivations beyond conception to those who never trod this thorny path; yet, with us, they are borne without a murmur. But I am wandering from my subject. About nine on the morning of the 18th, the clouds dispersed, and it gave over raining, and the enemy drew up in order of battle, and our line had been formed all night, so we were quite ready for them. Our troops were posted upon a chain of rising heights, which commands the plain before it, whilst those of the French were posted upon a rising ground, in a parallel line with ours; and their position was covered by a long chain of woods, which favoured, and hid many of their movements, so that we had no advantage of them, for we had the plain before us, and they the same. Thus all were ready, and about twelve the onset commenced, by a brisk fire from the sharpshooters, and soon after a very heavy cannonading ensued; and by two the action became general, and most desperate did it rage; for both sides seemed determined to keep their ground; but the enemy showed us, that they did not only mean to have their own ground, but our also. With this seeming determination, did they bring up a strong force of cavalry and infantry, and pushed with all their might upon the centre of our line, thinking to break it; but in this they were disappointed, for our cavalry met them, and drove them back, as fast as they advanced. Finding, therefore, that they could not move our centre, they then endeavoured to turn our left flank, by pressing upon it in the same manner. Upon this point our brigade was posted; but they met with the same reception as before: so, finding that we stood firm at this place also, they took up their own ground, and soon after endeavoured to advance at all points; but their attention was then arrested by a large body of Prussians, who came point blank upon their right flank, and opened a very heavy fire of artillery upon them. This for a little time put them in a consternation; but even this they recovered, and, altering their lines, seemed to suffer but little from this our new reinforcement. This was about five in the evening, and victory was still doubtful. The enemy then made one more attempt to vanquish us, by bringing the most of his force at our right flank, trying to force it, and to gain the high road for Brussels, which if he had succeeded, our defeat would have been complete; and here it was that our Commander the Duke of Wellington was put to the test; for they advanced with a vast and numerous body of cavalry, supported by infantry, and covered by artillery, and seemed determined to have this road. The chief of our artillery was then brought to this point, and theirs parallel with ours; such a tremendous peal of thunder did they ring one against the other, as I never knew since my name was Marshall. The whole of the cavalry belonging to the British was also brought to the right of our line, and charged them in brigades; and ours also left its post, where it had been all day on the left, and came to the right, and, having the greatest distance to come, we of course was the last, and the whole of our cavalry nearly had charged them. This stopped their progress in advancing

in a great measure. Our brigade was then formed into line, and then we stood showing them that we would have the ground, or perish in the attempt; but they did not much like our sturdy front. There had some brigades of Imperial Guards to confront us, and at a small distance off, but would not charge us; but we stood under a most galling and destructive fire from infantry and artillery for near an hour: but this could not move us; but firm as a rock we stood, except those poor fellows who fell victims to their bravery. It was now eight in the evening, and still the battle raged with redoubled fury, and still was much to be done, and but little time to do it in, for night was fast approaching; therefore, no time was to be lost. Our brigade was then formed into three lines, each regiment comprising its own line, which was the 10th, 18th, and a regiment of the German Legion Hussars, my own regiment forming the first line. The General then came in front of the line, and spoke in the following manner: "Tenth," he said, "you know what you are going to do, and you also know what is expected of you, and I am well assured it will be done; I therefore shall say no more, only wish you success;" and with that, he gave orders for us to advance. I am not ashamed to say, that, well knowing what we were going to do, I offered up a prayer to the Almighty, that for the sake of my children, and the partner of my bosom, he would protect me, and give me strength and courage to overcome all that might oppose me, and with a firm mind I went, leaving all that was dear to me to the mercy of that great Ruler, who has so often in the midst of peril and danger protected me. After advancing about one hundred yards, we struck into a charge, as fast as our horses could go, keeping up a loud and continual cheering, and soon we were amongst the Imperial Guards of France. The 18th Hussars also charging, as soon as we got amongst them, which so galled them, that we slew and overthrew them like so many children, although they rode in armour, and carried lances ten foot long; but so briskly did our lads lay the English steel about them, that they threw off their armour and pikes, and those that could get away flew in all directions. But still we had not done, for there were two great solid squares of infantry, who had hurt us much, whilst we were advancing, with their fire, and still continued to do so, whilst we were forming again: in short they were all around us. We therefore formed as well as we could, and at them we went, in spite of their fixed bayonets. We got into their columns, and like birds they fell to the ground. Thus they were thrown into confusion, for it seemed like wild-fire amongst their troops, that the Guards were beaten, and, panic-struck, they flew in all directions. But we had done our part, and left those to pursue, who had seen the onset. We took sixteen guns at our charge, and many prisoners: but it was so dark, we could not see any longer, and at length we assembled what few men we had got left of the regiment, and the General of Brigade formed us in close columns, so that we might all hear him, and he addressed us in the following manner: "Now, Tenth," he said, "you have not disappointed me, you were just what I thought you were. You was the first regiment that broke their lines, and to you it is, that we are indebted for turning the fate of the day; and depend upon it that your Prince shall know it; for nothing but the bravery and good discipline of the regiment could have completed such a work." We then gave him three cheers, and since that he has given us at great length, in our orderly books, his thanks and praise for our conduct. You may perhaps think, because I have spoke of this, that it shows my vanity; but my motive for having done so, is because I saw in an English newspaper, that the Life Guards were the only cavalry that had been of any service. It therefore did not much please me nor my regiment, that we should not have a little of the credit. The Guards certainly made a very brilliant charge; it ought to be spoken of. You will, however, see, by what I have here stated, that the regiment did its duty, and that is all we wish to be understood of us. I am sorry that we have to lament the loss of a most brave and gallant officer, Major Howard, who led on the squadron that I belong to; and most nobly did he show himself formed, to let them know that he was an Englishman; but when we charged the infantry, one of them shot him dead, just as we got within bayonet length of them. We had two officers killed, wounded three captains, and two lieutenants wounded. But how many privates we have lost, I do not know: but not so many as might be expected; for the French fired so high, that when we were at close quarters with them, half their shots did not tell, or they might have killed every man of us. But Providence is ever on the watch, and orders every thing as it pleases; and I can never return too many thanks to the Almighty, for preserving me through that day's peril and danger: for never did I behold such a day's slaughter as that. Never did British troops try more for victory, and never were they nearer being beat. But, thanks be to heaven, the work was at last completed, for the Prussian troops finished what we had begun, pursuing and driving them all night, the darkness of which helped to add to their horror-struck minds. Thus was the proud and destroying Tyrant once more beaten, and compelled to fly to his Capital for shelter, leaving his troops to their destructive fate. This proves him to be a coward, for he abandoned them in the hour of danger: and he, like the fretful porcupine, can no where find rest; his fate, and that of all Europe, depended upon that day; but the evening's clouds saw him a wretched fugitive, not daring to stop, nor yet to go on. We took from them two hundred and ten pieces of cannon, and stores of all descriptions, and many prisoners. He had during the action, in several places of his line, the black flag flying, which signifies "no quarter." No, if he had beat us, I dare say they would have showed us none; and myself am eye-witness to it, that many of them were laid to the ground, which would not have been, but for that he had covered his cavalry with armour to secure them; but we

wanted no steel covering, for our hearts proved to be already steeled, and we let them know it. We have followed them to the gates of Paris, which place gave up to us on the 6th of this month.

John Booth. *Additional Particulars to the Battle of Waterloo, Also of Ligny, and Quatre Bras, With Circumstantial Details by a Near Observer, Containing a Register of the Names of the Officers who Served in the Campaign of the Netherlands, 1815.* (London: 1817), pp. 63–68.