***To what extent did the garrison of La Haye Sainte facilitate the Anglo-German victory at Waterloo?***

**William Mitchell**

Wellington’s army at Waterloo numbered 67,000 men and 156 cannon. Of mixed quality, this Anglo-Allied force was outnumbered by Napoleon’s attacking forces, which numbered 73,000 men and 252 cannon. To offset this disadvantage, Wellington deployed his forces on the ridge at Mont St. Jean on the Brussels Road, 15km south of Brussels, where the topography was perfect for his preferred defensive grand-tactics. Not the least of these advantageous topographical features were the three farm complexes in front of the ridge, called Hougoumont (on the right flank), La Haye Sainte (in the centre) and Papelotte and La Haye (on the left). In accounts of the battle, historians have traditionally focussed much attention on the defence of the former. In doing this they have taken their lead from Wellington himself. Some years after the battle, in referring to the way Lieutenant Colonel James Macdonnell and Corporal James Graham of the Coldstream Guards had curtailed a French break-in there, the Duke of Wellington would claim that “The outcome of the Battle of Waterloo rested upon the closing of the gates at Hougoumont.” Here one must remember the context of Wellington’s remark. The Duke claimed for himself and for Britain the responsibility for Napoleon’s defeat; one way of doing this was to focus contemporaries’ attention on a place in which it could be said the battle was decided by British forces.[[1]](#footnote-1) While Hougoumont was garrisoned by British Guardsmen and was successfully held all day, the same could not be said for the other two farm complexes. In particular, La Haye Sainte, garrisoned by foreign troops, fell to French attacks at around 6pm. However, one historian has recently pointed to the ultimately unsuccessful defence of La Haye Sainte by King’s German Legion (KGL) soldiers as having been a more significant factor in the eventual Allied victory than the successful defence of Hougoumont. Indeed, the subtitle of Brendan Simms’ recent study – ‘the 400 men who decided the battle of Waterloo’ – makes his point all too clear.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unfortunately at no point in his work does Simms systematically explain why he feels the defenders of La Haye Sainte can be credited with having won the battle. In this essay I will therefore examine the competing claims of the defenders of both complexes, measuring them against other key factors behind the Allied victory.

***La Haye Sainte***

The Hanoverian garrison of La Haye Sainte at Waterloo comprised the 2nd Light Battalion KGL commanded by Major [Georg Baring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Baring), and part of the 1st Light Battalion KGL. During the battle they were supported by the 1st/2nd Nassau Regiment and the light company of the [5th Line Battalion KGL](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th_Line_Battalion%2C_King%27s_German_Legion). Commanded by the veteran Major Georg Baring, many of these Hanoverians had been fighting the French for over a decade. When the French overran Hanover in 1803, many of the electorate’s men had fled to Britain to fight on against Napoleon as a part of the British army. Along with other German soldiers fleeing the yoke of French domination, they formed a sizeable auxiliary force called the King’s German Legion. By 1814 this comprised 10,000 experienced soldiers, many of them Peninsular War veterans, although according to Siborne only 6,000 were present at the Battle of Waterloo, where the Duke also had the services of 11,000 more Hanoverians, 6,000 Brunswickers and 3,000 Nassauers from the armies of the newly resurrected German states.

The farmstead that Wellington entrusted to the Germans provided him with clear defensive advantages, at least in theory. Importantly, possession of La Haye Sainte promised to make it harder for the French to assault the infantry holding the ridge behind it. This was because any troops inside the farmstead could provide enfilading fire against any formation attacking the ridge. Indeed, this fire would have been all the more deadly, given that the majority of the troops garrisoning La Haye Sainte were armed with the [Baker Rifle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baker_rifle), as opposed to the normal smoothbore India Pattern ‘[Brown Bess](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_Bess)’ musket of the British Army. Enfilading fire has two key advantages. First, fire from the flank is more destructive than fire from the front, because the target is denser: a ball that misses one man is far more likely to hit another to his right or left. Second, enfilading fire is also intensely demoralising, because the casualties inflicted by it are essentially unexpected and difficult to respond to. This effect is magnified when the targets are also taking fire from their front. A good example of this was provided when French Middle Guard regiments attacked the ridge during the final stage of the battle. This three-pronged attack was repulsed with the help of enfilading fire from the 52nd Light Infantry. If Napoleon’s Guardsmen could be so decisively demoralised by this tactic, then regular line infantrymen stood little chance – or so goes the theory.

Despite this, when one looks afresh at the actual role that La Haye Sainte played in the defeat of the one large-scale French assault on Wellington’s centre, it is hard to say that it proved of much significance. The attack in question was that of Marshal D’Erlon’s 14,000-strong I Corps, which assaulted Wellington’s centre between about 12pm and 1.30pm. D’Erlon was apparently mindful of the threat that La Haye Sainte could pose, and so detached 2,000 men against the complex. With the support of some squadrons of French cuirassiers, the farmstead was successfully isolated; any attempt to relieve the garrison by the Allies ended in disaster (as we shall see). Meanwhile, D’Erlon’s corps advanced past La Haye Sainte and up the slope against the Allied centre. It appears that D’Erlon’s detachment effectively ‘smothered’ the fire from the farmstead, neutralising it as a factor in the outcome of the assault. Moreover, due to the length of the frontage over which D’Erlon attacked, it seems difficult to see how his corps could have benefited from the extra 2,000 soldiers, had they not been detached against the farmstead. Uncharacteristically, D’Erlon’s corps seems to have attacked in what historians have called ‘divisional columns’: each division attacked with its component battalions deployed in line one behind the other, probably because D’Erlon knew how British firepower had so often crushed attacking French battalions in the Peninsula while the latter were attempting to deploy from attack columns into line. The density of these divisional columns gave the troops a feeling of security and, in theory, resilience; even if the first battalion suffered high casualties, there was always the second battalion behind it, and so on. In the event this tactic seems to have caused havoc amongst the Duke’s units, including Bijlandt’s Light Netherlander Brigade, which was quickly recalled due to the weight of the impending French attack. The first British forces to resist the I Corps’ advance were General Picton’s division composed of British and Hanoverians. Realising that his Peninsular veterans (coined as the ‘Fire Eaters’) were in danger of being overwhelmed, Picton ordered a charge and in the process was shot in the head and killed. Manuals of British tactics describe an effective method of defeating the powerful French forces by delivering a shattering blow to the forming-up French, then charging the shocked and disorganised troops remaining and therefore routing them. This tactic, however, was hardly effective at this particular battle as the force behind the charge petered out for some units before it ever reached the enemy, and others were losing the melee they had created. Not to mention the I Corp was already formed into line so it could respond in kind immediately. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the French were gaining ground, which isn’t surprising considering most of the British battalions involved had been mauled at Quatre Bras.[[3]](#footnote-3) Importantly, D’Erlon’s columns were turned back only by the massed cavalry charge of the Union and Household Brigades, not by Wellington’s infantry. In short, it is hard to see how D’Erlon could have employed in this attack the battalions that he detached to mask La Haye Sainte. Formed up in the rear of the other divisional columns, they would have lent little force to the attack, which succeeded against the Allied centre very well without them. Nor would they have been able to prevent the catastrophic collapse of D’Erlon’s corps in the face of the Union and Household Brigades. Overall, therefore, it cannot be said that the garrison of La Haye Sainte did much to alter the result of the first major clash at Waterloo.

If the garrison at La Haye Sainte did not materially affect the outcome of D’Erlon’s attack, it could be said that, because La Haye Sainte lay in a hollow in front of the Allied line, Allied possession stopped the French from using the area as a sort of staging post for large-scale assaults on the ridge from very close range. At best this would have caused the reverse slope to become a much more dangerous place to be; at worst, it would have made it untenable. An early French capture of the farm would have been very dangerous because the Allies could not easily have driven the French out. This is clear from the fact that in almost all of the cases where forces in the main line attempted to support the KGL garrison, the battalion concerned was smashed by lurking French heavy cavalry such as Crabbe’s Cuirassiers. The best example of this is found when the 5th Line KGL was ordered forward to attack the French around La Haye Sainte; when it advanced it was attacked from the right and rear by a cuirassier squadron, suffering 153 casualties and ceasing to exist as a functioning unit.

Even if one rejects this scenario by saying that, after D’Erlon’s failure, the French did not have the troops to spare for large-scale assaults on the ridge, it could still be said that Allied possession of La Haye Sainte prevented French skirmishers from moving forward past it and exposing the Allied defenders on the ridge to constant attack. The soldiers of Wellington’s army were exhausted by the forced marches and incessant rain of the past two days. At the best of times continual attrition is massively detrimental to morale and therefore to combat effectiveness; persistent French sniping would probably have frayed Allied nerves to such an extent that a determined attack would have spelled the end of organised resistance on the reverse slope. We can say that this was likely because, when La Haye Sainte did finally fall at 6pm, the French were able to rush up horse artillery into close range and shred the Allied units on the ridge’s forward slope. The 27th Inniskilling Regiment, deployed in square, came under canister fire at a range of 300 yards. By the end, the regiment had suffered 478 casualties and was described as “lying dead in square.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The Allied centre was significantly weakened by this bombardment and, if Napoleon had had the troops to exploit this weakness, the Allied line would have been split in two. On no Napoleonic battlefield had an army had ever come back from that sort of disaster, so it is to the credit of the garrison that they held out for so long that their eventual defeat was not as game-changing as it might have been. When the attack finally did come, over an hour later, at 7pm, it was repulsed. But this was only because the arrival of the Prussians had allowed Wellington to change his disposition in the meantime, with Mitchell’s 4th Brigade coming from the extreme right, effectively plugging the gap.

***“Close the Gate!”***

Of all the other events during the course of the battle that contributed to the Allied victory, the fight for Hougoumont is easily the best known. The nature of this struggle is contested by historians. Most assume that the French attacks were an expensive and futile diversion, but Gareth Glover has recently disputed this, arguing that Napoleon wanted the farmstead captured.[[5]](#footnote-5) In command of the French forces tasked with attacking the farmstead was Marshal Reille, commander of II Corps. The attack started when Reille sent his light infantry to probe the woods south of Hougoumont. At this point the farmstead was garrisoned by 1,000 soldiers, half of them defending the perimeter. Unlike at La Haye Sainte the garrison at Hougoumont had had time to fortify the place, cutting loopholes and firing steps into the perimeter wall. The garrison itself compromised two Guards light companies, but these were larger than their line battalion equivalents and it would appear the men themselves had been subject to much harsher selection and training. Despite this, they were hardly ‘Old Guard’ standard, and many of the men had only received their combat initiation at Quatre Bras two days prior. In addition to the Guards, the task of occupying the south-facing woods was given by the Duke himself to German *Jaegers,* so called because they were composed of men who had previously been hunters. Wellington himself oversaw the disposition of forces in this area and sent another 700-800 Nassauers to Hougoumont to augment the Guardsmen inside the complex. By the end, almost 12,000 Allied and 14,000 French troops had been sucked into the contest for this ground, which lends credit to the case that Hougoumont was essential for both sides.

The fact that the Duke himself oversaw the defence of Hougoumont, and prioritised it over other positions, would seem to suggest that he saw the complex as crucial to any victory at Waterloo. However, it could be argued that Wellington’s heavy right-flank and light left-flank disposition had been designed more with the preservation of his forces in mind. Wellington’s escape plan, in the event of failure at Waterloo, centred on reaching the sea at Antwerp. If his right flank had been compromised this plan would almost certainly have been impossible and his army would have been forced to capitulate through lack of supplies (much as had happened to General Mack at Ulm in 1805). To avoid this, Wellington needed to strengthen his right flank: if Hougoumont held out, even if the centre broke and defeat was inevitable, then the army could still survive and the defeat would not be as crushing.

Although Reille, commander of the II Corps who were assaulting Hougoumont, had perhaps as many as 46 guns, he did not start his attack in the usual way, with a cannonade. Alessandro Barbero credits this to the fact that Reille could not see behind the woods, so he decided not to shoot blind.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although he could not have hit the compound with his cannon, each battery had several howitzers designed to fire over obstructions and Reille could have used these to great effect prior to his infantry assault. Such a bombardment only occurred after Napoleon himself ordered it after a number of failed attacks, including the 1st Léger’s gallant but doomed attempt to gain access to the farm.

The closest that Hougoumont came to falling was when Sous-Lieutenant Legros broke his way into the compound with a sapper’s axe, resulting in a bloody melee in which the party of Guardsmen led by Macdonnell and Graham cut off the stream of Frenchmen entering the courtyard and killed all within except a young drummer boy. Had Hougoumont fallen at an early stage of the battle, however, then a situation similar to that at La Haye Sainte may have occurred concerning skirmish lines. In addition, the whole of II Corps would have been freed up to be used in ways that further threatened Wellington. The problem for Napoleon with Hougoumont was that it sucked in troops until a large section of his army was devoted to capturing the place and therefore could not be used for anything else, such as delivering a crushing blow to the Allied centre after La Haye Sainte fell at 6pm. With the fall of Hougoumont, Wellington may even have lost his nerve and decided to abandon the battle, much as Marshal Ney thought he was doing prior to the great French cavalry charges. With Wellington fleeing with his tail between his legs, trust between the British and Prussian high commands, strained as it already was due to what Brendan Simms calls the ‘tragedy of errors’ of the previous two days (i.e. Wellington not supporting the Prussians at the Battle of Ligny even though he had promised 20,000 troops). Prussian and British cooperation may have completely collapsed, leading to the possible destruction of the only campaign-ready troops of the whole coalition. The loss of Hougoumont could therefore have been truly catastrophic. It was imperative that it was retained by Wellington, so it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the defence of Hougoumont was even more important in the eventual Allied victory than the defence of La Haye Sainte.

**No Quarter!**

The defence of La Haye Sainte and Hougoumont were not the only important factors behind the eventual Allied triumph. For this section, we must return to D’Erlon’s attack and the first major action of the battle. With the collapse of Bijlandt’s Netherlanders and the faltering of Picton’s division, the centre of the Allied line had essentially collapsed and the French looked as if they were about to win. As we know, however, this was prevented by the punishing cavalry charge ordered by the Earl of Uxbridge, second-in-command of the Allied army, and carried out by the Union and Household Heavy Cavalry Brigades. Although it is well known that the failure to maintain a reserve ultimately left the brigades open to devastating French cavalry counterattacks, the sudden materialisation of 2,500 heavy cavalry sabres in their front caused great confusion in the ranks of D’Erlon’s corps, not least because the unorthodox French divisional columns didn’t allow the battalions to form square in time or easily. Regardless, to the right of La Haye Sainte the 1st Lifeguards and 1st Dragoon Guards swept Dubois’ Cuirassiers from the field, while the 2nd Life Guards and 1st Dragoon Guards headed off some cuirassiers heading for the 95th Regiment’s riflemen in the sandpit to the north of La Haye Sainte. The rest of the Union and Household Brigades faced no effective resistance from D’Erlon’s panicking infantry; those at the front fleeing and those at the back wondering what was going on. The action descended into slaughter, to shouts of “No quarter!” To give an idea of how devastating the charge was, two French Eagles were captured by the Union Brigade, one famously by Sergeant Ewart of the Scots Greys, and the other by the 1st Royal Dragoons. This charge not only relieved the intense pressure on Wellington’s centre exerted by I Corps; it also dealt a decisive blow to that formation, so much so that took many hours to rally it again and send it back into action (the action in question being the final capture of La Haye Sainte at 6pm). Additionally, the British heavy cavalry charge temporarily silenced the grand battery of more than 80 guns set up to bombard the centre prior to the first French assault. This battery could not open fire for fear of killing more of their own men and the gunners could put up little effective resistance to the British horsemen’s onslaught. While the latter did not carry cannon spikes and so could not put the guns out of action permanently, many limbers were broken and many crew members killed or routed. In fact, the damage done was so massive that the Imperial Guard artillery had to act as a supplement and many common infantrymen had to be detached to serve the guns. All this greatly reduced the French artillery capability, it taking around an hour for it to get back into something like full swing. The significance of all this to the battle’s eventual result should not be downplayed.

**Better Late Than Never**

The Prussians had camped at the town of Wavre the night before the battle. Their commander, Field Marshal Gebhard von Blucher, was determined to honour his agreement with Wellington and come to his support if Napoleon attacked, in spite of the fact that Wellington had not done the same for him at Ligny. He ordered an attack from his only available force because he felt Wellington was close to defeat. Von Bulow’s IV Corps marched through Chapel St. Lambert in support of Wellington, coming in on the French right flank, with Ziethen’s I Corps heading in a more northerly route in order to meet directly with Wellington’s forces around Papelotte. Von Bulow’s corps encountered resistance on their right flank from the town of Plancenoit, where Lobau’s VI French Corps was stationed. Here 30,000 Prussians fought 6,000 French. Napoleon was told of the encroaching Prussians and although he is supposed to have already seen them some hours previously, he now sent nine battalions of the Young Guard to stem the flow and had initial success in throwing out the Prussians. But they quickly rallied and, together with a ‘fresh’ brigade from II Corps, counter-attacked and successfully threw out the Young Guard. The significance of this struggle lies in the fact that it occurred just as La Haye Sainte fell. Thus, when Ney sent a plea to Napoleon for men to exploit this momentary Allied weakness, Napoleon had on his mind the securing of his right flank against the Prussians. To do this he moved most of the Old Guard infantry to face the Prussians and sent in two battalions; the 1st and 2nd Old Guard, though greatly outnumbered, threw back the Prussians despite not even firing a single shot, such was the battlefield presence of these veterans. In summary, von Bulow’s attack forced Napoleon to use 15,000 men to secure his right flank. These men could have been sent to Marshal Ney, with which he could have shattered Wellington’s line and secured victory for the French. As the fate of the battle hung in the balance, the arrival of Ziethen’s I Corps on Wellington’s left flank allowed the Duke to move Anglo-Allied formations to bolster the crumbling centre. Therefore, the timely Prussian intervention, in the shape of Ziethen and von Bulow, not only enabled Wellington to redeploy forces in time to prevent Ney from rupturing the Allied centre; it also robbed Ney of the troops that he would have needed to launch that attack. By the time Napoleon was able to organise his last throw of the dice, in the shape of the attack of the Middle Guard regiments, the opportunity had passed. The French attack on Wellington’s bolstered centre was repulsed, putting the last nail in Napoleon’s coffin. The bulk of what was left of the French army, realising the Prussians had arrived and they had been lied to by their superiors, and hearing of the Middle Guard’s failure, disintegrated into a mass rout. The battle was irreversibly lost.

In conclusion, the retention of La Haye Sainte until 6pm did not secure an Allied victory at Waterloo, although without it the battle may not have been won. If it had fallen sooner, Napoleon would have almost certainly have been able to attack the weakened centre and shatter it. If one wishes to identify one factor that delivered Allied victory, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Prussian arrival was the most significant factor in the eventual French defeat. That said, a victory on this scale cannot be attributed to one action or event alone, but instead to an amalgamation of crucial events. The Duke of Wellington summed this up beautifully: *“The History of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is a battle won or lost;*

*but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference to their value or importance.”*

**3993 words**

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1. After the battle he characteristically wrote, “You may depend upon it, no troops could have held Hougoumont but the British, and only the best of them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  Brendan Simms, *The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo* (2014).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Indeed, the Cameron Highlanders had lost half of its personal that day, and the Duke himself stated that the Cameron’s “seem to have had more than they liked of it”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Digby Smith, *The Napoleonic War Database*, p. 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For this argument, see Gareth Glover, *Waterloo: Myth and Reality* (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Barbero, *The Battle*, p. 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)