

The Napoleon Series

General Miguel de Alava's Account of Waterloo

Supplement to the Madrid Gazette, July 13, 1815.

"The lieutenant-general of the Royal Armies, Don Miguel de Alava, minister plenipotentiary of his Majesty of Holland, has addressed to his Excellency Don Pedro Cevallos, first secretary of state, the following letter:—

"Most Excellent Sir,

"The short space of time that has intervened between the departure of the last post and the victory of the 18th, has not allowed me to write to your Excellency so diffusely as I could have wished; and although the army is at this moment on the point of marching, and I also am going to set out for the Hague, to deliver my credentials, which I did not receive till this morning; nevertheless, I will give your Excellency some details respecting this important event, which, possibly, may bring us to the end of the war much sooner than we had any reason to expect.

"I informed your Excellency, under date of the 16th instant, that Buonaparte, marching from Maubeuge and Philippeville, had attacked the Prussian posts on the Sambre, and that, after driving them from Charleroi, he had entered that city on the 15th.

"On the 16th, the Duke of Wellington ordered his army to assemble on the point of Quatre Bras, where the roads cross from Namur to Nivelles, and from Brussels to Charleroi; and he himself proceeded to the same point, at seven in the morning.

"On his arrival, he found the Hereditary Prince of Orange, with a division of his own army, holding the enemy in check, till the other divisions of the army were collected.

"By this time, the British division under General Picton had arrived, with which the duke kept up an unequal contest with more than thirty thousand of the enemy, without losing an inch of ground. The British guards, several regiments of infantry, and the Scotch brigade, covered themselves with glory on this day; and Lord Wellington told me, on the following day, that he never saw his troops behave better during the number of years he had commanded them.

"The French cuirassiers suffered very considerable loss; for, confiding in their breast-plates, they approached so near the British squares, that they killed some officers of the forty-second regiment with their swords; but those valiant men, without giving way, kept up so strong a fire, that the whole ground was covered with the cuirassiers and their horses. In the mean time, the troops kept coming up; and the night put an end to the contest in this quarter.

"During this time Buonaparte was fighting with the remainder of his forces against Marshal Blucher, with whom he had commenced a sanguinary action at five in the afternoon; from which time, till nine in the evening, he was constantly repulsed by the Prussians, with great loss on both sides. But, at that moment, he made his cavalry charge with so much vigour, that they broke the Prussian line of infantry, and introduced disorder and confusion throughout.

"Whether Buonaparte did not perceive this circumstance, or that he had experienced a great loss; or, what is more probable, that Marshal Blucher had reestablished the battle, the fact is, that he derived on advantage whatever from this affair, and that he left the Prussians quiet during the whole of the night of the 16th.

"Lord Wellington, who, by the morning of the 17th, had collected the whole of his army in the position of Quatre Bras, was combining his measures to attack the enemy, when he received a despatch from Marshal Blucher, communicating to him the events of the preceding day, together with the incident that had snatched the victory out of his hands; adding, that the loss he had experienced was of such a nature, that he was forced to retreat to Wavre, on our left, where the corps of Bulow would unite with him, and that on the 19th he would be ready for any affair he might wish to undertake.

"In consequence of this, Lord Wellington was obliged immediately to retreat; and this he effected with so much skill, that the enemy did not dare to interrupt him. He took up a position on Braine le Leud, in front of the great wood of Soignés, as he had previously determined, and placed his head-quarters in Waterloo.

"I joined the army on that morning, though I had received no orders to this effect, because I believed that I should thus best serve his Majesty, and at the same time fulfil your Excellency's directions; and this determination has afforded me the satisfaction of having been present at the most important battle that has been fought for many centuries, in its consequences, its duration, and the talents of the chiefs who commanded on both sides, and because the peace of the world, and the future security of Europe, may be said to have depended on its result.

"The position occupied by his lordship was very good; but towards the centre it had various weak points, which required good troops to guard them, and much science and skill on the part of the general-in-chief. These qualifications were, however, sufficiently found in the British troops and their illustrious commander; and it may be asserted, without offence to any one, that to them belongs the chief part, or all the glory of this memorable day.

"On the right of the position, and a little in advance, was a country-house, the importance of which Lord Wellington quickly perceived, because the position could not be attacked on that side without carrying it, and it might therefore be considered as its key.

"The duke confided this important point to three companies of the English guards, under the command of Lord Saltoun, and laboured during the night of the 17th in fortifying it as

well as possible, covering its garden, and a wood which served as its park, with Nassau troops, as sharp-shooters.

"At half-past ten, a movement was observed in the enemy's line, and many officers were seen coming from and going to a particular point, where there was a very considerable corps of infantry, which we afterwards understood to be the imperial guard; here was Buonaparte in person, and from this point issued all the orders. In the mean time, the enemy's masses were forming, and every thing announced the approaching combat, which began at half-past eleven, the enemy attacking desperately with one of his corps, and with his usual shouts, the country-house on the right.

"The Nassau troops found it necessary to abandon their post: but the enemy met such resistance in the house, that, though they surrounded it on three sides, and attacked it with the utmost bravery, they were compelled to desist from their enterprise, leaving a great number of killed and wounded. Lord Wellington sent fresh English troops, who recovered the wood and garden, and the combat ceased for the present on this side.

"The enemy then opened a horrible fire of artillery from more than two hundred pieces, under cover of which Buonaparte made a general attack from the centre to the right, with infantry and cavalry in such numbers, that it required all the skill of his lordship to post his troops, and all the good qualities of the latter to resist the attack.

"General Picton, who was with his division on the road from Brussels to Charleroi, advanced with the bayonet to receive them; but was unfortunately killed at the moment when the enemy, appalled by the attitude of this division, fired, and then fled.

"The English life-guards then charged with the greatest bravery, and the forty-ninth and one hundred and fifth French regiments lost their respective eagles in this charge, together with two or three thousand prisoners. A column of cavalry, at whose head were the cuirassiers, advanced to charge the life-guards, and thus save their infantry; but the guards received them with the utmost valour, and the most sanguinary conflict of cavalry that ever was witnessed now took place.

"The French cuirassiers were completely beaten, in spite of their cuirasses, by troops who had no defence of the kind; and they lost one of their eagles in this conflict, which was taken by the heavy English cavalry called the Royals.

"Intelligence now arrived that the Prussian corps of Bulow had reached St. Lambert, and that Prince Blucher, with another corps under the command of General Ziethen, was advancing with all haste to take part in the combat, leaving the other two in Wavre, which had suffered much in the battle of the 16th, at Fleurus. The arrival of these troops was absolutely necessary, in consequence of the forces of the enemy being now more than triple ours, and our loss having been horrid during an unequal combat, from half-past eleven in the morning till five in the afternoon.

"Buonaparte, who did not believe them to be so near, and who reckoned upon destroying Lord Wellington before their arrival, perceived that he had fruitlessly lost more than five hours, and that, in the critical position in which he would soon be placed, there remained no other resource but that of desperately attacking the weak part of the British position, and thus, if possible, beat the duke before his own right was turned and attacked by the Prussians.

"Henceforward, therefore, the whole was a repetition of attacks by cavalry and infantry, supported by more than three hundred pieces of artillery, which made horrid ravages in our line, and killed and wounded numerous officers, artillerists, and horses, in the weakest part of the position.

"The enemy, aware of this destruction, made a charge with the whole cavalry of his guard, which took some pieces of cannon that could not be withdrawn; but the duke, who was at this point, charged them with three battalions of English and three of Brunswickers, and compelled them in a moment to abandon the artillery, though we were unable to withdraw them for want of horses; nor did they dare to advance to recover them.

"At last, about seven in the evening, Buonaparte made a final effort, and putting himself at the head of his guards, attacked the above point of the English position with such vigour, that he drove back the Brunswickers who occupied part of it; and, for a moment, the victory was undecided, and even more than doubtful. The duke, who felt that the moment was most critical, spoke to the Brunswick troops with that ascendancy which a great general possesses, made them return to the charge, and putting himself at their head, again restored the combat, exposing himself to every kind of personal danger.

"Fortunately at this moment he perceived the fire of Marshal Blucher, who was attacking the enemy's right with his usual impetuosity; and the moment of decisive attack being come, the duke put himself at the head of the English foot-guards, spoke a few words to them, which were answered by a general hurrah, and his Grace himself leading them on with his hat in his hand, they eagerly rushed forward to come to close action with the imperial guard. But the latter began a retreat, which was soon converted into the most complete rout ever witnessed by military men. Entire columns, throwing down their arms and cartouch-boxes, that they might escape the better, fled in the utmost disorder from the field, and abandoned to us nearly one hundred and fifty pieces of cannon. The rout at Vittoria was not comparable to this, and it only resembles it, inasmuch, as on both occasions, the French lost all the train of artillery and stores of the army, as well as all the baggage.

"The Duke followed the enemy as far as Gemappe, where he found the illustrious Blucher, and both embraced in the most cordial manner, on the principal road to Charleroi; but, finding himself in the same position with the Prussians, and that his army stood in need of rest after so dreadful a struggle, he left to Blucher the charge of the following up the enemy, who promised that he would not leave them a moment to rest. He is now pursuing them, and yesterday, at noon, he had reached Charleroi, whence he intended to proceed at night, and continue the chase.

"This is the substance of what took place on this memorable day; but the consequences of the affair are too evident for me to detain you in stating them.

"Buonaparte, now tottering on his usurped throne, without money and without troops to recruit his armies, has received a mortal blow, and, according to the language of the prisoners, no other resource is left him, 'than to cut his own throat.'

"It is said that he had never been known to expose his person so much, and that he seemed to seek death, that he might not survive a defeat fraught with such fatal consequences.

"I informed your Excellency, under date of the 16th, that this manœuvre appeared to be extremely daring in the face of such generals as Blucher and the Duke. The event has fully justified my prediction. For this reason, I conceive that his executing it has arisen merely from despair, at the appearance of the innumerable troops who were about to attack him on every side, and in order to strike one of his customary blows before the Russians and Austrians came up.

"His military reputation is lost for ever; and, on this occasion, there is no treason on the part of the allies, nor bridges blown up before their time, on which to throw the blame: all the shame will fall upon himself. Numerical superiority, superiority of artillery, all was in his favour; and his having commenced the attack, proves that he had sufficient means to execute it.

"In short, this talisman, whose charm had so long operated on the French military, has been completely dashed to pieces. Buonaparte has for ever lost the reputation of being invincible; and, henceforward, this character will belong to an honourable man, who, far from employing this glorious title in disturbing and enslaving Europe, will convert it into an instrument of her felicity, and in procuring for her that peace which she so much requires.

"The loss of the British is dreadful, and of the whole military staff, the Duke and myself alone remained untouched in our persons and horses.

"The Duke of Brunswick was killed on the 16th, and the Prince of Orange and his cousin, the Prince of Nassau, aide-de-camp to the Duke of Wellington, received two balls. The Prince of Orange distinguished himself extremely, but, unfortunately, although his wound is not dangerous, it will deprive the army of his important services for some time, and possibly he may lose the use of his left arm.

"Lord Uxbridge, general of cavalry, received a wound at the close of the action, which made the amputation of his right leg necessary: this is an irreparable loss, for it will be difficult to find another chief to lead on the cavalry with the same courage and skill.

"The duke was unable to refrain from shedding tears on witnessing the death of so many brave and honourable men, and the loss of so many friends and faithful companions. Nothing but the importance of the triumph can compensate for a loss so dreadful.

"This morning he has proceeded to Nivelles, and, to-morrow, he will advance to Mons, whence he will immediately enter France. The weather cannot be better.

"I cannot close this despatch without stating to your excellency, for the information of his majesty, that Captain Don Nicholas de Minuissir, of Doyle's regiment, and of whom I before spoke to your excellency, as well as of his destination in the army, conducted himself yesterday with the greatest valour and propriety. He was wounded when the Nassau troops were driven from the garden; yet he rallied them, and led them back to their post. During the action, he had a horse wounded under him, and, by his former conduct, as well as by his behaviour on this day, he merits from his majesty some proof of his satisfaction.

"This officer is well known in the war-office, as well as to General Don Josef de Zayas, who has duly appreciated his merits.

"God preserve your excellency many years,

(Signed) "**MIGUEL DE ALAVA**
"Brussels, 20th of June, 1815."

"P.S. The number of prisoners cannot be stated, for they are bringing in great numbers every moment. There are many generals among the prisoners; among whom are the Count de Lobau, aide-de-camp to Buonaparte, and Cambrone, who accompanied him to Elba."

This article originally appeared on the John Schneider's Napoleonic Literature website and is used with his permission.

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