

The Napoleon Series

Some Thoughts on Communication on the Battlefield from the British Perspective

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Languages

At the time of the Napoleonic Wars, almost all of the ruling/officer classes in Europe (including Russia) spoke French.

Dialects of German were spoken from the southern Baltic shore, in the north-east, to Switzerland, in the south-west.

At the beginning of the 19th Century German and Dutch were already two different languages. The development of 'Standard German' would only become formalised in the mid 1800's

German Dialects in 19th Century Europe

Low Saxon	Sleswickian Holsatian North Low Saxon Gronings – East Frisian Dutch Low Saxon Westphalian Eastphalian
East Low Saxon	Pomeranian North Margravian Central Margravian
West Central German	Ripuarian Moselle Franconian Luxemburgish Hessian Rhine Franconian Lorrainian Franconian
East Central German	Thuringian Upper Sacon Berlian Dialect Upper Silesian
North Upper German	East Franconian South Franconian
West Upper German	Swabian Low Alemannic Alsatian High Alemannic Highest Alemannic
East Upper German	North Bavarian Central Bavarian Southern Bavarian

Dutch and Frisian Dialects

Dutch	Hollandic Brabantian Limburgish Flemish Low Rhenish
Frisian	West Frisian East Frisian North Frisian

At the Senior Department of the Military College at High Wycombe, which was intended to train staff officers, the chief instructor was a French émigré officer, General Jarry, who spoke nothing but French. When the Junior Department for officer cadets opened in 1801 at Marlow, it was laid down that all applicants were required to have already mastered the French language; one professor was appointed to teach German.

Wellington had been sent at the age of 15, to the French Royal Academy of Equitation in Angers to, amongst other things, learn French. A large number of pupils were British. Major-General Colin Halkett had begun his military career at 18 in the Dutch Guards, rising to captain in 1795. In 1803 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, having raised the nucleus of what was to become the King's German Legion. He commanded a KGL Brigade throughout the Peninsular War.

Major-General Robert Craufurd had also acquired some language skills in French and German. In 1793 (aged 29) until 1797, he was on attachment with the Austrian armies operating against the French. The following year he was British commissioner on Suvarov's staff when the Russians invaded Switzerland.

Once the war started in the Peninsula, it would take a while for the officers (and also the men) to pick up the rudiments of Portuguese and Spanish. One of the benefits of appointing William Carr Beresford to the task of reorganising the Portuguese Army was that he had learnt the language whilst posted to Madeira. He brought other Anglo/Portuguese officers onto his staff, such as Benjamin D'Urban and William Warre, to facilitate communications.

Wellington had an interpreter on his staff, but one can assume that he used the services of the Marquis of Alava, who was attached to his headquarters as a Spanish Liaison Officer. They became close friends and he would be with the Duke at Waterloo, even though his language skills were not required there.

Waterloo

In Wellington's Army fighting at Waterloo, the British were just 36%. The others were 10% King's German Legion (Hanoverians on the British payroll), 17% Hanoverians, 10% Nassau, 8% Brunswick, 13% Dutch & 6% Belgians. So, 45% of his 73,200 men spoke a form of 'German' as a first language

On Wellington's staff, as the Prussian Liaison Officer, was Karl von Muffling who spoke no English and communicated back to the commander of the Prussian Army, Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher and his Chief-of-Staff, August von Gneisenau. Blücher had only limited education in written German grammar and had picked

up just a little English. General Gneisenau had served in the American Revolutionary War, so probably also spoke some English. Attached to the Prussian Staff, as Wellington's Liaison Officer, was Henry Hardinge who spoke no German. The only French speaker amongst Blücher's senior officers was Graf Hans Karl von Ziethen, commander of the I Corps.

So at the famous meeting of the chiefs on 16 June, just before the Battle of Ligny started, Wellington was fluent in French but had no German, whilst Blücher could only communicate in German.

A large number of Dutch officers present at Waterloo had fought in the French army and spoke French fluently. German was a bit more difficult, but, compared to the French or British, the Dutch officers spoke German rather well. It is not clear how many Dutch officers were familiar with English, but some of the highest ranking officers (including the Prince of Orange and his Chief-of-Staff De Constant Rebecque, as well as General Henrik De Perponcher) had lived in England and/or served in the British army. The Prince of Orange spoke all four major languages.

It is therefore not surprising that there were problems in communication on the battlefield. Two incidents are worthy of note:

At some point a British staff officer rode up to Count van Westphalen, the Major commanding the Hanoverian Peine Landwehr Battalion. He spoke very hurriedly to him and then galloped off. Westphalen called after him, to explain that, not speaking English, he hadn't understood. Whereupon the staff officer shouted back at him, what Westphalen thought was 'Retirez-vous!' He accordingly withdrew his battalion, as well as the accompanying Hildesheim Battalion back some several hundred yards, creating a gap in the front line for a while.

The 92nd (Gordon Highlanders) Regiment had lost many officers and men on 16 June at the Battle of Quatre Bras. There were further losses at Waterloo and the remains of some of the companies were commanded by sergeants. An ADC rode up to one such NCO but could not make himself understood adequately, as the man spoke only Gaelic.

It must have been difficult enough to understand verbal orders in the heat of battle, without having the difficulty with the language.

Passing Orders and Messages

On the battlefield a commander either gave his orders in person or sent them through his staff officers / aides-de-camp. The official allowance of ADCs was: commander-in-chief, four; generals, three; lieutenant generals, commanding divisions, two; major generals, commanding brigades, one. However these levels were often exceeded. In the Peninsular, Wellington rarely had less than seven. At Waterloo he had eight. At brigade level, apart from an ADC there would also be a Brigade Major in attendance. Junior ADC's were often sons of the general, or close relations or sons of friends or men of importance at home to whom he wished to repay a favour. Senior ADC's at general or corps headquarters were lieutenant-colonels or majors.

Apart from misunderstanding the orders he was tasked with delivering, the ADC could get lost in the smoke and confusion of the battlefield, be un-horsed, wounded or even killed along the way. Of the fifty-seven British ADC's at Waterloo, six were killed and twelve wounded, being 32% in total.

On the battlefield Wellington rarely delegated and at Waterloo, as in many of his previous battles, paid scant regard to the normal channels of command. As an example of the former, at the critical moment at the opening of the Battle of Salamanca, Wellington galloped about 3 miles to the far right of his army to instruct D'Urban, Packenham and Le Marchant on their part in the coming battle, thereby minimizing the risk of confusion or misunderstanding. At Waterloo he went several times from his central command position to personally ensure that the Chateau of Hougoumont would hold.

Wellington gave his battlefield orders direct, either personally or via a staff officer to whoever he felt needed them. He scribbled pencil notes on asses' or goats' skins that could be wiped clean and used again.

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