

The death of Sir William Ponsonby.

One of the earliest descriptions of the death of Sir William Ponsonby at Waterloo dates back from 1817 and reads: “At this period of the engagement Sir William Ponsonby led his brigade against the Polish lancers, and checked their destructive attacks on the British infantry. Never was a more timely, or a more successful, charge: but the impetuous valour of two of his regiments hurrying them too far in the pursuit, he galloped forward, attended by only one aide-de-camp [brigade major Reignolds], to restrain their rashness. He entered a newly-ploughed field where the ground was exceedingly soft, and, being badly mounted, his horse sank in the mire, and was unable to extricate itself. At this instant a body of lancers approached him at full speed. Sir William saw that his fate was decided. He took out a picture and his watch, and was in the act of giving them to his aide-de-camp, to deliver to his wife and his family, when the lancers came up, and killed them on the spot. His body was found lying by the side of his horse, pierced with seven wounds.”¹

However, it is unclear upon which sources this version, which has been copied many times ever since, has been based.²



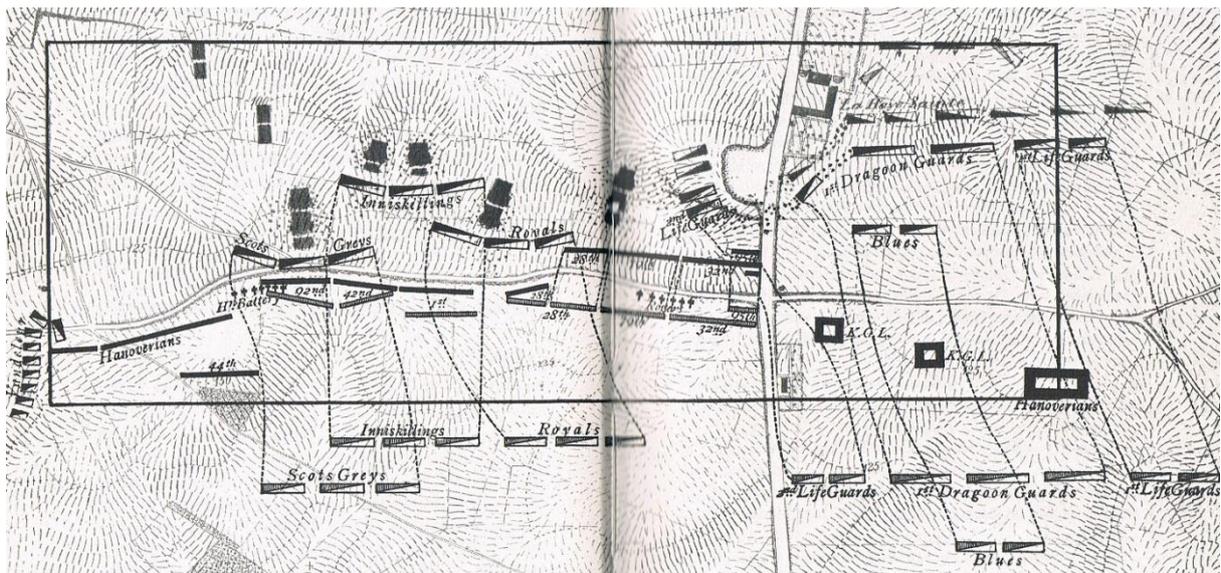
Sir William Ponsonby.

In 1839, major Evans, extra aide de camp to Ponsonby, wrote to Siborne: “After describing the success of the charge of the Scots Greys against the French columns of infantry, their pursuit and his own brief visit to Sir James Kempt, Evans writes: “I galloped back to Sir William Ponsonby. The dragoons were still in the same disorder, cutting up the remnant of the

dispersed infantry. We ascended the first ridge occupied by the enemy, and passed several French cannon, on our right hand towards the road, abandoned [on] our approach by their gunners, and there were some French squares of infantry in rear.

The French lancers continued to advance on our left in good order. If we could have formed a hundred men we could have made a respectable retreat, and saved many; but we could effect no formation, and were as helpless against their attack as their infantry had been against ours. Everyone saw what must happen. Those whose horses were best or least blown, got away. Some attempted to escape back to our position by going round the left of the French lancers. Sir William Ponsonby was of that number. All these fell into the hands of the enemy. Others went back straight – among whom myself – receiving a little fire from some French infantry towards the road on our left as we retired.

It was in this part of the transaction that almost the whole of the loss of the brigade took place. But this last occurrence took place about three hundred yards at least in advance of the farthest line of the square of the parallelogram marked in your map you have sent me, and accordingly the spot where Sir William Ponsonby fell, and his body was found by us next morning, was about five hundred yards in front of the centre of the brigade as marked in the square of your plan, on the ridge to which I have before alluded, and on which the enemy had, I think, occasionally their advanced batteries in the early part of the battle.”³



Siborne's square of the parallelogram, as referred to by Evans.

And on the 19th of June 1815 Sir Denis Pack wrote to the bishop of Derry: “His [Sir William Ponsonby] was found this morning about half a mile in front of our position pierced through the breast with a lance and he died seemingly without pain.”⁴

Major Clarke of the Scots Greys wrote: “Having passed through the line [of infantry] we charged the cuirassiers and lancers, who yielded to the impetuosity of our brigade, even broke and dispersed, and many of them were killed. The brigade still advanced upon the third line, on which, in our broken and crippled state, we could make but little impression. A retreat then became necessary; it was at this time that Sir William Ponsonby, Colonel Hamilton and all the officers of the Greys who were killed, met their lamented death. Numbers fell from the fire of

the third line of the enemy, whilst the lancers and cuirassiers forming the second line, having rallied [sic], pierced all our wounded, and, deaf to all prayers, refused quarters.”⁵

Being an orderly officer, lieutenant Hamilton of the Scots Greys was with him, but not as he fell, after having lost sight of him immediately after having driven back French lancers and cuirassiers. As the dragoons were then overpowered by French infantry fire and by the cuirassiers and lancers who had rallied, Hamilton was able to cut his way through the enemy who had got into his rear.⁶

Major Ch. Best wrote in a letter dated 25th of July to his niece Charlotte.: “I also found M Gnl. Sir Wm. Ponsonby, who was struck through the chest and body; he was stripped except his shirt which was entirely soaked in blood. I ordered some of my men to remove him to a farm house, his poor servant having recognised his master, came to me to request this favour.”⁷

Though not a witness, but Gore describes the location where Ponsonby fell as being halfway between the knoll in rear of the sand-pit and the centre of the French right wing).⁸ Another member of the Scots Greys, sergeant Clarke, claims Ponsonby was shot.⁹

From all this evidence it becomes clear that Ponsonby was killed on the intermediate ridge while rallying his men in front of the forces of Lobau and Milhaud, at a spot approximately some 600 meters east of the Brussels road and almost 600 meters south of the Ohain-road.

Though it becomes clear that he died of one or more lance-wounds, it should not be ruled out that he got wounded just before by musketry-fire from one of the squares of Lobau’s infantry; exposed as he was, that may have been an extra reason for lancers to bring him down shortly after.

Though separated from part of the remnants of his brigade, Ponsonby was certainly not alone when he met his fate, and therefore it can be presumed that Reynolds was with him by the time they were killed. Yet, so far no accounts have emerged of people actually witnessing his death, so it might have been that all fell in the hands of the enemy and were killed or mortally wounded on the spot.¹⁰

There is also no further corroborating evidence for the fact that his horse was unable to extricate itself from the mire, if there was a mire at all. We know that Ponsonby rode a secondary untrained horse, but whether this has played a role in his death remains unknown.¹¹

From the French side it is De Mauduit who asserts that a member of the 4th lancers, the maréchal-des-logis Orban (1st company, 1st squadron - 1778-1848), took Ponsonby prisoner and that he killed him as soon as some Scots Greys came in an attempt to rescue him. One of them would have been the dragoon who had taken the eagle of the 45th regiment of the line just before; he would have been killed by Orban as well and Orban would have retaken the eagle as a result.¹²

Colonel Bro, commander of the 4th lancers, mentions the intervention of his regiment as the British cavalry was in combat with the 3rd chasseurs à cheval, and he also confirms Orban killing Ponsonby with his lance and that he himself killed three of his captains.¹³

However, it is a fact that sergeant Ewart was the man who took the eagle in question and he survived the battle. Other than that, the Scots Greys, in front of whom Ponsonby was riding, had no confrontation with the French 3rd chasseurs à cheval and this was the regiment, according to Bro, with which the 4th lancers was acting against the British cavalry. There is no chance that Ponsonby could still have been alive by the time the 4th lancers was launched, after the intervention of Vandeleur to save Ponsonby’s men from the 3rd lancers. Therefore, the French claim that Orban killed Ponsonby is incorrect.

Morewood, J. An ornament to his profession. In: The Waterloo Journal. Vol.18 nr.1 p.7

¹ Kelly, W.H. - A full and circumstantial account of the memorable battle of Waterloo etc. London, T.Kelly, 1817 p.49

Bain, N. - A detailed account of the battles of Quatre Bras, Ligny and Waterloo p.130-131

Cf. Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, in 1815 under his grace the Duke of Wellington and marshal Prince Blücher, comprising the battles of Ligny, Quatre Bras and Waterloo. London, H.Colburn, 1817 p.280

² Dalton, Ch. – The Waterloo roll call p.19

Siborne, W. – History of the war etc. Vol.II p.43

Lieutenant colonel Murray (18th regiment hussars) wrote in 1834: “It was said general Ponsonby met his death in consequence of the tiring of his horse in the deep ground – and also that when he had fallen his brigade major Reynolds (of the Greys) lost his life in the romantic but devoted endeavour to save a beautiful miniature of lady Ponsonby which the general wore. “ In: BL, Add.ms.34.704 p.106-116

³ In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.119-123

⁴ In: Sir J.Ponsonby - The Ponsonby family p.220

⁵ Cf. his letter to sir J.S.Denham, dated 11th July 1815. In: NWMS, no reference.

⁶ Cf. his letter to captain Lawson, dated 24th June 1815. In: NWMS, nr.A.213.2.07

⁷ Sold at Bonhams at 1st of April 2015, lot nr.101 Cf. <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/22277/lot/101/>

⁸ In: Explanatory notes etc. p.80 and BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.119-123

⁹ In: Journal. In: John Rylands Library, Manchester.

Cf. <https://rylandscollections.wordpress.com/2015/05/29/witness-to-waterloo-a-soldiers-first-hand-account-of-the-battle/>

¹⁰ Ponsonby was interred on the 30th of June at the protestant cemetery of Brussels and reinterred on the 10th of July 1815 in the family-grave of Molesworth, Kensington.

¹¹ In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.124-126

¹² In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.300
Les fastes de la gloire p.265

Thiers, A. - Histoire du consulat etc. Vol.VI p.489

Glover states his sword was regained by the Ponsonby family at the beginning of the 20th century and following the trail back it appears originally to have been in the possession of sergeant Orban. In: Waterloo. Myth and reality p.139

¹³ In: Mémoires p.149