

The death of Sir William Ponsonby.

One of the earliest descriptions of the death of Sir William Ponsonby at Waterloo dates back from 1815. It states that his death “was occasioned by his being badly mounted. He led his brigade against the Polish lancers and checked at once their destructive charges against the British infantry; but having pushed on at some distance from his troops, accompanied only by one aide de camp, he entered a ploughed field where the ground was excessively soft. Here his horse stuck, and was utterly incapable of extricating himself. At this instance 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 delivering them to his aide de camp to deliver to his wife and family, when the lancers came up; they were killed on the spot. His body was found lying beside his horse, pierced with seven lance wounds. Before the day was over the Polish lancers were almost entirely cut to pieces by the brigade which this brave officer had led against them.”¹

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

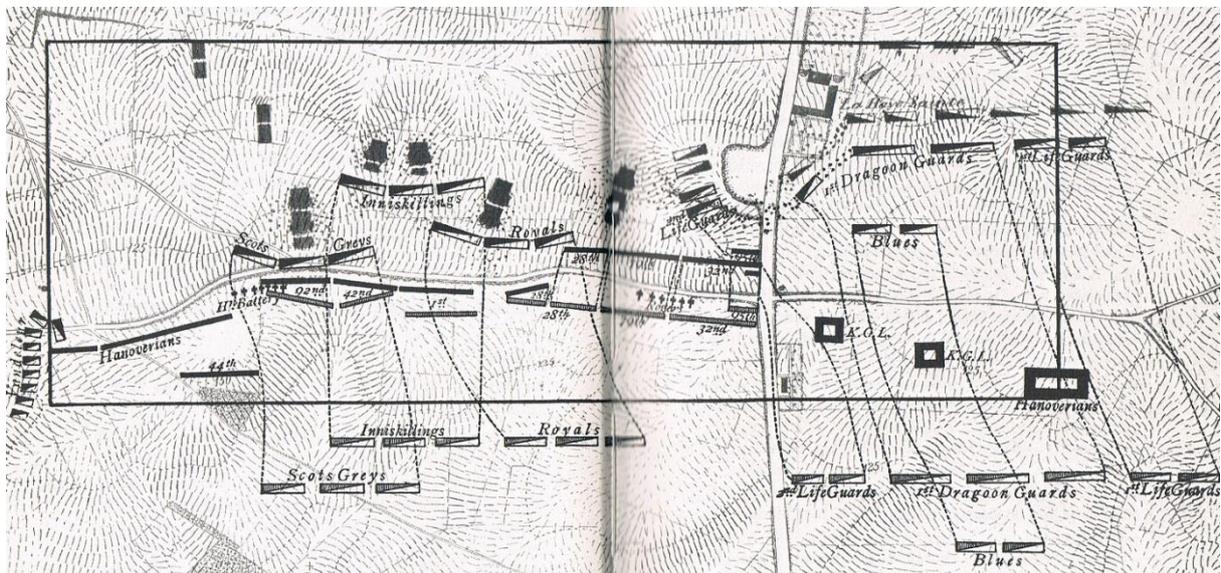


Sir William Ponsonby.

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 Charles 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, 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 by French infantry, and this can only be that of the French 6th corps, posted in squares on the intermediate ridge.⁹ The same is the case for lieutenant Gunning (1st Royal dragoons).¹⁰

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 Milhau, at a spot approximately some 500 meters east of the Brussels road and about 650 meters south of the Ohain-road.

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 Reignolds was with him by the time they were killed. Though it becomes clear that he died of one or more lance-wounds, it should not be ruled out that Ponsonby got wounded just before by musketry-fire from one of the squares of Lobau's infantry. Exposed as he was in this way, that may have been an extra reason for lancers to bring him down shortly after.¹¹

There is 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 on the high ground. We know that Ponsonby rode a secondary untrained horse, but whether this has played a role in his death is highly unlikely.¹²

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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.

The French claim that Orban killed Ponsonby is highly unlikely. Yet, tradition has it that Orban took Ponsonby's sword and that eventually ended up, through a French family with the name of Barbet de Vaux, back again in the hands of the Ponsonby family, where it still is. In case this event would be correct, the only explanation of this would be that Ponsonby, though wounded possibly a musket shot, headed further east / south-east in an attempt to muster his men, met members of the extreme left flank of the 4th lancers, which regiment had advanced to disperse Vandeleur's light dragoons.¹⁵

¹ S.Urban. The Gentleman's magazine Vol.2 1815 p.179

This extract is taken from: Morewood, J. – Waterloo general etc. p.199

For similar versions:

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 In: Morewood, J – Waterloo general p.206

¹¹ 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.

¹² In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.124-126

Lieutenant Gunning (1st Royal dragoons) is very clear on this by asserting that this version of the events is “a farce to please the lovers of the marvellous.” In: Morewood, J – Waterloo general p.206

¹³ 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

¹⁴ In: Mémoires p.149

¹⁵ Recent research situates Ponsonby's death at about 1600 metres east of the Brussels road and about 1000 metres south of the Ohain-road, south of the farms of La Haye and Papelotte. Cf. Morewood, J – Waterloo general p.187-212

The eyewitness accounts alluded to in this note, however, make it very clear that the charge took place towards the intermediate ridge and that it did *not* stretch into the French position to such an extent. Also see: Lieutenant Ingilby (Gardiner's troop). In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.266-271 plan 2