

The night of the 17th of June.

From 2 p.m. onwards the tremendous cloudburst of rain around Quatre Bras evolved into almost an almost continuous rain which moved north, to reach the positions in front of Waterloo probably late in the afternoon. From then on, the rain continued unabated in torrents until the next morning.¹

The result was that everywhere the fields, especially in the low grounds, turned into quagmires. Also lacking proper cover, by far the most of the men of both armies had to make the best of it when it came down to keep themselves dry and warm.

Having set up a bivouac in the orchard of the farm of Mont saint Jean, captain Mercer (Royal Horse Artillery) writes: “[...] we formed our park in the adjoining orchard, preferring its green turf to the plashy, muddy fields around, that morning covered with fine crops of wheat, now little better than aloughs. We were not long, however, in discovering that it was only exchanging the frying –pan for the fire, since our smiling turf was nearly ankle-deep in water, the orchard lying low and hollow, somewhat below the level of the road. But it was already growing dark, consequently too late to hunt out another, so we were obliged to put up with it. Thoroughly wet – cloaks, blankets and all – comfort was out of the question, so we prepared to make the best of it.[...]” After having taken care of the horses, Mercer continues: “Our gunners , &, soon stowed themselves away beneath the carriages, using the painted covers as additional shelter against the rain, which now set in again as heavy as ever. We set up a small tent, into which (after vain attempts at procuring food or lodgings in the farm or its outbuildings, all of which were crammed to suffocation with officers and soldiers of all arms and nations) we crept, and rolling ourselves in our wet blankets, huddled close together, in hope, wet as we were, and wet as the ground was, of keeping each other warm.[...]”²

Some distance away from Mercer, was the battalion Bremen of the brigade Kielmansegge. Its commander, lieutenant colonel Müller, writes in a similar way: “Bald nachher fieng es an, sehr stark zu regnen, welches um so empfindlicher war, weil es unangenehm kalt und die Leute, welche von Tages-Anbruch an sich fast immer im Feuer oder auf dem Marsche befanden, fast gänzlich abgemattet waren. [...] Die ganze Nacht regnete es fast unaufhörlich. An Schlaf ward wenig gedacht, weil der Boden, worauf man sich befand – ein sehr schönes Kornfeld mit beinahe sechs Fuss hohem Getraide – in sehr kurzer Zeit ganz flach getreten und so eingeweicht wurde, dass man kaum gehen konnte. Hütten oder Zelte waren gar nicht vorhanden. Jederman erwartete den Anbruch des Tages mit Ungedult [sic].”³

William Gibney, assistant surgeon to the 15th regiment of hussars, described the miserable situation of his regiment: “There was no choice; we had to settle down in the mud and filth as best as we could, and those having any provisions about them were fortunate. As I had obtained a bit of tongue (but whether cooked, or only smoked and salted, I know not) in the morning, and had a thimble-full of brandy in my flask, I was better off than many, and finishing somewhat queer-tasting food, with others I looked about for a drier place to lie down and rest the weary limbs. It was all mud, but we got some straw and boughs of trees, and with these tried to lessen the mud and to make a rough shelter against the torrents of rain which fell all night; wrapping around us our cloaks, and huddling close together, we lay in the mud and wooed the drowsy god, and that with tolerable success. For, notwithstanding rain, mud, and water, cold, and the proximity of the enemy, most of us managed to sleep. As for myself, I slept like a top, but I had become seasoned to the work, and was young and strong.”⁴

After having halted in a field about half a mile south of Mont Saint Jean, sergeant Robertson says about the situation of his battalion, the 1st battalion of the 92nd regiment: “We could get no fuel here to make fires as everything was soaked with the rain. There was a field of green clover in our rear of which we cut large quantities, and with some branches out of the hedges made a kind

of bed on the ground to keep us from the clay. Every regiment sent to its own front a small picquet for the purpose of giving information to the commanding officer in case of alarm. In this condition we stretched ourselves on our uncomfortable lair.”⁵

On the extreme right wing of the position, private Wheeler of the 51st regiment wrote about his situation: “[..] Night came on, we were wet to the skin, but having plenty of liquor we were to use an expression of one of my old comrades ‘wet and comfortable’. The bad weather continued the whole of the night, we had often experienced such weather in the Peninsular on the eve of a battle, for instance the nights before the battles of Fuentes d’Onor, Salamanca and Vittoria were attended with thunder and lightning. It was always the prelude to a victory.

It would be impossible for anyone to form any opinion of what we endured this night. Being close to the enemy we could not use our blankets, the ground was too wet to lie down, we sat on our knapsacks until daylight without fires, there was no shelter against the weather: the water ran in streams from the cuffs of our jackets, in short we were as wet as we had been plunged over head in a river. We had one consolation, we knew the enemy were in the same plight.”⁶

Lieutenant Martin (45th regiment of the line, division of Marcognet) cynically describes this plight this way: “Il faisait noir comme dans un four, l’eau tombait par torrents et sans discontinuer, et, pour surcroît de bonheur, le régiment se trouvait placé dans des terres labourées et entièrement inondées; c’est là que nous devons goûter les douceurs du repos. Pas de bois, pas de paille, pas de vivres et aucun moyen de s’en procurer. Ce dont nous pouvions pourtant le moins nous plaindre, c’était du lit: il n’était pas dur, au contraire. Aussitôt qu’on était couché, on se sentait enfoncer [sic] mollement jusqu’à mi-corps, et, avec la simple précaution de mettre un shako en guise d’oreiller, le duvet n’était pas plus doux. On était un peu fraîchement, il est vrai, mais on avait la satisfaction, en se retournant, de sentir laver par la pluie le côté qui avait pu être sali quand il était dessous.”⁷

Due to the clayish character of the soil, men not only got soaked from the rain from above but also from below. Assistant surgeon John Gordon Smith (12th regiment of light dragoons) says: “In front of the field which the horses occupied, ran a miry cart-road (upon which the officer’s fires were kindled) and by the side of this road was a drain, or shallow ditch. Here a party of us deposited our straw, and resolved to establish ourselves for the night, under cover of our cloaks; but such was the clayey nature of its bottom, that the rain did not sink into the earth, but rose like a leak in a ship, among the straw, and we were, in consequence, more drenched from below than from above.”⁸

Of those units being near hamlets, farms and other outbuildings, staff officers and others immediately made use of these shelters, while others strayed out to find them.⁹

Because of the rain and sometimes the lack of fuel as well, it was almost impossible to kindle any fires and - if this was at all possible - to keep them going.

Captain Von Scriba of the field-battalion Bremen (brigade Kielmansegge) writes: “Die Nacht vom 17. Auf den 18. Juny war höchst unangenehm. Ein starker Regen dauerte, nur mit kleinen Unterbrechungen, die ganze Nacht hindurch und führte eine so empfindliche Kälte mit sich, dass man sich tief in den October versetzt glauben konnte. Der aufgeweichte Lehm Boden war zu Schlamm geworden und bot kein trockenes Plätzchen dar, Holz zu Feuern fehlte desgleichen, und wenn auch hin und wieder jemand einige Stückchen Holz oder Bund Stroh erhaschte, so kam dieses nur einer sehr kleinen Anzahl zu Nutze.”¹⁰

Captain Mercer of the Royal Horse Artillery himself was lucky: “[..] There was no possibility of sleeping, for besides being already so wet, the tent proved no shelter, the water pouring through the canvas in streams; so up I got, and, to my infinite joy, found that some of the men had managed to make a couple of fires, round which they were sitting smoking their short pipes in something like comfort. The hint was a good one, and at that moment my second captain joining me, we borrowed from them a few sticks, and choosing the best spot under the hedge, proceeded

to make a fire for ourselves. In a short time we succeeded in raising a cheerful blaze, which , which materially bettered our situation.[..].”¹¹

Lieutenant Von Gagern of the 2nd battalion 1st regiment Nassau had also the chance to get to some fire, as he states: “Die Nacht vom 17. Auf den 18. war fürchterlich. Ich konnte nur drei Stunden schlafen, nämlich bis dass ich so nass war, dass kein trockner Faden mehr an mir war. Meinen Mantel hatte ich mir zwar den Abend vorher trocknen lassen, aber er war wieder ganz durch und durch nass. Ein Paar Händcher voll Korn hatte ich mir zusammengetragen, darauf schlief ich. Um 12 Uhr konnte ich es nicht mehr aushalten, da stand ich auf und stellte mich ans Feuer, um mich von allen Seiten trocknen zu lassen, denn mein Mantelsack war bei der zurückgebliebenen Bagage, also konnte ich mich nicht anders anzieh[n] [sic].”¹²

Also in the bivouac of the Scots Greys some men had fires, as sergeant major Dickson describes: “In a drenching rain we were told to halt and lie down away in a hollow to the right of the main road, among some green barley. Yes, how we trampled down the corn ! The wet barley soon soaked us, so we set about making fires beside a cross-road that ran along the hollow in which we were posted. No rations were served that night.”¹³

On the far left flank, John Gordon Smith, assistant surgeon of the 12th light dragoons, describes how fires were lit thanks to the presence of material coming from Vert Coucou: “Disappointed in the article of water, our attention was drawn to that of fire, in procuring which we were eminently successful. The adjoining village furnished fuel in abundance. Doors, and window-shutters – furniture of every description – carts, ploughs, harrows, wheel-barrows, clock-cases, casks, tables &c. &c. were carried or trundled out to the bivouac, and being broken up, made powerful fires, in spite of the rain.”¹⁴

In the bivouac of the 1st battalion 1st regiment of chasseurs of the Imperial Guard at Le Caillou the situation wasn't any better. Its commander, colonel Duuring writes: “Le soir, je fus de nouveau détaché pour rejoindre l'Empereur, à la ferme qui se trouvait sur la droite, à peu près à un bon quart de lieue de la ligne de bataille du lendemain. Le bataillon bivouaquait dans le jardin, sans feu; il fit un temps affreux.”¹⁵

And for Larreguy de Civrieux (93rd regiment, division Foy) this was no different: “La nuit du 17 au 18 fut affreuse. Une pluie violente avait détrempé le terrain; il nous fut impossible d'allumer des feux, même pour faire la cuisine.”¹⁶

Both armies had a line of sentries in advance to be on the alert of any possible threats.¹⁷ At least some units on the left wing of Wellington's army were disturbed that night by false alarms. Sergeant Robertson (92nd regiment) writes: “We lay about twelve o'clock when the alarm was given that the French were coming. We instantly stood to our arms and continued in that posture until the cause of the alarm was found to be groundless; it arose from a part of the Belgian cavalry going their rounds, having when challenged by our sentries replied in the French language.”¹⁸

It may have been the same alarm to which major general Best refers when he writes: “Die Nacht zwischen 1 und 2 Uhr entstand ein Allarm, der alles unter die Waffen brachte und einen feindlichen Überfall vermuthen liess; allein dieses war nicht der Fall, und so wurde die Ruhe bald wieder hergestellt.”¹⁹

Further to the right, the Coldstream Guards were vexed with two false alarm of alleged French cavalry charges. The battalion was in a hollow square all night.²⁰

Apart from the lack of sleep due to the rain and the lack of proper fires, both armies suffered from a lack of provisions. Accounts for the Anglo-Netherlands-German army are unanimous in the fact that no supplies were distributed during the evening of the 17th of June.

This was caused by the fact that most of the material of the commissariat had stranded in the forest of Soignes after the panick which had struck its drivers in the early evening after the artillery bombardment.

The result was that the men had to make the best of the supplies they still had in their knapsacks or to feed on what they could locate in the surrounding farms and villages in products as bread, biscuits etc. Any livestock present was slaughtered. The meat, however, was often hard or impossible to cook due to a lack of fires. In numerous cases, the foraging parties were sent out to find food.²¹

In the French army the supply of provisions wasn't much better either and all what the men could eat was that what they still had or what they could find on the spot.²²

For instance, it is general Guyot, commander of the heavy cavalry of the Imperial Guards who writes: "L'armée fait de grandes journées et ne marche pas en bon ordre; cela tient à ce que l'on ne fait point de distributions de vivres; les hommes sont fatigués et rien à manger. C'est un grand malheur parce qu'ils se répandent dans les campagnes pour vivres, ils quittent leurs postes etc."²³

Additionally, the French army also suffered from the chaotic way in which bivouacs were assigned and arranged. Baron Petiet, an officer of the general staff, sums it up thus: " Pendant la soirée et la nuit entière, la pluie qui continue à tomber par torrents fait cruellement souffrir les troupes bivouaquées au milieu de la boue, et détruit les blés jonchés sur la terre par l'orage et ce déluge fatal. L'armée anglo-belge, arrivée de bonne heure à sa position, avait ses vivres assurés; aussi nos ennemis purent sécher leurs vêtements et réparer leurs forces. Les soldats français, sans vivres, firent encore des marches et des contre-marches pour parvenir aux lieux fixés pour leurs bivouacs. L'obscurité, par cette pluie battante, étendit ses voiles sur nous plutôt qu'on ne le supposait; les hommes isolés cherchant leurs régiments, trouvèrent, après de vaines courses, un abri dans les maisons et se livrèrent à quelques désordres."²⁴

This would have been the case for the imperial guard in particular. De Mauduit says: "Toute sa [Napoleon's] garde vint s'y grouper successivement, mais chacun y arrivait exténué. Pendant les marches et contremarches de cette effroyable nuit, ce fut un véritable pêle-mêle. Les régiments, les bataillons, les compagnies mêmes, tous étaient confondus. On cherchait en vain ses généraux, ses officiers au milieu de l'obscurité la plus complète et par une pluie battante. A chaque instant, nous avions à franchir des haies vives ou de profonds ravins. Aussi, des murmures, des imprécations, partaient-ils de toutes parts contre les généraux auxquels on imputait, certes bien à tort, toutes ces fatigues: l'humeur alla même à tel point que des cris: à la trahison ! se firent entendre et furent souvent répétés."²⁵

It has been claimed that during the night of the 17th of June, physically, the majority of the army of Wellington was better off as Napoleon's was. It is true that part of it reached the position of Mont Saint Jean when it was still dry and that – in general – the bivouacs seem to have been assigned in an organised way. Yet, of course the rain made no difference for both armies and Wellington's men equally suffered from hunger and lack of fires, as Napoleon's men did.²⁶

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¹ Cf. Sir W.Gomm. In: BL, Add.ms.34.706 p.179-184

Captain Kennedy Clark (Royal dragoons). In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.3-5

J.Hamilton (2nd battalion of the line KGL). In a letter dated 21st July 1815. In: NAM, nr. Nr.7905/5.

Private Hemingway (33rd regiment). In a letter dated 16th August 1815. In: NAM, nr.8406/156.

Gourgaud - La campagne de 1815 p.67

Mémoires pour servir etc. p.111

Jackson, B. - Notes and reminiscences etc. p.34

Mercer, C. - Journal of the waterloo campaign Vol.I p.285

Ensign Larreguy De Civrieux (93rd regiment, Foy's division). In: Souvenirs d'un cadet 1812-1823 p.166

Lieutenant Müller (Hanoverian artillery). In: Kannicht, J. - Und alles wegen Napoleon p.62

² Mercer, C. - Journal of the Waterloo campaign Vol.I p.285-286

³ In: VPH, nr.40

⁴ In: Brett-James, A. - The hundred days p.100

⁵ In: Bruce Low, E. - With Napoleon at Waterloo etc. p.158

⁶ In: The letters of private Wheeler p.170

⁷ In: Souvenirs etc. p.282-283

⁸ Brett-James, A. - The hundred days p.96

⁹ The fact that the troops did not carry any tents is confirmed by captain Mackenzie of the 42nd regiment (brigade Pack). Cf. his memoirs. In: NAM, nr.7904/15 MFN

¹⁰ In: VPH, nr.41

¹¹ Mercer, C. - Journal of the Waterloo campaign Vol.I p.287

¹² Klötzer, W. - "Ein unbekannter Waterloo-Brief Heinrich von Gagerns." In: Nassauische Heimatblätter 46 (1956), nr.1 p.22

¹³ In: Bruce Low, E. - With Napoleon at Waterloo etc. p.139

Sergeant Clarke of the Scots Greys confirms that his men were able to get a fire going with the aid of material which came from the farm of Mont Saint Jean; from there they also procured some water. Cf. his journal. In: NLS, ms.15379 p.2

¹⁴ Brett-James, A. - The hundred days p.95

Cf. Private Farmer (11th regiment of light dragoons). In: The light dragoon p.152

Lieutenant Hay, of the same regiment, however, claims there were no fires in the bivouac. In: *Reminiscences under Wellington* p.174

Ensign Short (2nd battalion Coldstream Guards) adds that in his unit just one bivouac-fire was present. Cf. his letter dated 19th of June 1815 to his mother. In: NAM, nr . 7702-5

Also in the bivouac of the 1st regiment Life Guards, the men faced problems in lighting fires. Cf. Surgeon James. In: Vansittart, J. (ed) - Surgeon J.H.James's journal p.31

According to lieutenant Biedermann of the 2nd battalion of light infantry KGL, the men in the orchard of the farm of La Haye Sainte were not allowed to light any fires because of the near presence of the enemy. In: *Von Malta bis Waterloo* p.181

The rain preventing the men from lighting any fires is also seen by colonel Hervey, assistant quarter master general at Wellington's staff in 1815. In: *A contemporary letter etc.* p.430

¹⁵ In: d'Avout, vicomte – L'infanterie de la garde etc. p.116

¹⁶ *Souvenirs d'un cadet* p.166

¹⁷ Of Van Bijlandt's brigade, for instance, the 7th battalion of national militia would have had half of its strength in outposts, while the 8th battalion of national militia had its flanker-company as outposts about 300 paces in front.

Cf. Captain Van Bronkhorst in his letter dated 9th July 1815. In: *Ons leger* (1983) nr.6 p.32-38
Aantekeningen over 1815 uit de nagelaten papieren van kolonel De Jongh. In: *Nieuwe Militaire Spectator* (1866)

¹⁸ In: Bruce Low, E. - *With Napoleon at Waterloo* p.158-159

¹⁹ In: VPH, nr.23

Colonel Von Berger (chief of staff of Von Vincke's brigade) writes about the same alarm here: "In der Nacht wurden wir durch ein falsches Gerücht: die Franzosen sind da, allarmirt. Die Brigade war in wenig Minuten formirt und schlachtfertig." In: VPH, nr.25

This is corroborated by adjudant Von Berckefeldt who mentions cavalry from the army of the Netherlands who somehow had got lost in the darkness. In: *Geschichte des Königlich Hannoverschen Landwehr* p.223

It remains a mystery what cavalry referred to might have been as at that moment all units of Collaert were near Mont Saint Jean.

²⁰ Cf. Letter of ensign C.W.Short (2nd battalion of Coldstream Guards) to his mother, dated Nivelles 19 June 1815. In: NAM, nr.7702-5

²¹ Cf. for example the following accounts:

Captain Von Scriba (battalion Bremen, brigade Kielmansegge). In: VPH, nr.12

Aantekeningen over 1815 uit de nagelaten papieren van kolonel De Jongh. In: *Nieuwe Militaire Spectator* (1866)

Cornet Beckwith (16th regiment of light dragoons). Cf. his letter of the 19th of June. In: *Queen's Royal Lancer's Museum*

Report of the 3rd battalion of the line KGL. In: VPH, nr.34

Lieutenant Dehnel - *Rückblicke etc.* p.241

Lieutenant Swabey (battery Gardiner). In a letter dated 24th June. In: *Regimental Museum XVth / XIXth The King's Royal Hussars*

Captain Dyneley (battery Gardiner). Cf. his letter dated 23rd August 1815 to J.Douglas. In: *RAI*, nr. MD 1051

Lieutenant Hope (92nd regiment). In: Letters from Portugal etc. p.241
Captain Naylor (King's Dragoon Guards) in his diary. In: Regimental Museum 1st the Queen's Dragoon Guards
Sergeant major Page (King's Dragoon Guards). In: Mann, M. - And they rode on p.27
Captain Barlow (69th regiment). Cf. his letter dated 16th August 1815. In: NAM, nr.6507-1
J.Hamilton (2nd battalion of line infantry KGL). Cf. his letter dated 21st July 1815. In: NAM, nr.7905-5
Captain Verner (7th regiment of hussars). In: Reminiscences of William Verner (1782-1871) 7th hussars p.43
Mercer, C. - Journal of the Waterloo campaign Vol.I p.289-290
Captain Thackwell (15th regiment of hussars) in his diary. In: Wylly, H.C. - The military memoirs etc. p.70
Private Wheeler (51st regiment). In: Letter dated 19th June 1815. In: NAM, nr.6806/42
Private Jeremiah (23rd regiment of infantry). Cf. his account. In: NLW, Ms.22102A p.46-47
Private Lindau (2nd battalion of light infantry KGL). In: Ein Waterloo-Kämpfer etc. p.27
Captain Radclyffe (Royal Dragoons). Cf. his journal. In: De Ainslie. Historical records of the first or the Royal dragoons p.151
Fusilier S.A. (7th battalion of national militia - army of the Netherlands) even claims some of his battalion even strayed as far as Alseberg, which is about seven kilometres further north. In: Herinneringen uit mijn tienjarige militaire loopbaan.
Tupper Carey, assistant commissary-general, attached to the 2nd division, tried to procure provisions from the commissariat in the forest of Soignes, but was faced here with terrible confusion which reigned here and failed in his mission. Eventually, he got carried away as far as Brussels where he arrived by 2 a.m.. After having slept there for 2 to 3 hours, he returned to his division by 8 a.m. In: Reminiscences of a commissariat officer p.726-728

There is a claim that just at this moment the commissariat of the army of the Netherlands suffered from the shortcomings of the contractor who was responsible for the supply of provisions. Cf. Bas, F.de & T'Serclaes de Wommersom - La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.36

²² Cf. Lemonnier-Delafosse, J.B. - Souvenirs militaires du capitaine J.B.Lemonnier-Delafosse p.214

General Kellermann - Observations sur la bataille de Waterloo In: SHD, nr.MR719
Captain Duthilt (aide de camp of general Bourgeois, division of Allix). The delay in the supplies for the 1st corps was caused by the panick which had struck its commissariat on the 16th of June, after the échec of the cuirassiers at Quatre Bras. In: Les mémoires du capitaine Duthilt p.301

Lieutenant Martin (45th regiment). In: Souvenirs etc. p.282-283

Ensign Larreguy de Civrieux (93rd regiment). In: Souvenirs d'un cadet p.166

Houssaye claims provisions were issued for most regiments in the middle of the night, but there are no further indications for this claim. In: 1815. Waterloo p.275

²³ In: Carnets de campagnes p.292

²⁴ Baron Petiet - Souvenirs militaires p.209

Chef d'escadron Dupuy (7th regiment of hussars, division Jacquinet) tells that the two squadrons of his regiment had got separated from the remainder of the brigade; Dupuy was given the task that night to find the brigade; he did, near a farm. In: Souvenirs militaires de

Victor Dupuy p.287-294

General Kellermann also states: “Elle [the French army] prit position comme elle put pendant la nuit et non sans un peu de désordre et de confusion, suite inévitable de la contrariété de ce temps déplorable et du manque de subsistance.” In: Observations sur la bataille de Waterloo
In: SHD, nr.MR719

²⁵ In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.231

General Christiani, commander of the 2nd regiment of grenadiers of the Imperial Guard, confirms there was no one around to show him the place where he was supposed to establish his bivouacs. In: d’Avout, vicomte - L’infanterie de la garde etc. p.111-112

²⁶ The claim comes from Houssaye. In: 1815. Waterloo p.276

Both captain Duthilt and baron Petiet do the same to make the contrast with the situation of the own army even more shrill.

In: Les mémoires du capitaine Duthilt p.301

Baron Petiet - Souvenirs militaires p.209