

The Royal Sappers and miners during the campaign of 1815. ¹

The corps of Royal Sappers and miners was composed of 60 officers, 10 second lieutenants, 838 men, 500 drivers and 160 (pontoon)-wagons, medical officers and other non-combattants, plus about a thousand horses. The corps was not present at the battle of Waterloo. During the battle two companies were at Mechelen and the other three were near the battlefield. One of these companies has been blamed for having left the battlefield without any reason and for having lost all its baggage and equipment during its flight.

The company involved - the 1st company of the 4th battalion - moved on the 17th of June from Halle to Waterloo. It had got the instruction from headquarters, through lieutenant Sperling, to halt at Braine l'Alleud and to entrench the village.

Sperling arrived at 5 p.m. at Halle and the company was supposed to leave at 6 p.m. It actually marched off that evening but mistook the road in the forest of Soignes and finally reached Waterloo. It was in the immediate vicinity of this village that the company took up a position on the 18th of June. ²

After some time the company was instructed by captain Sir G.Hoste to go to the rear. After that the company was led by lieutenant W.Faris and second lieutenant R.Turner to a position on the extreme north side of the village. It halted there till about 3.30 p.m. when it was joined by lieutenant L.K.Sanders. At that moment numerous fugitives were passing towards Brussels spreading the alarm that the battle was lost. Sanders got convinced they were speaking the truth and ordered the company to fall back as well. The company got mixed up in the disorder on the chaussée by which it lost its order and with this a lot of its equipment, horses, baggage etc. ³

The 8th company of the 2nd battalion under second lieutenant P.Johnston left Antwerp for Brussels on the 18th of June at 2 a.m. From here it proceeded to the battlefield of Waterloo. It reached the village of Waterloo at 4 p.m. and stayed there until Johnston gave the instruction to go further to the rear to a barn along the Brussels road as the equipment was plundered by fugitives coming from the battle. It was in this position that the company still was on the 19th of June. It was for this reason that this company wasn't at the battle either and its members didn't get any Waterloo medal.

¹ Connolly, T.W.J. - History of the royal sappers and miners Vol.I. p.232-237

² John Sperling, In: Letters of an officer etc. p.131-132 Connolly believes the march was from Halle to Waterloo through Braine l'Alleud, but this is not correct. On the 16th of June, Sperling was at Brussels, as well as captain Oldfield. On the 17th of June he rode towards the retreating army, but it doesn't become clear where he actually met it. Having ridden to Halle that day he rode back to Brussels and spent the night there. He left Brussels on the 18th of June and it was at Waterloo that he met with other members of the engineers, like Sir G.Hoste and captain Oldfield. Sir J.Carmichael Smyth was then at the front. It was there that Sperling also went some time later. Cf. Letters of an officer etc. p.130-133

³ A member of the Royal Sappers and miners who was at the battle of Waterloo was corporal Donnelly. Donnelly was a messenger for captain Oldfield. He wasn't awarded with a Waterloo medal however. The claim Donnelly made for a medal was justified by the following document:

Company orders. Argenteuil. August 6 1815. In consequence of private Henry Donnelly being present at the battle of Waterloo he is entitled to two years advance of service. He will therefore be mustered according to the regulations of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, dated 29th July 1815 (signed) Ed.Covey, lt. R.E.

Colonel Carmichael Smith however undid this in July 1816 by stating that Donnelly had left captain Oldfield on the 17th of June on horseback and by returning to Brussels on the morning of the 18th of June . Cf. Connolly, T.W.J. - History of the royal sappers and miners Vol.I. p.235 Donnelly died on 25th July 1817.