

Waterloo. The Death of the Eagle (translated by Paul Wisken)
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During a banquet, to a British officer who asked him to describe the separate phases of the battle of Waterloo, Lord Wellington replied that it was as difficult to recount a battle as to describe a ball. However today we will try to describe a small part of the great battle where the future of Europe - that is to say the world - was played out.

The morning of 18th June 1815. The 45eme de Ligne takes position facing the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean in the sodden rye fields, and in marching the men tried to warm themselves up beneath the feeble glow of the sun. The earth, soaked with water, glued itself to the soles of their shoes and the wheels of the cannons which the poor horses had a hard job dragging out of the ruts. The men, who had camped in the pouring rain, were soaked to the bone. In the centre of his company, Lt. Pierre Guillot uncovered the eagle of the 45eme; the "golden cuckoo", the cravat and the flag material appearing spanking new .. perhaps too new. Guillot misses the old emblem of 1804 on which the eagle was so beautiful with its gold crown, given by the people of Paris. Like many of its sisters it had assisted in so many victories and flown over so many battlefields that the new King of France was in its shade and had ordered its destruction. And so the eagle of the 45th had flown away. in smoke. Now the officer contemplates the poet's "dull plain" , as far as his eye can see he sees thousands of infantry and cavalry.

Positioned like himself in the first line, Guillot recognises to his left the infantry of Donzelot's and Quiot's divisions. To his right, beyond his friends in Marcognet's division, he sees the shakos of Durutte's soldiers, and the lancers and hussars of Jacquinet's division. In the second line, beyond his brothers in arms of the 25eme, he sees the shining cuirasses of the 8 regiments of "big milk cows" which the centaur Milhaud commands. Finally almost at the end of the plain, impeccably strapped into their scarlet or blue Kurtkas, Guillot recognises the light cavalry of the Guard lined up beside the legendary Chasseurs a Cheval. Reassured by their presence, the eagle-bearer of the 45eme now turns his eye towards the plateau of Mont St Jean, topped by a track bordered with hedges, behind which he detects the presence of thousands of red coats. Towards one o'clock, 80 pieces of artillery concentrated on the plateau of la Belle Alliance open up. in fact, plenty of noise for little effect, because the cannons are placed far to far from Wellington's reserves. The bombardment continues for nearly half an hour, the British replying shot for shot, and the plain is covered with terrible smoke. On the orders of an ADC to Drouet D'Erlon (1), Colonel Chapuset gives the signal to attack. Oddly grouped in column, the two battalions of the 45eme de Ligne start the assault, muskets in the crook of the elbow.

The men sing out the "Chant du depart". Wow, what a target for the enemy! Imagine the battalions grouped with a frontage of 15 men, starting to climb the long grassy slope, made slippery by the incessant rain which has been falling for a fortnight! Pierre Guillot's (2) legs sink into the sodden earth, re-awakening his old wounds; the drums beat the charge, the pace increases. With a cry of "Vive l'Empereur", the soldiers breast the plateau when suddenly the Scots of Picton's (3) division reveal themselves.

One instant, Guillot sees the elegant uniforms of the Gordon Highlanders (92nd Regt) all covered with mud, then a terrible fusillade booms out, knocking down most of the soldiers in the front ranks. The moment the stupor passes, the men revive themselves, attacking with the bayonet and throwing back the Gordons. Victory seems in their grasp when suddenly the sound of thunder descends upon them. Certainly not the thunder of an epic charge like the talented Lady Butler (4) painted; no, a simple cavalry attack arriving at the psychological moment and led by the hand of Colonel Ponsonby. Immortally known by the name of "Scots Greys", the horsemen of the Royal North British Dragoons penetrate into our ranks, sabring all in their way with the cry of "No quarter", which is not very nice of soldiers whose ancestors were the subjects of a queen of France (5). Terrified, our unlucky soldiers fled; the bravest tried to form a square, but it was too late and with this damned mud which stuck to the shoes, the ground did not help the flight. In combat, the opportunity to seize an enemy flag would not be missed by the Scottish soldiers; which is why Sergeant Ewart attacked Lieutenant Guillot. It is difficult to know exactly what happened, what we can say is that the eagle bearer of the 45eme was not killed or even wounded! Almost alone and without help, did he slip on the sodden ground while trying to defend his emblem, or was he knocked down by Ewart's horse? As far as we know, Guillot (6) fell to the ground unable to rise alone because of his old wounds, he could not prevent the Scots from taking the emblem that he was entrusted with. We know that the eagle bearer never told his story to his children, because if the Napoleonic legend is full of great deeds, it forgets the defeats; it is true that for our old enemies, it is the same!

The great French comic, Alphonse Allais has previously remarked that the English have given the names of the greatest defeats - Trafalgar and Waterloo - to their principal monuments.

The eagle of the 45eme was captured at Waterloo and now resides in Edinburgh Castle. The eagle is the 1815 model although the numerals on the base are from the original 1804 pattern eagle.

NOTES

(1) Jean-Baptiste DROUET, Count of Erlon, was one of the rare confidants of the Emperor. At the start of the 100 days, he seized the stronghold of

Lille and was then compensated by being named Commander in Chief of the 1st corps of the Observation Army of the North and peer of France. Banished after the return of Louis XVIII, he fled to Germany where he ran a brasserie. Condemned to death in absentia, he was granted amnesty by Charles X and died Marshall of France on the 25th January 1844, He was 79.

On the 10th June 1815 the first 2 Battalions of the 45eme, which totalled 43 Officers and 960 men commanded by Colonel CHAPUSET, formed, along with the 25eme Regiment, the GRENIER brigade of the MARCOGNET division of the first Army Corps of the North which was commanded by Lieutenant DROUET d'ERLON. The losses at Waterloo were vast, so much so that a survey of the situation on the 24th June 1815 revealed that the 45th Regiment was reduced to 13 Officers and 110 men and the 25eme had no more than 10 Officers and 57 men!

(2) Pierre GUILLOT had been injured 3 times during the terrible war in Spain: in his right foot in 1809, his left side in 1811 and his right thigh in 1813 at the same time as the Tolosa retreat in November. Imprisoned by the British, he was freed on the 18th June 1814 and was re-instated the following 1st of August, with the title of 2nd Lieutenant in the 42eme Regiment of the new Royal Army where the flag bearer was Claude THOMASSIN. After the return of Napoleon, the 42eme once again became the 45eme and THOMASSIN, judged as too royalist was dismissed, but strangely was made to attend on the 30th May 1815, to watch his friend GUILLOT named as the eagle bearer.

(3) Lieutenant Sir Thomas PICTON was killed in action. The losses of the PACK brigade (Royal Scots, Black Watch, Gordons and East Essex) were heavy. The 32nd or Cornwall Regiment which made up a part of the KEMPT brigade lost a flag.

(4) This magnificent work of art, painted in 1881 represents the 'Scots Greys' in full gallop, in the tradition of battle painters of the time. Most of the details are false, as false as the figures are on the Famous painting by Edouard DETAILLE representing the handing over of the gold crowns of Paris to the Imperial Guard Regiments on the 25th November 1807.

(5) We want to mention Marie STUART, who was married in 1558 to the future Francois II. Of course we know that his reign was very short as it only lasted from 1559 to 1560 but the fact remains!

(6) The register conserved in the archives of service history of the army, states simply that Pierre GUILLOT had been dismissed by his Regiment on the 26th September 1815 which proves this fine man wasn't dead, as he was still alive! Did he go back to the charming town of Saint-Rémy in Provence where he was living on the 2nd September 1777? The actual level of our research means we cannot answer this question.