

‘Moving forward in the old style’: Revisiting Wellington’s Greatest Battles from Assaye to Waterloo

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ABSTRACT

Waterloo, as Wellington's final battle, and his only encounter with Napoleon, has been feted by historians as the Iron Duke's greatest battle. This article argues that, whilst the circumstances of the battle undoubtedly render it as one of Wellington's greatest, in terms of its importance in military history (i.e. the history of how wars are fought) Waterloo is in fact not Wellington's greatest battle. Instead, the article examines two of Wellington's own choices as his greatest: Assaye, fought in India in September 1803, and the Nivelle, fought in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Across a sweep of history that takes in Wellington's whole military career, it can be seen that these two battles represent Wellington's learning curve, and illustrate his tactical, operational and strategic brilliance. By contrast, Waterloo was for Wellington a hard fought, but disappointing battle, since Napoleon has proven less effective an opponent than expected. Indeed, the victory at Waterloo arguably bred stagnation and lazy thinking about the military profession within the British Army between 1815 and 1854.

As the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo approaches, a new volume on the great encounter between Wellington and Napoleon seemingly appears on a daily basis. As the historian of memory Alan Forrest has noted, this preponderance of literature is reflective of the national spirit the British associate with the battle. As Wellington’s only encounter with Napoleon, it must, by default, be the British general’s greatest battle. Wellington himself, however, did not hold this view. In the course of a conversation recorded by the Earl of Stanhope in the 1830s, the Iron Duke identified as his greatest victories the Battle of Assaye - fought in India against the forces of the Maratha Confederate Daulat Rao Scindhia on 23 September 1803 - and the Battle of the Nivelle - the second of three battles fought in the foothills of the Pyrenees during the autumn and winter of 1813, during which Wellington’s Anglo-Portuguese Army invaded France. By contrast, Wellington perceived Waterloo to be a hard-won victory - a close-run thing, to be sure - but certainly not

his greatest. The showdown with Napoleon Bonaparte, a masterful tactician, ultimately proved disappointing. 'Napoleon did not manoeuvre at all,' he had written shortly after the battle, 'he just moved forward in the old style, in columns, and was driven off in the old style.'¹ It seems apt, in the anniversary year of what many consider to be Wellington's greatest victory, to revisit the two battles he considered his greatest successes and compare his actions at Waterloo with those at Assaye and on the banks of the river Nivelles in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

First though, it is apposite to reflect on what precisely we mean by 'greatest battle'. A populist answer to this conundrum might equate a great battle with a great football game, in which the two teams are closely matched, the interaction between them is intense and highly skilled, and the result is in some doubt until the final moments. By this definition, Waterloo would certainly have a strong claim. But when dealing with war, in the course of which the lives of soldiers and civilians are either ended or horribly ruined, such a viewpoint is frankly unpalatable. Surely, in war, the definition of a great battle is the very opposite of such a cavalier definition. A great battle should at the very least be fought for vital national objectives, or fought as part of a campaign designed to achieve them. At Waterloo, the stakes were certainly high. Defeat for the Anglo-Dutch and Prussian forces would have been diplomatically disastrous, though it is highly likely that Napoleon would not have been able to overcome the enormous armies the Russians and Austrians were gathering in Central Europe. If not a great cause, perhaps a great battle is defined by the decisiveness of its result.

Besides a great cause, what other factors allow for a great battle? Taking Wellington's two choices, it is clear that he viewed very specific factors as important. At Assaye, he was surprised by the skill and abilities of his opponent. Despite this, and under heavy fire, he (and it is no exaggeration to say that Wellington himself was at the centre of the fighting) managed to turn the tide of the battle despite significant losses, and to win a decisive victory that effectively terminated Scindia's involvement in the Third Anglo-Maratha War and set the conditions for Scindia's eventual capitulation. The Nivelles was, by contrast, a highly orchestrated battle, taking place on what was undoubtedly the largest battlefield Wellington ever fought on. This meant highly detailed planning, coordination between forces that were dispersed throughout very hilly terrain across a seventeen-mile-wide front. Wellington sought to gain control of the ground his enemy occupied. If this meant outflanking and rendering his enemy's position untenable rather than direct confrontation, then so

¹ J. Gurwood (ed.), *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington during His Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, The Low Countries and France*, (13 vols., London, 1852) WD, vol. xii, p. 529, Wellington to Beresford, Gonesse, 2 July 1815.

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much the better. The strength of Wellington's army would be preserved for a more decisive fight later on.

In considering these factors, then, it is apparent that for Wellington, what constituted a great battle was neither the closeness of the match, nor the importance of the objective, but the tactical and operational skill required to achieve success. For Wellington, a great battle was an illustration of skill at the art of war and the profession of arms. Thus it is interesting to note that Wellington's view of his greatest battles is itself at the polar opposites of what might be considered great. Not only was one an opportunistic encounter during which young Wellesley salvaged victory from the jaws of defeat and the other well-planned and intricately timed, but they occurred at either ends of Wellington's career. Assaye was Wellesley's first battle in command of an army; the Nivelle was one of the final battles of the Peninsular War. More than this, the selection of the two battles implicitly illustrated Wellington's progression as a tactician and as a practitioner of operational art. Assaye was almost a blunder, whilst, if Waterloo had never overshadowed the end of the Peninsular War, the Nivelle might stand out as one of the most skilful illustrations of Wellington's art of war, alongside Salamanca (22 July 1812) and Vitoria (21 June 1813). As a study in progression, then, the two battles are interesting comparators. When set against Waterloo, though, it is clear why Wellington saw these as his greatest battles, and why Waterloo is considered great because of its circumstances rather than for its tactical and operational brilliance. This article will compare Assaye and the Nivelle in terms of the planning and execution of the battles. It will then draw conclusions about the influence of these two victories on the way in which Wellington planned for a battle against Napoleon during what became known as the Waterloo campaign, and how he executed that plan.

Wellington took his profession seriously from his entry into the service. Famously, the young Arthur Wellesley took with him for detailed study on the journey to India a library of books on Indian politics and the military capabilities of the disparate powers on the subcontinent.² More generally, a visit to the Duke's personal library preserved at Stratfield Saye reveals a sharp interest in both the military profession and military history. Besides various handbooks for infantry officers, including 'Military Instructions for Young Officers Detached in the Field' dating from 1774, and a 'A Treatise on Military Discipline' dating from 1759, Wellington owned a vast array of military history texts, including 'The Commentaries of Julius Caesar' published in 1677; a 'Military History of Prince Eugene and the Duke of Marlborough' published in 1736; and 'Reveries, or Memoirs Concerning the Art of War' by Maurice, Comte de Saxe.

² R. Muir, *Wellington: The Path to Victory*, (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 135.

All three texts emphasise the importance of tactical and operational variety, understanding how to apply alternative approaches in specific circumstances, and how to take advantage of opportunities as and when they arise. Saxe, for example, emphasised the usefulness of irregular infantry, which he had seen utilised in action by the Ottoman Empire during campaigns in Austria-Hungary in the 1720s.³ Out of this, the importance of the role of light infantry, for example, became apparent. Wellington's skill as a battlefield tactician and operational planner were far from innate, but clearly the product of focussed study. In the days following Waterloo, Wellington wrote privately of his disappointment at Napoleon's tactics.

The Battle of Assaye was an unplanned, opportunistic battle, but it is nevertheless possible to analyse some of the intelligence-based operational planning for a campaign that Wellington knew must result in a battle to decide the extent to which the Maratha Confederacy would be subservient to the power of the East India Campaign. Fought at the end of a lengthy pursuit, during which the Marathas clearly had the advantage, Wellesley commanded a force totalling 4000 troops at the Battle of Assaye. In an effort to find his opponents, he had been forced to split his army in two, with another 4000 elsewhere under the command of Colonel James Stephenson.

Wellesley had read copiously on the politics, society and culture of the Maratha Confederacy. He had also read campaign histories dating from the First Anglo-Maratha War, and the more recent Third Anglo-Mysore War, in which the Marathas had been British allies. These histories had portrayed the Marathas as an essentially irregular foe, dependant predominantly on cavalry. Their infantry and artillery were, in the opinion of one British observer, weak and ineffective, incapable of coherent tactical manoeuvres, and consequently represented no threat to a well-trained and -disciplined European-led infantry force.⁴

There was significant evidence, though, that Scindhia had made a considerable effort to train his infantry in European fighting methods. In late July 1803, Wellesley received intelligence from Lieutenant-Colonel John Collins, the British resident formerly at Scindhia's court, which challenged British preconceptions about the state of the Maratha Army. Collins estimated that Scindhia commanded upwards of 7,700 European-trained infantry.⁵ 'I tell you, General, as to their cavalry..., you may ride over them wherever you meet them,' Collins was reported to have told Wellesley

³ See Maurice de Saxe, *Reveries, or, Memoires Concerning the Art of War*, (1759).

⁴ See Major Alexander Dirom, *A Narrative of the Campaign in India which Terminated the War with Tippoo Sultan in 1792*, (London, 1793).

⁵ National Archives of India SD MS25/08/03 No. 90, Collins to Wellesley, 25 July 1803, ff. 9354-5.

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when they met in person in late August, 'but their infantry and guns will astonish you'.⁶

Arrogant and bigoted as many British officers in India were prone to be, Wellesley discounted this intelligence as the absurd protestations of a now irrelevant and poorly-informed former resident. This is a brief insight into the preconceptions Wellesley carried with him as he marched his army in pursuit of Scindhia. These preconceptions undoubtedly influenced any battle-plan he had when he eventually encountered the Marathas.

Scindhia had engaged in a counterintelligence campaign, which denuded Wellesley of timely tactical information from spies and reconnaissance. This confirmed for Wellesley that the Marathas had no useful infantry force, and suggested the cavalry was also of poor quality.⁷ Some time after the battle, Wellesley's close confidante Lieutenant Colonel Barry Close argued that Scindhia had managed to fool Wellesley on a number of counts: the position and composition of his army, and the method of warfare he intended to pursue.

It may be now seen, I think, that Scindhia never meant to pursue a predatory mode of warfare, for which indeed the greater part of his cavalry is not fitted... [H]is real design was to draw off our attention ... and afford leisure to his numerous infantries and cumbrous train to come uninterrupted and unnoticed through the ghats [mountain passes]... The post he occupied seems to have been selected with the intention of using it for an action. It was particularly secure and was well situated to allow of his retreating eventually with some convenience, through the pass... It does not appear that he made any movement to bring one of them separately into action, but keeping his ground at all hazards throughout as a lure to bring one of them into action.⁸

This resulted in Wellesley unexpectedly finding Scindhia's army at Assaye on 23 September. Intelligence indicated that Scindhia's army was sixteen miles away. Wellesley split his force in two in order to increase its manoeuvrability, and expecting to rendezvous nearer the anticipated enemy location. Wellesley's head of

⁶ Ralph Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure in Three-Quarters of the Globe...* (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), p. 145.

⁷ 2nd Duke of Wellington (ed.), *Supplementary Dispatches and Memoranda of Field Marshall Arthur Duke of Wellington, 1797-1818*, (14 vols., London, 1858) SD, iv, Wellesley to Malcolm, Camp, 9 September 1803, p. 173.

⁸ Raghurib Singh (ed.), *English Records of Maratha History (Poona Residency Correspondence): Volume 10: The Treaty of Bassein and the Anglo-Maratha War in the Deccan, 1802-1804*, (Bombay, 1951) PRC, x, Close to Webbe, Poona, 6 October 1803, pp. 151-153.

intelligence, Mountstuart Elphinstone wrote that the British army was 'within sixteen miles, at farthest, of Scindhia, and I hope soon to see some of our enemies. He is either at Bokerdun or Hussanabad, I think certainly the latter, with all his horse, from 16,000 to 20,000, two brigades... and forty pieces of cannon. I hope confidently that we shall have an engagement on the day after tomorrow. Even they [Scindhia] talk of fighting on Saturday, and this is Thursday. But who knows what a native will do; perhaps they will give us the slip and get to the southward.'⁹ Elphinstone clearly expected Scindhia to cut and run as soon as he was confronted with a disciplined fighting force, a view undoubtedly shared by Wellesley,¹⁰ and largely explaining his decision to attack as soon as he found his enemy at Assaye on 23 September, and not wait for reinforcements from Stevenson.

Once in a position to reconnoitre the enemy, Wellesley found the combined Maratha Army drawn in a strong defensive position running west to east on the opposite bank of the river Kailna. The Maratha infantry numbered over 10,000, with an additional 40,000 light horse and *pindarries*. By contrast, the British numbered just 1,300 European and 2,000 Indian infantry, and 1,200 cavalry, 4,500 in total. Behind the Maratha position ran the river Juah. The two rivers combined together some one and a half miles to the left of the Maratha line. The Maratha infantry occupied this small *doab*, whilst the cavalry were on the other side of the Juah. The Marathas were not expecting battle that day, and their heavy artillery bullocks were grazing. Wellesley's decision to attack was therefore a complete surprise, and prevented up to a third of the Maratha firepower from being used in the ensuing battle.¹¹

Nevertheless, the Marathas would be able to bring into action in short order much of their lighter weaponry, precluding the possibility of a direct river crossing in the Maratha front. Wellesley therefore chose to cross the river between Warur and Pipulgaon, not just because the proximity of the two hamlets on opposite sides of the Kailna meant that there would obviously be a ford between the two, but also because the mudwalls of the hamlets would provide visual cover from Scindhia's artillery. Also, by crossing at the far left of Scindhia's line, Wellesley hoped to outflank and turn the Maratha position. The decision to attack was therefore based on an inaccurate understanding of the intelligence Wellesley had at his disposal, but given these limitations, the plan was a reasonably sound one, based on Wellesley's soon-to-be characteristic reading of the terrain.

⁹ T. E. Colebrook (ed.), *Life of the Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone*, (2 vols., London, 1884), Elphinstone to Strachey, Camp twelve miles from Midgaon, 22 September 1803, p. 63.

¹⁰ Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure*, pp. 154-155.

¹¹ R. G. S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India: The Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy*, (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 103-105.

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As the British began crossing the river, their line strung out some 1,400 yards in length.¹² The Marathas began firing ranging shots as the troops crossed. In spite of this, the army was able to cross in a little over two hours and form up in two lines of infantry, with the fork of the rivers Juah and Kailna in their rear. In the meantime, the Marathas were hastily redeploying their line, transforming their infantry from a line running parallel with the Kailna into two hinged lines. One ran perpendicular to the rivers, and directly in Wellesley's front, and the other, at right angles to the first, running parallel with the Juah. The hinge of the two lines was at the village of Assaye, which straddled the Juah on the far left of Scindhia's line. 'This manoeuvre they were performing in the most steady manner possible,' recalled one participant in the battle, 'for each battalion came up into the new alignment in line, the whole body thus executing a kind of echelon movement on a large scale.'¹³ It was now Wellesley's turn to be surprised, as he had already formed his infantry into two lines that, rather than flanking the enemy position, was facing directly a well-ordered line of Maratha infantry, with several well-positioned artillery batteries.

Wellesley's outflanking manoeuvre had failed. As the Maratha infantry line formed, a heavy cannonade opened on Wellesley's force. Under intense pressure, he ordered the redeployment of his own infantry from two lines into one, with the 78th and 74th Regiments on either flank and the native infantry in the centre. So furious, though, was the bombardment from the Maratha artillery that he ordered an immediate advance to capture the guns. The second line of infantry was ordered to redeploy during this advance.¹⁴ There was nothing else Wellesley could have done in the circumstances. Unless he advanced immediately, the centre of his line, where most of the fire was directed, was in danger of collapsing.¹⁵

Wellesley was in the thick of the action, a characteristic for which he would become famous. Indeed, at Assaye, he had one horse shot under him and another piked.¹⁶ The right hand side of Wellesley's line, consisting mainly of the 74th Regiment of Foot, advanced in considerable confusion. Wellesley had ordered the pickets to advance to the perimeter of the village of Assaye, but rather than halting outside the village, the pickets carried on advancing into the village, which was heavily defended. The 74th, which had been ordered to follow the pickets, also advanced into Assaye. It was here that the considerable losses suffered by European infantry were sustained. Wellesley was furious, and blamed the officer in charge of the pickets, Lieutenant-

¹² J. Weller, *Wellington in India*, (London, 1972), p. 178.

¹³ Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure*, p. 161.

¹⁴ Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure*, p. 162.

¹⁵ SD, iv, Letter by Lieutenant Campbell relative to the Battle of Assaye, written at the time of the transaction, pp. 185.

¹⁶ SD, iv, Wellesley to Malcolm, Assaye, 26 September 1803, pp. 180-181.

Colonel William Orrock.¹⁷ Whether Wellesley was unfair in blaming Orrock is a matter of some discussion, but the result was that rather than advancing in one line, Wellesley's infantry splintered into two lines once more, with the left, led by the 78th, advancing on the Maratha artillery, and the right, led by the 74th, bogged down in Assaye. Seeing an opportunity to inflict severe losses, the Marathas launched a particularly bloody counterattack, giving 'no quarter to any of our wounded, only cutting and shooting them as they came up with them'.¹⁸ In response, Wellesley was forced to deploy the 19th Dragoons, commanded by Colonel Maxwell, to rescue the remains of the 74th.

Wellesley was reluctant to do so, and he again blamed Orrock. 'Another evil which resulted from [his] mistake', he complained, 'was the necessity of introducing the cavalry into ... the action long before it was time; by which the corps which I intended to bring forward in a close pursuit at the heel of the day, lost many men, and its union and efficiency.'¹⁹ But there was little option. If the Marathas were allowed to regain Assaye, then Wellesley's line could be outflanked. 'Now Maxwell', shouted Wellesley after riding up to the where the cavalry were stationed on ground overlooking Assaye, 'you must make the best of your cavalry or we shall all be done'.²⁰ Lieutenant Campbell of the 74th recalled that 'the charge of the 19th light dragoons made the enemy retire from their guns precipitately, and they fled across the nullah to our right at the village of Assaye, where numbers of them were cut up by the cavalry. It is in this business that Colonel Maxwell fell.'²¹

With the 74th frustrated at Assaye, the sepoy bore the main brunt of the artillery bombardments. In attempting 'to avoid the fire of the enemy's centre, [the sepoy battalions] crowded in on the 78th regiment which formed our extreme left'.

At this time the fire of the enemy's artillery became, indeed, most dreadful. In the space of less than a mile, 100 guns, worked with skill and rapidity, vomited forth death into our feeble ranks. It cannot then be a matter of surprise if in many cases, the sepoy should have taken advantage of any irregularities in the ground to shelter themselves from the deadly shower, or that even, in some few instances, not all the endeavours of the officers could persuade them to move forward.²²

¹⁷ SD, iv, Wellesley to Munro, Camp at Cheedkair, 1 November 1803, pp. 210-211.

¹⁸ National Army Museum (NAM) MS 8207/64, Account of the Battle of Assaye by Sgt Thomas Swarbrook, 19th Dragoons.

¹⁹ SD, iv, Wellesley to Munro, Camp at Cheedkair, 1 November 1803, pp. 210-211.

²⁰ NAM MS 8207/64, Account of the Battle of Assaye by Sgt Thomas Swarbrook, 19th Dragoons.

²¹ SD, iv, Letter by Lieutenant Campbell relative to the Battle of Assaye, written at the time of the transaction, pp. 184-187.

²² Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure*, p. 165.

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In the years and battles that followed Assaye, a classic hallmark of Wellesley's choice of battlefield was the reverse slope, helping protect his men from artillery assaults which preceded infantry attacks. Was this an outcome of Wellesley's experiences as Assaye? There is no documentary evidence to prove it, but the circumstantial case is compelling. At Assaye, though, the instinctual self-preservation of the sepoy's hampered the assault, but once the European soldiers of the 78th broke through the Maratha line, the rest of the infantry helped overwhelm the Maratha gunners, many of whom were 'bayoneted in the act of loading their pieces'.²³ As the British advanced, however, some of the surviving Maratha gunners turned their guns on the backs of the British, forcing a second assault on the Maratha artillery.²⁴ Despite this delay, Wellesley's infantry advance continued, pushing the Marathas back on their second line, on the river Juah, whilst the cavalry charge on the right helped to rout the Maratha force.

Despite overwhelming odds, through dogged determination, Wellesley's force had defeated the Marathas. Among the survivors, the dominant opinion was that Assaye had been 'the bloodiest battle ever fought in India'.²⁵ The battle had been marked by confusion and disarray, and its cost was high. 428 British (European and native) lay dead; 1,138 wounded out of a total of 4,500. Maratha losses were reported as approaching 6,000, although this was unconfirmed, and would certainly have included non-combatants.²⁶ Wellesley's men were too exhausted to pursue the fleeing Marathas, and turned their attentions instead to the wounded who lay strewn on the battlefield.²⁷ Odd, then, that in later life Wellesley should select Assaye as one of his greatest victories.

Clearly, it was a great and, given the circumstances, unexpected victory. Wellesley had engaged a significantly well-trained infantry and artillery army, outnumbered at least two to one, and despite grave difficulties during the battle itself, and against all odds, managed to translate serious jeopardy into a decisive result. Unquestionably, however, certain elements of the battle had been botched. Wellesley's misreading and misinterpretation of the intelligence available on the Maratha fighting ability combined with an arrogance not uncommon in British India to lead Wellesley to attack a superior foe on ground of their choosing. Improperly-conveyed orders had resulted in a serious error on the battlefield itself, which, it is no exaggeration to

²³ Blakiston, *12 Years Military Adventure*, p. 165.

²⁴ *SD*, iv, Letter by Lieutenant Campbell relative to the Battle of Assaye, written at the time of the transaction, pp. 184-187.

²⁵ Unnamed correspondent quoted in Colebrook, *Life of Elphinstone*, p. 71.

²⁶ Cooper, *Anglo-Maratha Campaigns*, p. 116.

²⁷ Colebrook, *Life of Elphinstone*, Elphinstone to Strachey, Camp at Paloor, 13 Miles south of Adjunttee, 9 October 1803, p. 76.

point out, would have resulted in a catastrophic defeat but for Wellesley's presence and personal command.

It is tempting to conclude that Wellesley selected the battle as one of his greatest because of the significant lessons he learned from it: intelligence organisation and interpretation had clearly been deficient, whilst the Sepoy use of terrain to shelter from artillery gave rise to the use of the reserve slope tactic so effectively used later on during the Peninsular War. Moreover, Wellesley learned a lot about when and when not to take advantage of opportunities, a skill never better illustrated than at Salamanca nine years later. But such an argument seems prosaic. Rather, it seems far more likely that Wellington considered Assaye as one of his greatest victories because it was his first victory in command of an army. Moreover, after a series of below-par performances, most notably at the siege of Seringapatam in 1799,²⁸ Wellesley might genuinely have wondered if he had the tactical and operational skill to command in battle. Assaye clearly illustrated that he did, and that he could command whilst under pressure and facing heavily stacked odds. This has led some historians to conclude that Wellesley deliberately attacked in sub-optimal circumstances in order to illustrate his skills and abilities as a commander.²⁹

The Battle of the Nivelle was diametrically the opposite of Assaye. Fought under extremely favourable circumstances, with few variables left to chance, it was also one of Wellington's last battles. The Battle of the Nivelle was fought on 10 November 1813, in cold but unusually clear conditions. From *La Rhune*, the highest point of the seventeen-mile wide battlefield, Wellington commanded a force of approximately 80,000 allied troops, 40,000 of whom were British, the rest Portuguese and Spanish. In opposition, Marshal Nicolas Soult had dispersed his force of nearly 70,000 in defensive fortresses, redoubts and entrenchments on nearly every hilltop from the coast to the River Nivelle. Assaye had been fought on a battlefield little more than two miles wide. Barely a year and a half before Wellington fought at Nivelle, he had commanded at the battle of Salamanca, in a space barely three miles wide. In the space of little more than a year, Wellington was able to conceive a battle nearly six times the size of Salamanca; in terrain that was physically brutal and near impossible for nineteenth century infantry to negotiate; on a scale that resembled battles of the Second World War. In short, in the fifteen months between Salamanca and the Nivelle, Wellington had overseen a transformation in warfare of incredibly significant proportions. Quite possibly, but for the intervention of Waterloo, the Nivelle might have been Wellington's greatest victory. How was he able to do this? The key to success at the Battle of the Nivelle was Wellington himself, and on 10 November 1813, Wellington was the sum of his experiences to that point.

²⁸ See my *Wellington's Wars: The Making of a Military Genius*, (London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1-3.

²⁹ Cooper, *Anglo-Maratha Campaigns*, p. 239.

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The battle of the Nivelle was the second stage of the invasion of France, after the successful crossing of the Bidassoa a month earlier. The Nivelle also represents a subtle adaptation in Wellington's approach to warfare. He did not seek a decisive battle. Before the Nivelle, Wellington planned to capture certain objectives which would make the next advance possible. As a whole, the invasion of France was designed to force the Soult's army out of its defensive positions along the rivers Bidassoa, Nivelle and Nive, to a more conventional battlefield, where Wellington stood a good chance of defeating his enemy in a traditional battle, in terrain which benefitted serried ranks of infantry supported by artillery and cavalry. The Battle of the Nivelle represented Wellington's talents on a grand scale: namely clarity of planning, communicated with simplicity, despite the complexity of the scenario; an operation based on surprise and deception, which maintained the political primacy of Britain's campaign in Spain. It is also had limited aims, fitting into a larger, multi-faceted operation, rather than being the climax of a linear set of movements.

Following the defeat of Joseph's forces at the Battle of Vitoria on 21 June 1813, the bedraggled French Army, devoid of cohesion and spirit, retreated headlong into the Pyrenees. In little more than a month, the man Napoleon had sent to rectify matters in the Peninsula, Marshal Nicolas Soult, had revitalised the deflated army, reconstituted it as the Army of Spain, and mounted a three-pronged counter-attack in the Pyrenees, which Wellington only narrowly defeated on 25 July. Soult retreated to the French border, whilst Wellington set about laying siege to the 'Keys to France', Pamplona and the coastal fortress of San Sebastian. A second French attack was defeated at San Marcial on 31 August, the same day that San Sebastian finally fell. Unsure of the strategic situation in northern Europe, and with his communications lines encumbered by the siege at Pamplona, Wellington took what can best be described as an operational pause.

Whereas Napoleon might have taken to the field to continue the momentum won at San Marcial, Wellington chose instead a measured and concerted approach, preferring to collect intelligence, both topographical and tactical, on his enemy's dispositions, whilst devising a plan to cross the river Bidassoa into France. A decisive victory against the French was unlikely, and Wellington could not afford the luxury of risking his army in an ill-planned crossing. The operational pause is an indication of Wellington's 'political generalship'. And it was undoubtedly the correct decision. When it came, the crossing of the Bidassoa, the first stage of what became the three stage invasion of France, was a complete success. Soult's right was completely surprised by a daring estuary crossing at Hendaye, whilst the supposedly impregnable French position on La Rhune was outflanked by a lightning assault up 'Bayonnette Ridge'. Two days later, the position itself was abandoned in the face of a fierce Spanish assault. Occupying new positions, and still unaware of the alliance of the

Great Powers now closing in on Napoleon in Germany, Wellington once more took an operational pause, primarily to collect intelligence on his enemy, and to let their actions decide his next move. He explained his decision to Bathurst, the Secretary for War, on 18 October:

I am very doubtful indeed about the advantage of moving any farther forward here at present. I see that Buonaparte was still at Dresden on 28 [September]; and unless I could fight a general action with Soult, and gain a complete victory, which the nature of the country would scarcely admit of, I should do but little good to the allies; should hardly be able to winter in France; and, in retiring, should probably incur some loss and inconvenience. It is impossible to move our right till Pamplona shall fall, which I think will be within a week; and I will then decide according to the state of affairs at the moment.³⁰

Clearly, Wellington was under pressure from London to continue the momentum of his advance through the foothills of the Pyrenees, but to his mind, unless the war in north-eastern Europe was guaranteed to continue to occupy Napoleon's attention, he would not risk an advance. Over the next month, a three-pronged assault, based on intelligence and surprise, and dependent on the extraordinary fighting power of the allied army, took shape in the Wellington's mind. On 27 October, Wellington received news of the Battle of Leipzig, and planned to make his advance two days later. News of a French defeat in Germany was not the only factor upon which an advance hinged. What really mattered was Wellington's ability to conceptualise an operation to advance across mountainous terrain, based on timely and accurate intelligence.

Immediately the operation to cross the Bidassoa succeeded, Wellington and his Quartermaster General, George Murray, began collecting intelligence in preparation for the next assault. Murray asked Major-General Charles Colville, commanding the Third Division, to 'cause as much information to be obtained as possible respecting the communications leading to any part of the river Nive';³¹ whilst as General Charles Alten's 'outposts command a good view of all the country towards the coast', the latter, commanding the Light Division, was asked to inform Headquarters 'of any appearance indicating an advance of the enemy in that quarter against the left of the army'. Indeed, in general, Alten was to keep an eye on the 'position and force of the enemy's troops seen from any of the most commanding situations from which you have had observations made' and to report any changes in disposition.³² It soon

³⁰ WD, vol ix, Wellington to Bathurst, Vera, 18 October 1813.

³¹ SD, vol viii, QMG to Colville, Vera, 11 October 1813.

³² SD, vol viii, QMG to Alten, Vera, 11 October 1813.

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became clear, however, that Soult was planning a terrain-based defence. Secret agents, spies and informants were not needed to work this out, as French movements could be observed with impunity from the summit of La Rhune. That said, Wellington did receive one piece of useful intelligence from a covert source based in Bayonne: that Soult's communication with Napoleon had been temporarily cut.³³

The hills that stretched from the coast to the steep foothills of the Pyrenees, combined with the anchorage of the River Nivelle on the French left, provided an apparently strong defensive line which Soult chose to occupy. Having been surprised on his right, at the coast, on 7 October, Soult paid most attention to this area, but in general occupied every hilltop and fortress which existed on the French border with Spain west of the Pyrenean mountain range: a defensive line which stretched seventeen miles in total. Simple occupation was not enough, as Captain Harry Smith, the headstrong Brigade-Major of Colbourne's 52nd Rifles of the Light Division, observed several days before the Battle of the Nivelle. 'The enemy, not considering this ground strong enough, turned to it with a vigour I have rarely witnessed,' remembered Smith in his autobiography. '[They] fortif[ied] it by every means art could devise. Every day, before the position was attacked, Colonel Colborne and I went to look at their progress.'³⁴ On one of these reconnaissances, Wellington joined Colbourne and Smith and rode back with them to observe the entire French line from the summit of La Rhune. The conversation that followed appears to be the moment at which Wellington firmed up his plans for the attack on the French lines.

In mid- to late October, Wellington devised a plan whereby the allied army would advance in three columns against the French positions. The left column, closest to the coast was going to be a feint: it will be remembered here that Soult had placed his strongest defence here. The Royal Navy would contribute to the feint by stationing gunboats and frigates close in-shore to bombard the French right.³⁵ The British right would capture the bridge of Amotz, which secured Soult's left flank, and would allow the British to turn the French positions. The centre would be the location of the main assault, forcing the French to retreat. These were the bare bones of the plan. On 27 October, the same day Wellington learned of Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig, Murray issued the specific orders to the divisional commanders. This was the result of a conversation on La Rhune, at which Harry Smith was present.

³³ WD, vol ix, Wellington to Beresford, Vera, 26 October 1813.

³⁴ H.G.W. Smith, *Autobiography of Sir Harry Smith, 1787-1819*, (London, 1910), <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>

³⁵ WD, vol ix, Wellington to Collier, Vera, 1 November 1813.

According to Smith, Wellington was lying down, his telescope at his eye, watching the French troops, in the words of Oman, 'toiling like strings of ants upon every hill-side below, each man bearing his stone for the erection of walls and redoubts'.³⁶ "These fellows think themselves invulnerable," Wellington allegedly exclaimed, "but I will beat them out, and with great ease'. Present also were General Alten, the divisional commander of the Light Division; Colonel Kempt of the 43rd Regiment; and Colonel Colborne of the 52nd, as well as several other staff officers, and the Quartermaster General. Colborne agreed, but could not understand how the task would be easy. 'Ah, Colborne, with your local knowledge only, you are perfectly right; it appears difficult, but the enemy have not men to man the works and lines they occupy. They dare not concentrate a sufficient body to resist the attacks I shall make upon them. I can pour a greater force on certain points than they can concentrate to resist me'.

There followed what Smith described as an 'earnest' conversation between Wellington and Murray, during which 'Murray took out of his sabretache his writing-materials, and began to write the plan of attack for the whole army'. This turned into the dispatch which was sent on the 27th. The extended reference to the conversation belies Wellington's acute understanding of tactics, but more importantly his ability to communicate his thoughts precisely and effectively, but concisely to the man responsible for translating those thoughts into reality. Murray had plenty of experience, of course, and the march on Vitoria from May to June 1813 had probably been the Quartermaster's finest moment, but the preparations for the Battle of the Nivelle were extremely complex and difficult. Smith asserts that 'so clearly had [Murray] understood the Duke, I do not think he erased one word' from the orders:

As Murray read, the Duke's eye was directed with his telescope to the spot in question. He never asked Sir G. Murray one question, but the muscles of his face evinced lines of the deepest thought. When Sir G. Murray had finished, the Duke smiled and said, 'Ah, Murray, this will put us in possession of the fellows' lines'.³⁷

The orders reflected Wellington's initial thoughts of a three-column assault, a model that the British had used several times in 1813 with great success. The Centre, consisting of the Light, the 3rd, 4th and 7th Divisions, Girón's Spaniards and Longa's Portuguese Brigades, was the main assault. This would punch through and turn the French line, either by outflanking or capturing the many redoubts and fortresses between La Petite Rhune and the French town of Ascain: the high ground before Ascain was considered Wellington's ultimate objective for the day. The Right, under

³⁶ C. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, (7 vols., Oxford, 1902), vol vii, p. 159.

³⁷ Smith, *Autobiography*: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>.

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the general command of Sir Rowland Hill, and consisting of the 6th Division, would provide a supporting manoeuvre, outflanking the French left. The Left would advance in three columns, the first along the coast between the heights of Urrugne, the second between the towns of Urrugne and towards Ciboure and Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and the third would advance as necessary to maintain communication with the Centre. It was not 'intended that the operations in this quarter should be pushed forward as a real attack; it is meant only to fix the attention of the enemy, and prevent his detaching troops to the support of other points of his line'.³⁸

As the critical point of Wellington's attack, it is on the Centre, then, that we will concentrate. However, the vista that Wellington viewed through his telescope, as he discussed his orders with Murray, is best described at this point. Immediately in front of him, to the north, was the rocky ridge of the La Petite Rhune. On this ridgeway, the French were building three stone redoubts, 'Place d'Armes', 'Magpie' and 'Donjon'. To the untrained eye, the ridgeway appeared to command a good portion of Wellington's front, theoretically limiting his options, but a small line along the ridge crest actually provided cover from all three redoubts, and as well as the Mouiz Star fortress immediately behind La Petite Rhune. Mouiz was a well-fortified location, and commanded most of the ground to its North, thus making the two positions combined theoretically secure from a flanking manoeuvre. As with the three redoubts on La Rhune however, Mouiz had a critical weakness on its north-western and north-eastern approach, allowing a small force to pass unnoticed. Soult had recognised this threat, and, turning west, two redoubts had been built on the small hills of Grenade and Santa Barbara, allowing the French to bring fire on the dead-ground to the north-east of Mouiz. The terrain theoretically prohibited any outflanking approach from the north-west.

This constituted Soult's first line of defence, but if that were penetrated, the British still had to contend with a number of connected positions north of the town of Sare. The lynchpin of this system was the heavily fortified Signals Redoubt. This was supported by the double forts of the Col de St. Ignace to its south-west, the Louis XIV redoubt to its south-east and the Esnaur redoubt to its north-west. Between them, the fortresses commanded the terrain, leaving no dead-ground along which the allied troops could pass unmolested. The French position in the town of Ascain itself was anchored to the north-west by the River Nivelle, and to the north-east by a third defensive line of forts, the only one of any significance being that of Bizkorzun, and a line which would not play a part in Wellington's concept of operations on 10 November.

³⁸ *SD*, vol viii, Arrangement for a Forward Movement of the Army, on the Surrender of Pamplona, Vera, 27 October 1813, pp. 325-329.

The ultimate objective of the strong supporting positions above Ascain aside, the various redoubts and fortresses between there and La Rhune constituted 'enabling objectives' whose capture during the assault by the Centre column of the allied army would contribute to the disintegration of the entire French line. The first objectives of the day were the three redoubts on La Petite Rhune and the Mouiz Star Fort. This, the Light Division was charged with.³⁹ We can glean specifics from the various regimental histories, as well as from Smith's autobiography. The 43rd Regiment would ascend directly up the ridge of La Petite Rhune, whilst the 2nd Battalion, 95th Rifles would support by attacking directly up the rocky face of the mountain. The 17th Portuguese Regiment, and 1st and 3rd Battalions, 95th Rifles would attack the Mouiz Star Fort directly, whilst the 52nd Rifles would march in the dead-ground to the north-west, around the hill, and attack the rear of the fort from the south-east.

Most of this plan was conveyed directly by Wellington to his regimental colonels on La Rhune on 27 October:

During the night previous to the attack, the Light Division could be formed on this very ground, so as to rush at La Petite Rhune just as day dawned, it would be of vast importance and save great loss, and by thus precipitating yourselves on the right of the works of La Petite Rhune, you would certainly carry them.

Alten and Kempt, who were aware of roads that would make their advance easier, both believed it possible, whilst Colbourne was equally positive. 'For me there is no road,' Smith recorded him saying, 'but Smith and I both know every bush and every stone. We have studied what we have daily expected, and in the darkest night we can lead the Brigade to this very spot.'⁴⁰

The attack was dependent on the surrender of Pamplona, and when that fortress capitulated on 31 October, preparations began for the advance. Snow and rain prevented the right flank from coming up, and attack was delayed first until the 9th and then 10 November. On the night before the attack, Smith and Colbourne guided their battalions to within 'a hundred and fifty yards of the enemy'. Kempt and the 43rd were successfully posted to their right, whilst Alten and the 95th and 17th Portuguese under Longa were slightly further to the rear.

About an hour before daylight, by some accident, a soldier's musket went off. It was a most anxious moment, for we thought the enemy had

³⁹ SD, vol viii, Arrangement for a Forward Movement of the Army, on the Surrender of Pamplona, Vera, 27 October 1813, pp. 325-329.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Autobiography*, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>

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discovered us, and, if they had not, such shots might be repeated, and they would; but most fortunately all was still. I never saw Colborne so excited as he was for the moment. The anxious moment of appearing day arrived. We fell in, and our attack was made on the enemy's position in seven columns, nor did we ever meet a check, but carried the enemy's works, the tents all standing, by one fell swoop of irresistible victory. Napier, ... at the head of the 43rd, had his pantaloons torn by the ball, and singed by the fire, of one of the enemy from the parapet of their works. Such was the attack and such the resistance, that a few prisoners whom we took declared that they and their officers were perfectly thunderstruck, for they had no conception any force was near them.⁴¹

The capture of La Petite Rhune was the key to the battle. It allowed for a flanking and frontal assault on the second defensive line. The capture, however, was only possible because Anson's brigade of the 4th Division and Inglis's brigade of the 7th captured the small redoubts of Grenade and Santa Barbara, which provided covering fire on some of dead-ground before La Petite Rhune. The 3rd, 4th, 7th divisions then mounted an assault on Sare, which opened up the route to the Louis XIV redoubt. The first line of defence had broken, but with it, the advantage of surprise had been lost. The assaults to take the St Ignace, Signals and Louis XIV redoubts would be much more laboured. The assault on La Petite Rhune had cost the 43rd just 11 officers and 67 men killed and wounded.⁴²

The allies now prepared to attack the second line of French defences. With their right flank covered, the Light Division was to march on the redoubts at the Col de St. Ignace, and then on to the Signals Redoubt. The 4th Division, having pushed the enemy out of Sare, were to advance 'against the hills beyond the village, [and] will ascend them so as that its left may cooperate with General Girón in the attack of the large heathy height [the hill on which the redoubt of Louis XIV stood].'⁴³ Girón had so far advanced in the ravine between La Rhune and the hills of Grenade and Santa Barbara. This operation had been designed to 'turn the enemy's troops if they remain on the rocky ridge [of] Petite La Rhune'. The 7th Division was to advance in parallel with the 4th Division and to their right, providing communication with Hill and the Right flank of the army, whilst also turning the enemy position at Louis XIV, thereby supporting the direct assault by 4th Division. The 3rd Division would advance to capture a bridge across the Nivelle, 'both for the purpose of preventing the enemy from using that communication between the camps behind Sare and those behind

⁴¹ Smith, *Autobiography*, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>

⁴² Oman, *History*, vol vii, p. 194.

⁴³ *SD*, vol viii, Arrangement for a Forward Movement of the Army, on the Surrender of Pamplona, Vera, 27 October 1813, pp. 325-329.

Ainhoue, and for the purpose of securing the use of the bridge for our own troops in their further operations'.⁴⁴

The Light Division temporarily lost communication with the 4th and 7th Divisions, owing to the confusion of the success achieved so far, combined with the difficulties of the terrain between the two columns. Their advance was therefore delayed, but to the commander of the second French defensive line, Clausel, it appeared that he was receiving the main assault from the 4th and 7th Divisions at the Louis XIV redoubt. This was not an incredible assumption to make: Wellington had specialised in surprise turning manoeuvres in the past. It was, however, an incorrect assumption. Clausel reinforced Louis XIV with the 1/59th Ligne, whilst also sending for help from Taupin, who commanded the Col de St Ignace and Signals redoubts. The latter sent half his divisional battery and two battalions of his divisional reserve. When the assault on Col de St Ignace was delivered by the Light Division, although they took casualties, the resistance was somewhat weakened:

In descending La Petite Rhune, we were much exposed to the enemy's fire, and when we got to the foot of the hill we were about to attack, we had to cross a road enfiladed very judiciously by the enemy, which caused some loss. We promptly stormed the enemy's works and as promptly carried them. I never saw our men fight with such lively pluck; they were irresistible; and we saw the other Divisions equally successful, the enemy flying in every direction. Our Riflemen were pressing them in their own style, for the French themselves are terrific in pursuit...⁴⁵

The 4th and 7th Divisions, however, suffered heavily at Louis XIV redoubt. With no guns of its own, the redoubt was supported by fifteen field-guns from the divisional artillery of Clausel's corps, which succeeded in beating back several of Cole's and Le Cor's infantry assaults. Only when Ross came forward with the only battery of Royal Horse Artillery to surmount the difficult terrain were the 4th Division able to storm successfully and take the redoubt.⁴⁶

As the French line disintegrated, the Signals Redoubt, the only completed defensive fort, was the one remaining obstacle. Colbourne realised it would soon be completely turned, and the garrison would have to surrender, but he received an oddly-worded order from Alten, delivered by the Assistant Quartermaster General of the Light Division, Charlie Beckwith: 'Move on'. Colborne was shocked: 'What,

⁴⁴ *SD*, vol viii, Arrangement for a Forward Movement of the Army, on the Surrender of Pamplona, Vera, 27 October 1813, pp. 325-329.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Autobiography*, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>

⁴⁶ Oman, *History*, vol. vii, pp. 189-190.

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Charlie, to attack that redoubt? Why, if we leave it to our right or left, it must fall, as a matter of course; our whole army will be beyond it in twenty minutes’.

At this point, the various sources contradict one another. Smith alleges to have said: ‘Oh sir, let us take the last of their works; it will be the operation of a few minutes’.⁴⁷ Other sources have it that Colbourne ordered Smith to find Alten, and clarify matters whilst he led the assault against the Signals Redoubt. Colbourne’s men tried attacking the redoubt twice, but both assaults failed because the defences were so well constructed. Most of the 52nd’s 240 casualties died unnecessarily in a ditch surrounding the redoubt, which still exists today. Realising the futility of the attack, Alten apparently ordered Smith to call off the assault. It was whilst riding to Colborne that Smith’s horse was shot from under him:

My horse was struck within twenty yards of the ditch, and I turned her round so that I might jump off, placing her between me and the fire, which was very hot. As I was jumping off; another shot struck her, and she fell upon me with a crash, which I thought had squeezed me as flat as a thread-paper, her blood, like a fountain, pouring into my face... While lying under my horse, I saw one of the enemy jump on the parapet of the works in an undaunted manner and in defiance of our attack, when suddenly he started straight up into the air, really a considerable height, and fell headlong into the ditch. A ball had struck him in the forehead, I suppose—the fire of our skirmishers was very heavy on the redoubt. Our whole army was actually passing to the rear of the redoubt. Colborne, in the most gallant manner, jumped on his horse, rode up to the ditch under the fire of the enemy, which, however, slackened as he loudly summoned the garrison to surrender. The French officer, equally plucky, said, ‘Retire, sir, or I will shoot you!’ Colborne deliberately addressed the men. ‘If a shot is fired, now that you are surrounded by our army, we will put every man to the sword’. By this time I succeeded in getting some soldiers, by calling to them, to drag me from under my horse, when they exclaimed, ‘Well, d— my eyes if our old Brigade-Major is killed, after all’. ‘Come, pull away’, I said; ‘I am not even wounded, only squeezed.’ ‘Why, you are as bloody as a butcher’. I ran to Colborne just as he had finished his speech. He took a little bit of paper out, wrote on it, ‘I surrender unconditionally’, and gave it to me to give the French officer, who laughed at the state of blood I was in. He signed it, and Colborne sent me to the Duke.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Smith, *Autobiography*, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hsmith/autobiography/peninsular.html#XV>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Smith makes no reference to his order from Alten to call off the attack. This might be because he did not wish to dwell on his failure to get to Colborne in time to save so many of the regiment. Other accounts say he never reached Colborne, and instead 'had to limit his triumph to carrying off his good and precious English saddle, which he performed with his accustomed coolness to the amusement of observing friends and enemies'.⁴⁹ Nor does Smith give a full account of Colbourne's bluff: the French officer refused to surrender even in the face of the entire allied army swarming around the Signals Redoubt. He had been told by Clausel to hang on at all costs, presumably in an attempt to delay the British advance and give the French extra time to retreat. Only when Colbourne threatened to hand the garrison over to Girón's Spaniards did the French finally capitulate.⁵⁰

Space and time do not allow for a closer examination of the Left and Right flank attacks. Suffice it to say that Hope, commanding the Left, thoroughly confused Soult with his feint, the latter only learning of the collapse of his central defensive line when it was too late. Hill's advance was equally successful and crucially helped maintain communication with the rear. The genius of the Battle of the Nivelle lies not in its military effectiveness or originality, nor in the nature of the defeat it inflicted upon the French. The genius of the battle lies in what it demonstrates about Wellington's generalship: the strategic approach; the clarity of his planning and orders; the scope of his intelligence-usage; his decisive use of terrain; the use of deception and surprise; the trust in his subordinates and army; and the limits on his objectives. These skills were the product of his military career. Here was a man who had moulded an army from a rabble composed of the 'scum of the earth', had trained it in the course of six years of high-intensity warfare, had developed his tactical prowess from defensive to offensive, and had worn down, divided, and all but annihilated an opponent whose ubiquitous military skill had conquered much of Europe and transformed warfare forever. Thus, the Battle of the Nivelle in its own right is an outstanding victory, but, for what it represents as a key event in Wellington's career, it deserves much more recognition. But for Waterloo, it might possibly be remembered as Wellington's finest victory.

Nineteen months later, Wellington defeated Napoleon on the ridge of Mont St Jean. A defensive battle, it secured Wellington's undeserved reputation, along with earlier battles like Talavera and Busaco, as a defensive general. In reality, there was little else Wellington could do as Napoleon attacked the weak linkage between the Anglo-Allied army and its Prussian counterpart. Wellington's army at Waterloo was a shadow of its predecessor that he commanded in the Peninsula. Composed principally of raw recruits and a melange of European allies, although the officer

⁴⁹ W. Leeke, *History of Lord Seaton's 52nd Regiment*, (London, 1866, vol. ii, p. 365.

⁵⁰ Oman, *History*, vol vii, pp. 193-194.

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corps contained some of Wellington's finest generals, brigadiers and colonels, it remained clear that he could do little of tactical complexity with it, certainly nothing on the scale of the Nivelles.

Comparisons of Waterloo with Assaye are nevertheless instructive. Napoleon's central attack through Charleroi and towards Ligny and Quatre Bras, rather than the outflanking manoeuvre Wellington expected through Mons, meant the British had to scramble to meet the oncoming assault from Marshal Ney at Quatre Bras on 16 June. Wellington misread the intelligence he had received in much the same way he had done prior to Assaye. His response was more composed, but Quatre Bras was another panicked battle, in which units were fed in to hold the line as and when they arrived on the battlefield. Waterloo itself was, by contrast, a well-orchestrated battle, fought on ground of Wellington's choosing. He had first encountered the ridge of Mont St Jean the previous year and had commented on its utility as a position from which to defend against a French advance on Brussels. More than a hundred years earlier, the Duke of Marlborough had identified the location with similar intentions for its use.

Wellington's reliance on the tactical initiative of his experienced subordinate officers was also apparent. Colborne, commanding once more the 52nd as part of Adam's Brigade, had been kept essentially in reserve throughout the battle. Towards its conclusion, as the French Imperial Guard made its final attempt to break Wellington's thin red line, Colborne saw an opportunity to advance and outflank the 4th Chasseurs of the Middle Guard. Taking the initiative, he wheeled his regiment to attack the flank of the Middle Guard. His brigade commander, Adams, quickly followed up by throwing two battalions of the 95th and the 71st in to support. Along with the stout defence of the 1st Foot Guards against another Imperial Guard attack, Wellington saw an opportunity to order a general advance as the enemy lost momentum and cohesion.⁵¹

That said, Waterloo was a very traditional battle - the 'old style' as Wellington soon after observed. The impact, though is greater than merely obfuscating operational successes in India and the Peninsula which heralded a British reaction to the revolutionary warfare of Napoleon. Napoleon's defeat appeared to discredit his approach to war as well. At Waterloo, line had defeated column, and square had defeated cavalry. Britain fought at least eight large-scale colonial conflicts in the wake of Waterloo between 1815 and 1854. During those conflicts, none of the large-scale troop movements that determined Napoleon's success in Europe had been possible, because South Asia and the Far East lacked the industrial and agricultural

⁵¹ See G. Glover, *Waterloo: The Defeat of Napoleon's Imperial Guard: Henry Clinton, the 2nd Division and the End of a 200-year-old Controversy*, (London: Frontline, 2015).

infrastructure that had made them possible in Europe.⁵² Moreover, the lessons that were learned from fighting large formations of disciplined infantry on the subcontinent reinforced Frederickian thinking on the use of infantry; that is to say that eighteenth century ideas of the use of armies pervaded well into the nineteenth century.⁵³ Therefore, the lessons learned in Britain's colonial conflicts reinforced the lessons learnt at Waterloo.

This has led many historians to conclude that the British Army rested on its laurels in the years succeeding Waterloo. In fact, as Hew Strachan has demonstrated, it was Wellington who held development back. Despite impressive localised reforms that illustrated progressive thinking on systems of discipline and professionalisation, Wellington prevented any attempts to render these peripheral developments in the centre. The army itself remained unreformed, whilst its regiments, away on colonial garrison duty across the globe, frequently in contact with unpredictable and culturally diverse enemies, adapted at varying speeds to the emergence of new ideas and thinking.⁵⁴

Whilst operational, tactical and administrative thinking and reform occurred unevenly and sporadically, thinking and reform in these areas was at least happening. Perhaps more egregious than his failure to foster centralised tactical and administrative reform is Wellington's failure adequately to ensure sufficient articulacy in the art and science of strategy. Considering that Wellington's success in the Peninsular War, and to some extent at Waterloo, was partly the result to his ability to link the political and military levels, his reluctance to engender a similar understanding in his subordinates and successors is particularly sad.⁵⁵

This resulted in an army that at least had the ability to fight, but lacked the ability to convey in a convincing and authoritative manner to politicians, when and where it should fight. What military thought that occurred in Britain in the years after Waterloo was almost totally focussed on the process of fighting rather than strategy. The operational art Wellington developed throughout his career and was illustrated at the crossing of the Nivelles, was lost, another casualty of Waterloo.

⁵² Hew Strachan, *From Waterloo to Balaclava: Tactics, Technology, and the British Army, 1815-1854*, p. 1-2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.

⁵⁵ For more on this, see my chapter 'The Legacy of Waterloo: War and Politics in Europe in the 19th Century', in N. Lipscombe (ed.), *Waterloo: The Decisive Victory*, (Oxford, 2014), pp. 344-376.