Waterloo - 200th Anniversary

18th JUNE 1815 - 200 YEARS AGO, THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO WAS FOUGHT Driven by his desire to make France a European empire, the defiant warlord Napoleon Bonaparte established himself as ruler and First Consul in 1799 after carrying out a coup against the government of the First Republic of France (the 'Directory').
The French Republic was officially recognised and the Peace of Amiens signed and plucky Bonaparte later declared himself First Consul for life and Emperor in 1804. Of course, Napoleon wasn't going to stop there though - he had much higher ambitions and his main desire was to make France the most powerful country in Europe by conquering other countries, including Britain.

In 1803, Britain declared war on France and the ensuing 'Napoleonic Wars' were fought between France and various Allied coalitions over the next 11 years. Eventually, the Allies successfully invaded in 1814 and forced Napoleon to abdicate at the Treaty of Fontainbleau.
Napoleon was then banished to the Mediterranean island of Elba, and after 25 years of war the European powers began restoring peace in their individual countries. However, peace did not last long in Europe and Napoleon escaped from Elba, making it back to France on the 1st March 1815 and resuming his title as Emperor. The unpopularity of Louis XVIII and the bad economic and social climate of France helped his popularity and he was able to restore his Grand Army, releasing those who had been captured during the years of fighting. Once he was back in Paris he began building up his army in preparation for an invasion of Belgium with the goal of capturing Brussels.
Leaders met at the Congress of Vienna and the 7th Coalition between Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia was formed on 25th March - the Allied powers of Europe immediately declared war on France and began to mass hundreds of thousands of troops on the borders of France. Only the armies of Wellington and Blücher, Commander of the Prussian Army, were in place in Belgium. Napoleon once described Britain as "the most powerful and most constant of my enemies." The Duke of Wellington had never been beaten by the French and had a reputation as a talented coalition general. Napoleon decided to attack before his enemies reached full strength and swiftly moved 124,000 troops to the Belgian border with the plan to surprise the two armies in an offensive attack on the Allied troops gathering in Belgium. He aimed to divide the armies before defeating them separately, forcing Wellington's army to retreat back to the Belgian coast in the west and the Prussians to retreat to the east.

Initially, Napoleon was partly successful and on June 16 he defeated the Prussians at Ligny. The victory was not completed though, because Marshal Ney, whose help was needed to destroy the Prussians, mismanaged a preliminary attack on British forces at Quatre Bras and arrived too late. Michel Ney, once one of Napoleon's best and brightest marshals, had helped to bring about Napoleon's abdication in 1814, but had gone back to him on his return to power. Nonetheless, his heart wasn't really in the fight, and the delay was the result of him ignoring one of Napoleon's express orders to follow his own judgement; a poor decision that impacted on the whole battle plan.

On the morning of June 18 Napoleon went after Wellington, while Marshal Grouchy, at the head of 33,000 French troops, hunted for Blücher. Oddly, Napoleon failed to action his plan first thing in the morning, giving the British army time to verify its position and prepare accordingly, and the Prussians, who had been crushed far less convincingly than intended, the chance to start marching to Wellington's aid. He only attacked Hougoumont at 11.30am, aiming to fool Wellington into strengthening this position, when all along the main attack was meant to fall on Wellington's own line, which had by now pulled back towards the Mont St John Ridge. However, the British leader was not fooled, and only sent just enough reinforcements to help the flank of his army stand firm.

By 1pm Napoleon was ready to launch his main attack, but Reille's Second Corps still had its hands full fighting the Coldsteamers at Hougoumont, and worse still, the Prussian army suddenly drew into view just as the fighting was kicking off. Time was short if Wellington's troops were to be destroyed before the reinforcements arrived, and Napoleon determinedly set his guns to pummelling the British line.

At 1:30 the attack proper began, with d'Erlon's First Corps attacking at La Haye Sainte. British troops there fought fiercely, but the French managed to get around them to capture Papelotte and Smohain. Their next target was Wellington's stronghold, the Mont St John Ridge. A rather green Belgium battalion that was first to meet the French was set to flight, but the second unit in the way was far more experienced, and more determined to put up a good fight. General Picton's brigade charged with their bayonets, and the battle was on. Some British units fared better than others against the strong foe, with the heavy cavalry having to save the day in a couple of weaker stretches of the line, but the French forces were soon set on the run. However, Uxbridge's cavalry over-stretched itself by continuing the charge into the French line rather than regrouping, and the French cuirassiers and lancers decimated it for its trouble.

Things were quiet after that while both sides patched their lines and regrouped, then the French once again bombarded the British before attacking. This time the thrust came from the French cavalry, led by the hapless Marshall Ney. The plan was to cut up the British infantry into small bunches that could then be picked off by the guns, but like Uxbridge, Ney became over-enthused with his charge. Instead of charging then pulling back, he followed the British to their line, where the horses shied away from the bayonets and refused to cut through the troops, at the same time getting between them and the waiting guns. The fighting was reaching a fever pitch when the Prussian guns finally added their voices at 5pm,

bringing relief to the British and dismay to the French. Now the battle would take place on two fronts.

Nonetheless, the French slowly but surely began to gain ground. Ney actually succeeded in capturing La Haye Sainte by 6.30, but when he demanded more infantry to help shoot the guns deep into Wellington's army, Napoleon refused, worrying that his soldiers had enough to do on the second front with keeping the Prussians busy, and his reserves could be needed elsewhere. It was not until 7.00 that he finally relented, and this gave Wellington time to reinforce against the coming attack.

The final French charge was made by the mighty Old Guard, who were spurred by a false report, spread by Napoleon, that Marshal Grouchy's men had returned and were coming to the main army's aid. Once again, Ney's charge was let down by bad strategising on his part, directed as it was with a lack of confidence and force. It was Colonel Colborne who saved the day for Britain, wheeling his first battalion round suddenly and unexpectedly to cut off part of the Old Guard charging at full throttle, then wheeling again to pepper the other column with gunshot. The French army, shattered, took to its heels with first the British then the Prussians in pursuit. The day was won, and around 33,000 Frenchmen were killed, wounded, or reported missing to the Allies' 23,000.

After this defining battle, France was left weak and Napoleon unpopular; four days later, he abdicated. He was then exiled to the island of St. Helena, and the Congress of Vienna resumed its work. Napoleon's final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo stopped his reign as dictator and ended 23 years of conflict beginning with the French Revolutionary wars in 1792 and continuing with the Napoleonic Wars from 1803. It also marked the end of the Emperor's final bid for power, the so-called '100 Days'.

Sources: BBC History, Famous Land Battles: From Medieval to Modern Times