



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Fighting against Napoleon



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'Our loss has been very severe, but it does not outweigh the advantages arising from so brilliant a commencement and so happy a termination of a war that promised destruction to Europe.'

Those words were written by Lieutenant James Henry Crummer to his father on 4 July 1815. Over two weeks earlier, Crummer's 28th Regiment of Foot had fought in the battles of Quatre-Bras and Waterloo. Here, we follow Crummer's activities between May and July 1815, as described in a series of letters he wrote to family members.

Endless war

Crummer, whose life and career we explored in an earlier article, was born on the Roscommon side of Athlone on 31 October 1792, although his family's normal place of residence was Birr, County Offaly. Records in the British War Office state that he joined the British army as a volunteer in June 1805, although Crummer later claimed that he actually enlisted in 1807. Either way, he was still a child when he became a soldier.

At that time, Europe was entangled in the Napoleonic Wars in which France was

fighting against ever-changing alliances of European powers. Crummer first entered combat in 1807 when British forces besieged Copenhagen, the Danish capital. His regiment was subsequently posted to the Iberian Peninsula where Crummer fought in numerous battles. He was badly wounded during the Battle of Albuera in 1811 when a musket ball passed through his left leg, fracturing bone on the way, and was wounded again at the Battle of Maya in 1813. Despite those wounds, which plagued him for the rest of his life, Crummer remained on active service during 1814 and 1815.

By 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte's France was no longer the dominant power in continental Europe. Three years earlier, Napoleon had led a massive invasion of Russia. Although his army occupied Moscow, it was forced into a disastrous retreat that left France on the verge of total defeat. In April 1814, following the surrender of Paris to a coalition of Allied armies, Napoleon abdicated and retired to the Mediterranean island of Elba. That retirement lasted less than a year and he returned to Paris in March 1815, where he formed a new army. In response, the Allies – chiefly Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia – declared Napoleon a criminal and began preparations for another invasion of France.

Crossroads

The first of Crummer's

letters, addressed to his father, Samuel, dates from 15 May 1815. His regiment had recently arrived at the Belgian city of Ghent, which Crummer described as 'large and well-fortified'. He told his father that news of Napoleon's activities and intentions was 'very scant and chiefly rumour'. Crummer, though, was confident that 'Bonaparte cannot hold out for many months'. The French army, he wrote, had 'two hundred thousand men, a small artillery and no funds', while it was plagued by desertions. Nevertheless, locals and the British army were 'preparing for the worst'.

In June 1815, Napoleon's army advanced from Paris, crossing the Belgian border in the middle of the month. Facing the French were two Allied armies: the Prussians, led by Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, and a British, German, Belgian and Dutch force under the Irish-born Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. Napoleon aimed to prevent those armies from joining together since their combined forces substantially outnumbered the French. On 16 June, Napoleon divided his army. He led his main force against the Prussians at Ligny, while he ordered Marshal Michel Ney to take control of the crossroads of Quatre-Bras on the road between the two Allied armies.

Ney attacked around 2pm, aiming to overrun the 8,000 Dutch troops



James Henry Crummer's 28th Regiment of Foot at the Battle of Waterloo, as painted by William Barns Wollen (Bristol Museum)

who held Quatre-Bras. At the same time, however, Wellington was nearing Quatre-Bras with thousands of reinforcements. Among them was James Crummer and the 28th Regiment, which took a position among one of the many rye and barley fields that surrounded the crossroads. Crummer's regiment formed into a hollow square, a common tactic of the British army when facing French cavalry. Such squares, in which each side comprised ranks of soldiers facing outwards, could move or fight in any direction and they proved their durability at Quatre-Bras.

In a letter to his father, Crummer described his regiment's experience of the battle. It was 'charged in square 4 times by the cuirassiers [cavalry regiments in the

French army], who carry lances and are covered in front and rear with armour, but succeeded in beating them off in every charge with loss'. Crummer admitted that his regiment was hard pressed by the French attacks – 'all was nearly up with us' – but the arrival of more British reinforcements ensured that the Allied lines were not broken. By nightfall, they still held the crossroads.

Both sides had suffered badly during the battle: the French lost over 4,000 dead and wounded whereas the Allies lost an estimated 5,000 dead and wounded. The 28th Regiment sustained very heavy casualties, although the figure varies depending on the source. Not only had the regiment faced repeated attacks from the cuirassiers but it also endured artillery

fire when the French bombarded the centre of the Allied lines. Crummer, as he wrote, 'got a slight scratch from the splinter of a shell, near losing my middle finger'.

Decisive days

Ney's French forces withdrew on the next morning, as did Wellington's troops. Meanwhile, at Ligny, Napoleon had forced the Prussians to retreat but his army had not won a decisive victory. A day later, the enemy armies met again near Waterloo. Crummer's letters contain little information on his experiences during the Battle of Waterloo since he told his father that 'I shall defer mentioning any details ... until we meet'. It is clear from other accounts, however, that the 28th Regiment played an important role during the battle by delaying the advance of

a French brigade near the fortified farm of La Haye Sainte. As at Quatre-Bras, the 28th suffered heavy casualties from sustained French attacks. Subsequently, the regiment received a special mention in Wellington's dispatches for their conduct at Quatre-Bras and Waterloo.

On the day after Waterloo, Crummer's regiment was ordered to follow and harass retreating French troops. By 20 June, the 28th Regiment had entered France and by 4 July, when Crummer next wrote to his father, it was camped less than ten kilometres from Paris. A week later, the regiment was in the French capital, three days after the reinstated King Louis XVIII had made his public entry into the city. Around this time, Crummer was promoted to captain and he took part in the victory parade of British forces along the Champs-Élysées on 24 July 1815. Crummer revelled in the moment, telling his father that there 'was an immense concourse of personages of all nations present' and that he particularly enjoyed meeting Cossacks who formed part of the Russian army. He was less friendly towards the defeated French, whom, he wrote, 'are not made to feel or suffer enough'. Crummer's war against Napoleon was over but, as discussed in an earlier edition, he still had a long military career before him.

