OLD ENGLAND'S WARRIORS

WATERLOO And the Fighting Qualities Of Great Britain's Soldiers

Officer of Light Dragoons, Uniform of 1813.

French Cavalry Charging British Squares at Waterloo.
By Phillipoteaux, from the Sphere.

Officer of Field Artillery, 1809.

By Richard G. Conover.

HOW much of a battler is the British soldier? What is the fighting pedigree of Tommy Atkins and what is his possible achievement measured by past performance in the field?

Great Britain having cast her lot with France and Russia in their war with Germany and Austria, what standard of valorous morale and what prestige does the red-coated man of war bring to the fray? Immediately the army of John Bull is mentioned the mind runs to Waterloo. Beyond question that battle is popularly deemed the high water mark of British military accomplishment.

These significant facts and characteristics, which can scarcely be percentaged or tabulated, should be borne in mind:—

The soil of Great Britain proper has never been trodden by an invading army since the time of William the Conqueror. France has on occasion sent a quota of troops to aid rebellion in Ireland, but never has an out and out French army landed on British soil to battle with a united British people.

It was the great orator, Daniel Webster, who pointed out in one of his eloquent periods that the drum beat of Great Britain circled the globe and that the sun never set on British dominion. Hasn't this special significance with respect to prestige? All over the earth the Briton has spread himself most liberally and always through force of arms. No other nation has carried its flag farther and more variously to permanent possession. It has taken power, courage and oft tried endurance to raise her banner where it flies. When the eye lights on the British Jack there's a picture of prowess and prestige formed at once. Perhaps the picture is much more vivid than actual accomplishment warrants, but the picture is there. This prestige cannot be standardized with respect to its sure effect.

Great Britain's soldier has travelled thousands of miles to fight, conquer and permanently possess. Other nations have sent their fighting men as far, but after a generation of warfare has been checked up it will be found that she holds the most, if not all, of what she fought for. In the magnitude and variety of military operations of which he has been the achieving agent there is no soldier on earth to be compared with the battler of the British Isles. This is a chronicle of fact entirely apart from praise.

Great Britain proper has a population of 46,036,570, and yet she controls territory inhabited by every race of man, containing 378,739,590 human be[illegible] Isn't the prestige in the air? Whenever you think of England you breathe prestige.

And remember this—only one nation in the world ever went to battle with Great Britain without being in the end whipped completely or compelled to submit to subjugating compromise. Sooner or later a British army has defeated its adversary in a battle that [illegible] quality of the quarrel. [illegible] the British standard may have been trailed in the dust at infrequent reverses, but [illegible] the [illegible] of the British [illegible] the [illegible]. The gradual incorporation of Normandy by France [illegible] three [illegible] of [illegible] the [illegible] England's [illegible] "fight and keep" system.

How did the British soldier behave at [illegible] What [illegible] a fighter was he? How did he compare with the soldiers of the other nations fighting with him? Never was there a better time to weigh him than at Waterloo, for he battled at the side of Dutch, Belgian, Prussian, Hanoverian and miscellaneous German troops.

It is a curious fact that Wellington himself did not have a very high opinion of the British soldier's sense of duty or patriotism. He believed that he could make him fight and that he would fight hard. Wellington believed in flogging in the army and many a British private was punished thus for derelictions. Letters are extant in the Iron Duke's handwriting, in which he says he commanded the "damndest lot of rascals and vagabonds unhung" at Waterloo. In the famous Creevy papers there is evidence that Wellington did not think the British soldier would have fought so well had not he (the Duke) commanded him. The conversation between Wellington and Creevy the morning after Waterloo contains this:—

Officer of Light Dragoons, Uniform of 1809

Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington.
From a Portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence.

Officer of Rifles, 1809.

Sergeant and Private of Infantry in Winter Marching Order, 1813.

Private of Heavy Dragoons, 1809.

Private, Infantry of the Line, 1809

"The first thing I did, of course, was to put out my hand and congratulate him upon his victory. He made a variety of observations in his short, natural, blunt way, but with the greatest gravity all the time, and without the least approach to anything like triumph or joy. 'It has been a damned serious business,' he said. 'Blucher and I have lost 30,000 men. It has been a damned nice thing—the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life. Blucher lost 14,000 on Friday night, and got so damnably licked I could not find him on Saturday morning; so I was obliged to fall back to keep up my communications with him.' Then, as we walked about, he praised greatly those guards who had kept the farm against the repeated attacks of the French; and then he praised all our troops, uttering repeated expressions of astonishment at [illegible]. He repeated so often its being so nice a thing—so nearly run [illegible] the French had fought better than he had ever seen them do before. 'No,' he said, 'they have always fought the same since I first saw them at Vimeira.' Then he said:—'By God, I don't think it would have been done if I had not been there.'"

Many of the British soldiers at Waterloo had been with Wellington in his Peninsular campaign. Sir Thomas Picton, the General on whom he placed the greatest dependence at Waterloo, had been with him in Spain and Portugal. Wellington said of Picton:—"He's as rough and foul-mouthed a devil as ever lived."

Picton was killed at Waterloo—shot through the head—and he was commanding thousands of the same sort of men that he had often sworn at.

This is not to be an account of Waterloo—just a few words of description of the British soldier fighting there. In tabloid, the battle was fought at its most centralized point by 68,000 troops led by Wellington, and Napoleon with 72,000 men. The English commander had 156 guns, the French 246. There is eternal argument as to what the outcome would have been had not Blucher with 30,000 men arrived to reinforce Wellington at six P. M. Twelve miles or so away Napoleon's general Grouchy with 33,000 men failed to march to the aid of his Emperor. From noon until half-past seven P. M. on the immortal June 18, 1815, the French hurled thousands against the allies and were as constantly repulsed. On "points" Napoleon would score because of having been the aggressor. Toward the last the left of the allies' line seemed to waver.

Wellington was heard to mutter:—"Would that night or the Prussians would come!" But Blucher came. Napoleon tried the Old Guard last and they charged up to the "thin red line" awaiting their onslaught grimly determined. Repulse, and then a sanguinary pursuit by moonlight of the fleeing French. The British losses were 13,000 and the Prussian 7,000. The French suffered to the extent of 30,000.

No matter what Wellington thought of the animating spirit of British valor, it is a fact that in the battle of Waterloo he placed British troops at the pivotal or crucial points. It was the Guards of Maitland posted in the cornfield along Wellington's battle ridge that sprang to answer the Duke's famous command, "Up, Guards, and at them!" when Napoleon's celebrated fighters were within twenty paces. The first volley by the British soldiers killed 300 French. The "red coats" fired with cool and steady aim. The French wavered. The British soldier for the first time that fatal day became the aggressor and drove Napoleon's crack battalions down the ridge.

The bearing and behavior of the British soldier were illustrated at an important point of the battle when Ney gathered together five thousand magnificent horsemen, and placing himself at their head, charged. Instead of being appalled at the advance of this galloping host, it is recorded that the British soldiers felt rather relieved that it was not infantry coming against them. Calmly the British were formed into squares, with their guns placed on the crest of the ridge. Ney's men rode against the artillery and captured it. But the squares poured such a steady, murderous fire in on them, they were forced to retreat down the slope.

Wellington knew the French impetuosity of attack from his Peninsular experiences. He had evolved a system of tactics specially to resist them. At Waterloo he placed his first line of infantry behind a ridge so that it might be invisible before the attack and during the attack itself. Not until the assailants had reached the very top of the ridge, confused by the fire of skirmishers and artillery, did the line of soldiers reveal itself, firing point blank at short range and following up with a bayonet charge. With the exception of one brigade and a chain of skirmishers, all of Wellington's infantry was so arranged.

While eating breakfast on the morning of Waterloo, Napoleon asked General Reille his opinion of the British soldier against whom he had so often fought in Spain. Reille replied:—

"When well posted, according to Wellington's usual manner, I consider the English infantry invincible, on account of their calm tenacity and the superiority of their fire. Before you can charge with the bayonet you will have to wait until half the attacking party is killed. But the British army is less agile, less supple and less able to manoeuvre than we are. If it cannot be conquered by a direct attack, it might be by manoeuvring."

Napoleon is reported to have scoffed at this opinion, so unerringly confirmed before night. It was the first time Napoleon had come in direct conflict with English troops.

He said irritably to Soult:—"Because you have been beaten by Wellington you consider him a good general. But I tell you that Wellington is a bad general, that the British are bad troops and that it will be all over before dinner."

This great battle that settled the fate of Europe fairly bristles with instances of British valor. Horse and foot, they outfought the French at every point of the field. It has been said that they took less chances than the French and that their commander exposed them less. Well, veterans declare that it takes more real courage to remain calm under fire and not strike back until ordered than it does to career hurrahing forward in a charge, buoyed up by excitement and passion. Some of the British squares were charged no less than thirteen times by Ney without being penetrated. The great French cavalryman, having three horses killed under him, was found by an aid standing in a bewildered fashion at the side of an abandoned British gun, striking its mouth with the flat of his sword.

In a general way it can be said that all of the victories of Wellington over his French adversaries were due to a skilful use of the two-deep line against the massive column which for many years was the fighting formation of France. The use of infantry in line was not his invention. It was used from Marlborough to Frederick the Great, generally three or four deep. The French Revolutionary generals reintroduced the advance in heavy mass, relying upon the effect of its impetus, the same as had been practised by the pikemen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Napoleon was fond of this mass formation, although if he had any out and out favorite it was a blend, or ordre mixte, in which brigade or regiment was drawn up in alternate battalions in line three deep and in column. More dash is required with the mass, more steadiness with the line. The British soldier for more than 200 years has gained much of his prestige through steadiness.

The British infantry at Waterloo used a nine pound flint lock musket, fitted with a pan, and not to be depended upon for accuracy for a range of more than 250 feet. The general volley effect was what was expected. Each soldier carried sixty stout paper cartridges, about sixteen calibre and about twenty to a pound weight. The cartridge had to be torn open by the teeth, a splash of powder thrown into the pan to catch the igniting spark, and then driven down the musket barrel with an iron ramrod. To stand and reload in the face of fire required the steadiness that became part of the English soldier, most prominently.

So, according to battling percentages or averages, it would seem that the British soldier leads the International War League list. He has engaged oftener and won oftener than all Europe. There is nothing that suggests decadence about his prowess; no highest point of greatness in his past history from which he has dwindled or declined. He is at his fighting zenith now as much as at any time of his career. Most of the other nations of the earth have had their more glorious days, but the British soldier's advance has been almost constant.