

# Cavalry Charge

Nathan W. Harter

It is midday, and Marshal Ney has ordered our cavalry across the trampled valley into the fiery north slopes of the steadfast allies. Against lesser foes, our artillery fire would have already bounded through the files of waiting infantry, dismembering along the way. But Wellington has couched his men on the far side of the ridge, thus hidden from view and protected from our barrages.

Each unit of cavalry steels itself for the several-hundred-yard race that must end in either victory for our Emperor or glory in death. The entire valley is washed in a dusty-blue haze, the smoke from the cannon and muskets. This constant smoke-screen obscures the distant ridge, and we peer with anxious eyes into the mist. Across these barren fields, our horses must sweep like the irresistible main. British infantrymen pebble the human shoreline. Marshal Ney would never order this assault without ample ground forces and abundant faith that the enemy lines will break. The order is given to charge.

Heavy rains from the night before have softened the ground to mud that the noontime sun has not yet turned to steady earth. The massive animals beneath us drive down the southern slope in nervous frenzy, churning the grain and pulp beneath their pounding hooves. Our cannon stop. Their cannon stop briefly to realign and reload. For a magic, consuming moment, the field of battle is hushed and graced with the awful sight of a thousand horsemen, hundreds abreast, descending the southern slope at breakneck speed. The martial blues

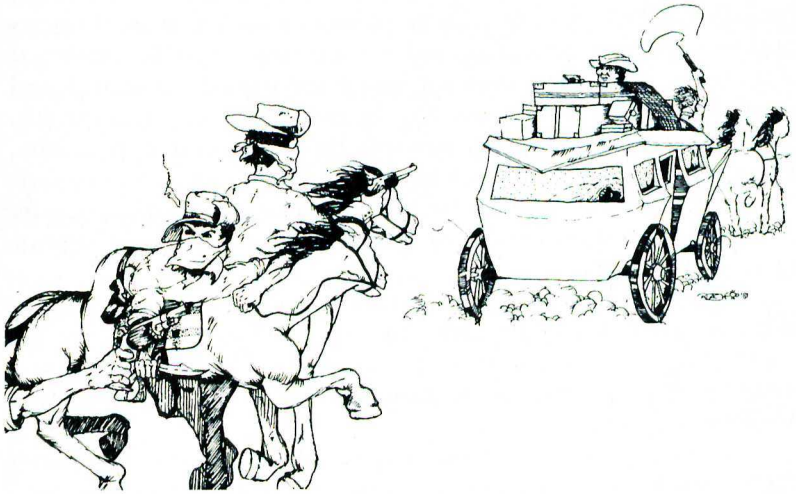


Illustration by Robert Roach (Freshman)

and blood reds of our uniforms and standards flow into the gap, onto the open plain between the Empire and Brussels, our destination.

My hand on my saber, raised in exultant gesture, I am carried along in the current of fury, looking neither left nor right. Surely the ground rumbles under such weight, madly plodding the treacherous way. My comrades shout, venting passions too intense and too complex to describe. One can only shout. Marshal Ney has called us to break the retreating army, break it and burst through to Brussels. Our Emperor is returned to us; Providence and he are with us. We are a force too colossal to withstand.

As we turn up the northern slope, encouraging the brave beasts beneath us, Wellington fires his grape shot on us. These are the nasty packets of nails, broken glass, and metal scraps his artillery sprays at short range. Grape shot does not bound and explode; it scatters and mows down whole rows of men. My comrade to the right falls quickly. One second we are bursting forward; the next, I am without him. Perhaps a fragment from the blast has torn into his shoulder or face. No, the horse would not stop for that. My comrade could not stop for that. The horse itself must have stumbled or been shattered beneath him.

My steed feels the clinging mud and labors to continue despite the difficult sprint just to get here. Though many have fallen, the tide continues to rise and engulf the forward guns. This is the moment of clashing. We bear down on the silent foe and end all intellection. Elan shall win the cause.

In the face of our monumental assault, Wellington has calmly formed his army into squares, a proven defense against cavalry, but a miserable formation to meet the trailing infantry. A square consists of human blocks, bordered by kneeling soldiers propping their bayonets with point up at the threatening animals. This row of spikes deters almost every beast, for it is said that insofar as we are master of him, he determines our limitations. Our men sweep over the crest, unable to retreat because the rushing ranks plow on behind, admitting no deceleration. The sea of blue crashes about these steadfast rocks and filters into the crevices between. We have met the stony shore.

My saber is worthless and my pistol gone. We must bolt about the squares, feinting and blustering, as the marksmen in the enemy squares load, aim, and fire into our mass. Many fine cavalrymen fall, but many more replace them. The noisy, smoky chaos lingers on the crest. I can see the flies buzzing about a British general's horse. I notice



the lame, abandoned in the rear, crying out in defiance and despair. I hear the trembling Dutchmen cursing either us or Duty. I can reach one soldier with my blade, and so I slash his face. We turn back down the slope, anxious to meet the grim soldiers of substance, our infantry, and we find there is not one! This is no grand assault, but a psychological thrust, a gamble, meant to demoralize the foe. We are to die. This knowledge braces our resolution. We *will* die.

At the bottom of the slope, our commander calls us around, up into the prickly fray. Soberly, I turn my frightened horse back into the grape shot the British have resumed in our short retreat. Sweat stings my eyes, and the smoke of allied cannon restricts my visibility to a few hundred feet. Into the clouds of fire and steel we march. We reach the crest; the squares remain intact; pandemonium returns. One brown stallion leaps over the silver hedge and lands, sprawling onto a dozen wriggling musketeers. I gallop around one of the squares, swearing at and baiting the wild-eyed British. Musket accuracy being what it is, no one is likely to hit whom he intends. Thus, I may taunt and frown within twenty feet of fifty guns.

Again, we slip back down the hill. Again, we align ourselves and charge into the thickening haze. This is suicide, I mutter, wondering how long their lines would hold. What time is it? No one can tell by the sun, eclipsed by bluish gasses. Into the renewed spray of hot and ripping metal, we clamber without zeal. Again and again, our tortured animals strain to take that hill. Many must have fallen in exhaustion. With mingling soot and sweat encrusting me, with a small sliver of glass buried somewhere in my thigh, and with thirst clutching at my dry and dirty throat, I fly into the increasingly black vapor—silent, crazed, and feverish. Madness.

\* \* \*

I do not know what tore my torso from me as I sped across the plain to the south. The charge was rescinded, and I was heading home. Now I can taste the soil in my mouth and hear distant drums of other skirmishes. My head buried halfway in the ground, embedded in the field I traversed scarcely an hour before, I am overwhelmed by thirst. I do not know if Marshal Ney is yet alive. I do not know if the Emperor is pleased. I do not know anything but the aching loss of body and the piercing lack of water. I pray somebody finds me. God, help me. *Vive L'Empereur!*