



Waterloo Veteran

Woodborough

Thomas Waight – 1796 to 1856 **Private, 4th Regiment of Foot ('Kings Own Regiment')**

Thomas Waight, the son of George and Elizabeth Waight (nee Rudman), was baptised at Woodborough on 6th October 1796.

George and Elizabeth had been married at Woodborough on 27th April 1790 and Thomas was one of ten children baptised in Woodborough between 1791 and 1814.

The army service records for Thomas are recorded under the name Thomas White. From these we learn that, aged 18, Thomas enlisted at Andover on 9th May 1815. Thomas is recorded as being a Labourer and a native of Woodborough in Wiltshire. On enlistment he is also described as being 5'8" tall with brown hair, grey eyes and a swarthy complexion. Thomas signed his enlistment papers with a mark.

Following his enlistment, Thomas was posted to the 1st Battalion, 4th Regiment of Foot (Kings Own Regiment), serving under Captain David Wilson in Company No. 8.

The Kings Own Regiment was unique in having served in the Peninsular Campaign (their battle honours included Vittoria and the Seige of San Sebastien), the American War of 1812 (where they were involved in the capture of Washington after the Battle of Blandensburg and the Battle of New Orleans) and the Battle of Waterloo. The Regiment only just made Waterloo arriving on the morning of the battle.

The Kings Own Regiment had returned to barracks in Deal in Kent, from America, arriving on 18th May 1815 where they were hastily re-equipped and brought up to strength. The Regiment had suffered 350 casualties at the Battle of Orleans and, presumably, Thomas Waight was dispatched to Deal from Andover as part of the new draft. Despite the new recruits, the Regiment was still short of officers, Captain Wilson (a veteran of the Peninsular War and the American Campaign) being one of just two Captains (the normal compliment was eight).

Following news of Napoleon's escape from Elba and the march of the French Army on Brussels, the Kings Own Regiment was dispatched to join Wellington's forces, landing at Ostend on 12th June. On landing, the Regiment marched to Ghent joining the 10th Brigade under Sir John Lambert. By marching forty eight miles in 30 hours, the Regiment arrived at Waterloo on the morning of the Battle. Lieut. Brown, of The King's Own, said, "we arrived about half-past eight o'clock, on the morning of the 18th June, band playing, colors flying."

Records state that the Kings Own Regiment arrived at Waterloo with 1 Field Officer, 2 Captains, 20 Subalterns, and 4 Staff, 36 Sergeants, 11 drummers and 596 Privates. This included Thomas Waight who

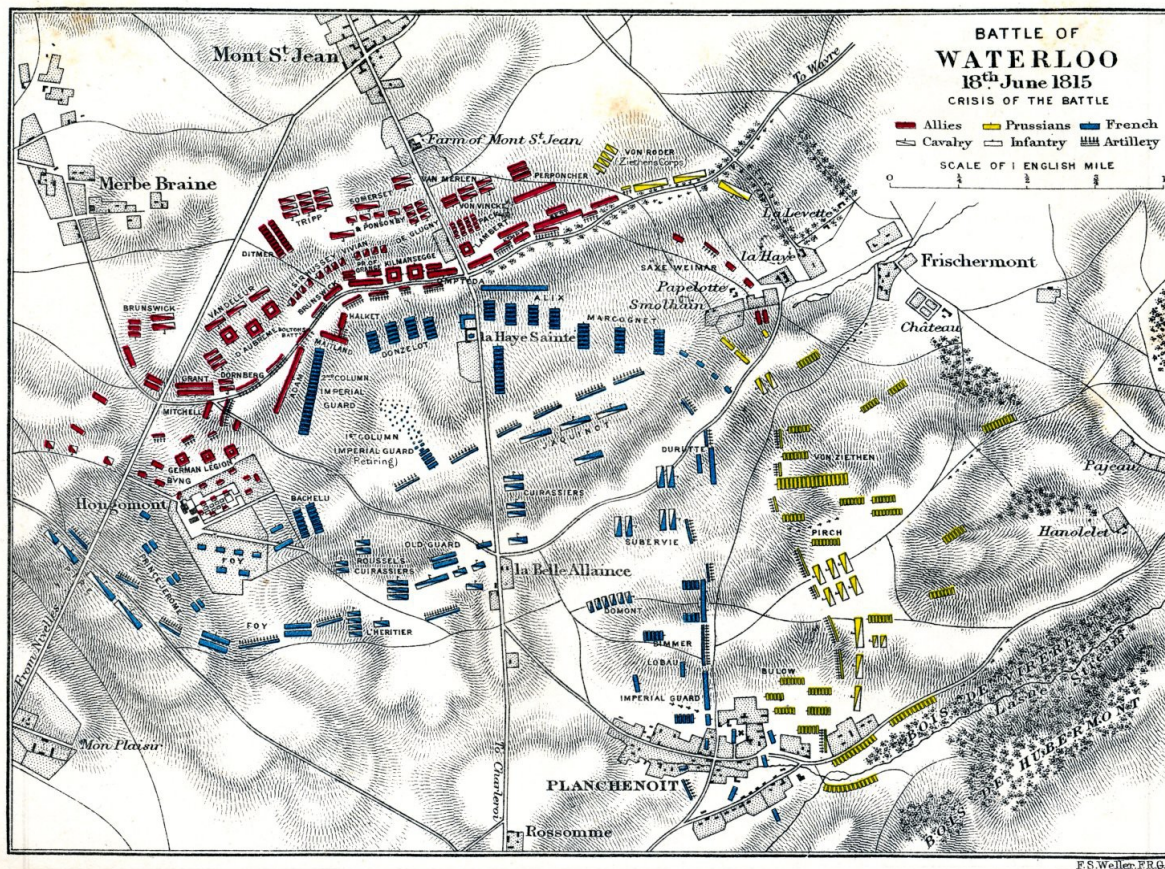
had now been in the army just 40 days and it is hard to imagine that he had had much in the way of military training.

The Battle commenced with an initial bombardment of Hougomont Farm on the extreme right of the Allied line by French artillery at about 1100 hrs¹. This was followed by a French infantry attack on the Farm about an hour later.

Following their arrival earlier in the morning, the 10th Brigade, which included the Kings Own Regiment, had taken up a position in the rear of the centre line behind the farm of Mount St. Jean, effectively being held in reserve.

At about 1330 hours, French artillery began a heavy bombardment on the centre and left of Wellington's line that lasted for approximately half an hour. French infantry columns then advanced, passing around the Farm of La Haye Sainte still held by the King's German Legion, and attacked the line left of centre, in part held by the Division commanded by Lt. General Sir Thomas Picton. Picton's Division repulsed the attack (although Picton himself was killed) and the retiring French infantry were then charged by the Union Brigade, who continued their cavalry charge across the valley up to the French guns on the far ridge taking heavy casualties in the process.

Now Sir John Lambert's 10th Brigade (which included Thomas Waight in the King's Own Regiment) were moved up to the rear of Picton's Division supporting him, and at about 1500 hours came up into the front line along the Wavre Road opposite a gravel pit near La Haye Sainte Farm.



Map of positions in the latter stages of the Battle of Waterloo

¹ All battle times are approximate as there are many conflicting contemporary reports of the timing of events.

A little before 1600 hours, apparently while attacking La Haye Sainte, Marshall Ney had gained the impression that Wellington's troops were retreating. It's likely that Wellington had simply ordered his troops to move back behind the ridge line, out of sight of French artillery, or that Ney had simply seen casualties, or prisoners, moving to the rear. Nevertheless, on the basis of this assumption Ney launched a series of massive cavalry attacks on the Allied lines. Over the next couple of hours about a dozen French cavalry attacks were made up to the ridge on which Wellington had based his troops. However, Wellington's infantry were able to repulse each charge by forming themselves into a series of squares (hollow box-formations four ranks deep) that the cavalry horses were unable to penetrate.

Eventually, Marshall Ney realised that cavalry attacks alone were not going to defeat Wellington's forces and French infantry assaults were renewed, including an attack on the farm of La Haye Sainte. The Farm had remained in Allied hands despite being isolated two hundred meters in front of the centre of Wellington's line. On this occasion the farm of La Haye Sainte fell to the attacking French troops (partly because the defenders ran out of ammunition).

A contemporary report states that following the loss of La Haye Sainte, the 10th Brigade (including the King's Own Regiment), who still appeared to be in their square formations but along the line of the Wavre Road, came under 'a most destructive fire' from French skirmishers now situated around La Haye Sainte. Other reports state that horse drawn artillery was also brought up by the French who opened fire with canister shot.

French commanders had not expected Prussian forces to arrive at the Battle, but the first troops were sighted coming from the direction of Wavre, on Wellington's left, at about 1730 hours during the latter stages of the multiple French cavalry charges. However, the main thrust of the Prussian forces attack was being made through the village of Plancenoit, where Napoleon had based himself the night before the Battle, which was now to the French rear. The arrival of Prussian forces would prove decisive as Wellington had been able to hold on and French forces, including reserves, had been committed to the Battle.

Following the fall of La Haye Sainte, French commanders believed that Wellington's line was exposed and, at about 1930 hours, committed their final reserves including Napoleon's Imperial Guard into an attack on Wellington's lines, the main thrust of which was to the west of La Haye Sainte Farm. However, this attack was repulsed and French troops faltered. It appears that panic began to set into French troops and with the advance of Prussian troops to their right and rear they began to retreat and disintegrate.

A little before 2000 hours Wellington ordered his troops to advance down the slope and to attack the remaining French infantry. The last cohesive French force consisted of two battalions of the Old Guard near the Inn named the La Belle Alliance where Napoleon had based himself during the Battle. Their defence had enabled Napoleon to escape but the Old Guard, who refused to surrender, were defeated. Some time between 2100 and 2200 hours Wellington and the Prussian Commander Blucher met, either at La Belle Alliance, or nearby Genappe, effectively signaling the end of the Battle. However, Prussian cavalry troops under the leadership of General Gneisenau continued to harry the retreating French troops for much of the night. This was extremely effective and ensured that there would be no regrouping of the remaining elements of the defeated French forces.

For Thomas Waight and the Kings Own Regiment it appears that, on the final advance, the remaining elements of the 10th Brigade reoccupied the Farm at La Haye Sainte, at which time their battle was over. The Kings Own Regiment had lost 10 Officers and 114 men either killed or wounded (a casualty rate of more than 1 in 6 men). However, it appears that Thomas Waight survived the Battle unscathed, although his Company commander, Captain Wilson, had been wounded (he had also previously been wounded both during the retreat from Corunna and at the storming of Badajoz during the Peninsula War but survived all, eventually dying in Romford in 1863).

Following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, Thomas Waight and The Kings Own Regiment went on to Paris, where they were to remain for 3 years, being praised for their good behavior, before returning to Winchester barracks in November 1818.

However, Thomas Waight's service in the army was to be a short one as he received a medical discharge on 17 March 1819. Thomas had been in the army for just 3 years 313 days. The service record states that Thomas' conduct was good and that his medical discharge was due to his suffering from 'amaurosis' (a loss of vision in the eye).

As a Waterloo veteran, Thomas was awarded a further two years pensionable service. This was to provide a pension of 6 pence per day (or 2 ½ shillings per week). At this time a farm labourer's weekly wage in Wiltshire would be about 8 to 10 shillings a week, while a sawyer at Honey Street Wharf might expect to earn 18 shillings a week. Hence, the pension granted to Thomas would not be sufficient on its own.

On being discharged, Thomas returned to Woodborough and on 6th July 1820 he married Joanna Smith in the Parish church of St. Mary Magdalene. The Parish register subsequently records that Thomas and Joanna had three children baptised in Woodborough. Two sons, Richard and George Waight were baptised on 20th November 1825 and the 4th March 1832 respectively, with a daughter, Elizabeth, being baptised on the 2nd August 1835.

Despite Thomas' vision problems with amaurosis, it appears that he was able to work. The condition can result in a temporary loss of vision but usually deteriorates over time. This may explain why Thomas is recorded as a labourer in 1825 and 1835 on the baptism of Richard and Elizabeth, but a retired soldier at the time of George's baptism in 1832. The service record for Thomas also indicates that his pension was increased some time after his discharge, due to a deterioration in his medical condition, but it has not been possible to decipher the amount and date of the increase in the written record.

At the time of the census in June 1841, Thomas and Joanna are recorded as living in Woodborough. On the census entry for Thomas, the letter 'P' is recorded for occupation. This is likely shorthand for Pensioner, rather than Pauper, as the latter is always written in full for others in the Parish. The 1841 census record also indicates that Thomas and Joanna had another son, Joshua, born in about 1821, although their daughter Elizabeth (who would be nearly 6) is missing. No burial record has been found for Elizabeth.

The subsequent census in 1851 again records Thomas and Joanna Waight as living in Woodborough, together with their son George. However, Thomas who is now 54 years old is recorded as being both a Pensioner and blind. Clearly, his amaurosis had become much worse and he would be dependent upon his pension and any income earned by his wife and son.

Thomas died three years later in February 1856. The Parish register for Woodborough records the burial of Thomas Wait, aged 58 years, on the 28th February 1856.

OPC Note: The summary of events from the Battle of Waterloo is intended to present a coherent timeline and picture as the Battle may have been seen through the eyes of Thomas Waight. Necessarily, the summary cannot be a detailed and wholly accurate narrative of the Battle, as even contemporary accounts appear confused and even contradictory. For those interested in reading more on the Battle of Waterloo and the events of 1815 then the books by Peter Hofschroer, which present a Prussian and 'German' perspective that counter-balance the more traditional 'British view', are well worth considering.