

## The Chairman's Dispatch



**Peter Warwick**

### The Royal Navy won the Battle of Waterloo

The 18th June 2015 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo; a defining moment in European history. The culminating point of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the battle was one of the most decisive battles in history. After more than 20 years of uninterrupted conflict this single day's encounter finally put paid to Napoleon's aspirations for European hegemony. It was a fight to the death that left over 50,000 corpses on the field and many more wounded. Where Trafalgar had been the last climactic fleet action of the age of sail, Waterloo was the last great battle of the age of the horse and musket. The world would never be the same again.

Napoleon's fateful invasion of Russia and the central European battles aside, naval power had a profound strategic impact on the land campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars. The Royal Navy's wooden walls were a potent force. They were both the shield protecting the country from invasion and guarding the nation's trade and the sword that took the fight to the enemy. British naval power enabled British armies to be transported to the continental theatre – and evacuated when required, as at Corunna in 1809, and once there to be maintained and supported.

This was most vividly demonstrated during the six years of the Peninsular War. Naval power gave British ministers considerable flexibility when deciding whether, when and to what extent they could commit troops to the region. Their commander, the Duke of Wellington enjoyed the ability to move his soldiers and materiel rapidly by water, a facility largely denied the French who faced his coastal strongholds at Lisbon and Cadiz, which severely disrupted their operations in Spain. Moreover, British sailors are to be found manning gunboats and batteries, such as the signal towers along the Lines of Torres Vedras. They hauled heavy guns and supplies inland, built bridges and implemented amphibious operations and diversionary attacks on coastal targets that tied down large

numbers of enemy troops. The Royal Navy provided a constant and reliable postal service for Wellington's communications with London and elsewhere and moved the vast amounts of bullion that enabled him to avoid living off the land.

The Duke himself recognized the strategic importance of the navy to his operation, remarking that 'If anyone wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell them that it is our maritime superiority [that] gives me the power of maintaining my army while the enemy are unable to do so.'

The bitter war in Iberia became Napoleon's 'Spanish ulcer' and it was a significant factor contributing to his downfall and exile to the island of Elba in 1814. Then dramatically within less than a year he returned to France and in a brilliant lightning campaign invaded the Low Countries (modern day Belgium) with the intention of dividing and defeating the Prussian army and a polyglot Anglo-Dutch force. Lord Castlereagh invited The Duke of Wellington, who was at the Congress in Vienna, to take command of the latter. He accepted without hesitation. Czar Alexander I of Russia remarked, 'It is up to you to save the world again'.

The 28,000 strong British component of this Army was both transported to Belgium and supplied while there with food, clothing and arms by the Royal Navy. It was an enormous undertaking. Moreover, if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, and as Wellington said, 'It was a damn nice thing, the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life', then the remnants of the army would have retreated to the coast, most likely to Ostend, where it would have been evacuated by the Royal Navy.

In this sense it could be said that the Royal Navy won the Battle of Waterloo! This is an extraordinary statement and one that I say to a certain extent with tongue in cheek, but I hope it highlights the vital contribution that so many accounts of the battle overlook completely. As is true to this day in the corridors of power in Whitehall, the workings of seapower are too often ignored or misunderstood.

The day after the Battle of Waterloo the Duke of Wellington wrote his famous and laconic Dispatch, addressed to Earl Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War. He ordered one of his surviving aide de camp, The Honourable Henry Major Percy, 14th Light Dragoons, to deliver it. By post chaise Percy travelled the badly made roads from Brussels to Ostend from where the Royal Navy made its final and fascinating contribution to the Waterloo story.

Arriving at Ostend on 20th June, Percy needed to cross the 72-mile English Channel and therefore sought a naval ship to take him on the next tide. There was a heavy to and fro traffic between Ostend and Ramsgate, then an important naval port. Percy reported to Admiral Sir Pulteney Malcolm, the officer in command of naval support for Wellington's forces, who tasked HMS *Peruvian*, under the command of Commander James Kearney White to sail as soon as possible. *Peruvian* was a two-masted brig-sloop with eighteen guns and would be fast. The *Peruvian's* log for that day records that at 2pm it weighed anchor 'with the Hon Major Percy with dispatches for the War Office from the Duke of Wellington and a King's Messenger'. Later the log records 'Light airs' and their progress was painfully slow. White decided to lower the ship's small boat and with four sailors they pulled about 20 miles towards the Kent coast. It is believed that both White and

Percy took oars, given that Percy had rowed as a schoolboy at Eton. They made landfall at Broadstairs, rather than Ramsgate, at about 3pm on 21st June and both of them travelled with the news and two captured Imperial Eagles in a post chaise to London.

The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo was the most momentous news to reach Britain in the whole of the nineteenth century, probably more so than the news of Trafalgar and the death of Nelson delivered by Lt. John Richards Laponotiere RN. This is largely because it brought to an end 23 years of conflict and presaged a peace that lasted for nearly 100 years, during which time Britain built an Empire and became the world's hyper power.

The story of the news of Waterloo, like the story of the news of Trafalgar, is the basis for an exciting ceremonial interpretation dubbed The New Waterloo Dispatch. It involves bicentenary ceremonies in Ostend, Broadstairs and London and at other places along the route taken by Percy and White where the post chaise changed horses, notably at Canterbury, Faversham, Sittingborne and Rochester.

The 1805 Club is hoping to arrange a 'Waterloo Way Coach Trip' for members who wish to be at Broadstairs and Canterbury on Saturday, 20th June. They will view the arrival of the Dispatch on the beach at Broadstairs, the New Waterloo Dispatch ceremony and the departure of the replica post chaise to Canterbury. They will be there to see its arrival and will have places at the Service in Canterbury Cathedral in the presence of a member of the Royal Family. At the time of writing the details are not finalized and a notice will be sent out shortly.

Members of the Club will also have the very special privilege of being able to apply for places at The Waterloo Banquet, which with the gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen is being held at St James's Palace on 9th June 2015. Members will be advised discretely about this in the near future, but meanwhile if any wish to register an interest please email: [peterwarwick@compuserve.com](mailto:peterwarwick@compuserve.com)

In my last Dispatch I referred to the forthcoming AGM in May and the election of officers. While most Council members are happy to serve in 2015 we believe the Club will only progress and prosper if we have others coming forward and I would urge you to give this serious consideration to see whether you might be prepared to take a more active role in future. Please feel free to contact me. We need you!

Fortunately, Peter Hore has agreed to edit the *Trafalgar Chronicle* for the next three years and so in the wake of the superb editorship of Huw Lewis Jones, this premier publication of the Club is in excellent and safe hands. Ken Flemming continues his excellent editorship of this fine newsletter – more of a magazine with its news, features and unique auction reports. Nevertheless, maintaining a regular supply of items and stories to create a 'washing line' of material is a considerable challenge for Ken and he would welcome contributions from members. Additionally, we are calling for general articles from students of naval history known to the National Maritime Museum and King's College London, which for many will be a chance to publish their work for the first time.

**With kind regards and best wishes to you all,**

**Peter Warwick, Chairman**