

## The Waterloo Campaign

“Three memorable days in June 1815”

Captain Cavalie Mercer held the rank of Second Captain in G Troop. The Troop was in fact commanded by Sir Alexander Dickson, but as he was temporarily assigned to other duties it was Mercer who was left in command at Waterloo. It was a fine troop, perfect in drill and splendidly horsed, comprising of the best elements of two horse artillery troops, broken up after Napoleon's exile on Elba.

G Troop took the pick of the horses from both Batteries. “...Thus,” says Mercer proudly, “making it the finest Troop in the service.” The Troop was made up of 80 gunners and 84 drivers who drove no less than 226 horses.

Indeed, in the Grand Cavalry Review held at Gramont, on the eve of the battle, the Duke of Wellington called the Prussian Prince Blucher's attention to what he called “the Beautiful Battery”, where upon Blucher exclaimed, “Mein gott, dere is not von orse in dies batterie which is not good for Veldt Marshall” (Captain Mercer's Journal of the Waterloo campaign).

On the 16th June the Battery moved forward to the field of Quatre Bras, close to the advancing French Army, travelling 38 miles over boggy and congested tracks. They took with them their 5 newly acquired 9 Pounders and one howitzer, procured to compete with the French 12 Pounders.

The French advanced all day long on the 16th, and by the 17th of June the British were retreating towards Waterloo. Mercer's Troop was ordered to cover the retreat as the British Cavalry and Prussian Infantry began to panic. Mercer's opened fire on the French Cavalry Squadrons at a range of 1,200 yards and the French called off the chase, allowing the British to escape.

Nightfall came late on the 17th June and it was a miserable night for Mercer's men, “...Seated on a few small twigs, or a little straw, in a newly ploughed field, well soaked with 6 hours heavy rain; their feet 8 inches deep in mud; a thin blanket their only shelter...cold, wet, hungry, without a fire, without meat or drink. And thus they tried to sleep after 48 hours on the march; but few managed it”. (Lieutenant Hope – Private Letter).

The Battle of Waterloo began at noon on the 18th June. Wellington had lost a quarter of his cavalry killed or injured in the first 90 minutes of the fighting, and the Allied troops appeared to be much shaken.

Fire rained down from the French artillery that had been realigned to engage the British infantry, who had been ordered to retire several paces and lie down in order to avoid the barrage. Mercer commented ‘So thick was the hail of balls and bullets that it seemed dangerous to extend the arm lest it be torn off.’ (Captain Mercer's Journal of the Waterloo campaign).

The Battle raged on with Wellington's position looking more fateful by the minute. Then, at about 1515 hrs the French launched three full divisions of cavalry against the Allied infantry. The situation was desperate. G Troop was ordered to abandon their guns when the French Cuirassiers were upon them and then to seek shelter in the infantry squares nearby.

Mercer did neither! The suspect Brunswick Infantry seemed ready to throw down their arms and flee. Mercer saw this and was convinced that if the Horse Artillery retreated, the Brunswickers would run away. His Battery stood firm under their Battery Commander; indeed Mercer's Troop was the only Battery on the field of battle to drive the masses of French cavalry off unaided.

Incredibly the Gunners were required to rush forward 100 yards in front of the infantry squares where their guns positioned totally unprotected. After disrupting the charge they would then return into the midst of the infantry before doing it all over again.

A French soldier wrote: "...Through the smoke I saw the English Gunners abandon their pieces, all but 6 guns (Mercer's Troop) stationed under the road...now, I thought, those Gunners will be cut to pieces; but no, the devils kept firing with grapeshot which mowed us down like grass."

Captain Mercer disobeyed the orders of the Duke of Wellington, by standing firm; his unrivalled Gunners took a terrible toll on the French cavalry. 'I allowed them to advance unchecked until the head of the column might have been about 50 or 60 yards from us and then gave the word "Fire!" The effect was terrible. Nearly the whole leading rank fell at once; and the round shot penetrating the column carried confusion throughout its extent.' In all, the Troop suffered 140 horses dead or injured, and it fired a total of 700 rounds; more than any other Horse Artillery troop in the battle.

The fighting around Mercer's men had been so intense that one British General said after the battle, "...that he could plainly distinguish the position of G Troop from the other side of the battlefield by the dark mass of dead French cavalry which, even at that distance, formed a remarkable feature on the battlefield." (Sir Augustus Frazer).

Had Mercer abandoned the guns the outcome could have been very different indeed. As it was the Battle of Waterloo was won by the evening of the 18th June 1815. Mercer was promoted after the battle and sent to command D Troop RHA.