

## The American: De Lancey at Waterloo, June 1815

by Alasdair and Fiona White

A British colonial of French Huguenot extraction, William Howe De Lancey was born in Manhattan in 1778, five years before the 1783 Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolutionary War. Being staunch loyalists, the family were forced to leave their home in 1784, settling first in Yorkshire, England and then in London, where William attended Harrow School for two years.

At the age of 13, he left school and was bought a commission in the 16th Light Dragoons. Tactical purchases saw him rise through the ranks and change regiments until in 1799 he was gazetted a major in the 45<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot. In 1802, he joined the Quartermaster-General's permanent staff to become one of the first professional staff officers in the British Army. In 1809, he was promoted (probably without purchase) to Deputy Quartermaster-General, a Colonel's rank, and fought in the Peninsular Campaign (1809-1814) under General Sir Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington. Distinguished service earned De Lancey a knighthood, as well as Wellington's complete confidence in his abilities. Throughout his time in Spain, his friends called him 'The American' in reference to his place of birth.

In 1814, with Napoleon in exile on Elba, Sir William De Lancey was posted to Scotland; he had been there before to stay with his good friend, Captain Basil Hall. The two men had met when Hall was a lieutenant on HMS *Endymion*, which had been one of the ships evacuating British soldiers from Corunna at the end of the First Peninsular War in 1809. On that visit, Hall had introduced De Lancey to his family in Scotland, including his sister, Magdalene, then 15 years old. On his return to Scotland, Sir William renewed his contact with Hall's family, fell in love with Magdalene, now aged 21, and married her on 4 April 1815.

Just ten days after his wedding, Sir William was summoned to Brussels by the Duke of Wellington, his former commander and 'most intimate friend'. His position was to be Deputy Quartermaster-General (DQMG) of the Army of the Low Countries under General Sir George Murray, who was serving in Canada where he was Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. Murray was to replace General Sir Hudson Lowe, who was married to De Lancey's sister, but Wellington could not abide Lowe and had had him transferred. In the end, Murray failed to make it to Belgium in time for the campaign there and it was De Lancey who served as DQMG but was effectively Wellington's chief-of-staff

Sir William was disappointed in not receiving a general's rank but departed on 9 May and arrived in Brussels on 25 May. His wife, Lady Magdalene De Lancey, followed, arriving in the city on 8 June.

This rapid deployment of both troops and officers was necessitated by the fact that Napoleon had escaped from Elba and returned to Paris where he once again assumed the rank of Emperor, King Louis XVIII having abandoned the throne in the face of this threat. The Coalition Countries opposing Napoleon declared him an outlaw and it was agreed that they would invade France in 1 July 1815. To this purpose the Anglo-Dutch Army of the Low Countries moved to hold the north of what is now Belgium with the Prussians arriving to hold the centre, whilst just across the border the large French Army of the North opposed them.

Napoleon took advantage of the fact that the Allies were still not properly positioned and on Thursday, 15 June 1815 he crossed the border at Thuin, near Charleroi, and the 1815 Belgian Campaign began. Napoleon achieved near complete tactical surprise and

was only lightly opposed by the Prussians. Indeed, Wellington and many of his officers were at a ball being given by the Duchess of Richmond and De Lancey was dining with the Spanish ambassador to the Netherlands when word was received of Napoleon's approach. De Lancey immediately rode off to inform Wellington, who on hearing the news instructed De Lancey to organise the positioning of the allied forces to meet the oncoming French. However, before carrying out Wellington's command, De Lancey went to his young wife and arranged for her evacuation to Antwerp, a port city away from any possible battle that would offer a safe route back to England if needed.

The French engaged the Prussians at Ligny and the Anglo-Dutch at Quatre Bras on Friday, 16 June 1815, achieving a tactical victory against the former while stopping the latter from joining their allies. The Prussians then conducted a spectacular night withdrawal north to Wavre, a distance of 18 kms, and, to keep in contact, Wellington ordered the Anglo-Dutch to a previously selected location at Mont St Jean, some 11 kms to the north and just south of the village of Waterloo where he established his headquarters. Sir William De Lancey, acting as Wellington's chief-of-staff, issued the orders for this withdrawal and then received the troops on the selected battlefield the following day to ensure they were disposed according to the commander's requirements. Some historians like to credit De Lancey with selecting the battlefield but this is not supported by the contemporary sources and it is highly unlikely that such an experienced commander as Wellington would have allowed his staff any such leeway. This strange accreditation almost certain arises from a misunderstanding of De Lancey's actual role in which he would certainly have provided the orders for the disposition of the troops.

Sir William De Lancey, along with all the senior officers, spent the night of 17 June billeted in the village of Waterloo. His billet would have been very close to the inn which he had selected as Wellington's headquarters<sup>1</sup> and which was on the main road that led from Brussels to Nivelles. The inn itself is still standing today and houses the Wellington Museum, while the ancient and important town of Nivelles has lost significance to the newer industrial town of Charleroi and the old road is now thought of as the Charleroi road.

On Sunday, 18 June 1815, the battle that would change the course of European and world history commenced around 11.30 a.m. The initial French actions were repulsed and were thus indecisive but during the later stages of the afternoon they launched a mass attack all along the line and managed to establish themselves within 100 metres of the Allied line. It was during this phase of the battle that De Lancey, while talking to Wellington just behind the front line, was knocked from his horse, either by the percussive shockwaves of a passing cannonball, or a 'spent' ricochet of one<sup>2</sup>, fired from the farm of L'Haye Sainte. He was thrown several yards from his horse, but immediately tried to rise, giving those watching the impression that he was not seriously hurt; in fact

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<sup>1</sup> It is the responsibility of the Quartermaster-General's (QMG) staff to choose and allocate billets for the officers and, as Wellington's acting chief of staff, De Lancey would have been next door to, or close to, Wellington's headquarters.

<sup>2</sup> Exactly what caused De Lancey to fall is unclear. Wellington thought it was a spent cannonball, but that is unlikely as other reports show De Lancey with no visible injury. A consideration of the ballistic data would suggest that a cannonball fired at a range of 100 metres, even if it had ricocheted and bounced to a height of two or more metres, would have had more than sufficient energy to dismember De Lancey, killing him instantly. Given the nature of De Lancey's internal wounds (the separation of his ribs from his spine), the percussive shockwave from a cannonball is a much more likely cause.

eight of his ribs had been detached from his spine. He requested that he be left to die in peace.<sup>3</sup>

Sir William's cousin, Colonel Delancey Barclay, who had witnessed the event, ordered Sir William to be moved to the rear. He was carried on a blanket to a nearby barn, probably part of the farm of Mont St Jean, which was being used as the Allies' field hospital, some 300 metres behind the battle lines. As the battle entered its last desperate phase, it looked likely that the Allied line would be overwhelmed and thus the field hospital captured, so the wounded that could be moved were sent further back for safety. De Lancey was thus moved again and would have almost certainly been sent back to his billet in Waterloo.<sup>4</sup>

After the battle, back at his headquarters in Waterloo, Wellington wrote about De Lancey's death in his dispatches, but was made aware of his error and went to see the seriously wounded officer in his billet. It was the last time that they would see each other.

Meanwhile in Antwerp, Lady Magdalene De Lancey was endeavouring to get news of what was happening in the battle. Sir William had given instructions to Captain Mitchell to look after his wife. On 16 June, she received a note from Sir William, written at Genappe after the battle at Quatre Bras. He said 'he was safe, in great spirits; they had given the French a tremendous beating'.<sup>5</sup> On Monday, 19 June, Captain Mitchell informed her that the French were defeated and that her husband was safe. Captain Mitchell had not received word direct from Sir William, but he had seen the list of wounded and dead and De Lancey's name was not there. However, others in Antwerp knew the true situation and broke the news gently to Lady De Lancey that her husband was not expected to live.

After yet more confusing reports on her husband's situation, Lady De Lancey left Antwerp early on Tuesday, 20 June to travel the 65 kms to Waterloo, a journey that would take her around ten hours. She arrived with her husband late that same day and was surprised at the strength in his voice – she had expected him to be weak and dying. Sir William received treatment in the form of bleeding and the application of leeches to reduce the bruising, and was looked after devotedly, day and night, by his wife. At first he seemed to be recovering but early on Monday, 26 June he started to deteriorate and within a few hours he was dead. He and Magdalene had been married less than three months.

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<sup>3</sup> What happens to De Lancey after being blown from his horse is unclear. Wellington, usually a reasonably reliable source, makes almost no further mention of his friend, believing him to have died; Delancey Barclay's intervention is recorded only in his own memoirs of the event with no collaborating evidence; and for everything thereafter the only source material available to historians is a copy of a copy of a remarkable memoir written by Magdalene De Lancey for her brother (Sir William's friend, Basil Hall) and subsequently published as *A Week at Waterloo*.

<sup>4</sup> It was common practice at the time that wounded soldiers were sent back to their billets to be nursed by the owners thereof. In this way, they were removed from the danger of the battlefield and placed in a location in which the QMG's staff could locate them and thus direct the medical staff as needed. Many such wounded subsequently recovered, paid for their billets (money refunded by the QMG's staff), and returned to their units. De Lancey would therefore have almost certainly been sent back to his billet in Waterloo where he would have had access to his personal possessions, his money (for medical supplies) and his clothes, and where he would have received care.

<sup>5</sup> *A Week at Waterloo in 1815, Lady De Lancey's narrative: Being an Account of How She Nursed Her Husband, Colonel Sir William Howe De Lancey, Quartermaster-General of the Army, Mortally Wounded in the Great Battle*. Edited by Major B.R. Ward, Royal Engineers, London, John Murray, Albemarle Street, W. 1906. An online copy can be found at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/31517>

Sir William Howe De Lancey was buried two days later in the cemetery of St Josse Ten Node – a protestant cemetery in Brussels – where Lady Magdalene De Lancey had a simple gravestone erected. In 1889, a magnificent Waterloo memorial was erected in Evere cemetery in Brussels and De Lancey's remains were disinterred and transferred for re-burial together with other famous casualties. The memorial was unveiled by HRH the Duke of Cambridge in August 1890 and the simple gravestone Magdalene had erected was placed on the monument.

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## Appendix

### All Saints' Church, Waterloo

All Saints' Church, Waterloo, part of the American Episcopal Convocation in Europe, is situated just off the battlefield of Waterloo, some 400 metres behind the centre of the Anglo-Dutch front line and on the location of a part of the hamlet of Mont St Jean.

It is interesting to note that the actual battlefield is at Mont St Jean, some 5 kms south of Waterloo and logically should have been called 'the Battle of Mont St Jean' and, indeed, the French did call it that for some years. However, 'to the victor the spoils' and also the right to name the battle. Wellington always named his battles after the place where he had his headquarters at the time, and in this case that was in what is now the largish town of Waterloo. At the time, it was big enough to have an inn, a substantial church, a number of reasonably large houses and substantial cottages, and an active and extensive population, many of whom worked as paviours – people who made cobblestone roads. The town was inside the extensive beech forest that surrounded Brussels.

The existence of the hamlet of Mont St Jean, which would have had a population of perhaps 20 people, between the village of Waterloo and the battlefield has led to some interesting historical interpretations of Magdalene De Lancey's memoir. This document was written in 1816 on the suggestion of her brother, Basil Hall, who wanted to know all that had befallen her and Sir William. Hall had been away for a year, on duty in India, and returned to Great Britain to discover that his sister had married his friend De Lancey and was now a widow, all without his knowledge.

Her narrative has proved invaluable to historians. In it, she is very clear that she found De Lancey in Waterloo after the battle and nursed him there until he died. But in her narrative she makes a single reference to the cottage being on the Nivelles road and this has led historians David Miller and Judith Monk to suggest that this was more likely to be in the hamlet of Mont St Jean, where, today, there is a major road called the Chaussée de Nivelles (the Nivelles road). This is, unfortunately, to misunderstand road naming at the time of the battle. In 1815 roads did not have names and were simply referred to as chaussée de (the next big town) or the road of, or leading to, the next big town. As such, the road south from Waterloo to Mont St Jean, now called the Chaussée de Bruxelles, would have been referred to as the road to Nivelles, that being the nearest big town and just 11 kms away. It is unrealistic, therefore, to claim, as do Miller and Monk, that De Lancey died in Mont St Jean, close to where All Saints' Church now stands.

However, contemporary maps do show a cottage on the site of All Saints' Church, which was the location of a Dutch-Belgian cavalry unit and some Allied bivouacs.<sup>6</sup>

Following the battle, it is understood that Sergeant-Major Edward Cotton lived in the cottage at the site of the current church. Having survived the battle, Cotton asked Wellington to discharge him from his duties so that he could stay in the area and act as the guide and curator of the battlefield and so preserve its memory. Wellington, conscious of the 'sightseers' and the inevitable tourists, who started arriving the day following the battle, agreed and Cotton was responsible for the building of the original visitors centre, which is still standing. The remaining stones from his cottage can be seen today in the Bivouac restaurant, opposite the infamous *Butte de Lion*, which was erected after the battle to commemorate the spot where the Prince of Orange was wounded. When Cotton died he was buried in the walled garden of Hougomont, which he had helped to defend, and was then re-buried in the Waterloo Memorial in Evere.

The battlefield itself can be visited free-of-charge at any time of the year and, near the *Butte de Lion*, there is a huge new visitors centre and museum being constructed underground. This will open in 2014. Close by is a magnificent and famous panorama painting of the battle housed in a circular building. The battle is a very popular re-enactor event and information about the bicentenary celebrations taking place in 2015 can be found at <http://www.waterloo200.org/>

Visitors to the battlefield are, of course, very welcome at All Saints' Church for Sunday services and it makes an excellent starting point for a battlefield tour.

All Saints' Church website: [www.allsaints.be](http://www.allsaints.be)

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<sup>6</sup> An Allied unit had its tents (i.e. bivouacs) on the site of All Saints' Church, seen on '*Plan de Veldslagen* by P.J. Gottghebuer, drawn for His Majesty King of the Netherlands'. One small building is visible to the south-west of the current All Saints' Church, seen on *Lith. de Gerard* in '*Atlas Portatif pour l'intelligence des Relations des Dernières Guerres publiées sans plans notamment pour la vie de Napoléon*'.