

Sebastiaan Allebrandi

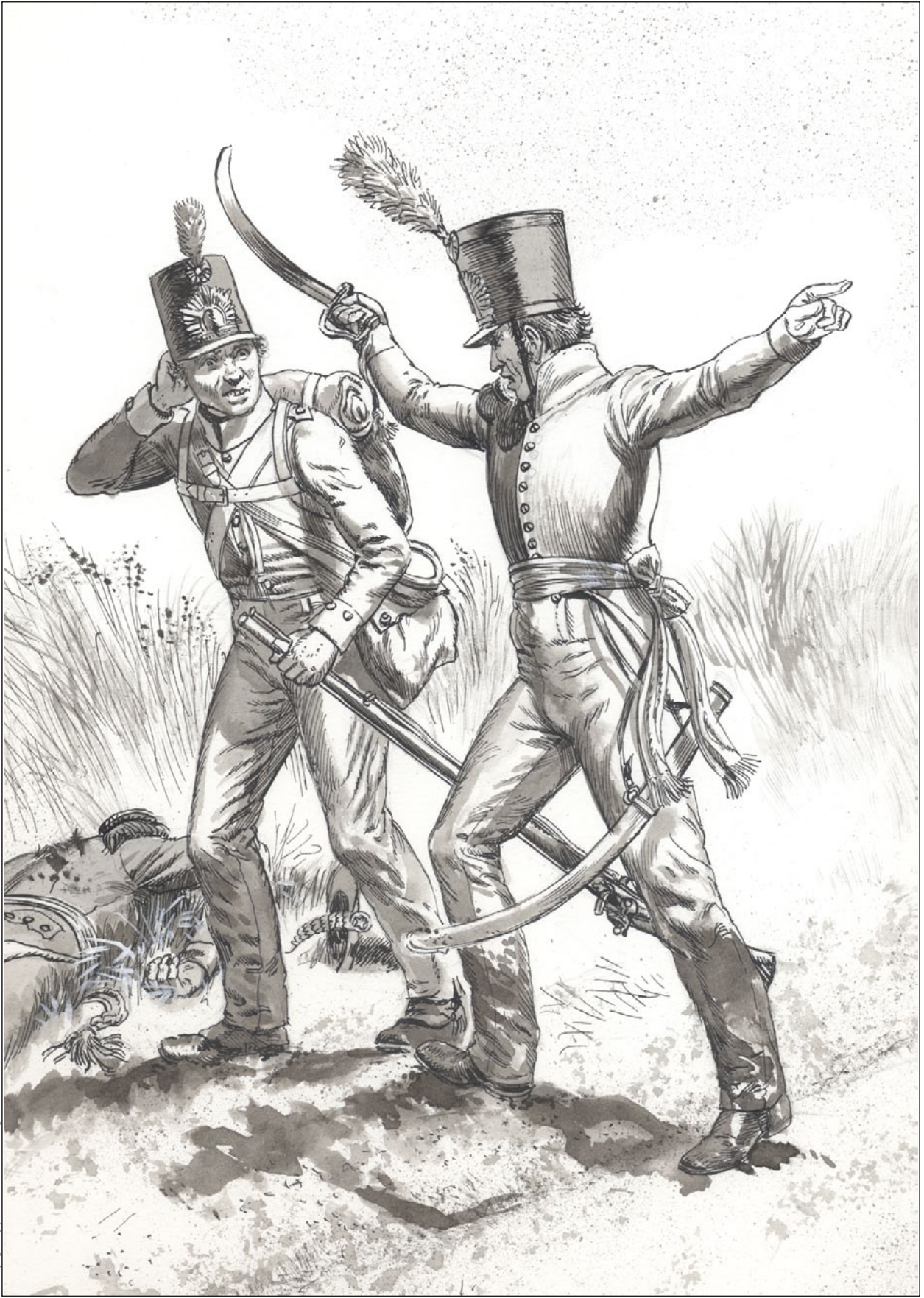
Source: Herinneringen uit mijne tienjarige militaire loopbaan. Amsterdam, 1835. Account, no date is given (circa 1835), of the Waterloo campaign by Sebastiaan Allebrandi, a former Private with the 7th Dutch Militia Battalion (translated from Dutch):

It was on the 16th June 1815 following a fatiguing march, which I nevertheless enjoyed, that together with my battalion (being one of the militia battalions), I arrived at a position close to the wood near Quatre Bras. I yearned like my comrades in arms to test my strength against the enemy, even though I was just seventeen years of age. An extensive clover field was considered to be suitable for our bivouac, and so we immediately took possession of it. Our most pressing need was to regain our strength by eating a meal, and attempts were made to satisfy this as much as one can within an open bivouac, where everything has to be gathered from afar and with the utmost care due to the proximity of the enemy. We succeeded according to our wishes, which were spurred by our great appetite. The few items our field kitchen produced were enjoyed greatly, almost as if it was an expensive meal which had been organised for our benefit. Yet, we were left with little time to digest the food and were unable to have an undisturbed siesta like the Spanish. This was because during the same afternoon we received the order to advance and to extend as skirmishers in the said wood, as the French had advanced in numbers, and were not more than one hundred paces from us.

We advanced while skirmishing, without being in the least deterred by the warm welcome we received from the enemy Voltigeurs. Finding our way through the wood from the direction of Hautainle-Val, we made many Frenchman fall in the dirt, despite the fact that on our side more than one brave soldier sealed his loyalty and love for king and country with his death, or was wounded. This first fight would nevertheless have been bloodier, if the widely spread trees and the hanging branches had not made it so difficult to shoot with greater accuracy. Indeed, its results resembled a heavy storm wind that swirls through the wood and covers the earth with leaves and twigs, and creates a scene of devastation which amazes the traveller, as the balls passed each other with such rapidity.

At last we exited the wood and found ourselves in an open field of corn, which had been trodden so much that it looked as if it had been flattened deliberately. We had hardly advanced a few paces when something happened that made a huge impression on me. An officer serving with one of the Nassau regiments lay dead on the road. Curiosity, helpfulness, or whatever other motivation it may have been in such circumstances which spurs the soldier, made me leave the ranks for a moment and approach this motionless figure. All of a sudden I was hit by a sharp blow on my shoulder, and turning round I saw my captain, who did not appreciate my rashness, and whose grim face and upright arm made me aware that I would receive another blow from the hilt of his sabre if I did not immediately return to my former position. Without reflection for a moment I did this, while rubbing my sore shoulder.

We eventually returned to our former bivouac, while our small force steadily increased with reinforcement from the various Allied contingents; the English, Hanoverians, Brunswickers, etc. Both of our Netherlands cavalry regiments were also there, including the so-called blue Hussars. Now we witnessed the arrival of uninterrupted streams of troops from all sides, as Hanoverians and



Brunswickers passed our bivouac, as they took their turn to participate in the battle, while we for the moment could quietly and undisturbed enjoy the splendour of our green beds. We had witnessed how the 5th Battalion of our arm, the militia, being mainly composed of Frisians, had suffered on this day. A great many of these brave men were killed and their number of wounded was exceptionally high. Their heavy losses were attributed to the rashness of the commanding officer of that corps.

The Allied troops who had passed us so as to be engaged in the battle had hardly been involved for half an hour, when we saw numerous wounded being carried to the rear, wrapped in blankets. I had noticed that the Hanoverians had been issued with these blankets instead of grey overcoats. This was truly an ingenious idea in the field and especially useful for the continuous bivouacking under the open sky, which efficiency was duly noticed by our men. The loss sustained by the Allies was very considerable, as the enemy had concentrated a formidable force at this point. Even the most insensitive observer would have been saddened by the number of soldiers who were covered with wounds, and the number killed; all of whom had passed only moments before in the prime of their lives and full of courage, which we now saw in such a miserable state. This filled our minds with an indescribable feeling. Yet, nothing was more striking than the look of the Brunswick troops who had lost their brave commander in this battle, the noble duke, who had lead them to extraordinary deeds of bravery, but they were now without him. They were enraged by this loss and repeatedly cried the name of the duke, as if their call would bring their commander back to life. Powerless, despair and lament! A deadly musket ball had taken the worthy duke and commander away from the Allied army.

It is well known that the Highlanders fought like lions on this bloody day; this all happened on 16th June in the span of a few hours. Unshakable, these sons of the mountains stood at their post, repelling each attack made by the enemy with his losses covering themselves with the laurels of glory. They also lost a huge number of their own and only few of them remained free of honourable wounds.

Finally, the French were forced to yield, and slowly retreated to their former position, being the wood behind the villages of Marbais and Villers. We took the opportunity from this pause to search for water close to our bivouac, as this was indispensable for our fatigued bodies. We, I mean almost all of my comrades, talked vividly about the events we had witnessed in such a short period of time, and which memory still fills our hearts, because we were young soldiers who had never been engaged in battle and previously had hardly imagined what we had been part of and witnessed. There surely is no soldier who has not, in living memory, a lasting impression of the first fight in which he participated and the first ball he heard whistle by.

It was between eleven and midnight, about half an hour after the firing had ceased, when I went to a nearby building with my small water canteen under my arm. This building was a distillery. I found the house packed with men belonging to the Allied army, who had all come for the same purpose. It took me some considerable effort to enter and it was initially poorly rewarded, because even though the cellar was full with liquor, I did not find what I was craving for. But at last there was a magnificent sight before my eyes, being a water pump, to which I hurriedly went and found crystal clear water to my joy! Here I filled my barrel and returned, feeling content with the result of my expedition. Having arrived at the corner of Quatre Bras I noticed a horrific scene. Thousands of bodies lay piled upon each other; thousands of victims of the unbridled lust for power of one man, of one tyrant, who if he had been able to dominate the entire world would have found the earth too small for his unbridled tyranny! There lies the earthly hope of so many loving parents, the lust, the staff, the comfort of so many spouses and loyal wives! With frightful expectations, with all the feeling of love and loyalty they

await news from their men at home, while those who are the object of so much worry and concern were lying here, robbed of feelings and life, merely stretched out in the ice-cold arms of death!

Yet, there were many men among this horrifying number that were not lifeless. Confused and terrifying cries for help, as well as lamentations in various languages made this clear. Here a French Chasseur à cheval called for compassion from those who passed by; yonder a Scot or Hanoverian moaned. I looked upon these unlucky ones with sadness and compassion; I wanted to help, but this was impossible. It was impossible in such terrible confusion and with such overwhelming numbers of wounded to assist all those who the required attention. The ambulances were fully packed, while wagons with wounded covered the road to Brussels and all means of transportation were commandeered from those peasants who had not fled from the tumult of war.

With a heavy heart I returned to my battalion in the darkness of night, creeping past the aforementioned distillery, and reflecting upon what I had seen, whilst admiring the unforgettable strength of mind that one of the wounded Brunswickers displayed. I had forgotten to mention this earlier, although the event had already taken place before I had set out to search for water. The farm or inn had been furnished as a hospital. In front of it was a wagon full of wounded, ready to ride to Brussels. They were waiting for one Brunswicker, of whom a surgeon was busily amputating the second leg that had been smashed by a ball; the other leg of the unfortunate man had been shot off at the knee. As soon as the operation was finished, the maimed man was put on the wagon and he immediately began to sing a popular song at the time: 'Unser alter Stadtverwalter'. Truly a rare feat from a stoic warrior!

Having continued to crawl along my path in the direction of our bivouac, I suddenly felt something soft and slimy with my hands. At first I imagined it were the discarded intestines of a pig we had slaughtered in the morning. But, I noticed this had been caused by a human body (no pen is able to describe the emotion at that moment); a Brunswicker had been robbed of his life by a ball in the stomach, so that his intestines hang out! Motionless and with folded hands I watched the horrible spectacle for some time before returning to full consciousness again, upon hearing an awful cry. Looking around I noticed some soldiers from my battalion who were towing a pig they had acquired out of the barn belonging to a peasant. The animal probably had no good expectations of his forced march and stubbornly refused with all the power in his lungs to continue the parade with his new guides. This had been the cries which had awakened me from my reflections. I hastened to assist my comrades, for which service I joined in their spoils.

Having safely arrived at our bivouac, we immediately organised the cooking of the animal, which resulted in a lovely meal for many of us. We spent the night quietly on our green beds. However, the night did not last long, because at three o'clock in the morning we stood to our arms again, ready for battle. No orders followed, and we remained on our position awaiting further orders until eleven o'clock, while other troops were engaged in fighting. Now we received orders to advance, or rather withdraw, and we did this for five hours, before halting close to Braine la Leud (sic) and Lembeek, where we established our new bivouac within the corn fields, which were already trodden down and covered by our troops, as well as the English cavalry. We hastened to construct tents of straw and branches in order to shelter from the heavy rain, which had begun to fall upon us when we were on the road. We had marched for over an hour through the water, with our ankles deep in mud. The huts we had constructed were not as comfortable we had wished, nor were they a shelter from the rain, but nevertheless they proved to be pleasant and of good service.

But here too our rest was short-lived, as our appetite had been greatly increased by the tiring march and subsequent building work, so every stomach called for satisfaction. What else remained for us other than the usual remedy for soldiers in the field who find themselves in such a situation: to maraud. This we did with lust and zeal; while one collected wood, the others obtained salt, meat, chickens; everything we could lay our hands upon in the neighbourhood which was to our taste. We gathered a great deal of provisions in a short time, taking into account we had to march for about three hours to Alseberg. The rain had not stopped pouring down, but this did not deter us from our endeavours, but spurred us to complete them.

When we had eventually collected the necessary ingredients for a good field meal, we hung our kettles above the smoking fires and began to cook. Pushing, peeping and yearning we stood with open mouths around the kettles, which hovered in the dense smoke of the wet wood. We longed for the delicious moment when the contents would be spread out in front of us in a tempting way. But alas! How often is the sweetest hope and expectation merely a deceptive dream! Suddenly, a clear drum roll sounded like thunder, and called the many cooks and guests to arms; to our woe we had to leave all of our meal. One comrade in my company defied fate; in all haste and neglecting his fingers, he filled his small tin kettle with hot potatoes and rushed up to his comrades with the spoils. He had the tin kettle strapped to his knapsack and rightly satisfied, marched along with us.

We halted and placed ourselves in a fairly advantageous position close to Waterloo, where we were sheltered from the enemies' small calibre arms, as we were on a plateau beside the road and where he could scarcely reach us from his position in the low ground, as most of his balls only hit the plateau that safeguarded us. In our turn we rarely fired back. But, as if on purpose a musket ball suddenly hit the kettle with potatoes, which our comrade carried on his knapsack, so that the costly earth fruit was spread in all directions. This caused a great deal of laughter among us, which must have seemed very peculiar to the enemy, if he was able to hear it.

So the hours of the day passed, while there was almost no fighting worth mentioning. The weather, which had remained well until the evening, became rainy again and in such a manner that it steadily increased. Soon it was as if the clouds wanted to pour their entire contents over us, because it was so incessant and violent in the way that the water poured down upon us. Standing deep in the water, as if in a swamp, we did not attempt to step on the dry ground for a moment, as this would only have been momentarily, because gradually the entire terrain changed into a quagmire. Under these circumstances it was impossible to fire a single shot and soon we had to clean our muskets. Our battalion received the order to assemble and to occupy the forward positions, to which purpose half of it had to remain under arms the entire night, despite the wretched weather, and had to keep alert so as not to be overwhelmed by the enemy. I have never lived through a more frightening night than this, and one has only to imagine our fatigue, our complete lack of basic necessities; the awful weather during the dark night, the thought of the fallen comrades of whom many lay helplessly around, and the uncertainty of the outcome of the bloody battle. One only has to imagine for a moment to understand that turmoil, which I do not exaggerate.

The expanding dawn, the one of the unforgettable and decisive 18th June, smiled friendly upon us. The heavens had cleared and promised a beautiful day. We felt our strength, our courage and our confidence revived and prepared everything for the approaching battle with a cheerful heart. As far as the eye could see, the ground was covered with the French. Their tumultuous sounds of war reached us and the wonderful rising sun was reflected in the helmets and cuirasses of their numerous heavy cavalry.



Our artillery had the honour of firing the first shot at the beginning of the battle, which soon became general, heavy and destructive. It is not my intention to go into the full details, as this task has already been done by more authoritative pens than mine; I only keep to that which happened to me in person. From three o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock in the evening we were constantly engaged in battle. I had not remained without any wounds; the sabre of a French Cuirassier had cut my upper lip and the thrust of a bayonet had wounded me fairly deep in the side. These wounds, together with the tremendous effort and the fatigue of the battle, caused me to become powerless and sick, so that I was no longer able to stand. This resulted in one of the surgeons taking me from the ranks, to look for a wagon to be transported to the hospital at Brussels.

There was no lack of such transportation wagons, and soon I found one, in which I was put with the assistance of a comrade. But when I was settled as well as possible, the wagon was unable to proceed, because of the baggage which blocked the road, along with broken carts, dead men and horses, etc. There I was, unable to move; overwhelmed by the impatience, my wounds became ever more painful, and despite the fact that I bandaged myself as well as I was able by tearing pieces from my shirt, I was in a most desperate situation. Darkness began to spread across the scene of confusion. I made a resolute decision and crawled from the wagon, so as to return to my comrades and to seek assistance from them. It was already ten o'clock. No firing could be heard; victory was ours, and the emperor of the French was in full retreat.

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