

The Charge of the 15th Hussars at Peterloo as described by Sir WILLIAM G. H. JOLLIFFE, Bart., M.P. in a letter which appears in Dean Pellew's *Life of Lord Sidmouth, Vol. III.*

9 St. James's Place, London

April 11th, 1845.

To Thomas Grimston Bucknall Estcourt, Esq. M.P.

My Dear Sir,

Twenty-five years have passed since the collision unfortunately occurred between the population of Manchester and its neighbourhood and the military stationed in that town, on the sixteenth of August, 1819.

I was at that time a Lieutenant in the 15th King's Hussars, which Regiment had been quartered in Manchester Cavalry Barracks about six weeks. This was my first acquaintance with a large manufacturing population. I had little knowledge of the condition of that population, whether or no a great degree of distress was then prevalent, or whether or no the distrust and bad feeling which appeared to exist between employers and employed, was wholly or in part caused by the agitation of political questions. I will not, therefore, enter into any speculation on these points, but I will endeavour to relate the facts which fell under my own observations, although acting, as of course I was, under the command of others, and in a subordinate situation. The military force stationed in Manchester consisted of six troops of the 15th Hussars, under the command of Colonel Dalrymple; one troop of Horse Artillery with two guns, under Major Dyneley; and nearly the whole of the 31st Regiment, under Colonel Guy L'Estrange (who commanded the whole as senior officer). [Sir John Byng was then at Pontefract.] Some companies of the 88th Regiment and [six troops of] the Cheshire Yeomanry had also been brought into the town in anticipation of disturbances which might result from the expected meeting; and these latter had only arrived on the morning of the sixteenth, or a few hours previously; and, lastly, there was a troop of Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry, consisting of about forty members, who, from the manner in which they were made use of (to say the least) greatly aggravated the disasters of the day. Their ranks were filled chiefly by wealthy master manufacturers; and without the knowledge possessed by a (strictly speaking) military body, they were placed, most unwisely, as it appeared, under the immediate command and order of the civil authorities.

Our Regiment paraded in field-service order at about 8.30 or it might be 9 o'clock, a.m. Two squadrons of it were marched into the town about ten o'clock. They were formed up and dismounted in a wide street, the name of which I forget * to the North of St. Peter's field (the place appointed for the meeting), and at the distance of nearly a quarter of a mile from it.

The Cheshire Yeomanry were formed, on our left, in the same street. One troop of our Regiment was attached to the artillery, which took up a position between the Cavalry Barracks and the town; and one troop remained in charge of the Barracks.

The two squadrons with which I was stationed must have remained dismounted nearly two hours. During the greater portion of that period a solid mass of people continued moving along a street about a hundred yards to our front on the way to the place of meeting. Other officers as well as myself occasionally rode to the front (to the end¹ of a street) to see them pass. They marched at a brisk pace in ranks well closed up, five or six bands of music being interspersed, and there appeared to be but few women with them. Mr. Hunt, with two or three other men, and I think two women dressed in light blue and white, were in an open carriage drawn by the people. This carriage was adorned with blue and white flags; and the day was fine and hot. As soon as the great bulk of the procession had passed, we were ordered to stand to our horses. In a very short time afterwards, the four troops of the 15th mounted, and at once moved off by the right, at a trot which was increased to a canter. Someone who had been sent from the place of meeting to bring us led the way through a number of narrow streets and by a circuitous route to (what I will call) the South-west² corner of St. Peter's field. We advanced along the South side of this space of ground without a halt or pause even: the words "Front!" and "Forward!" were given, and the trumpet sounded the charge at the very moment the threes wheeled up. When fronted, our line extended quite across the ground, which in all³ parts was so filled with people that their hats seemed to touch.

It was then for the first time that I saw the Manchester troop of Yeomanry; they were scattered singly or in small groups over the greater part of the field, literally hemmed up and hedged into the mob so that they were powerless either to make an impression or to escape; in fact, they were in the power of those whom they were designed to overawe, and it required only a glance to discover their helpless position, and the necessity of our being brought to their rescue. As I was at the time informed, this hopeless state of things happened thus: A platform had been erected near the centre of the field, from which Mr. Hunt and others were to address the multitude, and the magistrates, having ordered a strong body of constables to arrest the speakers, unfortunately imagined that they should support the peace officers by bringing up the troop of Yeomanry at a walk. The result of this movement, instead of that which the magistrates desired, was unexpectedly to place this small body of horsemen (so introduced into a dense mob) entirely at the mercy of the people by whom they were, on all sides, pressed upon and surrounded.

The charge of the Hussars, to which I have just alluded, swept this mingled mass of human beings before it; people, yeomen, and constables, in their confused attempts to escape, ran one over the other; so that by the time we had arrived at the end of the field the fugitives were literally piled up to a considerable elevation above the level of the ground. (I may here, by

¹ [St. John Street or Byrom Street.—Editor.]

² [South-east would be more correct.—Editor.]

³ [East would be more correct. The Cheshire Yeomanry filed along the south side. The arrows in Stanley's Plan make this clear.—Editor.]

the way, state that this field, as it is called, was merely an open space of ground, surrounded by buildings, and itself, I rather think, in course of being built upon).

The Hussars drove the people forward with the flats of their swords, but sometimes, as is almost inevitably the case when men are placed in such situations, the edge was used, both by the Hussars, and, as I have heard, by the yeomen also; but of this last part I was not cognizant, and believing though I do that nine out of ten of the sabre wounds were caused by the Hussars, I must still consider that it redounds to the humane forbearance of the men of the 15th that more wounds were not received, when the vast numbers are taken into consideration with whom they were brought into hostile collision; beyond all doubt, however, the far greater amount of injuries were from the pressure of the routed multitude. The Hussars on the left pursued down the various streets which led from the place; those on the right met with something more of resistance. The mob had taken possession of various buildings on that side, particularly of a Quakers' chapel and burial ground enclosed with a wall. This they occupied for some little time, and in attempting to displace them, some of the men and horses were struck with stones and brickbats. I was on the left, and as soon as I had passed completely over the ground and found myself in the street on the other side, I turned back, and then, seeing a sort of fight still going on, on the right, I went in that direction. At the very moment I reached the Quakers' meeting-house, I saw a farrier of the 15th ride at a small door in the outer wall, and to my surprise his horse struck it with such force that it flew open. Two or three Hussars then rode in, and the place was immediately in their possession. I then turned towards the elevated platform, which still remained in the centre of the field with persons upon it; a few straggling Hussars and yeomen, together with a number of men having the appearance of peace-officers were congregating about it. On my way thither I met the Commanding officer of my Regiment, who directed me to find a Trumpeter, in order that he might sound the "rally" or "retreat." This sent me again down the street I had first been in (after the pursuing men of my troop); but I had not ridden above a hundred yards before I found a Trumpeter, and returned with him to the Colonel. The field and the adjacent streets now presented an extraordinary sight: the ground was quite covered with hats, shoes, musical instruments, and other things. Here and there lay the unfortunates who were too much injured to move away, and this sight was rendered the more distressing by observing some women among the sufferers.

Standing near the corner of the street where I had been sent in search of a Trumpeter, a brother officer called my attention to a pistol being fired from a window. I saw it fired twice, and I believe it had been fired once before I observed it. Some of the 31st Regiment just now arriving on the ground were ordered to take possession of this house, but I do not know if this was carried into effect.

I next went towards a private of the Regiment whose horse had fallen over a piece of timber nearly in the middle of the square, and who was most seriously injured. There were many of these pieces of timber (or timber-trees) lying upon the ground, and as these could not

be distinguished when the mob covered them, they had caused bad falls to one officer's horse and to many of the troopers. While I was attending to the wounded soldier, the artillery troop with the troop of Hussars attached to it, arrived on the ground from the same direction, by which we had entered the field; these were quickly followed by the Cheshire Yeomanry. The 31st Regiment came in another direction, and the whole remained formed up till our squadrons had fallen in again.

Carriages were brought to convey the wounded to the Manchester Infirmary, and the troop of Hussars who came up with the guns was marched off to escort to the gaol a number of persons who had been arrested, and among these Mr. Hunt. For some time the town was patrolled by the troops, the streets being nearly empty, and the shops for the most part closed. We then returned to the Barracks. I should not omit to mention that, before the men were dismissed, the arms were minutely examined; and that no carbine or pistol was found to have been fired, and only one pistol to have been loaded.

About 8p.m one squadron of the 15th Hussars (two troops) was ordered on duty to form part of a strong night picket, the other part of which consisted of two companies of the 88th Regiment. This picket was stationed at a place called the New Cross, at the end of Oldham Street. As soon as it had taken up its position, a mob assembled about it, which increased as the darkness came on; stones were thrown at the soldiers, and the Hussars many times cleared the ground by driving the mob up the streets leading from the New Cross. But these attempts to get rid of the annoyance were only successful for the moment, for the people got through the houses or narrow passages from one street into another, and the troops were again attacked, and many men and horses struck with stones. This lasted nearly an hour and a half, and the soldiers being more and more pressed upon, a town magistrate, who was with the picket, read the Riot Act, and the officer in command ordered the 88th to fire (which they did by platoon firing) down three of the streets. The firing lasted only a few minutes; perhaps not more than thirty shots were fired; but these had a magical effect; the mob ran away and dispersed forthwith, leaving three or four persons on the ground with gunshot wounds. At 4a.m. the picket squadron was relieved by another squadron of the Regiment. With this latter squadron I was on duty, and after we had patrolled the town for two hours, the officer in command sent me to the magistrates (who had remained assembled during the night) to report to them that the town was perfectly quiet, and to request their sanction to the return of the military to their quarters.

On the afternoon of the 17th I visited, in company with some military medical officers, the Infirmary. I saw there from twelve to twenty cases of sabre-wounds, and among these two women who appeared not likely to recover. One man was in a dying state from a gunshot wound in the head; another had had his leg amputated; both these casualties arose from the firing of the 88th the night before. Two or three were reputed dead; one of them a constable, killed on St. Peter's field, but I saw none of the bodies.

As shortly as I could I have now related what fell under my own observation during these twenty-four hours... I trust that I have, in some degree, complied with your wishes.