

Trafalgar

Chapter One

Napoleon reviews the Army of England

The Emperor was coming and all of Boulogne was en fete. Along the cliffs north of the town, the men of Napoleon's army awaited his arrival. Almost 100,000 soldiers - the greatest army France had ever assembled - were gathered for his inspection. There were regiments of Guards drawn up on the slopes of Terlincthun. There were regiments of dragoons and light infantry, companies of Voltigeurs and artillery, rows of prancing horses and squadrons of cavalry in outrageous uniforms. It was not just the French army that was assembled at Boulogne. It was the grandest military spectacle the world had ever seen.

For many of the troops, fidgeting nervously as they waited for Napoleon to arrive, 16 August 1804 was going to be a day they would remember for the rest of their lives. A day their descendants have remembered too, ever since. The day the Emperor embraced them personally and bestowed on them the newly founded Legion d'honneur, France's highest decoration.

The ceremony had been planned for months. Boulogne had been specially decorated for the occasion. There were flags at every window and swathes of coloured bunting across the streets. There were triumphal arches, allegorical statues and signs pointing out 'The Road to England' towards the harbour. The road was lined with excited crowds, the girls wearing traditional fete costumes and patriotic ribbons, the children clutching tricolours in their hands. In the vale of Terlincthun, the massed bands of sixty regiments were waiting to greet Napoleon. Along the cliff tops, batteries of guns stood ready to fire a salute in his honour. Everything was in place, just waiting for the Emperor to appear.

In the middle of the vale, where he was to address the troops, a magnificent podium had been erected at the summit of a small rise. The podium was twice the height of a man, approached on either side and from the front by three sets of wooden steps. On top of it stood a splendid throne, said to have been used 1,000 years earlier by Dagobert, the legendary king of the Franks.

Behind the throne stood a theatrical backdrop of statues in shining armour and imperial eagles crowned with laurel wreaths. There was also a display of military banners, more than 200 of them, arranged in a fan shape around the podium. The banners were bloodstained and riddled with shot. They had been captured at the battles of Lodi, Arcola, Marengo and a score of other French triumphs. Now they stood fluttering in the breeze of the English Channel, eloquent testimony to the courage of the army that had captured them.

The army itself stood facing the podium in a giant semicircle. It was a fine sight, the pick of French manhood. Almost all the officers and NCOs had seen active service in recent campaigns, as had more than half the men. Their commanders were Michel Ney, Nicolas Soult and Louis Davout, figures legendary in the annals of war. The army had been camped at Boulogne for more than a year, training furiously for the assault on England. The troops were fully prepared and ready to go. Only a few more days now, they had been promised, just a few more days and then the invasion would begin. Their day of glory would arrive.

From their vantage points around the valley, some 20,000 citizens of Boulogne watched adoringly as the troops went through their paces. Many of the spectators were women, for Boulogne was a great prostitutes' town. The army had tried to get rid of them at first, refusing residents' permits to any who didn't actually live in Boulogne. But some had been allowed to remain, making fortunes in the process. Chief among them was Madame Forty Thousand Men, an energetic twenty-two-year-old whose chamber pot never stopped ringing to the sound of the ecus the troops flung in there. Recent analysis of some skeletons suggests that eighty per cent of the army had syphilis. Madame Forty Thousand was probably in the pay of the English.

But now here was Napoleon. They could hear the cheers in the distance. Cries of 'Vive l'Empereur!' and girls strewing flowers in his path. The army stiffened as the cheers drew nearer. The musicians picked up their instrument and the infantry shouldered their muskets. The officers unsheathed their swords, ready for the salute. Thousands of bayonets flashed as the men gripped their weapons, waiting for the order to present arms.

The Emperor was riding his favourite white horse. He wore the uniform of a Foot Guards general - coat, white waistcoat and breeches, shiny top boots and that famous black hat, the very image of Napoleon. He was accompanied by an escort of 300 glittering horsemen, grouped protectively around their new Emperor. Napoleon had only been an Emperor since May. He hadn't even been crowned yet.

A fanfare of trumpets greeted his arrival. Two thousand drummer boys raised their sticks and beat out the urgent rhythm of 'Aux Champs' as his entourage galloped at full speed towards the podium. The gun batteries fired their salute and church bells rang out across the town. As one man, the Grand Army crashed to attention and presented arms as Napoleon reined in at the saluting base. They watched with awe bordering on reverence as he dashed up the steps and turned to address them from the great throne of Dagobert on the top.

He spoke first to the recipients of the Legion d'honneur. There were more than 2,000 of them, almost the first to be awarded France's most prestigious decoration. One was an admiral, two - Ney and Soult - were marshals of France, and three were bishops. The rest were soldiers of all ranks, officers and men who had distinguished themselves in the service of their country

and who now stood waiting to reap their reward.

Napoleon surveyed them proudly. Then he raised his hand and swore them to be true to the ideals of the Legion:

Commanders, officers, legionnaires, citizens, soldiers. Swear upon your honour to devote yourselves to the service of the Empire, to the preservation of the integrity of French territory, to the defence of the Emperor, the laws of the Republic, and the property which they have made sacred. Swear to combat, by all the means which justice, reason and the law authorise, any attempt to re-establish the feudal system. In short, swear to concur with all your might in maintaining liberty and equality, the very bedrock of our institutions. Swear!

The recipients swore. Then Napoleon turned to the rest of the army:

And you, soldiers, swear to defend with your life the honour of the French name, your country, and your Emperor.

The soldiers swore, too. Few of them could actually hear what Napoleon was saying, but they took their cue from their officers, who shouted, 'We swear it!' with one voice. Then the bands struck up the 'Song of Departure' and the distribution of the Legion's crosses began.

The ceremony lasted for hours. The men climbed the steps at one side of the podium, bowed to Napoleon, received their cross, then descended the steps the other side, like a school prize-giving. The crosses were distributed from the helmet of Pierre Bayard, the 'chevalier sans peur' who had been the saviour of France in the 1520s. The helmet was carried on the shield of Bertrand Du Guesclin, the celebrated Constable of France. The new Emperor saw himself as the heir to these great Frenchmen. Whenever he recognised a soldier he knew, he exchanged a few words with him as he gave him his cross, reminiscing about times past, campaigns they had shared. Napoleon was said to have a gift for remembering the faces of ordinary soldiers. It was why the army loved him.

They never knew that actually Napoleon remembered very few of them. His aides simply primed him with the relevant information beforehand.

The afternoon was well advanced by the time all the crosses had been distributed. The weather was still fine, but rain clouds were gathering in the distance and a breeze was whipping up waves in the Channel. During a break in the proceedings, Napoleon took a telescope and turned towards the sea. He trained it on England, the object of his current preoccupations. The white cliffs of Dover were clearly visible in the sunlight, less than thirty miles from Boulogne. Napoleon had long been

familiar with the sight:

I have seen the English coast as clearly as one can see the Calvary [at Fontainebleau] from the Tuileries. One could pick out the houses, and see plenty of movement. The Channel is a mere ditch. It will be crossed as soon as someone is brave enough to try it.

And who was brave enough? Napoleon, of course. The arrangements were already well in hand. A few more days and everything would be ready for the invasion.

It had been planned down to the last detail. Julius Caesar had invaded England from Boulogne. His troops had landed somewhere between Walmer and Deal, where the gently shelving beach had made it easy for the legions to swarm ashore. As Caesar had invaded, so would Napoleon. From Deal he would advance to Canterbury, and from there to Chatham, Rochester and London. The English did not possess an army capable of stopping him, any more than their ancestors had been able to stop Caesar.

The campaign had been planned so meticulously that test dies for a commemorative medal had already been made. The medal was a classical affair, with a picture of Napoleon crowned with laurels on one side and one of Hercules on the other, subduing England in the shape of a half-man, half-fish. 'Descente en Angleterre', said the medal. 'Frappée a Londres en 1804'. Not true, of course, but who would ever know?

Thus would France be avenged. Thus would ten centuries of insult be expunged (Napoleon varied this speech - sometimes he thought it was only six centuries). Several centuries anyway of English tyranny, armies of boorish Anglo-Saxons rampaging unrestrained through the civilisation of France. Hordes of shirtless English peasants, roaring drunk, fighting anyone they met. The embarrassment of Crecy, the cruelty of Henry V, the disrespect of the archers at Agincourt, giving the chivalry of France a two-fingered salute to show that they could still pull their bowstrings. The burghers of Calais, the capture of Boulogne by Henry VIII (the town still had the cannon balls). The loss of Canada and India. The French kings and nobles dragged across the Channel and held captive for years in the Tower of London, some to be heavily ransomed, others to die miserably in that terrible place. All of this and much, much more would be avenged by Napoleon. A calm sea, a few days of good weather, and he would be in London, flying the tricolour from the flagpoles of that same Tower. Then would come the reckoning for all those years of insult.

Napoleon had already decided what he would do when he had conquered London: 'With God's help I will put an end to the future and very existence of England.' A republic would be proclaimed, with liberty, equality and fraternity for all. King George III would be removed from his throne, although allowed to live on as Citizen Hanover. The nobility would be abolished,

along with the House of Lords. Their lands and fine houses would be redistributed among Napoleon's supporters. The House of Commons would be allowed to remain, but only after major reform. A proclamation would be issued announcing that the French had come as friends, to restore popular government and liberate the common people from a corrupt and wicked aristocracy. There would be democracy and a redistribution of property in favour of the ordinary working man. The treasures and fine arts of the aristocracy would be redistributed, too - taken to France, where they would be far better appreciated by their new owners than a lot of useless English lords.

Then what? With England out of the way, the world would belong to Napoleon. He would be master of the seas, Emperor of all he surveyed. The West Indies would be his, rich in slaves and sugar. The route to India would again be open, and Canada and South Africa. Trade, commerce, profit, and no one to oppose him. He would make France the richest, greatest, most powerful country on the face of the earth. He would make it the world's first and only superpower, far surpassing anything Caesar had known, with himself unrivalled at its head. The prospect was dazzling, to say the least.

There was, however, one small cloud on this agreeably sunny horizon.

Napoleon adjusted his telescope. Turning away from Dover, he refocused on a sight much closer to home - a line of warships cruising the open sea outside Boulogne harbour. The ships were Royal Navy vessels, blockading the port just out of range of the shore batteries. They had been there for more than a year, watching the French army's every move. They were so close that they had heard the cheers for Napoleon and seen the banners waving around his throne.

Napoleon closed his telescope. The Royal Navy was an irrelevance. He had already devised a plan to get rid of the blockade. The ships would be lured away on false pretences, and while they were gone he would invade England behind their backs. His admirals had the details.

He consulted his watch. The party wasn't over yet. By some accounts there was a grand finale still to come - the arrival of the invasion barges that would ferry his army across the Channel. Their arrival was a well-kept secret, a surprise to rally the troops. The barges would appear out of nowhere, to highly theatrical effect. The sailors manning them would leap ashore amid wild cheering to join forces with their brothers in the army, throwing their arms around each other and shedding brave tears. Then they would all march past Napoleon, the sailors leading the way with boarding axes at their shoulders. More than 100,000 soldiers and sailors would swing past the podium, while Napoleon took the salute from his throne. It would be a splendid climax to the day's festivities.

But the flotilla was late. It should have arrived as Napoleon finished distributing the crosses. Something had held it up - perhaps the breeze that was getting stronger every minute, stirring up the

waters of the Channel.

Laure Junot, wife of one of Napoleon's generals, could see that something was wrong: 'It was five o'clock, and for about an hour I had observed the Emperor turning repeatedly to M. Decres, the Minister of Marine, and speaking to him in a low voice. Then he took a telescope and looked out to sea, as if he was hoping to see a distant sail. At length his impatience appeared to get the better of him. Berthier, too, who was biting his nails in spite of being a Marshal, was also looking out to sea. Junot was there there as well, all of them talking privately among themselves. They were obviously waiting for something to happen.

'At length the Minister of Marine got a message and immediately told the Emperor. Napoleon grabbed M. Decres' telescope so violently that it fell and rolled down the steps of the throne. We all looked in the same direction and saw a flotilla of between 1,000 and 1,200 boats, advancing towards Boulogne from the other nearby ports and Holland.'

It was an armada, of sorts. The barges were flat-bottomed, specially designed for the invasion. They were part of a larger fleet that would amount to more than 2,000 vessels when it was fully assembled. The coast of northern France had seen nothing like it since the days of William the Conqueror.

Other accounts, perhaps downplaying the incident, put the number of vessels at only forty-seven, bringing more troops from Le Havre. Whatever the true figure, they made a stirring sight as they approached the shore. They would put the fear of God into the watching English, who would be in no doubt as to what the barges were for. So many landing craft so close to England could mean only one thing.

But then something happened, one of those unfortunate accidents that could befall anyone, if they don't know what they're doing. The officer leading the first division of the flotilla was unfamiliar with the waters. Instead of waiting for a pilot to guide him in, he pressed on regardless, not realising that there were some new coastal works in the shallows that didn't appear on his chart. The leading barges bumped into them and promptly capsized. A number of soldiers vanished overboard, to loud cries of alarm from the watchers on land. The water was shallow, so most were able to make it ashore by themselves. Even so, one still managed to drown.

The onlookers rushed to help. Half of Boulogne hurried down to the seashore. They pulled the soldiers out of the water with a great deal of shouting and gesticulating, then turned their attention to the barges, now floating upside down on the swell. Admiral Decres had warned Napoleon that the flat-bottomed design was not well suited to the open sea. But Napoleon hadn't listened. He wasn't interested in naval design.

Napoleon remained on his throne, appalled. To be humiliated thus, in front of the English!

Caesar had had a slave at his elbow during his triumphs, whispering in his ear to remind him that he was still only mortal. Napoleon had the French navy

Climbing down from his throne, he strode angrily towards the cliff top with Decres and Marshal Berthier. The air was blue with obscenities as Napoleon watched the rescue operation. Onlookers agreed that he had not been in such a bad mood for a long time. There was to be a grand dinner for the soldiers that evening and a display of fireworks afterwards if the rain held off. Napoleon's mood did not improve as the heavens opened and the rain came pouring down. It grew worse, if anything, because he was not going to forget this day for a long time to come. The sniggers of the English, as they enjoyed the antics of the flotilla, had been more than he could bear.