

# Where were you at Waterloo?

## Chapter One

About five a.m. on the morning of the Queen's official birthday parade, Guardsman Turtle of Her Majesty's Gobelins Guards slipped quietly out of bed and tiptoed into the washroom to give his bearskin a shampoo. While the rest of 9 Platoon were still asleep in the barrack block, Turtle dunked his head-dress in a basin of hot water and squirted Vosene suds over it until he had worked up a fine lather. He sang a little song to himself as he did so. Today's parade, known to the ignorant as Trooping the Colour, was important to Turtle. It would be the first time that he and his Sovereign had worked together professionally. He wanted her to catch him at his best.

When he had finished shampooing the bearskin, Turtle rinsed it twice under the shower before giving it a brisk pummelling with his green army towel. Then he took it into the boiler room and left it to dry.

By six thirty, he couldn't do a thing with it.

It had dried all right, but it had dried like frightened candy floss. To Turtle, tearfully raking the fur with gobs of hair gel, it was obvious that his world was about to collapse.

At eight o'clock, Sergeant Ball broke the news to Sebastian Clinch. 'I shall have to get rid of him, sir,' he said. 'There's nothing else for it. I won't have him going on television looking like that. The cameras will pick him up, wherever he stands. They can't miss.'

Nor could they. Seventeen years old and six foot four, thin as a flagpole, Turtle was a conspicuous sight. He was not easily lost in a crowd.

'And another thing,' continued Ball. 'With the battalion going on Spearhead this afternoon, he's got to make out a will. In case he gets shot. He's asked you to witness it, sir. He won't have anyone else. Says it's personal.'

'I'll talk to him after the parade,' said Sebastian.

'If you would sir, please. By 1400 hours. I have to get the wills back to the Company clerk before we go on active service. Otherwise it might be too late. '

The heavy equipment had been packed and weighed, ready for airlift. The light equipment would follow as soon as the birthday parade was over. At two o'clock that afternoon, the 1st Battalion, the Gobelins Guards would go on standby as Spearhead of the British army for the month of June.

The Spearhead commitment lasts thirty days and is shared in rotation between all infantry regiments stationed in the British Isles. It is a commitment to fly anywhere in the world at twenty four hours' notice. In theory it could mean typhoon relief work in Hong Kong, a peace-

keeping role in Cyprus, an anti-Communist presence in the Gulf. In practice, or so it appeared to Sebastian, Spearhead in the post-imperial 1980s meant one place only - Northern Ireland. The Irish were hotting up for their silly season, culminating in the annual Apprentice Boys' march. A month on standby would surely require a trip across the Irish Sea to reinforce the tightly-stretched regular troops, in Derry perhaps or South Armagh. The question was not if, but when.

There were thirty men in 9 Platoon, average age twenty. Each of them had signed an official document that morning, warning them for immediate service overseas. Regular leave had been suspended for a month. Nobody would step outside the barrack gate without leaving a telephone number for contact in an emergency. The smell of action hung sharp and chill in the air. Every soldier in the platoon, every soldier in the battalion, knew that by the same time next week he might be dead.

Sebastian worried about all the men under his command, but about none more than Turtle. The others knew how to look after themselves. Partridge, his orderly, had grown up in a slum. Gilligan, a sombre mercurial Irishman, had volunteered for the battalion's last tour in Belfast. Turtle was different. If anyone in 9 Platoon was daft enough to accept a powdered glass sandwich from a girl whose smile hid IRA sympathies, or follow her twinkling buttocks to a party with a guest list of one, Turtle was. Sebastian feared for his life.

Horse Guards Parade, one minute to eleven. Eight detachments of Foot Guards drawn up to await the arrival of the Queen. The Grenadier Guards at the right of the line, because theirs was the Colour to be trooped today. Next the Gobelins Guards, identified by a yellow plume in the bearskin. Beyond them, elements of the Scots, Irish, Welsh and Coldstream Guards, in that order. Spectators lining the square, ladies in picture hats and gentlemen in morning coats. Chelsea pensioners in dress uniform, wearing their medals; old men and boy scouts standing together. Television cameras relaying the spectacle to twelve million living-rooms. Sunshine, flags and good humour. The nation was gathering to honour its Monarch.

On one side of the square stood the garden wall of 10 Downing Street. On the other, the old Admiralty building. The space in between had been used as a tilt yard during the reign of Elizabeth I. Later it became an assembly point for royal troops. Soldiers drilled here before the War of the Spanish Succession. It was here, on a cold morning in February 1793, that George III reviewed the Gobelins Guards before sending them to Holland to open the first campaign of the Napoleonic Wars. The dust was rich beneath Sebastian's feet. The ground had seen men in his uniform depart for the Crimea and the Boer War. It had seen them go twice to France this century to fight the Germans. The history of the Gobelins Guards, more than three hundred years of it, was the history of this ground.

The regiment was raised by King Charles II in 1652 to provide a royal bodyguard. It is the only regiment in the army to owe name and title to the charms of a woman. In 1652 Charles was an exile in Paris, a fugitive from Cromwell's England, hunted and penniless. Mlle de Gobelin (she added 'de' in honour of the royal connection) was a tapestry saleswoman who called on him with a selection of wallhangings and stayed to become his mistress. As a saleswoman she was not a success. She ended up lending Charles 3000 pistoles to finance a company of guards for the protection of his person. Duly and uncharacteristically grateful, he named them in her honour.

Yet the Regiment's tradition goes back much further than 1652. It goes back at least as far as the monarchy, to the house carls of King Harold, defenders of their liege at the Battle of Hastings. Strong blond men who would die rather than give ground to the Norman invaders - and did. A thousand years . had gone into the making of the Gobelin Guards, a thousand years of royal soldiering and taut professional pride. Men like Sergeant Ball, his moustache curling into his eyes, fought beside Henry V on St Crispin's Day. Men like Sebastian, too. And men like Turtle. A hastily borrowed bearskin had restored his equilibrium and he had wiped away his tears; he was on parade in scarlet tunic, at the end of the line furthest from the cameras. In days gone by, the ancestors of Ball and Sebastian and Turtle had known what it was to march to war. In days to come, Sebastian hoped and prayed, so would they.

The clock above the Horse Guards building was nudging eleven. Preceded by an escort of jingling horsemen, the Queen came into view from the direction of Buckingham Palace. She was riding side-saddle and wore the white plume of the Grenadiers in her hat. Behind her, swathed in gold braid, rode Prince Charles and the Duke of Edinburgh. At the first chime of the clock came the order to present arms. 'Royal salute. Present hipe!' Sword to lip, Sebastian kissed the hilt and lowered the blade with a swish towards the ground. The audience stood up. Above their heads, the clock struggled gamely for a while, then lapsed into silence as the band began to play.

After a preliminary inspection of the ranks, the Queen rode at a walk across the parade ground towards the saluting base in front of the stone-coloured archways of the Horse Guards building. A flurry of movement followed as arms were ordered and swords returned to the carry. The spectators resumed their seats. Now came the trooping.

With stately tread the red-gold Colour was borne aloft down the line of Guards, so that all might recognise and rally to it in battle. An escort of Grenadiers marched alongside in a protective phalanx. The ceremony had served a real purpose in times past, a symbolic one now. Towards the end of its journey, the Colour passed a few feet in front of Sebastian. It was gripped by a young ensign, lugubrious of face, erect of carriage. His lips trembled in silent incantation above his gleaming curb chain. His right elbow, held parallel to the ground, was burning with cramp.

Out of one eye Sebastian watched him revert to his original position at the right of the line. This

was the signal for the remainder of the parade, who had not moved during the troop, to get their legs back. Gratefully the men formed close order for the march past. At the beat of the drum, all eight detachments stepped off together. The Gobelins were in No 3 Guard, officers at the front in line abreast. They were led by the Company commander, Major the Earl of Malplaquet, MVO, DSC. He was the man to follow. If he put a foot wrong- which was quite possible, even with Sergeant Ball bellowing at him from behind - he would drop everyone in it.

It was very necessary for Sergeant Ball to bellow. The din was terrific. Lord Malplaquet's words of command, more confident than distinct, were snatched away by the noise of the band. Some officers, unsure of their vocal chords, had taken extra lessons from an opera singer in advance of the parade. It had not occurred to Malplaquet to join them.

'Steady, sir! Fill to your left!' Ball was stern, and full of authority, as if restraining a cocker spaniel. Obediently, Malplaquet did as he was told. He could not see what was going on behind him. He knew only that the march past was a complex manoeuvre, easier to conceive than to execute. There were corners to negotiate, and orders to be given on the correct foot at the right moment. No laughing matter when the eyes of millions were upon him. A cock-up, even a small one, could damage his career.

No 3 Guard had hit the home straight now, more or less intact, and there, up ahead, was the Queen. Her face was impassive, but her eyes did not miss a trick. Through a haze of dust the Guardsmen drew nearer and nearer until, at length, they were almost level. This was the moment they had been waiting for. The moment for which the spring months had been spent in rehearsal. The moment the Drill Sergeant - not normally an angry man - had insisted would never come, because the Queen would die laughing long before the exhibition that was No 3 Guard ever reached her.

'No 3 Guard!', yelled Malplaquet. 'Eyes - right!' Seventy pairs of eyeballs rattled in seventy skulls and three swords dipped in homage. The Queen acknowledged with a white-gloved hand. Earnest faces looked her squarely in the eye - Sebastian Clinch, conscious somehow of an unwritten debt to history; Turtle, aware that his mother had taken the day off from the factory to watch on television; Sergeant Ball, determined that nothing should go wrong now. And then the moment was over. The troops had gone past and were staring at the spectators in the stands. There remained only a halt to reform the ranks, a display by the cavalry - all tinsel and glitter - and the ceremony would be complete. Once the Royal Family had been escorted back to Buckingham Palace, the birthday would be out of the way for another twelve months.

The gates of Chelsea Barracks stood wide to admit the returning troops. Watched through the railings by a handful of curious civilians, the men of No 3 Guard teetered forward on their toes

in expectation of the order to dismiss.

It was 12.45. There was just time to change before lunch. In fifteen minutes a fly past of RAF jets from Strike Command would roar over the palace and across central London, the last public tribute of the day. An hour later, in camouflaged combat jackets and rubber boots, the battalion would go on Spearhead, packed, loaded and ready to move. Every man in barracks, six hundred in all, wondered what, if anything, the afternoon would bring.