
Opening Extract from...

Sharpe's Rifles

Written by Bernard Cornwell

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SHARPE'S RIFLES

Richard Sharpe and the French Invasion of Galicia, January 1809

BERNARD CORNWELL

HARPER

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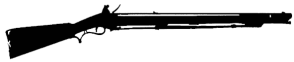
SHARPE'S RIFLES

PROLOGUE



The prize was a strongbox.

A Spanish Major was struggling to save the box, while a chasseur Colonel of Napoleon's Imperial Guard had been ordered to capture it. The Frenchman had been unleashed to the task; told that he could destroy or kill whatever or whoever tried to obstruct him.

The strongbox itself was a chest made of a wood so old that it appeared as black and shiny as coal. The wood was bound with two iron bands that, though pitted with ancient rust, were still strong. The old chest was two feet long, eighteen inches wide, and as many inches high. It was locked with two hasps that were fastened with brass padlocks. The joint between the humped lid and the chest was sealed with red seals, some of them so old that they were now little more than wisps of wax imbedded in the grain of the ancient wood. An oilcloth had been sewn around the strong box to protect it from the weather, or rather to protect the fate of Spain that lay hidden inside.

On the second day of 1809 the chasseur Colonel almost captured the strongbox. He had been given a Regiment of French Dragoons and those horsemen caught up with the Spaniards close to the city of Leon. The Spaniards only escaped by climbing into the high mountains where they were forced

to abandon their horses, for no horse could climb the steep, ice-slicked tracks where Major Blas Vivar sought refuge.

It was winter, the worst winter in Spanish memory, and the very worst time to be in the northern Spanish mountains, but the French had given Major Vivar no choice. Napoleon's armies had taken Madrid in December, and Blas Vivar had fled with the strongbox just one hour before the enemy horsemen had entered the capital. He had ridden with one hundred and ten Cazadores; the mounted 'hunters' who carried a straight-bladed sword and a short-barrelled carbine. But the hunters had become the hunted as, in a nightmare journey across Spain, Vivar had twisted and turned to avoid his French pursuers. He had hoped to find safety in General Romana's northern army, but, only two days before the Dragoons forced them into the hills, Romana was defeated. Vivar was alone now, stranded in the mountains, with just ninety of his men left. The others had died.

They had died for the strongbox which the survivors carried through a frozen countryside. Snow thickened in the passes. When there was a thaw it only came in the form of rain; a pelting, relentless rain that turned the mountain paths into mud which froze hard in the long nights. Frostbite decimated the Cazadores. In the worst of the cold the survivors sheltered in caves or in high deserted farmsteads.

On one such day, when the wind drove a bitter snowfall from the west, Vivar's men hunched in the miserable shelter of a narrow gully high on a mountain's crest. Blas Vivar himself lay at the gully's rim and stared into the valley through a long-barrelled telescope. He stared at the enemy.

Brown cloaks hid the pale green coats of the French Dragoons. These Frenchmen had followed Vivar every mile of his bitter journey but, while he struggled in the highlands, they rode in the valleys where there were roads, bridges, and shelter.

On some days the weather would stop the French and Vivar would dare to hope that he had lost them, but whenever the snow eased for a few hours, the dreaded shapes would always appear again. Now, lying in the shivering wind, Vivar could see the enemy horsemen unsaddling in a small village that lay in the valley's bottom. The French would have fires and food in the village, their horses would have shelter and hay, while his men sobbed because of the cold which lashed the mountainside.

'Are they there?' Vivar's second in command, Lieutenant Davila, climbed up from the gully.

'They're there.'

'The chasseur?'

'Yes.' Vivar was staring directly at two horsemen in the village street. One was the chasseur Colonel of the Imperial Guard, gaudy in his scarlet pelisse, dark green overalls and colback, a round hat made of thick black fur.

The other wore no uniform; instead he was dressed in a black, tight-waisted riding coat above white boots. Vivar feared the black-coated horseman more than he feared the chasseur, for it was he who guided the Dragoons' pursuit. The black-coated man knew where Blas Vivar was heading, he knew where he could be stopped, and he knew the power of the object that was hidden in the ironbound box.

Lieutenant Davila crouched in the snow next to Vivar. Neither man looked like a soldier any more. They were swathed in cloaks made from common sacking. Their faces, boots, and hands were wrapped in rags. Yet, beneath their makeshift cloaks they wore the scarlet uniforms of a Cazador elite company, and they were each as hard and efficient as any man who struggled in the French wars.

Davila borrowed Vivar's glass and stared into the valley. Driven snow blurred the view, but he could see the splash of

the scarlet pelisse hanging from the chasseur's right shoulder. 'Why doesn't he wear a cloak?' he grumbled.

'He's showing how tough he is,' Vivar said curtly.

Davila shifted the glass to see yet more Dragoons coming to the village. Some of the Frenchmen led limping horses. All carried swords and carbines. 'I thought we'd lost them,' he said sadly.

'We'll only lose them when we bury the last one.' Vivar slid down from the skyline. He had a face hardened by sun and wind, a pugnacious face, but saved from coarseness by the dark eyes that could spark with humour and understanding. Now, watching his men shiver in the narrow gully, those eyes were rimmed with red. 'How much food is left?'

'Enough for two days.'

'If I did not know better,' Vivar's voice was scarcely audible above the wind's noise, 'I would think God had abandoned Spain.'

Lieutenant Davila said nothing. A gust of wind snatched snow from the crest and whirled it in a glittering billow above their heads. The French, he thought bitterly, would be stealing food, firewood, and women in the valley. Children would be screaming. The men in the village would be tortured to reveal whether or not they had seen a tattered band of Cazadores carrying a strongbox. They would truthfully deny any such sighting, but the French would kill them just the same and the man in the black coat and white boots would watch without a flicker of emotion crossing his face. Davila closed his eyes. He had not known what it was to hate until this war had begun, and now he did not know if he would ever root the hate out of his soul.

'We'll separate,' Vivar said suddenly.

'Don Blas?' Davila, his thoughts elsewhere, had misheard.

'I shall take the strongbox and eighty men,' Vivar spoke slowly,

'and you will wait here with the other men. When we're gone, and when the French are gone, you will go south. You will not move until you are sure the valley is empty. That chasseur is clever, and he may already have guessed what I am thinking. So wait, Diego! Wait till you are certain, then wait another day. Do you understand?'

'I understand.'

Vivar, despite his agonizing tiredness and the cold that leached into his very bones, found some enthusiasm to invest his words with hope. 'Go to Orense, Diego, and see if there are any of our men left. Tell them I need them! Tell them I need horses and men. Take those men and horses to Santiago, and if I'm not there, ride east till you find me.'

Davila nodded. There was an obvious question to ask, but he could not bring himself to speak.

Vivar understood anyway. 'If the French have captured the strongbox,' he said bleakly, 'then you will know. They will trumpet their capture across Spain, Diego, and you will know because the war will be lost.'

Davila shivered beneath his ragged cloaks. 'If you go west, Don Blas, you may find the British?'

Vivar spat to show his opinion of the British army.

'They would help you?' Davila insisted.

'Would you trust the English with what is in the strongbox?'

Davila considered his answer, then shrugged. 'No.'

Vivar eased himself to the crest once more and stared down at the village. 'Perhaps those devils will meet the British. Then one pack of barbarians can kill the other.' He shuddered with the cold. 'If I had enough men, Diego, I would fill hell with the souls of those Frenchmen. But I do not have the men. So fetch them for me!'

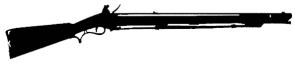
'I will try, Don Blas.' It was as much of a promise as Davila dared offer, for no Spaniard could feel hopeful in these early

days of 1809. The Spanish King was a prisoner in France, and the brother of the French Emperor had been enthroned in Madrid. The armies of Spain, which had shown such fine defiance the previous year, had been crushed by Napoleon, and the British army, sent to help them, was being chased ignominiously towards the sea. All that was left to Spain were fragments of its broken armies, the defiance of its proud people, and the strongbox.

The next morning, Vivar's men carried the strongbox to the west. Lieutenant Davila watched as the French Dragoons saddled their horses and abandoned a village that had been plundered and from which the smoke rose into a cold sky. The Dragoons might not know where Blas Vivar was, but the man in the black coat and white boots knew precisely where the Major was going, and so the French forced their horses to the west. Davila waited a full day; then, in a downpour of rain that turned the snow to slush and the paths to thick mud, he went south.

The hunters and the hunted were moving again, inching their intricate paths across a wintry land, and the hunted were seeking the miracle that might yet save Spain and snatch a glorious victory from defeat.

CHAPTER ONE



More than a hundred men were abandoned in the village. There was nothing to be done for them. They were drunk. A score of women stayed with them. They were drunk too.

Not just drunk, but insensible. The men had broken into a tavern's storeroom and found great barrels of last year's vintage with which they had diluted their misery. Now, in a bleak dawn, they lay about the village like the victims of a plague.

The drunks were redcoats. They had joined the British army because of crime or desperation, and because the army gave them a third of a pint of rum a day. Last night they had found heaven in a miserable tavern in a miserable Spanish town on a miserable flint road that led to the sea. They had got drunk, so now they would be left to the mercy of the French.

A tall Lieutenant in the green jacket of the 95th Rifles moved among the bodies which lay in the stable yard of the plundered tavern. His interest was not in the stupefied drunks, but in some wooden crates that had been jettisoned from an ox-drawn waggon to make space for wounded and frost-bitten men. The crates, like so much else that the army was now too weak to carry, would have been left for the pursuing French, except that the Lieutenant had discovered that they contained rifle ammunition. He was rescuing it. He had already filled the packs and pouches of his Battalion with as many of the precious cartridges

as the Riflemen could carry; now he and one Rifleman crammed yet more into the panniers of the Battalion's last mule.

Rifleman Cooper finished the job then stared at the remaining crates. 'What do we do with them, sir?'

'Burn it all.'

'Bloody hell!' Cooper gave a brief laugh, then gestured at the drunks in the yard. 'You'll bleedin' kill 'em!'

'If we don't, the French will.' The Lieutenant had a slash of a scar on his left cheek that gave him a broodingly savage face. 'You want the French to start killing us with our own gunpowder?'

Cooper did not much care what the French did. At this moment he cared about a drunken girl who lay in the yard's corner. 'Pity to kill her, sir. She's a nice little thing.'

'Leave her for the French.'

Cooper stooped to pull open the girl's bodice to reveal her breasts. She stirred in the cold air, but did not waken. Her hair was stained with vomit, her dress with wine, yet she was a pretty girl. She was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, she had married a soldier and followed him to the wars. Now she was drunk and the French would have her. 'Wake up!' he said.

'Leave her!' All the same the Lieutenant could not resist crossing the yard to look down at the girl's nakedness. 'Stupid bitch,' he said sourly.

A Major appeared in the yard's entrance. 'Quarter-master?'

The Lieutenant turned. 'Sir?'

The Major had a small wiry moustache and a malevolent expression. 'When you've finished undressing women, Quartermaster, perhaps you'd be good enough to join the rest of us?'

'I was going to burn these crates first, sir.'

'Bugger the crates, Quartermaster. Just hurry up!'

'Yes, sir.'

‘Unless you’d prefer to stay here? I doubt the army would miss you?’

The Lieutenant did not reply. Six months ago, when he had joined this Battalion, no officer would have spoken thus in front of the men, but the retreat had jaded tempers and brought hidden antagonisms to the surface. Men who would normally have treated each other with wary respect or even a forced cordiality, now snapped like rabid dogs. And Major Warren Dunnett hated the Quartermaster. It was a livid, irrational and consuming hatred, and the Quartermaster’s annoying response was to ignore it. That, and his air of competence, could provoke Major Dunnett into a livid anger. ‘Who in Christ’s holy name does he think he is?’ he exploded to Captain Murray outside the tavern. ‘Does he think the whole bloody army will wait for him?’

‘He’s just doing his job, isn’t he?’ John Murray was a mild and fair man.

‘He’s not doing his job. He’s gaping at some whore’s tits.’ Dunnett spat. ‘I didn’t bloody want him in this Battalion, and I still don’t bloody want him in the Battalion. The Colonel only took him as a favour to Willie Lawford. What the hell is this bloody army coming to? He’s a jumped-up sergeant, Johnny! He isn’t even a real officer! And in the Rifles, too!’

Murray suspected that Dunnett was jealous of the Quartermaster. It was a rare thing for a man to join Britain’s army as a private soldier and to rise into the officers’ mess. The Quartermaster had done that. He had carried a musket in the red-coated ranks, become a Sergeant, then, as a reward for an act of suicidal bravery on a battlefield, he had been made into an officer. The other officers were wary of the new Lieutenant’s past, fearing that his competence in battle would show up their own inexperience. They need not have worried, for the Colonel had kept the new Lieutenant from the

battle-line by making him into the Battalion's Quartermaster; an appointment based on the principle that any man who had served in the ranks and as a Sergeant would know every trick of the Quartermaster's criminal trade.

Abandoning both the drunks and the remaining ammunition to the French, the Quartermaster emerged from the tavern yard. It began to rain; a sleet-cold rain that spat from the east onto the three hundred Riflemen who waited in the village street. These Riflemen were the army's rearguard; a rearguard dressed in rags like a mockery of soldiers, or like some monstrous army of beggars. Men and officers alike were draped and bundled in whatever scraps of cloth they had begged or stolen on the march, the soles of their boots held in place by knotted twine. Their unshaven faces were wrapped with filthy scarves against the bitter wind. Their eyes were red-rimmed and vacant, their cheeks were sunken, and their eyebrows whitened by frost. Some men had lost their shakos and wore peasant hats with floppy brims. They looked a beaten, ragtag unit, but they were still Riflemen and every Baker rifle had an oiled lock and, gripped in its doghead, a sharp-edged flint.

Major Dunnett, who commanded this half Battalion, marched them westwards. They had been marching since Christmas Eve, and now it was a week into January. Always west away from the victorious French whose overwhelming numbers were swamping Spain, and every day of the march was a torture of cold and hunger and pain. In some Battalions all discipline had disappeared and the paths of such units were littered with the bodies of men who had given up hope. Some of the dead were women; the wives who had been permitted to travel with the army to Spain. Others were children. The survivors were now so hardened to horror that they could trudge past the frozen body of a child and feel nothing.

Yet if the army had been broken on the rack of ice-storms

and a frozen wind that cut like a chasseur's sabre, there were still some men who marched in good formation and who, when ordered, turned to keep the French pursuit at bay. Those were the hard men, the good men; the Guards and the Light Infantry, the elite of Sir John Moore's army that had marched into the centre of Spain to cut off Napoleon's supply roads. They had marched expecting victory, but the Emperor had turned on them with a savage speed and overwhelming numbers, so now this small British army retreated towards the ships that would take them home.

Dunnett's three hundred Riflemen seemed alone in a frozen wilderness. Somewhere ahead of them was the bulk of the retreating army, and somewhere behind were the pursuing French, but the Riflemen's world was the pack of the man in front, the sleet, their tiredness, and the pain of bellies cramped by hunger.

An hour from the village they reached a stream crossed by a stone bridge. British cavalry waited there with news that some artillery was floundering on a slope two miles ahead. The cavalry's commander suggested that Dunnett's Rifles wait by the bridge. 'Give us time to help the gunners to the ridge, then we'll come back for you.'

'How long?' Dunnett asked testily.

'An hour? No longer.'

The Riflemen waited. They had done this a score of times in the last two weeks, and doubtless they would do it a score of times again. They were the sting in the army's tail. If they were lucky this day no Frenchman would bother them, but the probability was that, sometime in the next hour, the enemy vanguard would appear. That vanguard would be cavalry on tired horses. The French would make a token attack, the Riflemen would fire a couple of volleys; then, because neither side had an advantage, the French would let the greenjackets

trudge on. It was soldiering; boring, cold, dispiriting, and one or two Riflemen and one or two Frenchmen would die because of it.

The Riflemen formed in companies to bar the road west of the bridge. They shivered and stared east. Sergeants paced behind their ranks. The officers, all of whom had lost their horses to the cold, stood in front of their companies. No one spoke. Perhaps some of the men dreamed of the Navy's ships that were supposed to be waiting for them at the end of this long road, but more likely their thoughts were of nothing but cold and hunger.

The Lieutenant who had been made into the Battalion's Quartermaster wandered aimlessly onto the stone bridge and stared into the stinging sleet. He was now the closest man to the enemy, twenty paces ahead of the greenjacketed line, and that piqued Major Warren Dunnett who saw an unspoken arrogance in the Lieutenant's chosen position. 'Bugger him.' Dunnett crossed to Captain Murray's side.

'He's harmless.' Murray spoke with his customary mildness.

'He's a jumped-up bloody nothing.'

Murray smiled. 'He's a damned efficient Quartermaster, Warren. When did your men last have so much ammunition?'

'His job is to arrange my bed for tonight, not loiter here in the hope of proving how well he can fight. Look at him!' Dunnett, like a man with an itching sore that he could not stop scratching, stared at the Quartermaster. 'He thinks he's still in the ranks, doesn't he? Once a peasant, always one, that's what I say. Why's he carrying a rifle?'

'I really couldn't say.'

The rifle was the Quartermaster's eccentricity, and an unfitting one, for a Quartermaster needed lists and ink and quills and tally-sticks, not a weapon. He needed to be able to forage for food or ferret out shelters in apparently overcrowded billets.

He needed a nose to smell out rotten beef, scales to weigh ration flour, and stubbornness to resist the depredations of other Quartermasters. He did not need weapons, yet the new Lieutenant always carried a rifle as well as his regulation sabre. The two weapons seemed to be a statement of intent; that he wanted to fight rather than be a Quartermaster, yet to most of the greenjackets the weapons were a rather pathetic pretension carried by a man who, whatever his past, was now nothing more than an ageing Lieutenant.

Dunnett stamped his cold feet on the road. 'I'll send the flank companies back first, Johnny. You can cover.'

'Yes, sir. Do we wait for our horse?'

'Bugger the cavalry.' Dunnett offered the infantryman's automatic scorn of the mounted arm. 'I'm waiting five more minutes. It can't take this long to clear some bloody guns off the road. Do you see anything, Quartermaster?' The question was asked mockingly.

'No, sir.' The Lieutenant took off his shako and pushed a hand through hair that was long, black, and made greasy by days of campaigning. His greatcoat hung open and he wore neither scarf nor gloves. Either he could not afford them, or else he was boasting that he was too tough to need such comforts. That arrogance made Dunnett wish that the new Lieutenant, so eager for a fight, would be cut down by the enemy horsemen.

Except there were no enemy horsemen in sight. Perhaps the rain and the wind and the God-damned bloody cold had driven the French to shelter in the last village. Or perhaps the drunken women had proved too irresistible a lure. Whichever it was, there were no Frenchmen in sight, just sleet and low clouds driven to turmoil by a freshening wind.

Major Dunnett swore nervously. The four companies seemed alone in a wilderness of rain and frost, four companies of

forgotten soldiers in a lost war, and Dunnett made up his mind that he could wait no longer. 'We're going.'

Whistles blew. The two flank companies turned and, like the walking dead, shambled up the road. The two centre companies stayed at the bridge under Captain Murray's command. In five minutes or so, when the flank companies had stopped to provide cover, it would be Murray's turn to withdraw.

The Riflemen liked Captain John Murray. He was a proper gentleman, they said, and it was a fly bastard who could fool him; but if you were straight with him, then the Captain would treat you fair. Murray had a thin and humorous face, quick to smile and swift with a jest. It was because of officers like him that these Riflemen could still shoulder arms and march with an echo of the *élan* they had learned on the parade ground at Shorncliffe.

'Sir!' It was the Quartermaster who still stood on the bridge and drew Murray's attention to the east where a figure moved in the sleet. 'One of ours,' he called after a moment.

The single figure, staggering and weaving, was a redcoat. He had no musket, no shako, nor boots. His naked feet left blood-stains on the road's flint bed.

'That'll learn him,' Captain Murray said. 'You see, lads, the perils of drink?'

It was not much of a joke, merely the imitation of a preacher who had once lectured the Battalion against the evils of liquor, but it made the Riflemen smile. Their lips might be cracked and bloody with the cold, but a smile was still better than despair.

The redcoat, one of the drunks abandoned in the last village, seemed to flap a feeble hand towards the rearguard. Some instinct had awoken and driven him onto the road and kept him travelling westwards towards safety. He stumbled past the flensed and frozen carcass of a horse, then tried to run.

'Ware cavalry!' the new Lieutenant shouted.

'Rifles,' Captain Murray called, 'present!'

Rags were snatched from rifle locks. Men's hands, though numb with the cold, moved quickly.

Because, in the white mist of sleet and ice, there were other shapes. Horsemen.

The shapes were grotesque apparitions in the grey rain. Dark shapes. Scabbards, cloaks, plumes and carbine holsters made the ragged outlines of French cavalry. Dragoons.

'Steady, lads, steady!' Captain Murray's voice was calm. The new Lieutenant had gone to the company's left flank where his mule was hobbled.

The redcoat twisted off the road, jumped a frozen ditch, then screamed like a pig in a slaughteryard. A Dragoon had caught the man, and the long straight sword sliced down to open his face from brow to chin. Blood speckled the frosted earth. Another horseman, riding from the other flank, hissed his steel blade to cut into the fugitive's scalp. The drunken redcoat fell to his knees, crying, and the Dragoons rode over him and spurred towards the two companies which barred the road. The small stream would be no obstacle to their charge.

'*Serrez! Serrez*!' The French word of command came clear to the Riflemen. It meant 'close up!' The Dragoons bunched, booted knee to booted knee, and the new Lieutenant had time to see the odd pigtails which framed their faces before Captain Murray shouted the order to fire.

Perhaps eighty of the rifles fired. The rest were too damp, but eighty bullets, at less than a hundred yards, shattered the single squadron into a maelstrom of floundering horses, falling men, and panic. The scream of a dying horse flayed the cold day.

'Reload!'

Sergeant Williams was on the right flank of Murray's

company. He seized one of the damp rifles which had not fired, scooped the wet sludge from its pan, and loaded it with dry powder from his horn. 'Pick your targets! Fire as you will!'

The new Lieutenant peered through the dirty grey smoke to find an enemy officer. He saw a horseman shouting at the broken cavalry. He aimed, and the rifle bruised his shoulder as he fired. He thought he saw the Frenchman fall, but could not be sure. A riderless horse galloped away from the road with blood dripping from its saddle-cloth.

More rifles fired. Their flames spat two feet clear of the muzzles. The French had scattered, using the sleet as a screen to blur the Riflemen's aim. Their first charge, designed only to discover what quality of rearguard faced them, had failed, and now they were content to harass the greenjackets from a distance.

The two companies that had retreated westwards under Dunnett had formed now. A whistle blew, telling Murray that he could safely fall back. The French beyond the bridge opened a ragged and inaccurate fire with their short-barrelled carbines. They fired from the saddle, making it even less likely that their bullets would find a mark.

'Retire!' Murray shouted.

A few rifles spat a last time, then the men turned and scrambled up the road. They forgot their hunger and desperate tiredness; fear gave them speed, and they ran towards the two formed companies who could hold another French charge at bay. For the next few minutes it would be a cat and mouse game between tired cavalry and cold Riflemen, until either the French abandoned the effort, or British cavalry arrived to drive the enemy away.

Rifleman Cooper cut the hobble of the Quartermaster's mule and dragged the recalcitrant beast up the road. Murray gave the mule a cut on its backside with his heavy sword, making

it leap forward. 'Why don't you let it go?' he shouted at the Lieutenant.

'Because I damn well need it.' The Lieutenant ordered Cooper to take the mule off the road and up the northern hillside to clear the field of fire for Dunnett's two companies. The green-jackets were trained to the skirmish line, to the loose chain of men who took shelter and sniped at the enemy, but on this retreat the men in green formed ranks as tight as the redcoats and used their rifles for volley fire.

'Form! Form!' Sergeant Williams was shouting at Murray's company. The French advanced gingerly to the bridge. There were perhaps a hundred of them, a vanguard mounted on horses that looked desperately tired and weak. No horse should have been campaigning in this weather and on these bitter mountain roads, but the Emperor had launched these Frenchmen to finish off the British army and so the horses would be whipped to death if that meant victory. Their hooves were wrapped in rags to give purchase on slippery roads.

'Rifles! Fix swords!' Dunnett shouted. The long sword-bayonets were tugged from scabbards and clipped onto the muzzles of the loaded rifles. The command was probably unnecessary. The French did not look as though they would try another charge, but fixed swords was the rule for when facing cavalry, so Dunnett ordered it.

The Lieutenant loaded his rifle. Captain Murray wiped moisture from the blade of his Heavy Cavalry sword which, like the Lieutenant's rifle, was an eccentricity. Rifle officers were expected to wear a light curved sabre, but Murray preferred the straight-bladed trooper's sword that could crush a man's skull with its weight alone.

The enemy Dragoons dismounted. They left their horses at the bridge and formed a skirmish line that spread either side of the road. 'They don't want to play,' Murray said chidingly,

then he twisted round in hope of a glimpse of the British cavalry. There was none.

'Fall back by companies!' Major Dunnett shouted. 'Johnny! Take your two back!'

'Fifty paces, go!' Murray's two companies, accompanied by the Quartermaster and his mule, stumbled back the fifty yards and formed a new line across the road. 'Front rank kneel!' Murray shouted.

'We're always running away.' The speaker was Rifleman Harper. He was a huge man, an Irish giant in a small-statured army, and a troublemaker. He had a broad, flat face with sandy eyebrows that now were whitened by frozen sleet. 'Why don't we go down there and choke the bastards to death. They must have bloody food in those bloody packs.' He twisted round to stare westwards. 'And where the hell's our bloody cavalry?'

'Shut up! Face front!' It was the Quartermaster who snapped the order.

Harper gave him a lingering look, full of insolence and disdain, then turned back to watch Major Dunnett's companies withdraw. The Dragoons were dull shapes in the middle distance. Sometimes a carbine fired and the wind snatched at a smear of grey smoke. A greenjacket was hit in the leg and swore at the enemy.

The new Lieutenant guessed it was now about two hours before midday. This fighting retreat should be over by early afternoon, after which he would have to hurry ahead to find some cattleshed or church where the men could spend the night. He hoped a commissary officer would appear with a sack of flour that, mixed with water and roasted over a fire of cowdung, would have to suffice as supper and breakfast. With luck a dead horse would provide meat. In the morning, the men would wake with stomach cramps. They would again form

ranks; they would march, then they would turn to fight off these same Dragoons.

Dragoons who now seemed happy to let the Riflemen slip away. 'They're not very eager today,' the Lieutenant grumbled.

'They're dreaming of home,' Murray said wistfully. 'Of chicken and garlic in a pot, good red wine, and a plump girl in bed. Who wants to die in a miserable place like this if that's waiting for you?'

'We'll retire by column of half companies!' Dunnett, convinced that the enemy would not risk closing the gap, planned to turn his back on them and simply march away. 'Captain Murray? Your men first, if you please.'

But before Murray could give an order, the new Lieutenant's voice called in urgent warning, 'Ware cavalry behind!'

'They're ours, you fool!' Dunnett's distaste for the Quartermaster could not be disguised.

'Oh, Christ!' Murray had turned to look up the road along which the four companies must retreat. 'Rear rank! About turn! Major Dunnett! They're crapauds!'

God alone knew how, but a new enemy had appeared behind. There was no time to wonder where they had come from, only to turn and face the three fresh squadrons of Dragoons. The French cavalry rode with open cloaks which revealed their pink-faced green coats. They carried drawn swords. They were led, curiously, by a chasseur; an officer in the red coat, scarlet pelisse and black fur hat of the Emperor's Imperial Guard. Alongside him, mounted on a big roan, was an equally strange figure; a man dressed in a black riding coat and boots that were gleaming white.

Dunnett gaped at the new enemy. Riflemen frantically reloaded empty weapons. The Quartermaster knelt, braced his rifle by looping its sling about his left elbow, and fired at the chasseur.

He missed. Rifleman Harper jeered.

A trumpet sounded from the enemy. There was death in its shrill note.

The chasseur's sabre was raised. Beside him the man in the civilian coat drew a long slim sword. The cavalry broke into the trot and the new Lieutenant could hear the hooves on the frozen ground. The Regiment of Dragoons still rode in squadrons that could be distinguished by the colour of their horses. The first squadron was on black horses, the second on bays, and the third on chestnuts; it was an arrangement common in peacetime, but rare in battle that swiftly diluted the pattern with remounts. The trumpeters were on greys, as were the three men who carried the guidons on their long staffs. The small flags were bright against the low clouds. The Dragoons' long swords were even brighter, like blades of pale ice.

Major Dunnett realized his Riflemen were in danger of annihilation. 'Rally square! Rally! Rally!'

The greenjackets contracted into the rally square; a clumsy formation whereby men crowded together for protection against cavalry. Any man who found himself in the front rank knelt and jammed his rifle butt into the turf so that his sword-bayonet's blade could be held rigid. Others reloaded their rifles, skinning their frozen knuckles on the sword-bayonets' long blades as they rammed the charges home. Rifleman Cooper and his mule sheltered in the middle of the square.

The chestnut squadron wheeled from the rear of the French charge, drew carbines, and dismounted. The other two squadrons spurred into the canter. They were still a hundred paces away and would not rowel their horses to the gallop till they were very close to their target.

'Fire!' Dunnett shouted.

Those Riflemen who had reloaded fired.

A dozen saddles were emptied. The Riflemen jostled each

other, shaking themselves into ranks so that the rally square became a real square from which every rifle could fire. There were three ranks of them now, each plumed with bayonets.

'Fire!' More rifles spat, more cavalry fell, then the chasseur officer, instead of pressing the charge home, wheeled his horse away and the two squadrons sheered off to unmask the dismounted men who now opened fire with their carbines. The first Dragoons, the company which had waited by the bridge, closed on the square's eastern face.

The rally square made a perfect target for the dismounted Dragoons. If the Riflemen shook themselves into line to sweep the makeshift infantry away, then the mounted cavalry would spur their horses back into motion and the greenjackets would become mincemeat. The chasseur Colonel, the Lieutenant thought, was a clever bastard; a clever French bastard who would kill some good Riflemen this day.

Those Riflemen began to fall. The centre of the square soon became a charnel house of wounded men, of blood, screams and hopeless prayer. The rain was stinging harder, wetting the rifle pans, but enough black powder fired to spit bullets at the enemy who, crouched in the grass, made small and elusive targets.

The two mounted squadrons had wheeled away to the west, and now reformed. They would charge along the line of the road, and the frozen steel of their heavy straight swords would burn like fire when it cut home. Except, so long as the Riflemen stayed together, and so long as their unbroken ranks bristled with the pale blades, the horsemen could not hurt them. But the enemy carbines were taking a fearful toll. And when enough Riflemen had fallen the cavalry charge would split the weakened square with the ease of a sword shattering a rotten apple.

Dunnett knew it, and he looked for salvation. He saw it in the low cloud which misted the hillside just two hundred yards

to the north. If the greenjackets could climb into the obscuring shroud of those clouds, they would be safe. He hesitated over the decision. A Sergeant fell back into the square, killed clean by a ball through his brain. A Rifleman screamed as a bullet struck his lower belly. Another, shot in the foot, checked his sob of pain as he methodically reloaded his weapon.

Dunnett glanced up the hill at the cloud's refuge. He stroked his small bristly moustache that was beaded with rain, then made his decision. 'Uphill! Uphill! Keep ranks!'

The square inched uphill. The wounded screamed as they were carried. French bullets still thumped home and the greenjacket formation became ragged as men stopped to return the fire or help the casualties. Their progress was desperately slow, too slow for Major Dunnett's frayed nerves. 'Break and run! Break and run!'

'No!' The new Lieutenant shouted the countermand, but he was ignored. Dunnett's order was given, and now it was a race. If the greenjackets could reach cover before the cavalry could reach them then they would live, but if the chasseur officer had judged his distance right, then he would win.

The red-coated chasseur had judged very well indeed.

The greenjackets ran, but over the sound of their hoarse breath and the pounding of their boots came the swelling thunder of the hooves.

A man turned and saw the bared teeth of a horse. He heard a sword hissing above the sound of the trumpet. The Rifleman screamed.

Then came chaos and slaughter.

The horsemen split the greenjackets apart then wheeled to the killing. The great swords chopped and speared. The new Lieutenant had a glimpse of a man with pigtails swinging beneath his helmet's rim. He twisted aside and felt the wind of the Dragoon's sword on his face. Another horseman rode

at him, but he swung his rifle by its muzzle to crack the horse over the mouth. The horse screamed, reared, and the Lieutenant ran on. He was shouting for men to close on him, but the greenjackets were scattered and running for their lives. The Battalion's mule bolted eastwards and Cooper, stubbornly trying to save his belongings which were strapped to the beast's panniers, was killed by a sword stroke.

Major Dunnett was ridden down to the turf. A seventeen-year-old Lieutenant was caught by two Dragoons. The first blinded him with a slashing backstroke, the second stabbed into his chest. Still the horsemen came. Their horses stank with saddlesores because they had been ridden too hard, but they had been trained to this work. A Rifleman's cheek was flensed from his face and his mouth bubbled with blood and saliva. The French grunted as they hacked. This was a cavalryman's paradise; broken infantry and firm ground.

The new Lieutenant still shouted as he climbed. 'Rifles! To me! To me! To me!' The chasseur must have heard him, for he turned his big black horse and spurred towards the Englishman.

The Lieutenant saw him coming, slung his empty rifle, and drew his sabre. 'Come on, you bastard!'

The chasseur held his own sabre in his right hand and, to make his killing cut easy, directed his horse to the left of the Rifleman. The Lieutenant waited to swing his curved blade at the horse's mouth. The cut would stop its charge dead, making it rear and twist away. He had seen off more horsemen than he could remember with such a stroke. The skill lay in the timing, and the Lieutenant hoped that the horse's panicked evasion would shake the rider loose. He wanted that clever chasseur dead.

A touch of the Frenchman's spurs seemed to make the horse lunge forward for the killing stroke and the Lieutenant swung his sabre and saw he had been fooled. The horse checked and

swerved in a manoeuvre which spoke of hours of patient training. The sabre hissed in empty space. The chasseur was not right-handed but left, and he had changed hands as his horse broke to the right. His blade glittered as it swept down, aimed at the Rifleman's neck.

The Lieutenant had been fooled. He had swung early and into nothing, and he was off balance. The chasseur, knowing this Englishman was dead, was planning his next kill even before his sabre stroke went home. He had killed more men than he could remember with this simple trick. Now he would add a Rifle officer to all the Austrians, Prussians, Russians, and Spaniards who had not been skilful enough.

But the chasseur's sabre did not cut home. With a speed that was astonishing, the Rifleman managed to recover his blade into the parry. The sabres met with a clash that jarred both men's arms. The Lieutenant's four-guinea blade shattered, but not before it had taken the force from the Frenchman's slashing cut.

The momentum of the chasseur's horse took him past the Englishman. The Frenchman turned back, astonished by the parry, and saw him turning to run uphill. For a second he was tempted to follow, but there were other, easier, targets down the hill. He spurred away.

The Lieutenant threw away his broken sabre and scrambled towards the low cloud. 'Rifles! Rifles!' Men heard and closed on him. They scrambled uphill together and made a large enough group to deter the enemy. The Dragoons went for individuals, the men most easily killed, and they took pleasure in thus avenging all the horsemen who had been put down by rifle bullets, all the Frenchmen who had jerked and bled their lives away on the long pursuit, and all the jeers that the Riflemen had sent through the biting air in the last bitter weeks.

Captain Murray joined the new Lieutenant. 'Outfoxed us, by God!' He sounded surprised.

The small group of Riflemen reached safety short of the clouds, up where the litter of rocks made the ground too uneven for the Dragoons to follow. There Murray stopped his men and stared, appalled, at the carnage beneath.

The Dragoons rode among the dead and the defeated. Riflemen with slashed faces reeled among them, others lay motionless until grasping hands turned the dead bodies and began ripping at pouches and pockets. The Quartermaster watched as Major Dunnett was pulled to his feet and his uniform searched for plunder. Dunnett was lucky. He was alive and a prisoner. One Rifleman ran downhill, still trying to escape, and the man in the black coat and white boots rode after him and, with a chilling skill, chopped down once.

'Bastards.' Murray, knowing there was no more fighting to do, sheathed his Heavy Cavalry sword. 'Goddamned bloody crapaud bastards!'

Fifty Riflemen, survivors from all four companies, had been saved from the rout. Sergeant Williams was with them, as was Rifleman Harper. Some of the men were bleeding. A Sergeant was trying to staunch a terrible slash in his shoulder. A youngster was white-lipped and shaking. Murray and the new Lieutenant were the only officers to have escaped the massacre.

'We'll work our way east,' Murray said calmly. 'Maybe we can reach the army after dark.'

A morose swearword sounded from the big Irishman and the two officers glanced down the valley to see the British cavalry at last appear in the drizzle. The chasseur saw them at the same time, and the French trumpet called the Dragoons into order. The British, seeing the enemy's preparedness, and finding no sign of infantry, withdrew.

The Riflemen on the cloud's edge jeered at their retreating cavalry. Murray whipped round. 'Silence!'

But the jeer had drawn the attention of the dismounted Dragoons on the slope below, and they believed the mocking sound had been aimed at them. Some of them seized carbines, others took up fallen rifles, and they fired a ragged volley at the small group of survivors.

The bullets hissed and whiplashed past the greenjackets. The ragged volley missed, except for one fatal bullet that ricocheted from a rock into Captain Murray's side. The force of the bullet spun him round and threw him face down onto the hillside. His left hand scrabbled at the thin turf while his right groped in the blood at his waist.

'Go on! Leave me!' His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

Rifleman Harper jumped down the slope and plucked Murray into his huge arms. The Captain sighed a terrible moan of pain as he was lifted. Below him the French were scrambling uphill, eager to complete their victory by taking these last Riflemen prisoner.

'Follow me!' The Lieutenant led the small group into the clouds. The French fired again, and the bullets flickered past, but the Riflemen were lost in the whiteness now. For the moment, at least, they were safe.

The Lieutenant found a hollow among the rocks that offered some shelter from the cold. The wounded were laid there while picquets were set to guard its perimeter. Murray had gone as white as cartridge paper. 'I didn't think they could beat us, Dick.'

'I don't understand where they came from.' The Lieutenant's scarred face, Murray thought, made him look like an executioner. 'They didn't get past us. They couldn't!'

'They must have done.' Murray sighed, then gestured to Rifleman Harper who, with a gentleness that seemed odd in a man so big, first unstrapped the Captain's sword belt, then unpeeled his clothes from the wound. It was clear that Harper

knew his business, and so the Lieutenant went to peer down the fogged hillside for a sight of the enemy. He could neither see nor hear anything. The Dragoons evidently thought the band of survivors too small to worry about. The fifty Riflemen had become the flotsam of war, mere splinters hacked from a sinking endeavour, and if the French had known that the fugitives were led by a Quartermaster, they might have been even more contemptuous.

But the Quartermaster had first fought the French fifteen years before, and he had been fighting ever since. The stranded Riflemen might call him the new Lieutenant, and they might invest the word 'new' with all the scorn of old soldiers, but that was because they did not know their man. They thought of him as nothing more than a jumped-up Sergeant, and they were wrong. He was a soldier, and his name was Richard Sharpe.