

Jacob Rotermund at the Battle of Waterloo

One of our ancestors, the great-great-grandfather of Joan Luhrs Berecz, was named Jacob Rotermund. He was born on January 3, 1791 in the village of Eickedorf, in the area of northern Germany known as the *Teufelsmoor* – the Devil's Bog. On March 30, 1818 Erert Bollmann, an original settler of the area, turned over operation of his farm in Meinershausen to Jacob due to his own physical frailty and debt. On July 30 of that year, Jacob married Bollmann's stepdaughter Anna Maria Mindermann. Apparently the transaction was handled in two steps because Jacob first assumed the debt, but wasn't given formal title to the property until after his marriage.

The beautiful and productive farmland seen today on the moor didn't exist at that time. During the next four decades, Jacob struggled to extract a living from the boggy land by digging and drying peat, transporting it to Bremen by canal boat and selling it there for fuel, and planting crops where the 10-foot deep peat excavations reached decent soil. He died on 11 April 1865 and was buried in the churchyard at Grasberg.



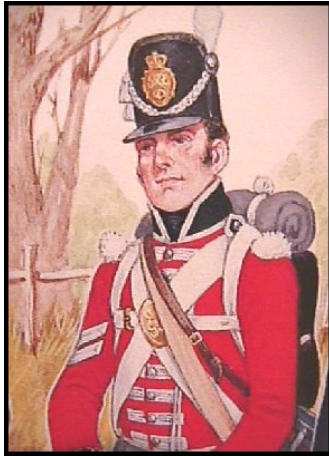
Settler's hut with drying peat and towboat on a canal in the Teufelsmoor.

These are the kind of facts that describe a typical life on the moor in the early 19th century. Many did not survive the rigors of early life on the moor. But, Jacob Rotermund was not typical, and he certainly was a survivor. Before his marriage he had endured something that set him apart from his peers ... something that helped ensure his success and inspired the lives of his descendants. He had been a participant in what is arguably the most famous battle of history – The Battle of Waterloo.

Here's a short version of what happened to lead up to this famous battle. Not long after our American Revolution, there was also a revolution in France against its autocratic king. While the principles of the French revolution were similar to those of our own revolution, they were soon perverted. Eventually a man took control of the revolutionary cause in France to satisfy his own desire for power. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte.

But, the man we know as Napoleon was not an ordinary man ... he was a military genius. He declared himself emperor of France and set out to conquer the world. He almost succeeded. He conquered most of Europe and northern Africa. The French occupied most of northern Germany and established a puppet regime. But, as was the case with other would-be conquerors, the vast distances and frigid winters of Russia's steppes were his undoing. In 1813, he was defeated and exiled to a small island in the Mediterranean Sea named Elba. While the other powers of Europe were arguing about how they would restructure the continent – each offering an alternative that primarily benefited themselves – in early 1815 Napoleon was planning a comeback!

Following Napoleon's initial defeat, the Kingdom of Hannover began to rebuild its armies. Jacob Rotermund, a young man in his early 20's was conscripted into his local militia ...the *Landwehr Battalion of Verden*, a nearby town. ["Landwehr" means militia in German.] Most young men preferred not to serve in the military; it was dangerous and interfered with their work on the family farm. But, every young man was obliged to serve. In times of peace, this meant only occasional training, as in our National Guard. But, in times of war – and in 18th and early 19th century Europe "times of war" were frequent – it meant much more.



Verden Militiaman.

We don't know what Jacob Rotermund looked like. This was before cameras were invented, and only the wealthy could afford an artist to preserve their image in a painting. But, here we see a picture of a typical man in the uniform of the *Verden Militia Battalion*. It is likely that our ancestor looked something like this ... the uniform is certainly correct, if not the facial features. The coat was red, with white belts and gold buttons. The pants were gray; and the plume on the shako hat was either white or yellow ...those being the colors of Hannover.

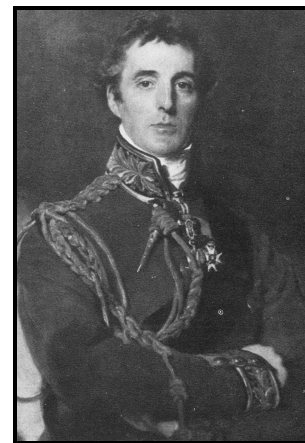
Does the uniform look familiar? Isn't it very much like the "redcoats" who fought against us in the American Revolution? There's a reason for that. It is the same uniform. The part of Germany that Jacob lived in was called the Kingdom of Hannover ...and at that time the King of England was also the King of Hannover. For all practical purposes, Jacob Rotermund served in the British Army. Actually, when the rebuilding of

the Hannover army began, the uniforms issued were from existing British supplies. Each militiaman was armed with a musket and bayonet, but did not carry a sword.

The Verden Militia Battalion at Waterloo consisted of six companies each commanded by a Captain or a Lieutenant responsible for a little over 100 officers and men. The companies were divided into two platoons of two sections each. The junior officers leading these were either Lieutenants or Ensigns (*Fähnlich* – officer candidates). Jacob was a *soldat* – a private. We don't know the specific unit within the battalion to which he was assigned.

In March 1815, Napoleon returned by boat to mainland France with a small, loyal band of soldiers. Over the next couple of months he rallied the French back to his cause and again took control of the nation. He decided to go on the offensive and try to capture Belgium and the Netherlands, which in the past often sided with France. His first objective was the major city of Brussels. There were only two armies that were positioned to attempt to stop Napoleon. These were the British army (with its Belgian, Dutch and German allies) and the army of Prussia – then an independent German kingdom far to the east. Over 100,000 men staffed each of these three armies. They all came together near the little Belgian town of Waterloo, in mid-June of 1815.

Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, commanded the British and allied armies, with the renowned cavalry leader, the Earl of Uxbridge, as second-in-command. Wellington had, years before, fought Napoleon's armies in Spain and Portugal and acquitted himself well. Wellington's two other Corps were led by the very young and inexperienced Prince William of Orange, son of the King of the Netherlands and leader



Wellington.

of the Dutch and Belgian allies, and Lord Rowland Hill, better known as the 1840 inventor of postage stamps. The British Reserve Corps, which we are most interested in, Wellington retained under his personal command.

The Emperor Napoleon led the French army. But, this was an older Napoleon who was physically unwell, and subject to periods of depression. He was not up to his earlier standards of leadership. His army was divided into three parts, also keeping the reserves under his personal command. The other two major army units were commanded by the very impetuous, and often irrational Marshal Michel Ney, and the Marquis de Grouchy, an expert cavalryman who had never before commanded a large combined arms force.



Napoleon.

The very elderly Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher commanded the Prussian armies. He was very eager to avenge his capture by Napoleon in the 1806 Battle of Jena. His chief-of-staff was Gen. August Wilhelm, Count of Geisenau, who held a great dislike for all things British.

With this cast of characters, it's easy to understand why *this battle didn't go off like clockwork*.

We are talking about a huge number of soldiers in a very small area. The village of Waterloo is about eight miles south of Brussels. The famous battle of June 18 was near Mont Saint Jean, just south of Waterloo. The two initial battle sites of June 16 were the crossroads known as Quatre Bras ten miles south of Waterloo, and the village of Ligny only five miles southeast of there. The fourth battle site, Wavre, is nine miles east of Waterloo. The area was rolling farmland, primarily planted in grain. So, early in the battle, it was easy for soldiers to hide among the crops.

Here's a summary of what happened. Since the forces aligned against Napoleon had him badly outnumbered, his primary objective was to keep the British and Prussians from combining forces. His hope was to fight and defeat them each, separately. He faced the British on his left and a few miles away the Prussians on his right. He began the attack late on June 15th with feints to both sides intended to get the British and Prussians moving further apart. On the 16th he ordered Ney to capture the crossroads at Quatre Bras to keep his two enemies from joining forces, and then support him in the attack on the Prussians at Ligny. The British stopped Ney at Quatre Bras and were able to hold their positions, though it was by no means a real victory. At Ligny the Prussians were defeated even without Ney's help. Field Marshal Blücher's horse was shot and fell, pinning him to the ground. He lay there until after dark when aides extricated him, and took him to the rear. There 'liberal application of gin and garlic' revived the old warhorse sufficiently to rejoin his army. The Prussians retreated to Wavre. Napoleon, feeling lethargic and depressed, failed to follow up on his advantage either that evening or the next day.

This brings us to the fateful day of June 18 and Waterloo. The battle began just before noon with a massive French infantry attack on the British that was finally repelled by the British cavalry. About four in the afternoon, the French cavalry attacked and inflicted great losses on the British forces, but were again eventually repelled. At six in the evening, about a third of the Prussian forces arrived on the battlefield and caught the French in a withering crossfire that led to their utter defeat before dark.

Late on the 18th and on the 19th Grouchy fought and defeated the remainder of the Prussians at Wavre, only to find out his Emperor had been defeated at Waterloo. All the French retreated in disarray to Paris, and Napoleon's comeback had ended. He spent the rest of his life in exile on the remote island of Saint Helena, in the south Atlantic.



The Battle of Waterloo – June 18, 1815.

That is just a summary ...and it tells us little of the role in the battle played by our ancestor Jacob Rotermund and his Hanoverian compatriots. So, I will describe the events from the 15th through the 18th of June from the perspective of the 4th Hanoverian Brigade, which included the Verden Militia Battalion. This brigade was under the command of a Colonel Best, and was nominally one of the two major components of the 6th Anglo-German Division. Some of what you read here may seem very strange to us, but remember this was a very different time.

The *Order of Battle* (OOB) is a formal way of describing how the various components of an army are to report and fight, relative to one another. The OOB of Wellington's army included a Reserve Corps of 23,000 men under his direct command. He intended to use them to meet unforeseen critical needs. This corps consisted primarily of the 5th Anglo-German Division under Lt. Gen. Thomas Picton, the 6th Anglo-German Division under Lt. Gen. Galbraith Cole, and the Brunswick Division of the independent Nassau Brigade under William, Duke of Brunswick.

That was the theory. The facts were that General Cole, commander of the 6th Division, was on leave to get married, and missed the battle completely. Also the second major component of the 6th Division – the 10th British Brigade – was quite late in arriving for the battle. So, the reality was that the 4th Hanoverian Brigade was attached to Picton's 5th Division where they joined Col. von Vincke's 5th Hanoverian Brigade. Much of this division was made up of Scottish Highland regiments decked out in kilts and marching to the wail of bagpipes. It must have been quite an experience for these farm boys from the moors of Germany. By the way, it's interesting to note that while General Cole was at home being married, his two fellow commanders of the Reserve Corps (General Picton and the Duke of Brunswick) were both killed in action.

The Verden Militia Battalion consisted of 621 infantrymen under the leadership of Major Christian van der Decken. It made up about a quarter of the 2669 men of Best's 4th Hanoverian Brigade. The other units making up the brigade were the militia battalions of the towns of Lüneberg, Osterode, and Münden. In addition to the infantrymen, they were also supported by two artillery batteries each consisting of five cannons that shot 9-pound balls, and one howitzer that fired 5½ inch shells.

On the night of June 15-16, the 4th Hanoverian Brigade was bivouacked in the fields just east of the city of Brussels. You see, it was an important night in Brussels. The Duchess of Richmond was hosting a Grand Ball for all the British brass. It was at 2AM at the ball that Wellington heard of Napoleon's troop movements that were intended to draw him to the west. Wellington did not take the bait, and he ordered Picton to move south. So at 4AM on the 16th Jacob began his march with the 4th Hanoverian Brigade. As it turned out, his unit was to play a critical role in both the battles of June 16 and June 18.

Napoleon's written orders were late in getting to Ney, and when they arrived at 10:30 on the morning of the 16th there seemed to be no rush, so the attack on Quatre Bras was delayed so he and his army could have a good dinner. Meanwhile not seeing smoke from the neighborhood of

Quatre Bras, Napoleon assumed Ney had taken the crossroads without a fight. He began his attack on the Prussians at Ligny, expecting Ney's support shortly.

But, back to Quatre Bras ... Picton was assigned the east side of the Brussels road, the Prince of Orange and the Duke of Brunswick the west side. Picton put his two British brigades out front in a long line along the Namur road. The 4th Hanoverian Brigade served as their backups just to the north and east of the road.

The French formed up in massive columns of infantry to attack. They fully expected the British to run. They were perplexed when Picton's men stood in their long line with arms ready, but not firing. They marched on until they were at very close range and when Picton chose to fire the French columns were covered from both sides, his muskets decimated the entire length of the columns. Unfortunately, the Dutch and Brunswickers on the west side of the Brussels road did not fare as well, and many ran to the nearby woods to hide.

As was normal, the French followed up with a cavalry attack. To the west, the French cavalry had their way with the remains of the Prince of Orange's army. The Duke of Brunswick lost his life trying to counterattack against the French cavalry. But, on the east side of the road Picton's troops "formed up into squares" the normal tactic for repelling a cavalry attack.

There are two things that a cavalry horse won't do. They will not enter a wall of flame, nor will they throw themselves against a pincushion of bayonets. The *square* was a densely packed group of infantrymen facing outward in each of the four directions. The outermost two rows of men knelt with their muskets and fixed bayonets pointed outward to ward off the horses. The inner rows fired their muskets to pick off the on-coming troopers.



Infantry square repelling a cavalry attack.

The enemy cavalry had just attacked, and ridden through the 42nd Scottish Regiment, which had rushed into action with great boldness. Here let's go directly to the words of Colonel Best's report:

About 4PM, Lieutenant-General Sir T. Picton ordered one battalion of my brigade into a position to fire at the enemy from the ditches along the Namur road. I gave this order to the Battalion Verden under the command of Major Christian von der Decken. General Picton positioned it himself, and used it to support and extend our line of sharpshooters, with the 1st Company advancing in open order into the skirmish line. Inexperienced in this type of fighting, but full of courage and determined to distinguish itself, part of this company pushed so far forward that it was cut off by the enemy and taken prisoner. This was Lieutenant von der Horst, Ensign Plate and Ensign Kotzebue along with several sergeants and 63 men. The captured skirmishers were replaced immediately, and the battalion stood its ground, even though it suffered terribly from the larger number of enemy skirmishers. Lieutenant Waegener of this battalion, and Lieutenant Jenisch, commander of the sharpshooters of the Osterode Battalion, were shot. Major von der Decken gave me the following report of the courageous

behaviour of his battalion, particularly the sharpshooters and their leader, Lieutenant Hurtzig:

‘Lieutenant Hurtzig was deployed with his sharpshooters, men of the 1st Company, against some enemy skirmishers. The enemy was behind some bushes and trees, pouring deadly fire into our line, which was standing in the open with no cover. Nobody dared to attack this fire-spitting hedge, although troops of all types, English, Scottish, and Hanoverians, were standing opposite it. Then Lieutenant Hurtzig ordered his sharpshooters to storm the hedge, with Lieutenant von Hinüber promising to support the attack with part of the 1st company. These two officers then placed themselves at the head of their men, who were at first deterred by the heavy enemy fire. Encouraged by the words of their officers, they charged the hedge, and, with their supports, drove off the enemy. Lieutenant von Hinüber was wounded, later dying of this wound. ... Lieutenant Hurtzig led his men in another attack on the enemy skirmishers and drove them out of their next position, but, so as not to become surrounded, fell back to the first hedge, to which the English and Scots troops, positioned to the left and right, had moved up.’

With the success of Wellington’s counterattack described in part above, and seeing no help coming, Ney ordered an almost suicidal cavalry attack. Though somewhat successful against the Prince of Orange, Picton’s squares again held firm. Wellington realized the French had nothing left, and ordered yet another counter attack. They fought forward until dark, moving the lines a couple of miles south of their initial positions. The successful repulsion of the French attack at Quatre Bras was in significant part the result of the efforts of the *Landwehr Battalion Verden*, including our ancestor Jacob Rotermund.

The lull on the 17th was a missed opportunity for the French. It allowed Blücher to withdraw and regroup his forces at Wavre. Wellington also reassessed his situation and pulled back several miles toward Brussels, to a ridgeline just south of Mont Saint Jean. A rainstorm that day turned the roads into a quagmire of mud.

On the morning of the June 18, Napoleon had recovered from his depression and turned overly confident. At breakfast, he announced his plans to have dinner in Brussels. His aides warned that the British were prepared for a frontal assault, and suggested he recall Grouchy and his 34,000 men, and to use tactical maneuvers. Napoleon ignored their advice. Grouchy circled to attack Wavre from the east, permitting Blücher to begin unimpeded movement of some 30,000 of his troops to support Wellington. And perhaps most importantly, Napoleon decided to wait a while to attack – until things dried off and his army could have a good meal. This gave the Prussians the opportunity to arrive at the crucial point of the battle.

As noted, Wellington repositioned his forces along a defensible ridgeline south of Mont Saint Jean. The initial disposition of Best’s 4th Hanoverians was near the east flank of the main British line. That line from center to the east consisted of Lt. Gen. Kempt’s Highlanders, Maj. Gen. Pack’s Highlanders, Col. Best’s 4th Hanoverians and Col. von Vincke’s 5th Hanoverian brigade. The French began a frontal assault with massive columns of infantry at 1:30PM, toward the center of the British line. The Belgians who were forward at that point immediately ran. Kempt and Pack’s brigades lay in a roadside ditch until the French were almost upon them. Then at the last moment they stood and fired, surprising and devastating the French. Picton personally led the counterattack in that area and was killed.

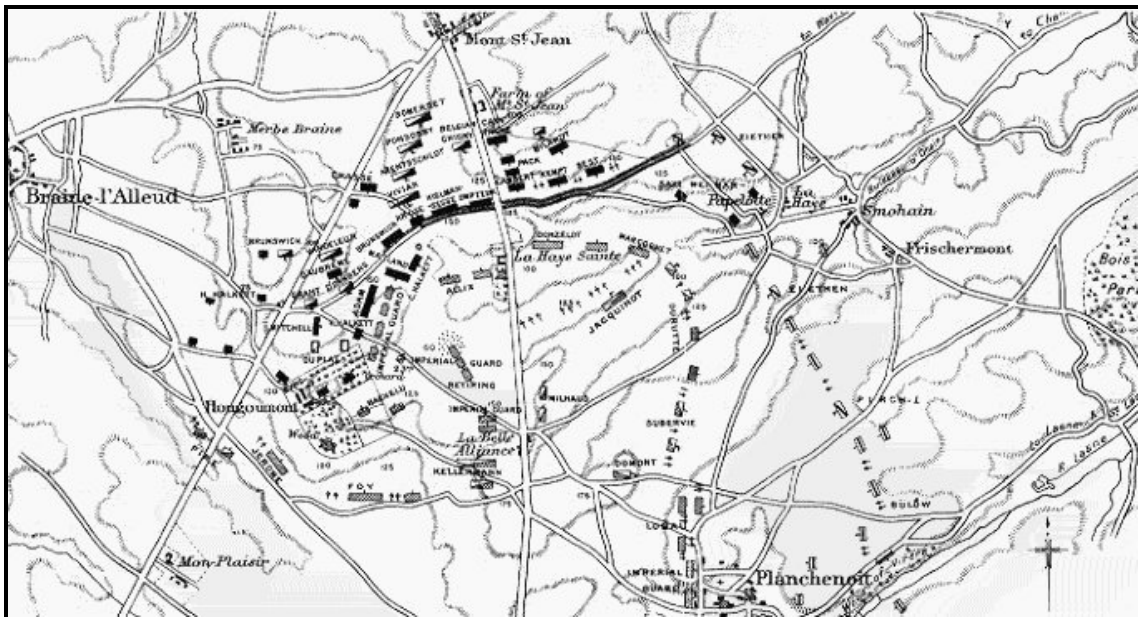
A succession of alternating infantry and cavalry charges ensued. The most important maneuver for these infantry units was to switch their deployment in a line (which was intended to repel an

infantry attack) to a square (which aimed at repelling a cavalry assault). As the battle progressed, Colonel Best found his brigade at the easternmost flank of the fighting.

After 4PM, the French initiated another series of major cavalry attacks. The entire east side of the British line formed into dozens of squares. Attack after attack was repelled. The French waited too long to throw their infantry into the fight. When they came on, the British cavalry tore apart their columns. Napoleon's personal *Imperial Guard* made a last vain effort to snatch victory from almost certain defeat. The lone Nassau square on the eastern line held up the Guard's First Brigade for a short while ...but they were surrounded and without hope.

The Duke of Wellington, perceiving the disorder of the French, and the advance of the Prussians on their right flank, immediately commanded the British troops to form a line, and assume the offensive. It was reported that 'Colonel Best's 4th Hanoverian Brigade, the next unit in line, saw the flight of the Nassauers with growing concern but the *Landwehr* battalions that made up the brigade responded admirably to their commander when he ordered one battalion to shift its position and form a line facing to the east.'

At this point, it was early evening and the Prussian units were taking positions on the east side of the battlefield. Best's Hanoverians – including our Jacob Rotermund -- had major parts of the French army and its Imperial Guard trapped between themselves and the Prussians. The whole line formed four deep, and, supported by the cavalry and artillery, rushed down the slopes and up the corresponding bank, driving before them the fleeing French, whose confusion became each moment more irretrievable. The heavy infantry of the Imperial Guard attempted to cover the retreat; but they were charged by the British cavalry, and literally cut to pieces. The rout began. By nightfall the French were retreating in complete disarray. The greatest battle in the history of mankind was over in less than one day.



Map of the later stages of the Battlefield at Waterloo.

Colonel Best's 4th Hanoverian Militia Brigade consisted of 2,582 fighting men going into the battle. It sustained 489 dead, wounded and missing of all ranks. This 20% casualty rate was typical of the Anglo-German forces at Waterloo. [The Belgian-Dutch forces reported higher casualty rates, but their numbers included many deserters listed as 'missing' who simply went to

their nearby homes.] Obviously, there were variations in casualties from one unit to another. But, it does seem from the above descriptions of both Quatre Bras and Waterloo that the Verden Battalion suffered substantial losses. At lower levels of organization, there may have been units (companies and platoons, for instance) that were almost completely wiped out.

The above is intended to set the stage for the only piece of personal information concerning the Battle of Waterloo passed down by Jacob Rotermund to his descendants. He apparently claimed to be one of only three soldiers from his unit that survived Waterloo. We are uncertain about what "unit" he was referring to ...perhaps his platoon or section. As in the old game of gossip, it's hard to tell when or if such tales may have strayed from the facts. But, we were told this by Mathilda Bruning,, who heard it directly from her grandmother, Meta Wiechmann – Jacob's daughter-in-law.

Whatever the veracity of the claim concerning the number of survivors, the Battle of Waterloo obviously had an impact on Jacob Rotermund's life and family. Like every survivor of the Anglo-German army at Waterloo, Jacob was awarded a personally inscribed medal commemorating his participation in the battle. This silver medal shows Prince Regent George (soon to be King George IV of Great Britain and Hannover) on the front, and on the reverse it proclaims "Hannoverian Gallantry – Waterloo – Jun XVIII." Inscribed around the rim "So ldat Jacob Rotermund Landwehr Bat Verden." We are pleased to still possess this medal.

So that's the story of that old silver medal which is displayed proudly in our home.



Jacob Rotermund's Waterloo Medal.